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Challenging Despair

Teaching About Women's Resistance to Violence

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In this article, the author describes an approach to teaching about violence against women that balances discussion of violence with information about women's individual and collective resistance. This strategy addresses two concerns about traditional approaches to this topic: that focusing only on victimization disempowers students and that it provides only a partial view of the reality of violence in women's lives. To address these problems, the author integrates discussion of resistance into the class's working definition of violence, assigned readings, guest speakers, and course assignments. The author concludes with a discussion of the positive effects of this approach.

Keywords: *resistance; teaching; violence against women*

When I first began teaching about violence against women, my principal concern was convincing the students that sexual assault and battering were serious problems. Faced with classrooms of students with seemingly little knowledge about violence against women, I felt I needed to make a strong case about the pervasive and devastating nature of such violence. I gave sobering lectures, and I could see in my students' faces that they were affected.

Over time, however, I became increasingly uncomfortable with this approach, particularly as I began teaching entire classes on violence against women. My discomfort stemmed from two sources. First, my students, approximately 90% of whom were women, seemed profoundly disempowered by the material on violence. They were outraged, yes, and their awareness of

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violence was heightened, but they were also scared, pessimistic, and hopeless. These students felt deeply vulnerable, as though violence was inevitable and as though there was nothing they could do, individually or collectively, to prevent or stop it. Such reactions seemed particularly severe among those who had previous experiences of violence—women who, I began to see, made up a large proportion of my students.¹ Although it was perhaps necessary to convince some students—those who had never encountered such violence, for example—of the import of this topic, others were already too well aware of it, and I feared that my grim lectures only deepened their pain.²

I noticed these responses in students' weekly papers and in end-of-term course evaluations, where students wrote that they were depressed, fearful, and hopeless. Some described having dreams in which they were assaulted or abused; others noted their increasing fear of violence and suspicion of friends, acquaintances, and strangers. These responses were also palpable during the class itself, which took on its own emotional pattern. The term began with an initial period of energy, when students found themselves learning new information, sharing experiences, and seeing taken-for-granted feelings and interactions in a new light. Midway through the term, however, their weekly papers and their in-class demeanor evidenced an escalating sense of despair, as the unrelenting accumulation of readings and discussions about atrocities increasingly weighed on them. As one student wrote in an anonymous midterm evaluation, "Can't we find anything positive?"

These reactions are, of course, not limited to classes on violence, though they are perhaps especially salient there. Classes on women and gender are also subject to similar dynamics, where students are overwhelmed by the reality of women's oppression. In part, this is a result of the new information and perspective gained in these classes. But another part is the unintended consequence of feminist struggles to heighten awareness of inequality and domination. To drive home the point that violence against women is an urgent social problem, feminist writers have often focused on women's oppression and victimization.³ These efforts are in service of important political ends, yet they may end up disempowering those they hope to empower, by making invisible women's strengths and resistance to violence (Burton, 1998;

Lamb, 1999; McCaughey & King, 1995).⁴ As McCaughey and King (1995) argue, "What good does it do a woman to know that a man might rape her? Most women already live with the awareness that they are potential victims of rape. . . . The point of rape education certainly should not be to terrorize women" (p. 375). Emphasizing women's victimization reinforces the cultural fusion of femininity with vulnerability, weakness, and fragility (Hollander, 2001). It also erases the ways in which women themselves have used violence, either to protect themselves or to control others (Shulman, 1999a, 1999b).

Of course, sadness, anger, and despair are all appropriate reactions to material on violence against women. Indeed, not experiencing or expressing such emotions is part of the problem of violence against women, because this silence makes the violence seem normal and acceptable. But at the same time, remaining mired in our own despair and pain keeps us paralyzed and prevents us from resisting oppression, whether individually or collectively. This sense of futility reduces our effectiveness in preventing and ending violence against women and thus functions to support the very phenomena we hope to counter. For example, women's belief in their own vulnerability reduces their likelihood of resisting violence if they are assaulted, and men's belief in women's vulnerability also increases violence against women: "Men are able to initiate assaults because of the collective assurance that women will not fight back as men would" (McCaughey & King, 1995, p. 376).

I am also convinced that this sense of futility does not fit the facts about violence: I do not think the situation is hopeless, either individually or societally. This was the second source of my discomfort with my original approach to this topic: My increasingly firm belief that emphasizing women's victimization at the hands of men was, at best, telling only a partial story. My own interest in women's self-defense training led me to a literature that I had largely overlooked in my drive to convince students of the seriousness of women's victimization. According to this literature, neglected by many other writers as well, women's victimization is pervasive but not inevitable. For example, women successfully resist at least 75% of all attempted sexual assaults (Bart & O'Brien, 1985; Gordon & Riger, 1989; Ullman 1997); in other words, they escape, they stop the violence, and they protect themselves as

much as possible. Rozee and Koss (2001) note that attempted rapes are in fact instances of successful rape avoidance; sadly, these stories are rarely reported in the media (Riger & Gordon, 1981), which focus on sensational cases of extreme violence. Moreover, physical resistance, contrary to myth, generally does not increase women's risk of sustaining additional physical injury (Ullman & Knight, 1991) and may also facilitate positive psychological consequences (Bart & O'Brien, 1985; Rozee & Koss, 2001).⁵ In battering relationships, women employ a range of active and creative strategies to resist and escape violence from their intimate partners (J. Campbell, Rose, Kub, & Nedd, 1998; Cook, Woolard, & McCollum, 2004; Gondolf, 1988; Jones, 1994). On the individual level, in other words, there is considerable evidence that many women resist violence, and they do so successfully. Cultural beliefs about women's inherent vulnerability have made this successful resistance invisible. For example, women who resist and escape attacks are often described in media articles as victims, erasing their own self-defense (Hollander, 2002).

Equally important, resistance is possible, and has been successful, on the collective level as well. During the last few decades, there have been tremendous changes in public awareness of violence against women, the legal treatment of such violence, and services to those who are victimized. For example, acquaintance rape, marital rape, sexual harassment, and stalking are now recognized social problems. Mandatory arrest laws and victimless prosecution are increasingly common policies for addressing battering, while spousal rape exemptions and the reading of the "false accuser" warning in jury instructions have been largely eliminated. Rape crisis centers, domestic violence shelters, and other services such as hotlines and advocacy centers are now commonplace (R. Campbell & Martin, 2001; Jones, 1994; Matthews, 1994; Rozee & Koss, 2001). Much remains to be done, of course, but it is important to recognize and celebrate those changes that have occurred. Grassroots collective action was responsible for many of these changes: women (and sometimes men) acting together, demanding change, and creating new structures and meanings. In short, social change is indeed possible.

My two concerns with my original approach—that focusing only on victimization disempowered students and that it

provided only a partial view of the reality of violence in women's lives—led me to modify my approach to the topic in my classes. In recent classes, I have made resistance an explicit and ongoing theme of the class. Beginning on the 1st day of the term, the class discusses not just violence against women, but violence and women's resistance to it. I found that this approach reduces some of the negative effects I describe above, without compromising the students' views of violence as a serious and urgent social problem. In the remainder of this article, I describe my new approach,⁶ which is integrated into the class in several ways: in our working definition of violence, in assigned readings, in the guest speakers who visit the class, and in the course assignments. I discuss each of these dimensions below.

I should note at the outset that the characteristics of the class and the environment in which it is taught may affect the success of these strategies. My Violence Against Women class is a small (20 to 30 students) upper division class that sometimes enrolls graduate students as well as undergraduates. To enroll in the class, students are required to fulfill one of the prerequisites (an introductory sociology of women or women's studies class) and obtain instructor permission, so I know at the outset that students have some familiarity with the issues we discuss. My class focuses exclusively on violence against adult women, particularly sexual assault and battering and mainly in the U.S. context.

INTEGRATING THE RESISTANCE THEME

DEFINITIONS OF VIOLENCE

I introduce the theme of resistance on the 1st day of class. I say that although violence against women is widespread, this does not mean that women are passive in the face of violence against them. Indeed, every incident of violence involves women's resistance, because inherent in the concept of violence is the idea that it is unwanted—the woman did not choose it, did not ask for it, and does not desire it. This sense of “no,” even if it is not verbalized, is the kernel of resistance. Resistance is most obvious when it is physical, such as yelling, kicking, or running away. But it can also be cognitive (as when women think about alternatives and strategize how to stay safe) or emotional (as when women protect

some core part of themselves even if they choose to submit to an attack to protect themselves from other injury). In some way, no matter how invisible it may be to the observer, the woman victim resists being involved in violence. As a result, it is a mistake to characterize women who are victims or survivors of violence as weak or passive. They actively resist violence, using whatever resources and strategies are at their disposal to avoid it, minimize it when it does happen, and escape from it when they can. These actions indicate not passivity, but strength and courage.

READINGS

This discussion about violence and resistance initiates the theme of resistance in the class. I then reinforce this theme by including readings on women's individual and collective resistance, empowerment, or coping strategies. My goal is to include at least one such reading every week. For example, included in readings for the first substantive class session, which focuses on personal narratives of violence, are "On Becoming a Dangerous Woman" by Elena Featherston (1992) and "Poem About My Rights" by June Jordan (1980). When we discuss rape, I include excerpts from Caignon and Groves's (1987) wonderful (though out of print) *Her Wits About Her: Self-Defense Success Stories by Women*; Snortland's (1998) *Beauty Bites Beast: Awakening the Warrior Within Women and Girls*; Gold and Villari's (2000) edited collection, *Just Sex: Students Rewrite the Rules on Sexual Violence, Activism, and Equality*; Buchwald, Fletcher, and Roth's (1993) *Transforming a Rape Culture*; and Andrea Dworkin's (1993) fiery speech, "I Want a Twenty-Four Hour Truce During Which There Is No Rape." In the section on battering, I include Anannya Bhattacharjee's (1997) "A Slippery Path: Organizing Resistance to Violence Against Women" and J. Campbell et al.'s (1998) "Voices of Strength and Resistance: A Contextual and Longitudinal Analysis of Women's Responses to Battering." We also discuss social movement activism against violence against women, as well as the gains this activism has made in services for survivors of violence (e.g., Allen, 2001; R. Campbell & Martin, 2001). Barbara Shulman's (1999a, 1999b) thoughtful articles on teaching violence against women suggest additional readings on both individual and collective resistance.

These readings meet with enthusiastic response. For example, recent students wrote the following:

I found the Snortland article to be incredibly entertaining, inspiring, and helpful.

The optimistic focus [of these readings] was a refreshing change. . . . I was really happy to read about women helping women, creating rape crisis centers and hotlines. . . . Mostly I was left with a long-lasting feeling of hope.

I would like to say thank you for putting these readings in this part of the course. I really needed to read something positive after so many depressing readings. It was really comforting to read about the rape crisis center movement, that there are so many across the country and that they have helped so many women.

Hurrah! The positive readings for this class . . . fueled me with energy. . . . How refreshing to read stories of women successfully fighting off or eluding attackers after being bombarded by the media with the message [that] women cannot defend themselves.

GUEST SPEAKERS

A third component of the resistance theme involves guest speakers. I invite a series of guests to visit the class. However, I ask them to focus not simply on women's victimization but also on issues of prevention, resistance, and social change. For example, speakers from the local battered women's shelter and rape crisis center discuss the evolution of their services from the 1970s, advice for supporting friends who are involved in or leaving battering relationships, and violence prevention. The next time I teach the class, I hope to invite speakers from social change organizations (such as Men Against Rape or Home Alive) to describe their efforts to effect change in laws, services, and male violence. Other possibilities might include those who work in batterer intervention programs, prosecutors who specialize in domestic violence cases, or coordinators of campus sexual assault prevention programs.

By far, the most powerful presentations, however, have been made by instructors from the campus self-defense class, whom I asked to present an hour-long workshop on the theory and practice of feminist self-defense.⁷ This workshop took place midterm, after our discussion of rape and sexual assault and at an

emotional point in the class when spirits were flagging and energy was low. The self-defense instructors began by discussing the philosophy behind feminist self-defense: that women have the right to be safe and free, that women are capable of protecting themselves, and that the heart of self-defense is the belief that one is worth defending. They illustrated verbal self-defense strategies that could be used with acquaintances or strangers (setting clear boundaries, de-escalation, the use of the voice), as well as simple physical self-defense techniques. Again, it is important to be careful when presenting this material. Presenters must make clear that self-defense involves a variety of strategies—emotional, verbal, and physical—that women use to make themselves safer and that presenting information about physical self-defense does not imply that physical self-defense is the best or only choice for all women.

My own current research focuses on the consequences of self-defense training for women's lives, so I was not surprised by the positive reactions of my students to this presentation. My research (Hollander, 2004), as well as that of others (McCaughey, 1997; Ozer & Bandura, 1990; Weitlauf, Cervone, Smith, & Wright, 2001), has found that self-defense classes effect deep and fundamental changes in women's perceptions, both of themselves and of the world around them, as well as reduce fear of violence and increase women's confidence in their own abilities to protect themselves. Despite this, I was shocked by the effect that a 1-hour presentation had on my students, both individually and as a group. Students commented, both immediately after the presentation and 5 weeks later in their course evaluations, that they had a stronger sense of women's strength and power and a new belief that women could defend themselves from men's violence, countering the myth (often expressed in class prior to the self-defense workshop) that men were inherently stronger than women and, therefore, always capable of overpowering them. Many students also confided to me that they planned to enroll in a self-defense class at the earliest opportunity, and, indeed, when I visited the campus self-defense class during the next academic quarter, I saw several of these students in the class. In sum, this presentation proved to be a galvanizing moment for the class, changing the emotional tenor of the discussion and becoming a frequently mentioned touchstone for the remainder of the term.

Interspersed throughout the term, these guest speakers take the material discussed in the class into the real world. They inject alternative, more activist voices into the curriculum. They also demonstrate possibilities for action, by individuals (self-defense training, career possibilities) or by groups (collective action), and provide a sense of movement and hope that is a welcome relief from grim information and discussions.

COURSE ASSIGNMENTS

The final strategy involves course assignments, which I use both during and outside of class to encourage both an intellectual understanding of resistance and proactive resistance to violence. In class, we have frequent discussions of prevention. I link our attempts to understand why violence occurs to our shared goal of reducing and preventing it: If we can understand the causes of violence, we gain clues to preventing it. I also regularly ask students to envision alternatives to the current situation of violence against women. For example, after the students complete a media analysis project, where they investigate representations of violence against women in a variety of media, I ask them to search for alternative representations of women's empowerment and safety, which they bring in for a morale-boosting show-and-tell session.

Another way to integrate material on resistance into a violence against women class is to devote entire sessions or sections of the class to these issues. I tend to intersperse these sessions throughout the term to balance the emotional weight of material on victimization with more hopeful material on resistance. For example, I conclude units on sexual assault and domestic violence with presentations about the social change that has occurred around each type of violence. These real-world success stories counter the feelings of futility that result from the repetition of information about women's victimization. To conclude our discussion of rape and sexual assault, I ask the class to work in teams to evaluate our campus's existing sexual assault prevention strategies and envision new alternatives. I also show McCaughey and King's (1995) composite video *Mean Women* (described in their 1995 *Teaching Sociology* article), which includes film clips of women successfully defending themselves against male violence. Although always

controversial, students also report feeling empowered by these alternative images, which McCaughey and King describe as a “fantasy” that can help to “rearrange the assumptions about masculinity and femininity” that support sexual violence (p. 379).

The emphasis on resistance extends to exams, where I always include questions on the implications of the material for prevention and social change. For example, one exam asked,

We have discussed four theories of violence against women in this class. For each theory, please discuss how the theory would suggest that we (as individuals or as communities) go about reducing or preventing violence against women. Are these strategies feasible? Please be as concrete as possible in your discussion of these strategies.

Such questions test students’ understanding of the course material while encouraging them to think concretely about social change.

Other out-of-class projects can also encourage both an intellectual understanding of the issues and proactive resistance to violence. For example, when I assign a term paper, I give students the option of completing a traditional literature review on the topic of their choice or an “action project” intended to spark change around issues of violence. This project (inspired by Netting’s 1994 article in *Teaching Sociology*) allows students to channel their emotional reactions to the material toward creating positive change in the local community. I ask them to choose some aspect of violence against women that they wish to address and to design a real-world project that will produce some measurable change in the local context. The assignment reads as follows:

If you choose this option, you (either alone or with others in the class) will select a problem or issue in the real world that you would like to change. Then you will spend the rest of the term trying to make this change happen. At the end of the term, you should turn in an essay describing your efforts. This essay should describe the social change you were trying to encourage, background on this issue (What problem does it address? Who is affected by this problem? How widespread is it? What are some of the possible causes and consequences of this problem?), how you went about trying to create change, how other people reacted (what support you got, what resistance you encountered, and your thoughts

about why), what changes occurred as a result of your efforts (both in society and in yourself), and your feelings while working for social change. Finally, based on your own experiences, discuss your thoughts about how an individual can or cannot affect the world around her/him.

The action project is often met with disbelief: How can students possibly hope to create meaningful change in the space of a 10-week quarter? However, many students are enthusiastic about the opportunity and undertake a variety of projects. For example, one term six students decided that they wanted to address the treatment of battered women in local courtrooms. One of the students worked at the local domestic violence law clinic and had noticed that some clients did not have appropriate clothes for court appearances, which seemed to affect their treatment by the court. The students designed and carried out a clothing drive, in which they visited the university's sororities, asking for donations of professional-style clothing. Although their efforts were not entirely successful, they did establish a permanent closet of appropriate clothing at the law clinic. I was especially moved by one student's summary paper, which she concluded with the following paragraph:

At first I was completely blown away by your request [to do an action project]. I ranted to myself, and out loud to a few others, "How can she expect us to make a positive change in three weeks?" The problems seemed so huge, and the solutions so complicated. As you know from my conversations with you, I was confused and frustrated. Even as I prepared to write this paper, I was unsure how I could fill ten pages with this seemingly trivial attempt to change our community. It was not until I spent several hours contemplating the project, and considering how I myself have changed throughout the term, that I realized its importance, and the significant changes that I may have played a vital role in bringing about for individual women, and our community. I saw that I was using lessons I had learned to make other positive changes around me. Now, as I conclude this assignment, I am astounded at the impact it has had on me. I no longer feel that my group's work was "trivial" or unimportant. I do not see your request as unrealistic, but as an extremely useful tool in propelling us as students, and as community members, to reach beyond our doubts and sense of powerlessness to find the ability to make positive changes all around us.

Although such assignments may not produce such strong effects in all students, the potential for empowerment is clearly present.

Other types of assignments could produce similar effects. For example, Kersti Yllo (1988) describes two projects that she assigns to students in her violence against women class. First, students complete a small-scale research project on a topic of the student's choice (e.g., surveys of student attitudes, interviews with community activists, or media analyses). Then, students conclude the class by designing and carrying out a 3-day symposium on violence against women open to the campus community. These projects have similar intent to those I have described here: "Students aren't just absorbing bad news, they are doing something about it" and thus regaining "a sense of control in their own lives" (Yllo, 1988, p. 22).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Together, these strategies help balance students' feelings of vulnerability and futility when learning about violence and provide a more complex picture of the realities of violence in women's lives. Information on women's resistance to violence included in class readings and lectures helps counter the myth that women can never defend themselves from men's violence and helps expand the students' understandings of resistance to include emotional, psychological, and verbal strategies. Alternative representations of women and male-female relations provide a vision of what the world could be—a vision necessary to inspire change. Information on those changes that have occurred challenges the sense of futility and powerlessness that often produces frozen inaction. Assignments that require or permit students to create or envision change spark the beginnings of action. Finally, guest speakers provide other voices to support these ideas.

Students' comments on end-of-term evaluations demonstrate that this new approach is effective in balancing discussions of violence with issues of resistance:

[The instructor] encouraged us to really think about the world around us and what we could do to make positive changes.

I especially appreciated the attention to feminist self-defense, as it is usually ignored in women's studies classes.

The subject matter of violence against women can be very depressing at times, but Jocelyn always kept some focus on the good changes that are being made, and that each person can make a difference.

Although the mood of the class remains serious, the deep emotional dips I experienced in past quarters seem less extreme.

These efforts have broader effects as well. Cultural beliefs about women's inherent vulnerability to violence help to perpetuate this violence by increasing men's confidence that they can overpower women and by decreasing women's confidence in their own abilities to resist. If we do not take seriously women's resistance to violence, we do nothing to counter the "myth of male physical power and female vulnerability" (McCaughey & King, 1995, p. 377) that underlies violence against women. Focusing only on women's victimization may have the unintended consequence of increasing women's fear and disempowering the very people we want to empower. In consequence, I think it is enormously important to figure out how to balance depictions of victimization with images of resistance and to counter students' feelings of vulnerability and despair when teaching about this material. The efforts I have described here are first steps toward that goal, but there is still far to go. I look forward to hearing others' ideas about how we can make learning about violence against women a more empowering experience for our students.

NOTES

1. Indeed, this should not have been a surprise, because prevalence research suggests that about 25% of college women have experienced an attempted or completed sexual assault (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000; Koss, 1988). In addition, large numbers of college women have likely experienced child sexual assault, relationship violence, sexual harassment, or stalking, and many have doubtless witnessed violence in their families of origin (Fisher et al., 2000).

2. Of course, these reactions were not uniform among either survivors or nonsurvivors of violence; students' varying individual circumstances, and (for survivors) their position in the processes of recovery and healing, help to determine their reactions.

3. As others (e.g., Crowley, 1999) have discussed, both *victim* and *survivor* are imperfect labels for those who have experienced violence. Although recognizing the disadvantages

of each term, I have found no better alternatives, and thus I use these terms guardedly and interchangeably in this article.

4. A similar point has been made—in a distorted way, I think—by those who decry “victim feminism.” These writers (e.g., Roiphe, 1993; Sommers, 1994) say that feminists have focused too much on violence against women: they have distorted its definition; exaggerated its extent and consequences; and so have frightened, infantilized, and disempowered women. I would agree that the increased attention to violence against women has had the unintended consequence of making some women more fearful and less aware of their potential power. But I do not think that the problem of violence against women has been exaggerated (particularly by feminists), and I do not believe that the solution is to stop talking about it. Rather, a better solution is to acknowledge and publicize women’s resistance to violence, as well as the violence itself.

5. It is important to state explicitly that acknowledging that many women do physically resist violence and that such resistance is often successful does not mean that all women should resist violence or that women who do not do so are in some way responsible for their own victimization. Victims are never responsible for the violence against them; the perpetrator is always and only responsible. Moreover, only the woman experiencing the attack can judge what her response should be, and, in some cases, physical resistance may not be the best choice. It is important to recognize the severity of violence and to honor whatever strategies that survivors use to protect themselves. At the same time, it is also important to know that on average, some of these strategies increase the would-be victim’s chances of avoiding, stopping, or escaping the attack.

6. In designing my class, I have drawn from others’ discussions of how they teach similar classes, especially Barbara Schulman (1999a, 1999b), Martha McCaughey and Neal King (1995), and Kersti Yllo (1988). Newman’s (1999) discussion of the ethical issues involved in teaching about violence against women is another useful source.

7. Note that feminist self-defense differs in significant ways from nonfeminist self-defense. Unlike traditional self-defense or martial arts classes, which focus principally on physical skills and attacks by strangers, feminist classes focus on sexual violence against women (and so are generally limited to women students); address assaults by acquaintances and intimates as well as strangers; analyze the gender socialization and inequality that make self-defense difficult for women; and teach physical, verbal, and emotional strategies appropriate to women’s bodies and experiences (see Telsey, 2001).

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