

Surviving Domestic Violence: Seeking Support in Cyber-Space

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RESEARCH PROBLEM

Domestic violence (DV) continues to be a substantive criminal issue with profound personal, health, and economic consequences for survivors as well as a complex impact on society at large. Almost 5.3 million victimizations by intimate partners occur every year among U.S. women age 18 and older (Centers for Disease Control, 2003). These attacks include stalking, verbal abuse, sexual assault, rape, beating, and murder. Although women who live below the poverty line and young women are more likely to be abused, domestic violence crosses all social, economic, educational, racial, and cultural boundaries (Heise & Garcia-Moreno, 2002). In households with children, forty to sixty percent of perpetrators also abuse their children (Goelman, 2004).

Numerous studies confirm that DV survivors prefer using informal support networks rather than official legal, medical, or social service support (Grayson & Smith, 1981; Bowker, 1983; Harris, 1988; Harris, Stickney, & Grasley, 2001). Cyber-based social networks, such as discussion lists, exemplify this preferred type of support. They can provide, therefore, a unique window on the information needs and resources shared among DV survivors.

RESEARCH CONTEXT AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Although the Internet is certainly not universally available, used, or accessible, it is increasingly commonplace in the homes of even lower income American families. For DV survivors, the electronic bulletin boards of the Internet provide opportunities for support that can be, quite literally, life-saving. People who are reluctant to approach formal support systems (e.g., police, doctors) or informal support systems (e.g., pastors, family, friends), may feel safe enough in the Internet's digital anonymity to express their concerns and seek answers on critical questions of survival within a community of peers. Issues of cyber-safety, notwithstanding, the affective and cognitive experiences of sharing concerns in an online community can be of tremendous value to survivors, particularly those whose abusers force them into social isolation.

Little substantive examination of the nature and efficacy of information structures used to support DV survivors has been conducted since the advent of the Internet. The only nationwide, overarching analysis of formal information support systems that serve DV survivors was conducted in Canada in, essentially, a pre-Web environment, i.e., Roma Harris and Patricia Dewdney's *Barriers to Information: How Formal Help Systems Fail Battered Women* (1994). Those findings indicate that information was needed on 18 separate problems including housing, emotional support, professional counseling, money, protection, medical attention, children's needs, and transportation (Harris & Dewdney, 1994, p. 79). A total of 23 different agencies or services were expected to be able to provide help in solving these problems including women's shelters, police, pastors, the Salvation Army, community centers, taxi companies, and the YMCA (Harris & Dewdney, 1994, p. 80).

Survivors actively seeking assistance must move through at least three layers of service providers: emergency aid (e.g., police and ER staff), DV assistance centers (e.g., shelters and referral centers), and then an array of specialized support services (e.g., WIC, victim's assistance, mental health services) (Harris, Stickney, & Grasley, 2001). To make these steps, women use an array of information supports. For example, women involved in safety planning (i.e., structuring a plan to use in case of immediate physical danger) sought information from religious organizations, health care providers, shelters, hotlines, counselors, and families (Goodkind, Sullivan, & Bybee, 2004, p. 520). In certain situations, moving into the formal social service system as a victim of domestic violence results in "less

control over their lives and being required to attend counseling, parenting classes, or go into a domestic violence shelter" and even the possible loss of their parental rights (Postmus, 2004, p. 113).

Reijo Savolainen's work on the "Everyday Life Information Seeking" (ELIS) model serves as the theoretical framework for this study. ELIS posits that active information-seeking behavior can be used with varying degrees of success to support problem-solving that maintains or develops a mastery of life (Savolainen, 1995; Savolainen & Kari, 2004). The ELIS model notes that "people commonly look first for advice and information from interpersonal sources, especially those similar to themselves" (Wathen & Harris, 2006, n.p.).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is the first to examine the information issues of DV survivors functioning in an online environment. It seeks to identify the information needs and resources noted by participants in an active bulletin board community over the course of a single year. The anonymous community under study has been functioning for 2.5 years, includes 1,326 threads, and 7,566 responses to those threads. Only screen names are used and the community self-regulates to encourage solid cyber-safety practices; the members appear to feel comfortable expressing their concerns.

The analysis was completed in three phases. First, a stratified random sample was taken to cover 20% to 30%, depending on the traffic level, of every month's threads from October 2005 through September 2006. Second, the sample postings were prepared for coding by removing potentially identifying information. Finally, the resultant postings were analyzed (using HyperResearch to record the codes and their applications) to delineate information needs (e.g., legal, medical, social) and resources (e.g., web sites, safe houses). Using the constant comparison method of content analysis, the researcher noted, defined, and applied the codes which emerged from the data (Krippendorff, 1980; Miles and Huberman, 1984; Strauss, 1987). The final coding scheme employed 121 codes which were applied to 341,382 words in 1,793 separate postings.

The limitations inherent in any qualitative study pertain to these findings. The individuals who posted on this forum are not statistically representative of any full population so the findings only apply to these individuals. While this moderated forum uses common techniques to eliminate artificial postings, there is no way to guarantee the authenticity of any particular post. Certainly other coders may identify additional codes but these codes reached saturation (i.e., a point at which no new codes were added) at the end of the tenth month; two additional months were completed to insure that all critical items had been recognized.

FINDINGS

The community norms influenced the intent and focus of the postings and, therefore, the codes applied to them. Open to anyone, the forum is housed in a web site which provides extensive resources on domestic violence; the forum and the overall web site include cyber-safety information. In that relatively safe space, the most common pattern for posting is the identification of a problem, need, or acute situation by a single individual followed by a series of responses from community members who provide emotional support and concrete advice regarding tactics, resources, and referrals. Since some posters were just starting to verbalize their abusive situations, their descriptions did not always explicitly identify information needs; nevertheless, obvious examples of such need were coded appropriately.

INFORMATION NEEDS

Information needs fell into five broad categories: finances, law, mental health, domestic violence, and logistics. Understanding bankruptcy options, separating checking/credit card accounts, breaking apartment leases to move away from a stalker, and loans are a few of the financial issues explained in postings. The following post is typical: *He left all of our bills with me, including a loan that's in my name and his dad's name. The last thing he said before he left was that he'd kill me if I ruined his dad's credit.* Financial needs were generally viewed as a by-product of abuse, much like a black eye; there was little sense that anything could be done to improve the situation.

Closely tied to the financial needs are the following legal issues: legal protection from the abuser (193 instances such as *After I left for good he continued to stalk, assault, and tried to kill me and our children*), child custody/visitation (81 instances such as *No judge is going to take your boys away from you based SOLELY on your going to a shelter*), property/income law (66 instances such as *I left with only my clothes and my laptop*), documenting abuse (36 instances such as *Remember when you go to report an incident sometimes the bruises don't show up for a day, especially ones from being choked or restrained by the arms...go back the next day and have the cops take pictures*), divorce (26 instances such as *When I asked him for a divorce, he put the house on the market the very next day*), and other less common needs. Legal information needs often focused on making the system work or dealing with its failures.

Mental health needs pertained to the survivors themselves (*my deepest depression to date. Pills and the river looked so very inviting*), their children (*it's esp important to treat your son right now so you can help overcome his habits that he's picked up from the father*), and their abusers (*He had never been to serious therapy to deal with his childhood of abuse*). While the value of counseling for survivors was a common theme in discussions of mental health information needs, a great deal of effort was expended in discussing the mental health needs of the abuser, including the possibility of effective "treatment" for DV behavior, as well as addictions which were seen as the root cause of violence. *He said he'd go to anger management and counseling. Where can I seek help for that?*

Domestic violence information needs were less common but quite fundamental to progress. In eleven of the twelve months, a few individuals asked for confirmation of their perception that they were indeed being abused. Without an understanding of that basic fact, they had little chance of moving forward. (*He makes me feel ... no matter what I say or do it is never right. After looking at some of these websites I've realized that maybe this could be a form of abuse but when I talk to him about it he feels that it is not and that since he does not leave any physical bruises on my body that it is not abuse.*) Experienced forum members responded to these information needs with definitions, examples, and clarifications in an effort to demonstrate the fact that abusive behaviors run the gamut from isolation to murder.

Finally, information needs pertaining to the logistics of communication, relocation, employment, and other survival concerns surfaced regularly. People sought and gave advice on postal addresses (*Get a post office box for a forwarding address so you can be untraceable*), phone access (*change your phone number*), safety planning (*secretly pack documents, clothes, money etc so that when you leave you won't be empty handed if you have to go in a hurry*), documentation (*Me and my children have new names and ssn so there is no way to trace us*), and finding local social service agencies (*I have searched for local help but have not found anything*). The cyber-safety concerns often revealed a limited understanding of the degree of privacy available on the Internet (e.g., *My abuser managed to find me via lycos email and yahoo email*).

Information needs started with an understanding of what behaviors constitute abuse and then moved on to understanding the process of growing strong enough to separate. The act of separation included legal protections, property division, child custody, and divorce. The final stage, however, was the most common and difficult, that of staying away from the abuser despite emotional connections, fiscal problems, legal issues, and physical threats; mental health needs characterized this stage. Individuals joined the forum at various stages in the escape/survival process so no single pattern of information needs encompassed all users.

INFORMATION RESOURCES

The array of information resources offered in response to these needs included the Internet, services, and individuals. No single resource or type of resource dominated the postings. Instead, the resources were often described as useful

but difficult to obtain in that they required a great deal of emotional energy, planning, and persistence to maximize their effectiveness. This patchwork quilt of information resources was rarely seen as sufficient but a long-term combination of resources could be life-saving.

The most common resource was information-seeking (120 instances); the value of seeking information in general (21) and reading specific self-help books (18) combined with general use of the Internet for information and/or emotional support (81). The act of seeking information was viewed as inherently therapeutic and empowering while the resulting understanding of DV and additional resources were viewed as tools with which to build change.

Formal and informal help systems were often recommended, particularly to those whose abusers isolated them. Counseling (81 instances) was useful throughout the escape process as beyond as survivors dealt with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. A shelter or DV service (60) was often recommended as at points of acute need while telling or moving in with someone trustworthy (59) could provide emotional support at any time. Although not universally trusted, the police (55) stood as a bulwark against physical danger.

Various activities designed to distract survivors from their urge to return to their abuser (e.g., taking classes, volunteering) or used in support of their overall healing (e.g., exercising, relaxation breathing) were suggested in 48 postings. Other resources were less commonly mentioned including abortion providers, support groups, the media, lawyers, a dog, a gun, and the ACLU.

Several resources were specifically described as problematic including the police (28), court officials (16), mandatory classes for abusers (8), and shelters/DV services (8). Although details were often lacking, some problem scenarios indicated an inaccurate understanding of what the resource could do, such as expecting police to function as body guards.

In this online community, domestic violence survivors are actively, regularly, and deliberately identifying a wide range of information needs and resources. They share affective concerns, pose cognitive problems, and share tactics on behavioral issues. As might be expected of individuals posting online in times of stress, they value both their online community and related resources, such as web sites. Legal, mental health, and social work resources are called for and recommended extensively. Certainly context-specific recommendations could be constructed from careful data-mining of state, county, and local service resources. Further examination of this type of support network for domestic violence survivors may reveal further commonalities which could serve as the basis of a service template. The complexities of the problem definitely requires such work just as the pain of the problem warrants a viable solution.

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