

Counseling Domestic Abuse Survivors within the African American Community

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Abstract

Domestic abuse in the African- American community is often ignored, denied and underreported by the media. It is a source of shame for the victims and often, their children. Yet, left unchecked, it repeats, generation after generation; only stopping with intervention. Not even death stops it. The next generation unknowingly repeats its vicious cycle...piecing together the broken emotions, caused by their parents, much like a shattered vase is pieced together and reused after a fall. This research examines some of the reasons why domestic abuse in the African- American community is disproportionately higher than in other racial communities. The research compares the risk factors that may trigger the abuse present in the African- American community. This examination also explores the impact of abuse and the probability of reoccurrence.

Statement of Problem

Domestic violence and its devastating repercussions are felt in many families, but research shows it affects African American families and communities, disproportionately compared to other cultures (Williams, Oliver, & Pope, 2008). Research and studies have sought many different, yet intersecting, strategies to attempt to examine and explain the increase of domestic violence within the African American culture. This literature review will seek to provide brief background of constructs that serve to maintain current trends and barriers that perpetuate domestic violence in the African American culture.

Review of Literature

Domestic violence is defined as deliberate abusive behavior by a person in an intimate relationship with the victim (Sillman, 2011). Domestic violence in any community is devastating. In the African-American community, domestic violence is particularly crushing. Though domestic violence can and does happen to anyone, regardless of ethnicity, gender and socio-economic status, those factors can worsen the long-term effects in the African-American community. The abuser is habitually controlling and his actions may include physical, sexual, and emotional abuse in addition to financial control and social isolation of the victim (Sillman, 2011). Domestic violence most often occurs with a man as the aggressor. A woman is then victimized. Men too, though rarely, are victims of domestic abuse in the African-American community. In a survey from 1996, one in 12 African-American men report being abused by their partner at least once (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000).

Consequently, children surrounded by domestic violence also endure the negative effects caused by domestic violence. Without intervention, children growing up in abusive homes are almost certainly doomed to repeat the cycle, usually with the boys growing up as abusers and the girls being victims in their own abusive relationships (Hampton & Gelles, 1994). Research of family violence in the African-American community is lacking, making it difficult to track down supporting evidence.

About two million women are abused each year in the United States (Kass-Bartelmes, 2004). This number does not include domestic violence incidents that go unreported and undiagnosed because the victim often conceals the abuse. For instance, when bruises and broken ribs result in emergency room visits; women who are abused frequently attribute their injuries to tripping and falling over toys left on the floor by children, running into a door or cabinet, or falling down the stairs due to clumsiness (Sillman, 2011). Women who are abused have a propensity to provide excuses as to why they are injured that do not include intimate partner violence because they live in a state of constant fear. Similarly, the abuser may lead the victim to believe she is at fault for the abuse. When women are blamed for the abuse they endure by their intimate partners, they may experience feelings of shame, guilt, and low self-esteem. These negative feelings further prompt women suffering from domestic violence to conceal the abuse.

One in 4 women will experience domestic violence during her lifetime (Caetano, Schafer, & Cunradi, 2001). African-American women experience it at an alarming 1 in 3 (Institution on Domestic Violence in the African American Community [IDVAAC], 2006). As mentioned previously, most victims fail to report, therefore it is speculated by many that the numbers in all

communities are actually overwhelmingly higher. Violence among African-Americans is often related to economic factors. Intimate partner violence among blacks occurs more frequently among couples with low incomes, those in which the male partner is underemployed or unemployed, particularly when he is not seeking work, and among couples residing in very poor neighborhoods, regardless of the couple's income (Benson, Woolredge, Thistlewaite, & Fox, 2004). Moreover, alcohol problems that plague a relationship such as drinking, binge drinking and/or dependency, are most frequently related to intimate partner violence for African-Americans than for whites or Hispanics (Caetano et al., 2001).

As with other abusive men, African-American men who abuse have higher incidences of jealousy and the need for power and control in the relationship (Caetano et al., 2001). When men feel powerless, they may seek to exert power over those they know are defenseless against them, both by choice and because they are unaware that they will need to defend themselves against their partner. After the abuse begins, it tends to reoccur, and may continue until the victim is hospitalized at least once, before she even attempts to leave him.

In many cases, the psychological effects that remain from domestic abuse are far worse than the actual physical abuse. Health professionals regularly treat women who have experienced abuse at the hands of intimate partners which often lead to psychiatric disabilities such as substance abuse, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Derr, n.d.). Furthermore, African American women who have been battered have more physical ailments, mental health issues and have substance abuse issues during pregnancy than African American women who have not experienced abuse (IDVAAC, 2006).

Domestic violence is a serious problem, but getting out of an abusive relationship is not easy, especially when the victim has been isolated from friends and family, physically and emotionally abused, and financially controlled. Also, women suffering from domestic violence are repeatedly judged and criticized because they choose to stay in abusive relationships. Women, especially, African-American women, who have been abused, need emotional and practical support to lessen their chances of staying in the abusive relationship (IDVAAC, 2006).

In the majority of domestic violence cases, women are unaware of the options available to help escape the abusive relationship. Treatment options for the victim of domestic violence vary, but the overall goal is the same: to help empower women who experience the effects of intimate partner violence (Derr, n.d.). Treatment for victims of domestic violence can include meeting with the victim on an individual basis, crisis intervention, and group and family therapy (Derr, n.d.). Community outreach and advocacy are important resources to help make others aware of domestic violence. Counselors and health professionals may offer books, videos, and pamphlets to victims as part of a self-help approach (Derr, n.d.).

Because of the psychological effects that domestic abuse can have on the victim, it is important for health professionals to screen patients for domestic violence when there is any indication of potential abuse. Once domestic violence has been identified, the counselor has an opportunity to inform the victim of her options and develop a safety plan. In addition, victims "need to be told what their legal, emotional and physical options are in their abusive relationship" during the session (Fredrick, 2012, para. 2). This initial meeting may be the only opportunity the counselor may have to provide the victim with life-saving advice and resources. Even if the victim does not return for further assistance, she at least has a safety plan and resources to contact if the violence continues.

Another technique used in helping victims of domestic violence is crisis interventions. Crisis counselors are trained to assist victims who are experiencing intense emotions that may possibly lead to thoughts of suicide or homicide (Derr, n.d.). Of the African American women who murder their partners, almost 80% is the direct result of their history of abuse (IDVAAC, 2006). Even more disheartening, almost 50% of African- American women who are killed by their partner died while trying to leave the relationship. Crisis interventions can prevent more deaths by helping victims develop a safety plan. Furthermore, crisis counselors are able to provide victims with information of available community resources such as: shelter, food pantries, and law enforcement.

Apart from individual counseling, group and family counseling are other methods of treatment for victims of domestic violence. With group therapy, women experiencing domestic abuse are provided an opportunity to come together with others who are in a similar situation (Fredrick, 2012). Group therapy gives the victim a sense of not being alone and it “can be a source of strength and support for victims who have left dangerous and abusive situations and can be a valuable part of establishing a new life” (Fredrick, 2012, para. 5). Dr. Sandra Kaplan, chair of the American Psychiatric Association’s Committee of Family Violence and Sexual abuse, adds that group therapy helps the victim overcome social isolation and provides the victim with necessary skills to overcome domestic violence from other victims and the counselors (Derr, n.d.).

Another option consists of family therapy, wherein the victim and family work on communicating with one another. It is not recommended to include the abuser in family therapy, but it is highly advisable to include the children of the victim, if any (Derr, n.d.). During family therapy, communication is highly important because in most domestic violence cases the families of the victim and/or abuser are not aware of the abusive relationship. This method of therapy provides family members with an opportunity to become aware of the victim’s experiences. In addition, family members may develop skills that are essential for the healing process.

Summary

Available treatment options are essential for victims to construct safety plans, learn new coping skills, and to assemble support systems and resources. Counseling victims of domestic violence is never simple. In some cases, the violence may end after on-going counseling and treatment; but unfortunately, many victims return to their abusive and controlling partners. The cycle of abuse in turn is passed down to children who endure the detrimental effects caused by domestic violence. Therefore, preventative measures and interventions are highly imperative to breaking the cycle of abuse. Using public awareness as a preventative measure allows others to recognize the signs and patterns of an abusive relationship. These measures can possibly save a victim’s life and break the cycle of abuse.

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