ATTRIBUTIONS RELATED TO WIFE ABUSE: A COMPARISON OF THE PERCEPTIONS OF VOLUNTEER ADVOCATE-COUNSELORS AND MARRIAGE AND FAMILY THERAPISTS

Michael J. Sporakowski
A. J. McKeel
Debra Madden-Derdich

ABSTRACT: Attributions related to wife abuse held by advocate-counselors working in women's shelter home settings and marriage and family therapists were compared. The major finding was that the two groups were surprisingly similar in their attributions even though their theoretical backgrounds and training were considerably different. Implications for practice and training are presented.

An ongoing debate has existed between family systems theorists and feminist theorists about who is responsible for wife battering. The fall 1991 issue of the AFTA Newsletter and the July 1992 issue of the Journal of Marital and Family Therapy reflected some of the current concerns in this debate, raising questions about the appropriate-
ness of family systems oriented therapists practicing in the area of family violence (Avis, 1992; Beels, 1991; Bograd, 1992; Erickson, 1992; Fox, 1991; Kaufman, 1992; Meth, 1992).

Many feminists take the position that men are solely responsible for their abusive, aggressive, and violent actions (Bograd, 1984). From a feminist perspective, male-female relationships are structured according to the unequal distribution of power based on gender in the larger patriarchal society (Bograd, 1984; Flemons, 1989; Goldner, Penn, Sheinberg, & Walker, 1990). These theorists view violence as an overt means of control by men over women. Victim advocates and shelter staff members holding this perspective are likely to view the causes of battering to be related to cultural values which promote the toleration of sexism and violence (Sato, 1991).

Systems theorists would likely disagree with the feminists' perspectives regarding the allocation of blame being given strictly to the man. From a systems theory perspective, humans are seen as participating in circular loops of causation, and as a result, lineal control (over others or the system) is impossible (Dell, 1989). Although batterers may be seen as being responsible for their specific actions, both spouses are responsible for the relationship and their actions related to the abusing situations. The causes of battering might be viewed as "interactive reciprocal coercive behaviors" between couple members (Sato, 1991, p. 69). Flemons (1989) states that "if we are to take the ecosystemic perspective of family therapy seriously, if we are to pay heed to context, we must examine how every aspect of the system intertwines" (p.4). Flemons goes on to specify that this includes the cyclic bond between the abuser and the abused.

These contrasting views on the placement of blame may result in differing priorities in the area of intervention and therapy. Many feminists place the highest intervention priority on providing shelter for women and children (Neidig, 1985). They believe that violence by husbands against their wives should be treated like any other type of violence, and the male perpetrators should be jailed (Gondolf, 1985). One consequence of such feminist beliefs is that intervention tends to be directed toward the victim and very rarely includes the family system (Gelles & Maynard, 1987). When discussing possible drawbacks on conjoint therapy, Bograd (1984) suggests that it may compromise the goal of ending abuse by placing emphasis on strengthening the existing relationship. Feminist therapists are likely to warn against conjoint treatment since it discourages the recognition of battering and its effects (Sato, 1991).