Reflection

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When I first began my study of the psychological impact of domestic violence on the battered woman, it was the mid 1970s and the feminist movement had a negative reaction to anything that came with a clinical psychology label. I was fascinated with the fact that the hundreds of women I interviewed had such great difficulty in believing in their own ability to escape from the battering relationship, yet they had incredible coping skills to stay alive and minimize the harm they and their families experienced. The standard clinical psychology diagnoses or theories, including the ever-popular "masochism" or even "low self-esteem," could not account for the complexity of battered women's lives, nor could it explain the impact of the dual nature of the batterer who was sometimes very loving and other times extraordinarily mean and abusive. A social psychology theory that also accounted for personal behavior adding motivational factors seemed to be a more comprehensive approach.

I chose Seligman's theory of learned helplessness to study for several reasons: first, it is an economical explanation of the loss of escape skills with simultaneous development of extraordinary coping strategies to stay alive. After all, Seligman and his colleagues' dogs found the safest place in the cage to stay where they would experience the least pain from shock that was administered even if they couldn't stop it or leave the cage. Second, the feminist theory that accounted for gender differences in the experience of motivation once the link between cause and effect was broken was neatly accounted for in the social-learning theory that looked at attribution from personal efficacy and from luck or situational factors. Women's socialization was thought to interfere with women's ability to believe in their own competence in certain areas. Third, the theory accounted for the impact of the duality of the batterer's behavior. His Dr. Jeckyll–Mr. Hyde performance was analogous to the random and variable aversive stimulation in the animal and college student laboratory experiments. The women could learn the contingencies, the batterer's behavior would no longer be experienced as random and variable, and the psychological impact of the abuse would be lessened. Fourth, the theory accounted for reversibility. The dogs had to be shown over and over again how to escape, but they could relearn their original skills. So too for battered women. With participation in groups or individual therapy, battered women could relearn how to protect themselves and their children, even if it meant leaving the relationship.

I was delighted to find that the research supported the theoretical formulations applying learned helplessness theories to the experience of battered women. Here was a non-pathologizing theoretical explanation with good scientific grounding that could explain why battered women behaved in ways that puzzled friends, family, and service providers. Imagine my surprise when I found the theory misunderstood because of its name—learned helplessness—which was said to imply that the women were helpless and not able to do any of the courageous strategies that were so evident in the research. I was frustrated with the inability to explain the theory adequately to get beyond a decidedly erroneous image that the title gives it. The theory was highly successful in persuading juries to understand how

battered women killed their abusive partners in self-defense and it was helpful in designing intervention strategies to help them become empowered and find safety. But, even psychology colleagues misunderstood its scientific underpinnings because of the title. Although Seligman himself has changed the title to "learned optimism," emphasizing the motivational piece that makes it more positive psychology, the misunderstanding and misapplication of the theoretical premises still remain rampant in the battered women's community. Nevertheless, twenty-five years later, I still believe that the scientific understanding of the psychological impact on battered women is well accounted for by this theory and my only regret is that I was unable to explain it better so it would have had wider acceptance to help battered women find safety and heal from their experiences.