



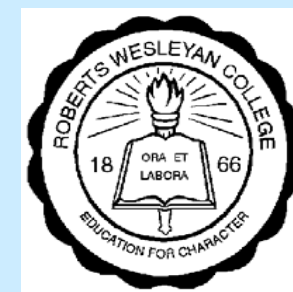
ENGAGING THE CLERGY IN ADDRESSING PARTNER VIOLENCE IN FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to query Clergy about the “next steps” for engaging spiritual leaders in the community’s efforts to reduce and eliminate partner violence (PV). Researchers assembled three clergy focus groups (one all male group, one all female and one mixed gender) from an upstate NY county of approximately 750,000 residents. Group members viewed via a power point presentation the results of an earlier study (Horwitz, 2002) about community professionals’ attitudes and beliefs about partner violence in which Clergy had participated. Focus group members were asked to respond to pre-designed questions mailed to them prior to the focus group session. Questions focused on the knowledge and expertise clergy need to engage effectively with parishioners in abusive couples and identify skills needed to collaborate with professionals from other disciplines who struggle with the complexities of partner violence in their practices. The sessions were audiotaped and transcribed. The content of the sessions was analyzed using Atlas.ti. Findings elucidated (1) the competing value systems that clergy experience as they minister to couples and individuals living in abusive relationships, (2) their responsibilities for addressing partner violence in their congregations, (3) the limitations and barriers that impede active involvement with abusive couples, and (4) Clergy recommendations for addressing the problem of partner violence in their congregations.

Introduction

Tolerance, reciprocity and trust have never been established between the religious community and the domestic violence community. As a result the ability to share a common outlook, to join together for a common purpose and to develop a corporate spirit, or, more practically, to collaborate in developing a comprehensive coordinated community response to partner violence that includes an engaged religious community has not yet been achieved.

The reluctance with which the religious community responds to PV is well documented in the literature spanning the last twenty-six years (Adams & Fortune, 1998; Alsdurf, & Alsdurf, 1989; Annis, Loyd-Paige & Rice, 2001; Cassidy-Shaw, 2002; Kroeger & Nason-Clark, 2001; Miles, 2000). Phillip (2002) contends that the reason for this lack of involvement is that no mutually informed bridge currently links the religious community with the PV community. The domestic violence community sees clergy as patriarchal and male dominated, interested in protecting the dominance/submission contracts within marriages, while clergy see the PV community as insensitive to the sanctity of marriage. This study seeks to (1) identify how clergy address partner violence in their religious settings, (2) understand the clergy’s value system and tension points in engaging secular PV service providers and (3) assist in defining the clergy’s scope of practice as it relates to PV.

Participants

- Clergy from all religious denominations, churches, mosques and synagogues (75 denominations or faith perspectives) from an upstate NY county were identified from a list generated by a local seminary and from the on line yellow pages.
- Religious organizations were contacted to verify addresses. Those not responding were eliminated from the master list.
- Because the clergy is a male dominated profession all female clergy were selected in an effort to over-represent female participation. Every sixth male clergy was selected.
- The recruitment sample included 114 Clergy; 50 women and 64 men.
- Participants constituted 6% (14 Clergy) of the sample recruited.

Denominational affiliation	Master list	No. of Participants
Non Denominational	113	7
Catholic	69	2
Baptist	53	0
Methodist	31	3
Presbyterian	30	0
Lutheran	25	0
Jewish	12	0
Episcopal	8	1
Wesleyan	4	1

Procedure

- The focus groups met in various churches.
- Each focus group followed the same format and script, beginning with the signing of the consent forms and completing a demographic survey.
- A 20-minute power point presentation of the results from the *Community-wide Professionals’ Response to Partner Violence* (Horwitz, 2002) were presented to each group.
- Participants were invited to respond to the following questions:
 1. What do these results say to you about your professional response to domestic violence?
 2. How prepared do you feel for dealing with partner violence in your congregation?
 3. What do you think your role should be in working with partner violence?
 4. What next steps do these results suggest?
 5. Why do you think people who are in partner violent relationships in most congregations ask for help at such low rates?
 6. Are there any other observations that you would like to make regarding partner violence within the church?

Analysis

- Audiotaped focus group sessions were transcribed and analyzed using Atlas.ti (Scientific Software Development, Scolari, 2002).
- Coding at Levels 1, 2 and 3 (progressively higher levels of abstraction) was conducted using a consensus approach with the 5-member PVIP team. Level 1 coding produced 29 distinct codes. Level 2 coding produced 7 code families. Level 3 coding produced four substantive and overarching themes.

Themes/Results

1. COMPETING VALUE SYSTEMS

The tension Clergy reported when their theological perspectives conflicted with their “real life” experiences was particularly poignant as Clergy grappled with

- (a) setting the tone regarding PV within the congregation,
- (b) attending to safety issues versus protecting the sanctity of marriage,
- (c) confronting PV versus avoiding or omitting the subject from individual contacts with congregants, and
- (d) correcting scriptural distortions versus promoting patriarchal interpretations.

Tension between reliance upon theological expertise versus therapeutic expertise surfaced when Clergy recognized the importance of empowering, affirming, encouraging congregants to seek help inside and outside of the Church, but challenged the idea that violence leads to divorce, expressing a desire to extend the boundaries of their practice, thereby isolating the congregants or couple from those who are trained in PV counseling.

2. ACCOUNTABILITY

Clergy’s responsibility in addressing PV in their congregations begins with receiving training. Most expressed

- (a) that their training was “inadequate,” “not in depth,” and that “it was clear how ill equipped we are,” and
- (b) the need to make use of both the pulpit and adult educational opportunities to clarify distorted scriptural passages and to reinforce that the Church supports safety.

Themes/Results cont’d.

3. LIMITATIONS AND BARRIERS

- Clergy reported that barriers to addressing PV with individual congregants and couples involved:
- a. Church politics
 - b. Overcoming the image of “Judge,” reflecting congregants’ fear of Clergy disapproval.
 - c. Lack of confidence and training in PV.
 - d. Fear of not being helpful.
 - e. Personal experience with PV paralyzing Clergy from intervening effectively.
 - f. Lack of clarity regarding responsibilities to PV couples.
 - g. Fear of the violence and ramifications of getting involved.
 - h. Difficulty identifying and managing PV.
 - i. Low frequency of exposure to the problem.

4. THE CLERGY’S SCOPE OF PRACTICE

The parameters around which clergy practice patterns revolve regarding partner violence is viewed as the Clergy’s scope of practice.

<u>Do</u>	<u>Don’t</u>
--Preach about PV from the pulpit.	--Avoid the problem.
--Seek training and establish a network of trusted referral sources.	--Recommend “turning the other cheek.”
--Empower congregants to challenge their situation and to work toward positive change.	--Pass judgement on either party.
--Challenge scriptural passages (and those who distort such passages) that connote “submission” as permission to abuse.	--Support scriptural distortion.
--Seek financial assistance/employment opportunities for abused persons needing to leave the home, or needing to ease the financial tensions in the marriage.	--Ignore the financial component that traps individuals in abusive relationships.
--Make clear the sanction against violence in the home through teaching, sermons, posters, buttons, workshops and pamphlets.	--Ignore the problem, or attempt to solve it by yourself.
--Make known that you are open to helping.	--Let your uncomfotability or lack of confidence stop you from learning more and becoming a valued resource.

Discussion

The results of this study supported previous research, indicating that Clergy are inadequately trained to deal with PV and are reluctant to address the problem of PV either directly or indirectly within their congregations. Findings suggest that clergy are aware of the competing values they hold regarding PV. Focus group participants were open to additional training from and collaboration with trustworthy referral sources sensitive to the needs of the religious client. It should be noted, however, that participants were few, despite the wide range of Clergy approached. Participants’ willingness to engage in further training and to incorporate the “Do” list into their practice patterns may be more a reflection of the “already engaged”, rather than a capturing of previously disinterested or unmotivated Clergy.

These results also suggest that the opportunity exists for the PV advocacy community to assist the clergy in the development of a clergy service provider protocol. Future research could seek to identify the key components of a protocol and enlist clergy assistance in its design and implementation and evaluation of the protocol’s effectiveness. Clergy educators will need to examine PV training curricula and its adaptability for use with religious leaders, as well as its use in religious settings. Finally, having an engaged Clergy would fill a serious void in the community’s efforts to reduce and eliminate PV through active Clergy involvement in a coordinated community response to PV.

* The authors wish to acknowledge the assistance of Jason McKinney, BSW and Elizabeth Luebbe for their administrative and analytical contributions.