AMERICAN ORTHODOX JEWISH WOMEN AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: AN INTERVENTION DESIGN

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Abstract

Orthodox Jewish women who experience domestic violence face unique challenges when seeking aid and assistance. This paper presents an intervention design developed to help these women and their husbands cease their patterns of violence. Both rabbis and social workers are involved in this process, which includes strategies to reduce enactments with male authority figures and the use of therapeutic metaphor, all within a framework of the Orthodox Jewish tradition. In the intervention design presented, the larger Orthodox community is encouraged to participate in helping these women by making their synagogues into places of safety and tolerance.

While there are between five and six million Jews in the United States, or 1.7%-2.2% of the country's population, only about 600,000 people in all of North America consider themselves Orthodox Jews as of 2009, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Orthodox Jews comprise a highly religious sect that follows the most literal interpretations of ancient Jewish laws (Steinmetz and Haj-Yahia 2006). Because they tend to live in closed communities (Hurst and Mott 2006), they are nearly invisible to the larger population. Therefore, the developmental issues and service needs that affect this small population are generally unknown in social work practice. For example, Chicago has no particular intervention ready for Orthodox Jewish women suffering the effects of domestic violence. But the unique life experiences of this small group of women demand special attention, for they are not only survivors of violence, but survivors with a unique developmental history. This paper presents an intervention strategy designed for women in this community.

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WOMEN AND JEWISH ORTHODOXY

Jewish people pride themselves on having harmonious, violence-free relationships and since Orthodox Judaism encourages men to be stable and rational, spousal abuse is not recognized as an issue (Steinmetz and Haj-Yahia 2006). Although Orthodox Judaism has moved in a slightly more egalitarian direction (Hurst and Mott 2006), most women born into Orthodox Jewish families begin their lives with a specific script defining what it means to be a woman: the social and religious realms belong to the man, whereas the hearth and home are the realms of women. According to Jewish law, known as *Halakha*, women are not allowed to engage in religious leadership roles and are to perform the tasks that maintain the family's health and happiness, and to support the growth of the children.

They may study the Torah and the Talmud, the Jewish holy texts, but there are few avenues for Orthodox women to assert their opinions about what they read (Rich 2002). Men write, read, and interpret the rules of Judaism and women are subject to the interpretations of their fathers, rabbis, and husbands. Some progressive Orthodox synagogues have found some limited ways to expand the role for women in religious life, but practices such as an all-women's Torah study group are typically met with disapproval by the ultra-Orthodox community.

Of particular interest in relation to the issue of domestic violence is that the Jewish laws dictating rules of modesty and relations between men and women, *Tzniut*, includes a prohibition on men listening to the sound of a woman singing. The only exemptions to the singing law are when women are singing to their children or singing songs for the dead—activities considered household necessities (Jachter 2002). While this law only applies to singing, not speaking, there is an underlying implication that women's voices have a dangerous quality. Men are warned not to listen to women, for fear that they will be greatly moved or swayed from their course of action. Men are allowed to listen to women speak, but it seems that if women's voices are to be avoided in one context, they may not be given much respect in another context. The responsibility seems to lie with the women, who must not sing around the men, for it will not always be possible for a man to leave the presence of a singing woman. The message to women, then, is that it is their duty to keep quiet in any situation when they might be overheard. Perhaps they will even refrain from singing in situations where they think they are alone, just in case a man was to enter unexpectedly. Silence is safer than the risk of making forbidden sounds.

Another relevant aspect of *Tzniut* is the law protecting the modesty, safety, and chastity of Jewish women by prohibiting men and women being alone together unless related by blood or marriage The implication is that violence and dangerous sexual interaction are only likely to occur between unrelated men and women. There is no recognition of the dangers between married men and women. While Jewish law forbids physical contact with the opposite sex outside of the family, sexual relations and physical contact between husband and wife are required; it is the man's duty to have intercourse with his wife, and she is prohibited from refusing him (Guterman 2008). There is no clear way, then, for an Orthodox woman to conceptualize her husband's actions of violence as the law allows him to touch her as he chooses in all situations.

Since Orthodox Jewish women have been instructed that they have a submissive role in relation to men, it becomes apparent that treatment of abused women in this group may be extremely challenging. Social workers who will assist victims from this population must be aware of the unique developmental issues and relational dynamics of Orthodox women. These women may be difficult to engage because of the unique combination of shame, isolation, and denial of the problem (or their control over it) that may emerge from someone within the Orthodox community. Social workers treating these clients must recognize that they come from an oppressed population—both as Jews themselves, and as women within the Jewish community—and that their experiences with powerful male authority figures may lead to enactments with their rabbis or other helping professionals. Even though American Orthodox Jews are frequently middle-class and of white-European descent, one must not assume that as Americans, they are fully integrated with mainstream American society. These factors make this a particularly difficult population with which to intervene, but the possibility for positive change is tremendous if an intervention is handled appropriately and respectfully.

CREATING A DOMESTIC VIOLENCE INTERVENTION

The modern American domestic violence movement is saturated with views such as those expressed on the website, DomesticViolence.org: "Domestic violence should never happen to anybody. Ever. Period." This same website —the first website that comes up when one performs an internet search for "domestic violence"—also says that women can and should leave their abusive partners quickly and safely. There is no discussion of women living in isolated communities, however. In such communities a woman might find that even her close family members might not support a choice to leave her husband. Social workers may find that Orthodox Jewish women have a stronger drive to maintain the marriage in spite of the abuse. Social workers should be prepared for their clients from this community to prefer working out their problems with their husband rather than simply leave a violent situation. For women who live their whole lives according to a specific set of religious laws, the assumptions illustrated by the secular website above are unlikely to reach women operating on deeply-held religious beliefs.

Given these dynamics, any intervention that targets the Orthodox Jewish community must come from an understanding of Jewish laws and traditions and be based on respect for the lived experience of Orthodox women. Unfortunately, there are few programs prepared to meet the needs of these women. Project S.A.R.A.H. in New Jersey is one of the very few programs designed to work with women who have experienced domestic violence in the Orthodox Jewish community. Its premise is that neither domestic violence training nor an understanding of Jewish law is sufficient on their own to be of service to these families. But Project S.A.R.A.H. does not explicitly discuss how the developmental issues of Orthodox women may affect their perception of what constitutes an unacceptably violent relationship (East and Stein 2008).

The intervention proposed here fulfills that need. It includes four components: the formation of a women's group at the Orthodox synagogue, individual assessment, a home visit performed by a rabbi and a female social worker, and a community outreach component led by the congregation's rabbis. It combines the work of religious leaders and a social worker trained to conduct treatment within the parameters outlined below.

Orthodox women's group. Because abuse survivors are often afraid to commit a *shonda*, or to bring embarrassment upon their families and communities (Dratch 2006e), the Orthodox women's group is not limited to victims of abuse. Ideally, it will attract women who are in a variety of different marital relationships. Inviting these women to come together in an open forum might encourage women in need of help to make connections with other women who can provide support. The group will consist of two parts.

First, led by a prominent female community member, the women join together to sing traditional songs. By introducing a space where women can sing freely and as loud as they wish, the hope is that women become comfortable hearing the sound of their own voice and the voices of other women. If they can then identify with their feeling of silence and powerlessness, perhaps they will learn to break through it in multiple areas of their life, guided by the capacities of their singing voices (Siegelman 1990). This exercise in vocal power is designed to carry forward into the Talmud study group led by a rabbi.

Second, a rabbi provides a brief study of Jewish laws related to the relations between men and women and the possibility for violence between them. More and more rabbis are learning that the problem of domestic violence does exist in Jewish communities, and there are training programs designed to teach them how to address this topic with their congregations and it has been shown that Orthodox Jews respond well to domestic violence programming and services that are marked with rabbinical approval (East and Stein 2008). Here the rabbi does not perform the role of male authority-figure since Orthodox women might then begin to reenact a pattern of submission (McWilliams 1999). The rabbi's position is not to correct or critique the thoughts of the women in the group, but to help them deeply explore the Jewish laws and discuss their meaning in relation to controversial gender and family based topics (Cohen 1998). Sessions should end with rabbis reminding women that if they would like to discuss these issues further, they are encouraged to meet with their rabbi privately at any time.

Individual assessment. When a woman from the group meets with the rabbi in his office, a female social worker with an extensive knowledge of Orthodox Judaism will be present. This both adheres to the law which states that another person must be present with the rabbi and a woman so as to uphold the laws of modesty and allows the social worker to begin operating within the confines of the community. Together the rabbi and social worker can perform crisis assessments. This intervention is concerned with women for whom partner abuse occurs within a religious context. Since such cases can be seen as a serious misinterpretation of Jewish law within an already patriarchal religious system, the social worker and the rabbi must intervene directly in addition to referring the victim to various community resources. Throughout all stages of the intervention, while the rabbi can address the religious components, the tone of meetings and the interactions of the wife and husband must be carefully monitored by the social worker.

In furthering the work with such clients, Madsen (1999) suggests not asking these survivors what they have done to attempt to solve the problem in the past. In this case, with such an isolated and disempowered group, this line of questioning would likely lead to the woman being reminded that nothing she has done has been able to change her husband's behavior. She may blame herself even further, and be even less convinced of her own agency. Similarly, when dealing with a domestic violence relationship, putting too much focus on the survivor's behavior may inadvertently blame them for their husband's abuse. It may be beneficial to ask the woman what she would like to see different in her marriage. Whether or not she originally believes she can make changes, listing out her desires in detail is a step toward achieving them.

The rabbi and the social worker provide an opportunity for a partnership with the woman, leaving subsequent steps to her discretion. Home visits by the rabbi and social worker are one such option. Depending on the marriage and the husband's trust of the rabbi, the woman may feel comfortable making the purpose of the home visit explicit, or she may prefer that it be masked. If the woman does decide to proceed with a home visit, the rabbi will be there to discuss the marriage from the perspective of Jewish laws and traditions, and the social worker will help encourage positive communication and collaborative goal-setting. The violence may or may not be mentioned explicitly. If the violence is addressed directly, the rabbi and social worker shall not immediately demonize or criticize this fact. As long as the wife wants to solve this problem mutually with her husband, neither party can be alienated from the intervention. Angering the husband may in fact be quite dangerous; outbursts of violence tend to be more extreme after a victim leaves her partner or attempts to involve the authorities. Instead, the social worker and rabbi will attempt to help the family by respecting both stories, and helping both partners think about how their actions affect the other (Nichols and Schwartz 2005, 275).

Using core conflictual relationship themes and goal-setting. The social worker may find it helpful to search for the Core Conflictual Relationship Themes (CCRTs) expressed by both the husband and wife. Throughout the home visit, the social worker should attend to stories about *relationship episodes;* such episodes consist of a person expressing a clear wish for something to happen within a relationship, there is a response to that wish from their partner, and a final response from the original person (Book 1998). An example of a CCRT in an Orthodox marriage may be the wife wishing that she could feel like an equal to her husband, but when she attempts to assert some control, he hits her or reprimands her harshly. Her response to him may be to isolate, to engage in self-blame, and to be reluctant to assert herself in the future. Describing this CCRT in front of her husband could be a very powerful experience; if his actions have encouraged her to hide her feelings, he may have been relatively unaware of the damaging affect of his behavior on her psyche. The design here borrows from the narrative approach of family therapy, for if violence is acknowledged, this is part of her story, and the husband will be asked to hear about the pain and fear that he causes his wife. The husband should also be encouraged to tell his own story and the wife will be asked to listen, to acknowledge any stories of shame or guilt that he tells about his behavior.

Because both Orthodox men and women spend much of their lives secluded from the opposite sex, husband and wife may find themselves endlessly repeating the gender roles that were established at a very young age (Hurst and Mott 2006). This intervention is designed both to put a stop to this repetition, and to foster new patterns of marital interaction that are still compatible with Orthodox Jewish tradition.

In addition to the use of CCRTs and the desired areas of change, the intervention relies on a collaborative goal-setting process. Without stating outright that the clients have “a problem” that requires action, the social worker helps the clients develop a mutual goal for their marriage. The social worker elicits details of the goal; for example, what it will look like when the goal has been accomplished, and what behaviors could they each do to step toward the goal. With any family for whom violence is an issue, the rabbi and the social worker will request at least one follow-up session either at the home, or at a private office in the synagogue. The decision for this step should be made by the couple. It is important to let the couple know that any information disclosed in any session will be kept utterly private from the other families in the congregation as this encourages trust and a feeling of safety.

The role of Jewish law and the community. While the social worker is helping men and women focus on collaborative goal-setting, the rabbi will help the couple conceptualize their problems within the context of Jewish traditions. Here the work of Rabbi Mark Dratch (2006c) is very useful and relevant. For example, in his sermon on *Shalom Bayit*, or family peace, Dratch addresses the Orthodox law which states that any money that the woman earns must go toward the betterment of the household, and must be given to the husband to spend as he sees fit. While acknowledging this law, Dratch shows that because it is the husband’s responsibility under the law to spend his money wisely and provide well for his wife, the law actually creates a form of reciprocity and that the gender roles outlined in Jewish law need not result in an imbalance of power or in violence.

The intervention is designed to suggest a recognition that Jewish law states most marital obligations are not required if the couple mutually chooses to abandon them. Therefore, it is appropriate under Jewish law for Orthodox couples to rewrite their household division of labor, or for a wife to help her husband make financial decisions, if they mutually conclude that doing so would be beneficial to their frayed relationship. The rabbi can therefore provide the religious context in which couples seek out new ways to interact. The abusive partner can be shown that domestic violence is not only in violation of Jewish law—which commands that married partners treat each other with kindness and respect—but it is a sin that cannot solely be forgiven by God. For sins against another human being, it is necessary to earn the forgiveness of the person wronged before the divine forgiveness is bestowed, and only sincere apologies need be forgiven under God’s law (Dratch 2002). Once the wife is in a place where she can forgive him, he can also experience the gift of forgiveness by forgiving his wife when he feels angry. Instead of letting anger rule him, he too can practice forgiveness. Both parties can endeavor together to be more forgiving; it fits in accordance with Jewish tradition and it can be another goal that the social worker can help them work toward.

In order for this intervention to appear viable, the rabbi needs to set up the congregation as a place of safety for domestic violence survivors. Interestingly, the place where the holy books are kept in the synagogue is referred to as the *sanctuary*. The rabbi can turn the idea of sanctuary into a metaphor that encompasses the whole congregation by announcing to them that the sanctuary holds the most sacred of objects, and now this synagogue will be a sanctuary for those who are suffering at the hands of another. For those women who do not have money at their disposal, the rabbi can set up a fund where a part of the synagogue's financial resources can support women in the congregation who are planning to leave violent husbands. Resources for domestic violence shelters, counselors, and support groups—both geared toward Orthodox women and more mainstream programs—are to be posted in the women's rooms of the synagogue. In this context, the social worker can help recruit families to offer room in their homes to women in the congregation who are trying to secretly and safely leave their husbands and seek help.

In order to spread the idea of the sanctuary throughout the congregation, the rabbi will address domestic violence in his sermons as a community issue that demands attention. The rabbi must acknowledge how hard it is for Jews to admit that fellow Jews are capable of such violent actions. However, Jewish law states that Jews have an obligation to both support and rely on each other. Abuse against one Jew weakens the strength of the community, particularly in the small neighborhoods in which Orthodox Jews tend to live (Dratch 2006a). Another sermon topic that could expand the notion of synagogue as a sanctuary is to encourage congregants to speak up to the rabbi or other authorities when violence occurs. *Lashon Hara* means gossip or slander, and it is typically prohibited in Orthodox Jewish communities. The rabbi must identify *Lashon Hara* as a law that is frequently misused as a tool to keep victims from speaking out against their abusers. The rabbi must remind the congregation that God commands the Orthodox Jews to follow all laws, unless it would be dangerous to do so. For example, the young, the old, and the sick are not to fast on Yom Kippur for the sake of their own health. In this vein, abused women are hereby exempt at this synagogue from the principle of *Lashon Hara*, and those congregants who become aware of interpersonal violence in their community are in fact obligated to report it and protect others from danger (Dratch 2006b). Such sermons encourage community involvement and engagement in the issue of domestic violence. They also tie all Jews together as people who have suffered and must protect each other from suffering. The synagogue is identified as a safe space with trusted authorities who will listen to, and support, victims. Domestic violence and other issues rarely talked about in Orthodox life are thereby unearthed and acknowledged. This acknowledgement empowers the victims in the congregation by giving validation to their experiences and support for their mental and physical health. All of these principles fit with Bloom's (2000) notion of what constitutes a therapeutic sanctuary, and the synagogue would start to become a place where the traumatized can go to seek healing.

CONCLUSION

Mainstream domestic violence projects, and even Project S.A.R.A.H., seem to respond to every instance of violence by separating the husband and wife and giving them separate counseling. This intervention presented here will always give the couple a greater range of agency and choice. Survivors are given a great deal of self-determination as they choose how to respond to their difficult family situations. Singing and studying in a women's group may help female congregants feel a sense of empowerment, while the entire congregation will learn from the rabbi's sermons that the synagogue is now a place of sanctuary for the abused. The home visit intervention will take into careful consideration all the developmental issues with which Orthodox men and women have been raised. The social worker and rabbi, trained and prepared, will help call attention to instances of old relationships being re-enacted, or a husband's self-loathing being projected onto his wife, or how the long history of Jewish oppression can still affect Jews living today. By integrating these components, the intervention helps Orthodox Jewish women, a population frequently misunderstood and underserved, realize that there is the opportunity to make some changes in their lives.

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