

What's Wrong with the Duluth Model?

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Batterer treatment programs around the world are adopting the "Duluth model," perhaps the most widespread of the male-patriarchy batterers' programs, with trainings in hundreds of cities across the country and a recent series of Marine Corps contracts. It promotes a gender-polarizing view that battering is a conscious strategy by men to assert male dominance over women.

What *is* the Duluth Model? It was created by the Duluth, Minnesota Domestic Abuse Intervention Project. It's described in detail in Pence, E., and Paymer, M. *Education Groups For Men Who Batter: The Duluth Model*. The "Power and Control Wheel," central to the model, "depicts the primary abusive behaviors experienced by **women** living with **men** who batter." [emphasis added] There's no doubt that it reflects a feminist ideology of male oppression of women.

What's *wrong* with it? Here's what experts have to say:

- **It's about blaming and shaming men, more than giving them the insights and support to help them stop their abusive behavior.**

The Duluth Model preaches that men who batter don't have a personal problem, but are simply reflecting "a culture that teaches men to dominate." John Everingham, co-author of *Men Healing Shame* and a professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago, calls this "shame of male for being male." But shaming is a *cause* of rage, not a *cure* for it.

Is wife-beating an accepted cultural norm? Think about it: do *you* know any man who thinks that beating your wife is "normal" or "OK"? Psychologist Donald G. Dutton, author of five books about spousal abuse by men and expert witness in the O.J. Simpson trial, says, "Men who have been convicted of wife assault do not generally feel that what they did was acceptable. Instead they feel guilty, deny and minimize the violence, and try to exculpate themselves in the manner of one whose actions are unacceptable to oneself." He points out, "the vast majority of men are non-assaultive for the duration of their marriage." And as violence escalates beyond pushes and slaps, "the size of this minority group of perpetrators shrinks."

The Duluth Model is a "blame and shame" behavior modification approach, focusing only on the perpetrator's role. This approach is used often with prisoners. Rule infractions result in punishment, and "good behavior" (absence of rule-breaking) results in early release. A different approach sees anger and violence as part of a "dance" between two people in an intimate relationship. The approach is to examine the role of *each* party, so that *both* may be empowered to make decisions in their own lives. This model is used in many successful prison *rehabilitation* programs and in AA, which holds people accountable for their lives without "blaming and shaming."

- **It's based on ideology, not science.**

The authors of the book on the model make no bones about it:

The tactics used by batterers reflect the tactics used by many groups or individuals in positions of power. Each of the tactics depicted on the Power and Control Wheel are typical of behaviors used by groups of people who dominate others. They are the tactics employed to sustain racism, ageism, classism, heterosexism, anti-Semitism, and many other

forms of group domination. Men in particular are taught these tactics in both their families of origin and through their experiences in a culture that teaches men to dominate. ...We use gender-specific terms not only because the curriculum is for men who batter, but because battering is not a gender-neutral issue.

The model was developed, not by a team of psychologists and research scientists, but in consultation with "a small group of activists in the battered women's movement," and "more than 200 battered women in Duluth." The Power and Control Wheel names eight factors contributing to domestic violence, including "using male privilege" and "using economic abuse." It relies heavily on Dobash & Dobash, *Violence Against Wives: A Case Against the Patriarchy*, who state: "[The] long patriarchal tradition... was explicitly established in the institutional practices of both the church and the state and supported by some of the most prominent political, legal, religious, philosophical, and literary figures in Western society... They believed that men had the right to dominate and control women and that women were by their very nature subservient to men. This relationship was deemed natural, sacred and unproblematic and such beliefs resulted in long periods of disregard and/or denial of the husband's abuses of his economic, political and physical power."

The model rejects treatment through insight models, family systems theory or cognitive-behavioral models in favor of what supporters call a "sociopolitical model" and San Jose therapist Eric Towle calls a "radical feminist re-education camp," where battery is equated with masculinity. The goal of sociopolitical therapy is to "challenge sexist expectations and controlling behaviors that often inhibit men and motivate them to learn to apply newly learned skills in a consistently non-controlling manner." Intervention deals with sexist expectations and attitudes.

Psychologist Dutton wrote an article outlining all the evidence feminist researchers and proponents of the model had to **overlook**, because it contradicted their ideological paradigm. As he put it, "Paradigms direct research, but *they also serve to deflect critical analysis of the paradigms' own central tenets through diverting attention from contradictory data.* A form of 'groupthink' ensues whereby dissent is stifled by directing attention from potential contradictory information." Amy Holtzworth-Munroe, associate professor of psychology at Indiana University, says, "states are basing rigid treatment policy on rhetoric and ideology, not data."

What evidence *is* overlooked? For starters, the fact that *most* men are *not* violent to their wives or lovers. Dutton estimates that 80% of the men who *do* beat their intimates have drinking or drug problems, Borderline Personality Disorders, or other diagnosable psychological pathology.

- **It ignores drinking, drugs, Borderline Personality Disorder and other serious psychological problems.**

As Cathy Young, author of [*Ceasefire: Why Women and Men Must Join Forces to Achieve True Equality*](#) states, "Dutton and other researchers have found that wife-beating is far more strongly associated with 'borderline personality disorder' (characterized by proclivity for intense relationships, insecurity, and rage) than with patriarchal attitudes; drugs and alcohol are major factors as well."

Dr. Dutton's concern is echoed by Paul T. Mason, M.S. and Randi Kreger, authors of *Walking on Eggshells*, who see Borderline Personality Disorder at the heart of a lot of domestic violence. And, they point out, 75% of the people with BPD are *women*. A focus on "male oppression" must, by definition, overlook this important contributor to domestic violence.

Yale psychiatrist Sally L. Satel uses the case of "Don" for an example. "Don's group leaders were adamant that alcohol was never a cause of violence. Feminist theory downplays the relevance of alcohol abuse, and as a particularly foolish result in Don's program, failed to make sobriety a condition of the treatment for domestic batterers." The National Association of Alcoholism and Drug Abuse Counselors' Nov/Dec 1998 issue of *The Counselor* raises concern about this issue.

- **It says there is only one cause for domestic violence, and only one solution.**

This approach rejects joint therapy in all cases, even when the woman feels safe and wants to keep the marriage together. San Diego judge William Cannon says, "It's ridiculous. We treat women as brainless individuals who are unable to make choices."

Washington state specifically prohibits joint therapy, even in conjunction with the Duluth Model. One Bellevue therapist almost lost his license for merely *proposing joint therapy to another therapist*.

Satel states: "In at least a dozen states, including Massachusetts, Colorado, Florida, Washington, and Texas, state guidelines effectively preclude any treatment other than feminist therapy for domestic batterers."

Satel points out that these policies would outlaw, for instance, the kind of help that saved the decade-long marriage of a midwestern couple we'll call 'Steve and Lois M.' After their last fight, in which he gave Mrs. M. a fractured arm, she gave him an ultimatum: unless he went with her to marriage therapy, she would take their nine-year-old son and leave. He agreed, and the couple saw Eve Lipchik, a Milwaukee, Wisconsin expert in family therapy. 'One can still deplore the aggression and be an advocate for the relationship when two people want to stay together and are motivated to make changes in the relationship,' says Lipchik. 'It's too easy to stuff people into boxes labeled villains and victims.'"

Satel asserts, "Many advocates are also apparently so blinded by ideology that they are unable to draw distinctions between types of abusers. Some men, for example, are first-time offenders, others are brutal recidivists, others attack rarely but harshly, others frequently but less severely, and many are alcoholics. Such a heterogeneous population cannot be treated with a one-size-fits-all approach."

- **There's no real evidence it works.**

The best we have is one-month follow-ups. Satel points out that women are advised to leave their husbands; the programs have no faith that the indoctrination they offer actually *works*.

- **It ignores domestic violence by women.**

The (U.S.) National Violence Against Women survey estimates that each year 1.5 million women and 835,000 men are assaulted by intimate partners. The (U.S.) National Child Abuse and Data System reports that over 55% of the physical abuse of children is by women. Dr. Dutton points out that lesbian relationships were significantly more violent than gay relationships; rates of verbal, physical and sexual abuse were all significantly higher in lesbian relationships than in heterosexual relationships; and in one sample of women, 78.2% had been in a prior relationship with a man: reports of violence by men were all lower than reports of violence in prior relationships with women.

All of these findings refute the notion that family violence is caused by male control of women. They are ignored by domestic violence "experts" and the media because

they contradict the ideological paradigm of these programs, that family violence is men's efforts to control women. One result is that there is virtually *no* public education, victim outreach and education, or help for battered **men**.

Is domestic violence by women in self-defense? Dr. Martin Fiebert of the University of California at Long Beach surveyed almost 1,000 women, 280 of whom had initiated an assault on their partner. The most common reasons? "My partner wasn't sensitive to my needs." "I wished to gain my partner's attention." "My partner was not listening to me." These all ranked above "My partner was being verbally abusive to me."

- **Women who need help can't get it.**

A [Detroit News special report](#) on battered husbands provides a dramatic example.

For 13 years, Karen Gillhespy was the abuser. She says she broke her husband's ribs, ripped entire patches of his hair out, scratched him, bit him, beat him with a baseball bat and kicked him. He never hit back -- and he never filed charges. But more shocking to Gillhespy are the reactions she encountered telling her story. "They told me I was the victim," said Gillhespy. "Here's no way any of this was his fault."

Cathy Young, author of [Ceasefire](#), quotes a letter from a shelter that gives as an example of assault by the *husband*, "In an argument, 'Mrs. C. grabbed Mr. C. by his necktie (and) he pushed her away. Mrs. C. then punched his face and her nail cut his neck.'" Domestic violence researcher Suzanne Steinmetz says this is common, and is simply one more way that a woman's experience is devalued. "The bottom line is that women get the short end of the stick anyway. When we say women can't possibly be violent, she must have done it for some reason, we are in essence denying women services."

And programs that preach that male oppression is at the heart of domestic violence have nothing to offer to women who batter.

- **It's taught by "wounded healers."**

Shelter staffs and perpetrator treatment programs are often dominated by women who have been victims themselves. Maurice Oates, who co-founded a highly successful Native-based Circle of Harmony Healing Society in Terrace, British Columbia that works with couples on a voluntary basis, says: "We don't really give a damn about what white people think. All participants are considered equal and not adversaries. All our programs avoid sexual bias. Local gender feminists were telling us it would be a disaster. We call those people the 'wounded healers' because they try to help people, but they have not yet dealt with their own pain and agony."

- **It's a gender-polarizing approach that only serves to perpetrate the "battle of the sexes."**

Cathy Young, author of [Ceasefire: Why Women and Men Must Join Forces to Achieve True Equality](#), states:

The most obvious casualties of the War on Domestic Violence have been men, particularly men involved in contentious divorces. But it has also hurt many of the women who are its intended beneficiaries. Part of the problem is the one-size-fits-all approach to domestic violence. For many couples in violent relationships, particularly those involved in mutual violence, joint counseling offers the best solution. But if they have come to the attention of the authorities, it's one form of counseling to which they are unlikely to be referred. Couples therapy is vehemently opposed

by battered women's advocates--ostensibly out of concern for women's safety, but also because of the implication that both partners must change their behavior.

Yale psychiatrist Sally Satel states:

Like so many projects of the feminist agenda, the battered women's movement has outlived its useful beginnings, which was to help women leave violent relationships and persuade the legal system to take domestic abuse more seriously. Now they have brought us to a point at which a single complaint touches off an irreversible cascade of useless and often destructive legal and therapeutic events. This could well have a chilling effect upon victims of real violence, who may be reluctant to file police reports or to seek help if it subjects them to further battery from the authorities. And it certainly won't help violent men if they emerge from so-called treatment programs no more enlightened but certainly more angry, more resentful, and as dangerous as ever.

My thanks to Erin Pizzey, founder of the first shelter for battered women and author of Prone to Violence, the controversial first book to explore violence in women. She challenged me to write this piece, to use in speaking out against attempts to implement this model in the UK.