Hard Knocks

Domestic Violence and the Psychology of Storytelling

SAMPLE CHAPTER

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INTRODUCTION

Stories about first experiences are as much about the present as they are about the past. In the course of writing this book, I often recalled my earliest consciousness-raising gathering. It was a divorce self-help group in the early 1970s—made up of mostly young white women, working low-wage jobs while going to school. Many of us had married during a time when college girls were expected to major in finding a good husband. With the dawning of a new age, many of us were now changing our majors. Wandering through the student union building at the University of Washington, I noticed a pink flyer offering the deliverance I was seeking: “For a fifty dollar filing fee, you can write your own divorce documents without the assistance of an attorney . . . come join us and learn together!”

Some in the group told stories of living hell—of having been brutally raped or beaten by their husbands. Others showed more ambiguous signs of suffering that, as Betty Friedan (1963) noted in The Feminine Mystique, “had no name.” We understood our task, though, of bringing our various marital grievances into compliance with the only legal escape clause available at that time prior to no-fault divorce—mental cruelty. In my case, when the judge asked me to explain the nature of the cruelty I had endured, he was met with my tears and downcast eyes. “I don’t want to talk about it,” I demurred, summoning the evasive modesty accorded to women addressing such intimacies. Lacking a dramatic story, I nonetheless knew the cues. The mental cruelty category encompassed a vast array of female complaints, even as it required a consistently dramatic performance.

By the 1990s, domestic violence had emerged as a “legitimate” container for the unhappiness of women and similarly came to carry considerable cultural freight. In churches, schools, and police departments, groups gathered to discuss the problem of domestic violence and school themselves in the power-and-control motives of abusive men. Even in conservative religious communities, workshops on domestic violence opened space for women to address less readily articulated grievances in addition to physical abuse, from the unfair division of domestic responsibilities to suffering the emotional cruelty of husbands (Haaken et al., 2007).
Hard Knocks builds on my previous work on explaining how stories of familial or domestic abuse acquire complex and varied social symbolic loadings over time (Haaken, 1998, 2002b, 2003). And much like my earlier work, this book enlists a long tradition of psychoanalytic feminist thought to advance a set of political aims. Although psychoanalysis has been used to pathologize women, it also has been used to diagnose those social pathologies that make women feel sick (Benjamin, 1988; Chodorow, 1978; Dinnerstein, 1976; Haaken, 1998; Layton et al., 2006; Ussher, 2003). In their emphasis on the dynamic interplay of rational and non-rational elements of human consciousness, psychoanalytic approaches to social problems challenge rigid categories between rational (coded as masculine) and irrational (coded as feminine). Further, we may be better able to recognize our collective capacities to stir things up. Any force for social change inevitably becomes a fantasy object for the broader culture—a repository for diffuse anxieties, fears, and longings. Just as the oppressed must learn to read between the lines of everyday encounters, so, too, must activists be equipped to read the subtexts of dominant modes of storytelling.

More than other major theoretical traditions in the field of psychology, psychoanalysis places storytelling at the center of human development. As such, it offers a rich legacy of ideas that may be applied to processes of individual and social transformation. Social change involves finding new uses for old stories, and means of breaking out of stereotypical scripts to find alternative denouements. How, for example, do we make use of the intrigue generated by the trope of “behind closed doors” in the domestic violence field and claim cultural space for less dramatic revelations of female suffering?1 And how do we separate the voyeuristic pleasures produced by portrayals of intimate hidden crimes from their subversive possibilities? These distinctions require that we listen closely to how the story is being told, to the positions of various protagonists, and to recurring themes, motifs, and subtexts in the narrative resolution of the drama.

In attending to storytelling dynamics in the history of domestic violence work, I describe throughout this book recurring plots and sub-plots deployed and chart their migrations across the political landscape. Although many advocates and activists in the domestic violence field are, themselves, battered women, others are engaged in the issue because the bruises and broken bones of women symbolize the broader struggle against patriarchy and sexism.2 Early organizers of Bradley Angle House in the United States, one of the oldest shelters in the world, describe how their stories of hard living and surviving on the streets aroused less interest than portraits of mothers escaping despotic husbands. At the same time, they recognized how wife beating was “a symbol for what was happening to us” (Bradley Angle, 1978: 44).

Stories recounted here are drawn from over 200 interviews with advocates in the field, as well as from films, novels, pamphlets, and self-help
books that were cited in the interviews and in the various training sessions and workshops that I attended over five years of field research. Through this research, I show how storytelling practices became increasingly stereotypical and narrowly scripted as battle fatigue overtook the field. Nonetheless, a rich storehouse of cultural knowledge emerged—much of which has operated “behind closed doors” in the movement itself. Storytelling served as the portal of entry to this background knowledge—what might be termed the social unconscious of the movement—and to forms of collective remembering that may be useful in thinking through present dilemmas.

This book takes its title from the idea that fighting for social change requires toughness. Women who have suffered the hardest knocks under patriarchy, whether victims of rape, incest, domestic assault, sex trafficking, or war, occupy special positions in the cultural legacy of grassroots feminism. More than other images of female victims, the stories of battered wives circulate as cautionary tales about the lethal potential of romantic love.

The title of the book also carries the echo of lessons from my childhood. While reverential toward places of higher learning, my father, who was never able to go to college, often described himself as a product of the “school of hard knocks.” He protected us from the full scope of his street curriculum, but one lesson was clear: It is important to stand up and fight for what you think is right. I took this lesson into my early feminist radicalism, adopting the principle that those who suffer the direct blows of the system are most positioned to resist it. Radical feminism took up this campaign of wife beating—as well as many other campaigns—with the toughness of a street fighter. And this toughness had its costs, just as it does for other fighters.

The book re-visits four battle zones in the history of this movement where narrative responses to conflicts rigidified over time and where signs of battle fatigue have been most acute. First, there is the conflict between the battered women’s movement and the state, and feminist ambivalence over the role of the police as both enemy and ally of abused women. A second front concerns the relationship between domestic violence and other social problems, and the question of whether woman battering is a special case that differs from other forms of social violence. The third conflict centers on tensions between groups of women within the movement, and how to address differences based on race, class, or other dimensions of power, including understandings of what constitutes violence. A fourth involves the contentious issue of how to acknowledge forms of female aggression while still preserving a gender analysis of intimate partner violence. In taking up this last conflict, I address what most advocates wrestle uneasily with on a day-to-day basis: the knowledge that many abused women bring complex psychological dynamics of their own into their embattled attachments (Renzetti, 1994, 1999; Ristock, 2002).
In working through dilemmas that arise in constructing stories about domestic abuse, I make use of one of the oldest rhetorical devices of the movement: the counterposing of myth and fact (Okum, 1986; Pagelow, 1992). From the earliest consciousness-raising of the 1970s through contemporary educational campaigns, advocates have distributed myth/fact sheets challenging conventional assumptions about abused women. For example, the assumption that “domestic violence is primarily a problem of poor people” may be followed by the “fact” that domestic violence cuts across all class and race boundaries. This coupling of counter-claims transfers the battered woman from the economic margins to the very center of society. The battered wife is recast as Every Woman.

In this book, I counterpose myth and what I term “counter-myth.” Rather than presenting feminist rebuttals as facts, I prefer the term “counter-myth” because it suggests a problematic affinity between the two claims. Indeed, the rhetorical dichotomizing of “myths” and “facts” builds on what Roland Barthes (1972: 129) describes as a key founding myth of bourgeois society—the assertion of facts separate from those signifying contexts (and forms of power) that produce knowledge: “The bourgeois class has precisely built its power on technical, scientific progress,” set in opposition to myth.4 Trumping myths with “factual claims” is part of this bourgeois universalizing tendency—the hubris of speaking as if from a position of nowhere.

The mythic disguise—what Barthes (1972) describes as the metalanguage of myth—lies in its disavowal of the web of linguistic and cultural signifiers surrounding its claims. The myth both declares a truth and prohibits scrutiny. In the claim that domestic violence is only a problem for poor people, for example, feminists rightfully expose the racist and class associations invoked through such speech acts. But the claim that domestic violence is more common in poor communities may be understood as a fact in either conservative or progressive ways, depending on the contexts enlisted in explaining links between poverty and violence.

My use of the term “counter-myth” in describing feminist “facts” does not mean that these refutations are false. In that they do “reveal the political load of the world” (Barthes, 1972: 146), feminist “facts” represent an advance over the claims they counter. But feminist facts operate as myths when they are accepted without question—when truth claims, in the words of Barthes (1972: 148), are “reduced to a litany.” Put psycho-analytically, facts may operate as an obsessive defense against ambiguity. And those areas where the lived experiences of women belie feminist factual claims—an issue taken up throughout this book—are precisely those areas where we can see group dynamics at work.

In analyzing dilemmas that have emerged in the history of the battered women’s movement, Hard Knocks also offers a theory of storytelling, with a particular focus on what I term “subversive storytelling.” Many scholars
who study the psychology of storytelling suggest that the mind is organized
to generate coherent accounts (Gergen & Gergen, 1986; Mankowski &
Rappaport, 1995; Nelson, 1989). Novel or emotionally arousing events are
particularly ripe for generating stories—for explaining what happened, why
it happened, and who was responsible (Bruner, 1990). But not all arousing
stories find receptive audiences—a point often overlooked in the social
scientific literature that maps this same cultural terrain. My focus on
subversive storytelling addresses this political dimension of the problem,
where contests emerge over the legitimacy of particular accounts and their
social interpretations (Haaken, 1998).

Stories are typically structured around a series of actions: something
happens that disrupts the normal state of affairs and a conflict (or series of
conflicts) arises that is then resolved by the end of the story. The denoue-
ment may be unhappy or ambiguous, but stories are expected to offer some
sort of ending. In my work as a clinician, research interviewer, and docu-
mentary filmmaker, I am particularly interested in the beginnings and
endings of stories. The beginning sets the stage for the framing of the
conflict and introduces the protagonists that drive the story forward. The
ending brings some form of closure, even as it may “repress” alternative
resolutions by appearing as the natural outcome of events. As Mark
Freeman (2004: 65) suggests, “only when a story has ended—whether the
ending is temporary, as in life, or permanent, as in death—is it possible to
discern the meaning and significance of what has come before.” Ideological
readings of stories require that we uncover the role of social power in this
narrative work of the ending and how ruling modes of story production
may foreclose on the range of alternative resolutions.

My own ambivalent struggle with radical feminist politics in the 1970s
and 1980s, as the strong and uncompromising “mother” of my early
political education, informs this project just as it does much of my earlier
scholarship on gender dynamics and processes of social change (Haaken,
gripping dramas portrayed in this book—have been much maligned by
critics. Donald Dutton (Dutton & Corvo, 2007; Dutton & Nicholls, 2005;
Dutton et al., 2009), a leading critic of feminist scholarship on domestic
violence, has built a career out of casting feminists as censorious and
powerful enough to block scientific advancements at the national level. His
characterizing of “the feminist paradigm” casts a wide and undifferentiated
net, however, over a complex history of feminist scholarship. Dutton offers
that radical feminism “views all social relations through the prism of gender
relations and holds, in its neo-Marxist view, that men (the bourgeoisie) hold
power advantages over women (the proletariat) in patriarchal societies . . .”
(Dutton & Nicholls, 2005: 682). This collapsing of feminist and Marxist
categories under the rubric of radical feminism overlooks the complex
history of feminist scholarship, including differences in liberal, cultural,
radical, socialist, and Marxist feminist positions on conceptualizing violence (Donovan, 1996). In summarily dismissing feminism, Dutton fails to map the very terrain on which he stakes his claims.

Yet it has been difficult for feminists as well to critically reflect on practices in the field of domestic violence. Many of the critiques presented here grew out of my social justice activism and work with feminists who attend to the intersections of interpersonal and structural forms of violence such as unemployment, poverty, and the prison/industrial complex (Crenshaw, 1994; Davis, 2000; Incite!, 2005; Richie, 2000; Sokoloff, 2005). Drawing on the moral authority and insights of women of color, I have, as a white feminist, called for more attentiveness to class and race as they shape experiences with and interpretations of domestic violence (Haaken, 2002a, 2008b). I also have been wary of over-reliance on the good female victim/bad male perpetrator typology because women, as well as men, can be cast out of the category of the “good” and viewed as collaborating with the enemy when questioning deeply held tenets in the field.5

Cathy Humphreys has pointed out the tendency to rely on “atrocity stories” in advancing the aim of child protection in the domestic violence field (Humphreys & Stanley, 2006: 21). My interest on a political level is to identify the relative progressiveness or regressiveness of a range of cultural narratives where the drama centers on a domestic abuse scene. Gergen and Gergen (1988, 1997) introduced these terms into narrative psychology to distinguish plots that move the protagonist forward developmentally through the integration of conflict, on the one hand, and those that represent loss of capacities or disintegration on the other. These psychological distinctions between progressive and regressive resolutions of narrative dilemmas may be at odds, however, with political readings of these same narratives. My use of the terms refers to the extent to which the narrative subverts conventional denouements and invites a critical and complex engagement with those human dilemmas at the center of the drama.

PSYCHOLOGY OF STORYTELLING

Any project of social change requires some understanding of human psychology. Alternatives to oppression are not a given but rather must be imagined and this imaginative work requires some theory of mind and of how to change minds. As a psychologist, I spend a great deal of my time listening to stories that are hard to tell, either because the experiences are difficult to put into words or because others are uneasy and therefore stop listening. The accounts of battered women are most certainly difficult to hear, and thus are vulnerable to unconscious structuring—or filling in of the gaps—on the part of the listener (Leisey, 2008).
Although the leading early theorist of the movement, Lenore Walker, is a psychologist, most in the field have jettisoned her work on the battered woman syndrome and cycles of violence, arguing that domestic violence is a political rather than a psychological problem (Allard, 1991; Bograd, 1984; Ieda, 1986; Pence & Paymar, 1993; Roche & Sadoski, 1996). The rejection of psychology is overdetermined, however, by less readily articulated anxieties in the field. One concern grows from fear that psychology is a zero sum game—that any acknowledgement of pain or suffering in the lives of violent men, for example, means lost ground for women. Further, domestic violence—what is now more commonly termed “intimate partner violence”—seems to generate too much psychology to manage politically rather than too little. Domestic violence differs from other social problems faced by women in that it typically takes place in the context of adult relationships. While date rape, pornography, and sex work generally involve younger women, domestic violence is an issue that more often affects women who have been in relationships with men for some time (Lawson, 1989).

In bringing psychology back into conversations about domestic abuse, Hard Knocks makes extensive use of psychoanalytic social theory as well as feminist theory—an approach that focuses on group dynamics and how unconscious anxieties and defenses operate on societal levels (Alford, 1989; Nicolson, 1996; Zaretsky, 2004). Working psychoanalytically means that transference processes—how participants bring emotionally charged experiences from the past into present encounters—are important to explore. Although social psychology served as the primary lens on this project of looking back on the battered women’s movement, most people associate psychology with clinical work. Advocates interviewed over the course of this research generally began by emphasizing how psychologists blame the victim, promote psychotherapeutic change in ways that put women at risk, and redeem men by focusing on childhood trauma rather than on male power and control motives. Psychoanalytic psychology is viewed as particularly suspect, advocates insist, because the focus on unconscious motivation bypasses the political source of the problem. Further, introducing the concept of the unconscious, with its tricky reversals, seems to redeem men and villainize women.

This book represents my long response to those concerns. But in the interviews, I posed the question of why the domestic violence field has been so notably resistive to psychology, even after decades of research and theorizing by feminist psychologists. There is a robust history of critical feminist thought that makes use of psychology to analyze the relationship between social power and gender dynamics (Benjamin, 1988; Butler, 1997; Dinnerstein, 1976; hooks, 1992; Mitchell, 1974; Rose, 1986). Many psychoanalytic feminists have laid claim to the critical methods of Freud as well, including elements of his theory of gender development (Chodorow, 1978;
Harris, 2005; Ussher, 2008). Take, for example, early feminist critiques of Freud’s infamous concept of penis envy. In societies where the phallus operates as a symbol of power and signifier of hierarchical differences, girls and women may, indeed, come to resent and envy the “phallus”—which may be any signifier of masculine entitlement or power—and may come to fear their own aggressive impulses as well (Benjamin, 1988; Dinnerstein, 1976; Frosh, 1995).

THE BATTERED WOMEN’S MOVEMENT

Prior to contemporary feminism, men who beat their wives were cast as losers, the degenerate side of the social order. According to conventional thinking, powerful men—those successful enough to inspire genuine devotion in their wives—need not resort to brute force. The popular American television show of the 1950s, The Honeymooners, satirized working-class men who tried to show their women “who’s the boss.” Jackie Gleason played a fat and ineffectual husband who asserted his manhood by threatening to smack his wife. Undaunted by such pathetic displays, his wife vacillated between protecting and puncturing her husband’s hyper-inflated ego.

The battered women’s movement intervened in this cultural script, recasting the characters on the stage. Rather than a series of isolated tragedies, with each woman coping with her own terrible fate, feminists identified a social pattern in the abuses women suffered in the domestic sphere. The bruises and broken bones of beaten wives viscerally displayed what second-wave feminists advanced in pamphlets and at rallies: the home is a dangerous place for women (Koss et al., 1994; Walker, 1979b).

Feminists also created new denouements to the story of wife beating. Rather than turning to male protectors, women sought refuge in their collective strength. Hundreds of crisis centers and shelters, run by and for women, were established throughout North America, Europe, and Britain in the 1970s (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Martin, 1976; Pleck, 1987). The claim that all women were equally vulnerable to male violence, which emerged as the rallying cry of the movement, challenged the seductive fantasy that women could individually negotiate their fate and find security in the arms of a good man.

Of all of the campaigns of feminism, the movement against woman battering has achieved incontestable moral victories. No other issue separates old and new world attitudes as decisively as does that of wife beating. More than fights for equal pay, abortion rights, paid parental leave, health care, or gender equality in the household, the campaign against domestic violence has won support across a wide political spectrum. Growing from an underground network of safe houses in the 1970s to national and
international campaigns in the 1980s and 1990s, the battered women’s movement was a powerful impetus behind the 1993 United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women. In the following year, the movement achieved enough momentum in the United States to secure passage in 1994 of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) in the US Congress. This momentous victory also created the Office on Violence Against Women in the United States Department of Justice. VAWA ushered in an unprecedented 30 million dollars in funding for shelters and other crisis services for women, as well as funds for tighter law enforcement (Goldfarb, 2000). Pressed by this initiative and global human rights initiatives carried out by women, in the 1990s the European Union brought domestic violence onto the parliamentary agenda as well, although with fewer binding directives than legislation in the United States (Morgaine, 2007).

The sheer numbers of victimized women and the dizzying array of statistics generated by governmental and non-governmental organizations—with rates ranging from five percent to 73 percent of women reporting domestic assaults, depending on definitions and procedures for counting—ran the risk of overwhelming feminist efforts to frame the problem (Kelly et al., 2001; Klein, 1998). Drawing domestic violence survivors from around the world into a common fold carried the risk of overriding differences in their experiences, as well as erasing from the picture more impersonal or structural forms of violence. For women of color, particularly, there was a painful irony in proclamation after proclamation in the 1990s to “Stop Violence Against Women” as these very same institutions supported economic policies that plowed women down (Incite!, 2005; Kelly et al., 2001; Volpp, 2005).

Although mobilizing around a unifying story of woman battering was an advance, the search for a single voice in resisting male violence in the household also meant that some voices were inevitably shouted down. For women of color concentrated in unstable working-class communities, the combustible atmosphere of family life was not so readily contained behind closed doors, nor was the boundary that separates various sources of bad treatment so distinct (Collins, 1998; Richie, 2000; West, 1999; White, 1985). In her analysis of domestic violence stories in lesbian communities, Janice Ristock (2002) similarly calls for deeper reflection on how feminists frame domestic violence as a social problem. She offers that “we need a much more adaptive, context-sensitive analysis to figure out what is going on” (2002: xi) and that this process can be “anxiety-provoking for feminism” because it is associated with the loss of a gender analysis (2002: 121). Critical space for addressing such anxieties has widened in recent years but so, too, has the movement toward “gender symmetry” in approaching the issue—a movement of considerable concern to feminist researchers in the field (DeKeseredy, 2006; DeKeseredy & Dragiewicz, 2007; Straus, 2006).
In the early 1990s, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1994) introduced the concept of "intersectionality" to critique "Eurocentric" feminist models that over-universalize and over-simplify links between gender and domestic violence. She emphasizes the dynamic interplay of systems of oppression in shaping women's experiences of violence—and that any system of domination produces forms of violence. Rather than an additive model, for example, listing the double or triple oppressions of women, feminist models must be extended to include structural forms of violence, such as denial of food, housing, work, and other means of survival, and attend to the combustible contexts where the overwhelming stresses of life can erupt into violence. Crenshaw (1994: 100) charges that the "gag order" within feminism on "discussing higher rates of domestic violence in poor communities" has marginalized the voices of poor women. Beth Richie (2000: 1134–1135) concurs, observing that, however well intended, the initial strategy of downplaying differences in the impact of gender violence in women’s lives has been a costly one, particularly for women of color, and has contributed to "a national advocacy response based on a false sense of unity around the experience of gender oppression." Similarly, Ristock (2002: 125) calls for "a language of power that allows us to map the multiple and interlocking nature of identity" and how such identities are enacted in violent relationships. Yet these critiques have not been integrated into the dominant storytelling practices of the field, even as calls for attending to "multiple oppressions" gain currency in domestic violence conferences and trainings.

FEMINIST SOCIAL ACTION RESEARCH

My research continues to be fuelled by the passions that drew me into the field of psychology in the 1970s. During the course of my graduate training, I learned about radical traditions of psychoanalysis and social action research. In calling for researchers to leave their laboratories and enter the field of real social problems, Kurt Lewin (1975, c1951: 169), the founder of social action research in psychology, quipped that "there is nothing so practical as a good theory." I was most intrigued by the Lewin aphorism, "If you want to understand something, try to change it." His program of research was oriented toward practical problems but action research also depended on good theory—ways of seeing and understanding how things may fit together within some explanatory framework.

A primary aim of a series of studies carried out by my research team over a period of five years, a program of inquiry that included interviews with advocates in a number of countries, centered on understanding how cultural and historical contexts shape the elaboration of stories about domestic abuse. As the culmination of that program of research, this book
takes up what Amy Shuman (1986) terms competing “storytelling rights”—contestations over how stories should be told and who (or which group) has the right to tell them. For social action researchers, the negotiation of storytelling rights is an ongoing process rather than a problem that can be settled procedurally, for example through consent forms (Fine, 1998; Fine & Vanderslice, 1992; Kidder & Fine, 1997). The question of who has the right to tell stories about abused women would include discussion of whether there are sufficient life experiences in common, but also understandings of shared political commitments. Yet commitments and other areas of identity give rise to storytelling in complex ways—a quandary taken up in this book.

Rather than focusing on the accounts of abused women, my research team at Portland State University carried out a series of studies focused on advocates—volunteers, staff, activists, and program directors—who intervene in domestic violence situations and assist women in giving voice to their experiences. Much like other social problems, the field of family violence involves a vast array of experts whose job it is to “name the problem” and help victims generate accounts of their experiences. For example, using the term “your batterer” rather than “your boyfriend” (or his name) when women enter a shelter does structure the woman’s account. It creates social distance between the woman and her partner, and it confronts her with the seriousness of his behavior. Although this may be helpful for the woman in crisis, women’s advocates may be unaware of how such structuring overrides aspects of an abused woman’s own account.

Social action research orients knowledge production toward social change. Feminist traditions of social action research, or participatory action research, are intensely collaborative (Fine, 1998; Fine & Vanderslice, 1992; Kidder & Fine, 1997). *Hard Knocks* draws on these traditions in creating a conversation among women’s advocates on dilemmas in the history of the movement. My use of the term “conversation” is not simply rhetorical. The interviews were carried out very much as conversations—as collaborative engagement on difficult questions. Although there were sets of interviewing questions, the format also allowed for “free associations” with the questions and discussion of the stories that emerged in individual and group discussions.

My approach was to enlist the interviewees, whether as individuals or groups, in a process of analyzing the movement. In this sense, we were a group reflecting on our practices and revisiting some of the emotionally charged terrain where battles had been fought and positions had hardened. In entering this terrain, I sometimes used the analogy of post-traumatic stress to suggest how movements, not unlike soldiers on battle fields, can suffer forms of shell shock. Most of the advocates contacted welcomed this line of inquiry, even though it meant revisiting old questions that many felt had been settled long ago.
In recounting the stories of this movement, *Hard Knocks* brings the locale into view—the character of the many places in which women have organized around battering. This book is predominantly structured around conversations carried out with advocates in Berlin, Germany; London and Manchester, England; New York City; and Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, United States. In addition to these four major geographical sites, five separate studies carried out by the research team and interviews with advocates in other locales are integrated into the analysis presented here. The four geographical sites were selected because each had long histories of innovative domestic violence intervention. I weave together scholarly sources on the history of the movement and the oral histories that emerged from the interviews carried out with women, and some men, working on domestic violence in the various geographical settings.

While there is broad agreement that men batter as a means of establishing power and control over women, the consultations reported here go beyond this basic point of commonality to identify areas where women’s experiences diverge, and where national history and social identities shape understandings of the problem. I was interested in how the broader political landscape shaped the differing histories of activism and how related social problems, for example, housing politics, welfare policies, child protection services, and immigration rights, influenced the ways advocates thought about the dynamics of family violence. I also was interested in social class as it both brings people together around common interests and struggles, whether as workers, managers, or owning classes, and produces differences in relation to the problem of violence. In the domestic violence field, I have been interested in how class positions shape understandings of what constitutes abuse and violence as well as what should be done about it.¹⁷

In analyzing transcripts from the research interviews, my research team and I sought to identify junctures where respondents discussed what could be described as a standard “line” in the field. We wanted to unpack these points where defensive stances hardened into stereotypical responses. There are compelling reasons, we understood, for adopting a standard line on a political issue (Kingsolver, 1989). Indeed, social movements require some capacity to unify around shared positions in resisting the status quo. Training materials often provide “scripts” for responding to questions, such as that of why some women stay in abusive relationships. However, as anti-violence activists, many of my students and I shared a concern that the mainstream literature in the domestic violence field had become too narrowly scripted.

In identifying the participants, we adopted an approach where participants in group interviews would remain anonymous in order to allow for greater freedom of discussion. Those who offered to be interviewed individually could choose to either remain anonymous or be cited by name. All advocates interviewed individually did choose to be identified by name.
In presenting the findings, I have attempted to preserve the structure of the stories that emerged as well as the ethnographic feel of the settings.  

**THE CHAPTERS**

*Hard Knocks* focuses on dilemmas at the level of both theory and practice, and on knowledge that emerges through struggle. Each chapter begins with a myth and counter-myth in order to open up a creative space between two opposing claims. By starting each chapter with a pair of myths and counter-myths, my aim is to create a conversation—to bring together the many intelligent, committed, passionate women (and some men) who participated in this series of interviews. In so doing, it is my hope that their insights will reach a wider audience.

The book is divided into two parts. Part 1, “Dilemmas of theory,” focuses on key ideas that have guided the movement through the broad contours of its history. My aim here is to identify recurring sources of group conflict in the movement and show how a feminist psychology can offer insights in addressing those conflicts. Chapter 1 addresses the claim that domestic violence transcends race and class differences. This chapter takes up feminist perspectives that unfold through advocates’ accounts of conflicts that arose as domestic violence expanded from a radical feminist to a mainstream political issue. Chapter 2 brings psychology into the conversation, beginning with competing ideas about whether psychology takes the field forward or backward. The chapter goes beyond clinical approaches to family violence, introducing psychoanalytic social theory to bridge individual, couple, and group contexts for understanding violence. Chapter 3 introduces a psychoanalytic cultural theory of storytelling, making use of ideas in the field of literary criticism. In describing three genres that have emerged in the domestic violence field—stories of bondage, stories of deliverance, and stories of struggle and reparation—this chapter offers ways of framing the development of narrative strategies over time in the battered women’s movement.

Part 2, “Dilemmas of practice,” covers three areas of acute *border tensions* in advocacy work—areas where emotional investments in drawing boundaries between feminist and non-feminist practices are particularly intense. Chapter 4 focuses on the symbolic and practical meanings of shelters (or refuges) for battered women and on group defenses that emerge in women’s crisis work. Chapter 5 explores controversies over batterer intervention programs. In identifying dilemmas that arise in working with batterers, I address tensions surrounding the coordination of feminist and criminal justice system responses to violence. Chapter 6 examines the conflicted relationship between child advocates and women’s advocates in the field of family violence. A key issue concerns the tendency to cast
women as either abusers (as mothers) or victims (as wives) in the choreography of family violence.

The Conclusions summarize the key findings of the book and highlight promising models of collaborative work—models suggestive of the radical possibilities of the women’s anti-violence movement. Many of these projects involve minority communities—spaces and places where women, and some men, work at the intersection of gender, race, and class and confront on a daily basis the interdependence of private and public forms of suffering. In gathering up stories and their various plotlines and competing interpretations, I hope to show how the narrative resources of a movement can be as critical to survival as material resources—and sometimes just as hard to defend.

NOTES

1 The metaphor of “behind closed doors” has been used throughout the history of the battered women’s movement to signify both the hidden nature of crimes against women in the private sphere and social blindness to the phenomenon. See, as an early example, Straus et al. (1980).

2 Linda Gordon (2007) points out how the terms “patriarchy” and “sexism” are often used interchangeably. She limits the term “patriarchy” to kinship-based modes of production where the senior males—often the oldest males—hold positions of power and authority over group members. In a patriarchal structure, males are subjected to the power of senior males but they also inherit rights to gain access to power or compete for power.

3 Men, like women, are brutalized by patriarchal societies—as casualties of war and exploitive labor under the control of more powerful men. But women have been more apt to resist the system of patriarchy because they are offered fewer compensating rewards. Patricia Hill Collins (1998) suggests that women of color have fewer illusions still about patriarchy because they are not protected in the same way as are white women from the brutality of the system.

4 In rejecting the hubris of modern science, set in opposition to “primitive” or archaic knowledge, anthropologist Micea Eliade (1967: 27) suggests that, “The myth never quite disappears from the present world of the psyche; it only changes its aspect and disguises its operations.” Micea credits Freud with exposing the various disguises of the modern subject—how fantasies originating in infancy retain their hold at an unconscious level on the subject even as he (or she) enters adulthood. He also contrasts the Platonic idealism of Jung’s collective unconscious, with the psyche as storehouse of fixed archetypes, with Freud’s focus on psychic instability and the infantile substrate of fantasies that find their way into the symbolic social order, for example, religious systems of thought.

5 In her autobiographical accounts, Erin Pizzey, founder of the refuge movement in Britain, offers many stories of how she was persecuted and villainized by feminists who were critical of her positions on domestic violence, and particularly her stance that women could be as violent as men. See http://www.erinpizzey.com

6 The psychoanalytic concept of “overdetermination” is related to the notion of multiple causes, particularly in bringing into focus more historically remote and
less consciously accessible determinants of consciousness (Davis, 1988). This same concept has been taken up in critical social theory, particularly through the work of Althusser (1969).

7 This claim is complicated by findings that abused women are more apt to seek help when children become involved (see Stubbs, 2002).

8 Wife beating occurs in countries throughout the world, including in Western countries, as have campaigns organized by women in opposition to this and other forms of violence against women. A central focus of this book, however, is the symbolic resonances of the issue, including its associations with traditional and delegitimized forms of male power.

9 See, for example, the special issue on “The Development of a Theory of Women’s Use of Violence in Intimate Relationships” in Violence Against Women, 12, 2006. Swan and Snow (2006: 1039) call for the “study of women’s violence within social, historical, and cultural contexts” and greater attentiveness to both “risk and protective factors that appear to be related to women’s use of violence with male partners.” While acknowledging such contexts, they do not take up the theoretical and political task of addressing where such considerations conflict with earlier feminist formulations. The result is more of a listing of factors than a re-theorizing of links between gender and violence.

10 In Domestic violence at the margins: Readings on race, class, gender, and culture (Sokoloff, 2005), contributors draw on Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality to critique Euro-centric feminist universalizing models and widen the social and cultural contexts for thinking through feminist interventions.

11 In most of the volunteer trainings that I attended, materials included a focus on “white privilege,” “heterosexual privilege,” as well as “male privilege.” These multiple presentations tended to be presented additively rather than integrated into a coherent analysis, however, so that one evening one might learn that “women are rarely perpetrators of domestic assault” and the next week that “lesbian battering is a hidden epidemic,” with no attentiveness to the apparent contradiction between the two claims.

12 There has been some controversy over the source of this widely cited quote by Lewin and its authenticity.

13 In Dangerous passage, Constance Nathanson (1991) analyzes shifting discourses in the United States over teen pregnancy and how such discourses register broader cultural anxieties over challenges to social boundaries and how youth, and females particularly, operate as sites for a range of projected anxieties.

14 For analysis of battered women’s ways of understanding abuse based on qualitative research in a range of countries, see Klein (1998).

15 For a list of interview questions and protocols, contact the author.

16 For discussion of psychoanalytic methods of research interviewing, see Devisch (2006) and Hollway (2004).

17 The stratification model is often used in the social sciences to introduce social class as a variable. For Marxist frameworks for understanding class formations within capitalism, see Ehrenreich (1989) and Thompson (1966).

18 The interviews were audio-taped and took place over four or five days in each of the settings, with group interviews comprised of six to 12 advocates from a range of domestic violence organizations in the region. Although groups included individuals holding a range of positions, from volunteers, line staff, lawyers, program directors to probation officers, I use the term “advocate” because all of the interviewees described themselves as women’s advocates, a role that conveys political alliances with women as well as provision of specific crisis services. In addition to the group interviews, which lasted approximately two hours, I visited

http://www.psypress.com/hard-knocks-9780415563420
a number of the programs in each of the regions and sought out women of color who played key roles in domestic violence programs. Between four and six individual interviews took place in each site, each of which was approximately an hour long.