

# Rebuilding Battered Women's Positive Sense of Identity: A Case Study

## Abstract

Many agencies that work with battered women provide services up to the point where the woman has left her batterer and secured independent housing and income. Whilst these are critically important steps for battered women, they are not the end, as many would see them. Instead, they mark the beginning of a profound struggle for battered women to come to terms with their experience, build a positive sense of identity, and achieve a sense of wholeness. This paper briefly outlines the psychological process of thought reform or brainwashing experienced by many battered women (McHugh, 1997), and explains how this theory is valuable for assessment and intervention with battered women. A case study illustrates both assessment and intervention.

# Rebuilding a Battered Woman's Positive Sense of Identity: A Case Study

## Introduction

This paper describes the struggle of an abused woman to build a positive sense of identity after separating from her violent and abusive husband. Although this is an account of one woman's life, the theory used to understand her experience and guide practice is used successfully with women at the Goulburn Valley Centre Against Sexual Assault (GV CASA).

I will briefly explain the process of thought reform or brainwashing (McHugh, 1997) on which we base our assessment and intervention with battered women. I'll describe the intake meeting, the assessment, practice details and conclude with a description of how the client, Cheryl, and her daughters, Kate 20 and Emma 18, are today.

## What is Thought Reform or Brainwashing?

Brainwashing is a social method of control, which can profoundly change people's beliefs, thoughts and attitudes. The brainwashed behave in ways that serve their abusers' best interests rather than their own (Watson, 1978).

Brainwashing occurs within dictatorial relationships in which those with power demand the loyalty and submissiveness of those they control. A combination of coercion and occasional kindness is

used by perpetrators of brainwashing to re-educate victims about how to think and to behave (Dutton & Painter, 1981).

Brainwashing is complete when the victim's positive identity has been replaced with a negative identity (Lifton, 1961), and he or she accepts the abuser's reality as his or her own. One woman illustrates acceptance of her batterer's reality that she causes his violence when she says,

every time I saw myself in the mirror I looked so ugly, I felt this great sense of despair. I felt worthless, that I must be a bad person to make him do this to me (Horley, 1991,p.36).

Battered women's positive identity is destroyed when batterers' criticise and question everything about them their actions, beliefs, opinions, strengths, abilities, intelligence, physical appearance, relatives, career, and interests.

Battered women say these ongoing assaults lead them to feel confused and their life takes on an unreal quality. They don't know who and what they are. What's happening. What's right and what's wrong. Eventually they become and say whatever their batterer demands. Unable to rely on their own judgement they depend on their abuser's which increases his power over them.

Guilt is central to the process of brainwashing. Batterers blame battered women for everything that goes wrong in the relationship and in their lives. One woman illustrates this when she says,

it was my fault he couldn't find his cigarettes, it was my fault he didn't get his cigar, if the shops were closed it was my fault (Horley, 1991, p.76).

Admitting guilt, where none exists, results in acceptance of the guilty role. Batterers falsely accuse their wives of wrongdoing and then interrogate them for hours to force an admission of guilt from them. Worn down by the argument, battered women eventually admit to the wrongdoing. This marks the point at which they begin to feel guilty about precisely those actions batterers say are wrong. They see the violence as punishment they deserve. One woman said,

I'm sure I do provoke him. There's something I'm not doing right, even if it's being too submissive. He doesn't deserve this. Somehow, I must have brought him into it (Davidson, 1978, p. 55).

Self-betrayal is a requirement of brainwashing. Battered women are forced to compromise their values and betray others who trust them. Self-betrayal deepens battered women's sense of guilt, and ensures that they become emotionally isolated from others. Herman (1994, p.83) says,

the final step in psychological control of the victim is not completed until she has been forced to violate her own moral principles and to betray her basic human attachments. Psychologically, this is the most destructive of all coercive techniques, for the victim who has succumbed loathes herself.

Eventually battered women come to realize that their batterer may indeed kill them. At this point they feel overwhelming fear and anticipate their future with hopelessness and dread.

Batters show occasional kindness toward battered women, which rekindles hope in the women that they are making positive progress in their relationship. They feel "they must be doing something right." However despite batterers' contrition, they remain firm in their demands that the women change in ways that they direct. One woman describes these feelings of hope when she says,

and I really did want him to be like he used to be, like the Jimmy I first met. And there were lovely times (Horley, 1991,p.43).

If battered women finally leave their batterer, they face a new identity crisis. They have a profound struggle to build a positive sense of identity, and achieve a sense of wholeness. This struggle is a vital part of the brainwashing process and it cannot be separated from what has gone before.

## The Intake Meeting

Cheryl contacted the Goulburn Valley Centre Against Sexual Assault (GV CASA) in May 1996. She was seeking assistance for Kate, her 15-year-old daughter. Kate's father had sexually assaulted her from the age of 10 to 15. Kate was a very angry young woman, who was physically violent and psychologically abusive toward her mother and younger sister, Emma.

When Kate disclosed her sexual assault, Cheryl left her husband, Russell. However, finding it difficult to manage without him Cheryl returned to live with him a few weeks later.

In the week prior to coming to GV CASA Cheryl had again left Russell because Child Protection had made it clear that they would be intervening to protect her daughter if she stayed.

At the initial interview, the counsellor's impression of Cheryl was that she wanted the best for her daughter but she was meek and indecisive. When asked if she wanted tea or coffee her answer typified her interactions with others at that point in her life, she said, "tea, no make it coffee, oh I don't know, what do you think?"

When asked if she had experienced domestic violence in her marriage, she said no. Later she described Russell dragging her around the room by her hair. As she talked it became clear that Cheryl's husband had been physically and psychologically abusive toward her and their daughters.

She said she felt "like she was living in a heavy fog" during her marriage and she had behaved as if she was one of the children. She said her husband condemned her ideas and decisions about parenting. Now that she had separated from him, she was parenting her daughters for the first time.

Cheryl felt overwhelmed by Kate's violence toward her and Emma. On one occasion, Kate was strangling Emma before Cheryl intervened to stop her. Kate trashed Emma's bedroom and smashed Cheryl's possessions. Kate burnt Emma's homework on Emma's bedroom floor.

Cheryl said that now she had separated from her husband she felt as if she was being manipulated by both of her daughters who used similar strategies to those previously used by her husband to control her. She said she often felt very confused.

### Had Cheryl been subjected to Thought Reform?

It was clear that Cheryl had been subjected to the process of thought reform. Her husband had been constantly critical of her and he had demanded her complete loyalty and submissiveness. (A Dictatorial Relationship.)

She had been unable to mother her children as her husband had condemned her ideas and decisions about parenting. (Attack on her identity.)

She said “her life was like living in a heavy fog”. She felt confused. She felt and behaved as if she was one of the children. (Effects of attack on identity.)

She felt guilty about issues she had no control over. For example, her husband said it was her fault that he had sexually assaulted their daughter. (Establish her guilt and channel that guilt.)

Cheryl was afraid of her husband’s violence. She feared he would follow her and the children and harm them. (Induce fear in her.)

Cheryl betrayed her values. She said Kate was critical of her because she believed that Cheryl had not protected her from her abuser. Kate had first disclosed the abuse when she was 10 years old. Cheryl left Russell when Kate was 15 year old. (Require that she betray herself.)

Cheryl’s husband had always told her she would not be able to manage on her own. She accepted his reality and returned to live with him after finding it too difficult to manage on her own. After attending GV CASA for some time she still contemplated returning to him because it was “too hard” by herself. (She accepts his view of her as her own.)

When Cheryl Contacted CASA she had ahead of her a profound struggles to rebuild a positive sense of identity and to achieve a sense of wholeness. (This is the transition after release.)

### Interrupting the Effects of Thought Reform - Tasks

A practice approach that challenges the batterer’s reality is required to assist battered women to build a positive sense of identity. The counsellor used her understanding of the role thought reform

plays in the entrapment of battered women in battering relationships to inform her work with Cheryl.

- To assist Cheryl and her daughters to be physically safe. To stop any harassment over the telephone. (To install an answering machine to screen calls.) Refer Cheryl to a solicitor familiar with the law relating to family violence issues.
- Provide emotional support in counselling. To explore the emotional support available to Cheryl in her extended family to counter the power of the batterer.
- Assist Cheryl to regain her adult status, and to see herself as a parent rather than one of the children. Assist her to set appropriate boundaries with her daughters.
- Challenge the batterer's reality by providing Cheryl with an alternative view of herself, which diminishes her negative identity and assists her to rebuild a positive identity.
- Educate her about the process of thought reform and assist her to make the links with her own experience.
- To actively assist her to access and organize other appropriate assistance.
- Give her the opportunity to deal with her feelings of guilt. Show her that because of the thought reform process she had been unable to act in her own or her daughter's best interests. Discuss the difference between appropriate and inappropriate guilt. The aim is to have her able to determine whether or not guilt is the appropriate response to a given situation.

## Safety and Legal Issues

The solicitor assisted Cheryl with various legal issues that arose in counselling. These included how to go about gaining an intervention order, divorce, division of property, and child protection issues. It is important to say that Cheryl did not take out an Intervention Order on Russell because she was afraid it would inflame the situation. However, this was an informed choice on her part.

Cheryl had been so afraid of Russell that, before attending GV CASA, she had agreed not to seek her share of their property. With appropriate legal advice and counselling support, she decided to ask for her fair share of their property and she received it.

## Emotional Support In Therapy

Cheryl's counsellor understood that she needed to allow some dependency from Cheryl whilst working toward Cheryl attaining independence. Client dependency is a concern for social workers but the abused woman is unable to go from having her abuser make all her decisions for her to being independent in a short space of time. The issue of dependence was discussed with Cheryl.

After attending CASA for some time, Cheryl dropped in to see if she could speak to her counsellor without an appointment. She said, "I'm always here. I can't do anything unless I check with CASA first." Her counsellor said, "But that won't last forever, one day you won't need us, and went on to outline the progress Cheryl had already made in becoming independent.

Over time, Cheryl changed from talking with her counsellor before acting, to taking action and then telling the counsellor how she had handled the situation.

## Group Support

Cheryl attended an education group run by GV CASA in which the process of thought reform was explained. This provided a framework for her to understand her experience of abuse and its effects on her and her daughters. She was able to see the similarities of her experience with that of other abused women. One woman captured this experience when she said, “Are you sure we haven’t all been married to the same man?” Cheryl received and gave emotional support in the group.

## Family Support

Cheryl’s family is supportive of her. Her parents made a home that they normally rent out, available for her to live in. (Cheryl’s parents are working class and the home was purchased after many years of hard saving.) Her parents are retired and in their late sixties.

They requested counselling at CASA to help them to understand what was happening in their family. They wanted to know how to be helpful. They have Kate stay with them when it is difficult for her to stay with Cheryl. They are firm with Kate but not punitive. (Kate has been quite a challenge at times with her violence, abuse and manipulation.)

Having no experience of abuse himself Cheryl’s brother believes families ought to be able to work out their difficulties. Cheryl says, “he’s naive.” Despite this, he and his family have maintained constant support for Cheryl, Kate and Emma over the five-year period. Many times he has travelled hundred’s of kilometres to transport Kate or Emma when things have been difficult for Cheryl. His family has had Kate stay for Christmas when it has been impossible for her to spend it with Cheryl and Emma.

## Peer Support

Cheryl has a peer group of women friends. They go to lunch regularly. They like and support each other. They have fun together. Cheryl has been re-socialized within this group.

Providing and tapping into existing emotional and social support is essential when assisting battered women to rebuild a positive sense of identity. Social and emotional isolation binds battered women to their abuser.

## Regaining Adult Status

Regaining adult status in the family has been a major, ongoing challenge for Cheryl. Kate and Emma continue to attempt to control her through physical coercion and psychological manipulation. Despite this, Cheryl has shown patience, compassion and wisdom in dealing with them.

## Rebuilding a Positive Identity

Cheryl was asked to think about things she was good at or had enjoyed before she was abused. It was suggested that she re-introduce any of these activities into her life

Cheryl had played a musical instrument before she was married. However, she did not play during the 16 years of her marriage. She took up playing this instrument again after separation and has learnt to play two new instruments as well. She now gets regular work in a band. She gets on well with the band members.

Cheryl has other, regular permanent-part-time work. She was not capable of working at all when she first came to CASA.

Her concentration has improved greatly during the last 12 months. She thinks she would be able to learn in a formal educational setting now.

### How is Cheryl Today?

Cheryl has a positive sense of identity that has been hard won. She has regained her adult status. She has appropriate boundaries with her daughters and in her life generally. She understands the difference between inappropriate and appropriate guilt.

She has lived alone for some five years now. She thinks for herself. She likes herself. She is aware of her vulnerabilities. She has good judgement about what is good for her life. She manages all aspects of her life well. She will never return to her abuser. Nor will she enter another abusive relationship. She understands and can recognize the thought reform process of entrapment in battering relationships. Currently she is in a relationship with a man. She does not live with him and both have agreed to take time to decide whether they want a committed relationship. Unbeknownst to him he has had to pass many tests to establish himself as a non-abusive man. Cheryl knows that she does not need this man to survive, but she enjoys his company.

### How Is Kate?

Kate's behaviour is defiant and oppositional. She has depression. She lives alone and is somewhat reclusive. She does not work. She is not furthering her education. She lives some 300 kilometres from Cheryl. Cheryl keeps in touch with her by telephone. Kate has joined a church group. Cheryl hopes she might find the nurturing and socialization she needs there. Kate refuses to have counselling. She sees it as a sign of weakness.

## How Is Emma?

Emma has an oppositional, defiant style like Kate. She has a part time job but her defiant and volatile manner is a barrier to its longevity. She has anorexia. She attended counselling for a short period. Some progress was made during that time, but there is a long way to go before she will be able to live her life without resorting to intimidation and manipulation of those around her.

In June this year Emma and a boyfriend trashed Cheryl's house. Emma had intimidated and threatened Cheryl for too long. Reluctantly but with resolve Cheryl took out an Intervention Order on Emma. Cheryl could no longer sustain the continual fear for her safety and loss of her possessions caused by Emma's persistent threats and psychological manipulation.

## Conclusion

Assisting families like Cheryl and her daughters is long term work. Developing a positive identity takes time. Allowing short-term dependency whilst providing the means for future independence is important. As is being able to openly discuss with the client behaviour and beliefs in the context of the thought reform process. This paper demonstrates how understanding the process of thought reform is valuable in assessment and intervention with battered women.

## Postscript

In 1999 Cheryl brought a newspaper cutting into GVCASA. The headlines read “Court told of alleged gunman’s threat: This is the End”. Court told man tried to shoot girlfriend. The gunman was Russell, Cheryl’s ex-husband.

The article said he had held a gun to his girlfriend’s head and fired. The loaded gun misfired and she escaped when Russell went to get another gun. The article went on to say that two days earlier he had fired shots into his girlfriend’s house. He had apologized and she did not report the incident to the police.

Cheryl had been afraid Russell was capable of lethal violence. Deplorable as this action was, Cheryl now felt validated. Many people had not believed her when she told them Russell was violent.

Kate and Emma were shocked and ashamed of their father. In the past they had seen him as strong and felt contempt for what they saw as Cheryl’s weakness. Russell actively encouraged these opinions. The attempted murder however challenged their beliefs about their father. They too knew that he could have killed them.

Today Cheryl is decisive, she can tell you clearly whether she would like tea or coffee or when an appointment time will suit her.

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