

Focus Groups of African-American Men: Perspectives on Addressing Domestic Violence



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Introduction

Social class and cultural context are essential elements to include when African-American women and men are concerned. It is essential to address their authentic realities, if approaches to reduce domestic violence are to be successful.

Conventional programs, which address domestic violence, have had marginal success with African-Americans. This is particularly true with men who batter. Although law enforcement strategies are important in order to confront these men, it cannot be the only solution. Law enforcement and treatment programs cannot respond to every case of domestic violence. It is imperative that communities take on the responsibility of confronting this problem. Intervention strategies must be shaped from the authentic experiences of the African-American community.

The number one killer of African-American females, ages 15 to 34, was homicide at the hands of an intimate partner or ex-partner (Bureau of Health Statistics, 1994; [Sullivan and Rumpitz, 1994](#)). In addition, African-American women are more likely to experience the most severe violence compared to other groups. If she is low income and poorly educated this can increase her risk of abuse. As with African-American women, homicide is the leading cause of death among African-American men ages 15 to 34. They also have high rates of acquaintance violence and suicide ([Wilson, 1991](#) ; [Oliver, 1994](#) ; [Rich and Stone, 1996](#) ; Williams, 1998). Social structural oppression and high stress community environments are explanations for what results in violent behavior among some African-American men. In the field of partner abuse, sexism, male socialization, and a patriarchal society have been explanations for male violence. Among some African-American males an additional consideration is that the conditions resulting in violence from man to man can also result in violence against women (Williams, 1998).

Given this reality, the purpose of this investigation is to identify realistic approaches when encouraging African-American men to confront friends, neighbors, relatives, co-workers or strangers, who are African-American men who batter. What is unique about this investigation is that African-American men will be the key informants. They will discuss their first hand knowledge of the issue and their key insights concerning causes, prevention, and intervention strategies.

This study is the first step toward a larger, multi-site project that would obtain valuable information about how to help African-American men prevent or eliminate violence in relationships. Results from the multi-site studies will be used to develop materials, handouts, and approaches to help men eliminate violence. Furthermore, this study will test the usefulness of the focus group methodology for this type of research project.

The Focus Group Approach

Another objective for this project was to test the usefulness of the focus group approach in addressing the project's major research questions. It is the opinion of the independent researchers that the qualitative analysis of the focus group audiotapes provides a wealth of information about the participants' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors regarding issues related to domestic violence. For example, men offered and freely described their personal experiences with partner abuse. They not only talked about themselves but also related stories concerning domestic violence in their families, with their friends, and in their communities. Men described their frustration, rage, lack of self-esteem, and limited communication skills with women. They communicated

their experiences with oppression, their lack of identity, and their perceptions of being treated unfairly. Furthermore, they offered rationales for their actions and frequently attributed their behavior to underlying causes. Men offered their personal experiences of being raised in dysfunctional families and not growing up with appropriate male figures. Men expressed their loneliness and their need for a mentoring relationship with an older male who could teach them about their cultural identity and how to form and maintain respectful and healthy relationships with African-American women. Men gave general suggestions for dealing with other men who engage in domestic violence. They spoke about their previous attempts to intervene and stop other men from abusing their partners. Men gave examples of what worked and what did not work. Often, they expressed their limitations, but most seemed to feel an obligation to try to stop violence.

Overall, the focus group approach provided rich information about many issues related to domestic violence. It appears that this methodology is an appropriate method for collecting detailed and descriptive information about domestic abuse in the African-American community. However, participants in this study represented a restricted sample of African-American men. Most subjects lived nearby or at poverty level and had extensive histories of domestic violence. Therefore, caution should be used in generalizing these results to other men. Further research is needed that investigates differences that may exist among diverse samples of African-American men. These samples would represent men from different social economic conditions, geographical locations, and men who have achieved and maintained violence sobriety (men who were once violent but have stopped their pattern of violence for at least one year). These studies may identify causes of violence that may include information about differences in problem solving skills and psychosocial variables that contribute to partner abuse. Furthermore, findings from these studies will help better explain why some men are violent and what interventions are possible by other African-American men.

Method

Two focus groups were held in the San Francisco Bay area. African-American men were recruited by Family Violence Prevention Fund staff. Participants from local organizations that provide treatment programs for men who batter were included. The first group was held in San Francisco on June 9, 1998 and the second group met in Oakland on June 10, 1998. At the start of the group men were informed about the purpose of the study, use of data, and procedures and policies associated with the project. At the end of the group men signed an informed consent form and completed a simple demographics information sheet. Participants received a \$20 incentive for participating in one of the groups. Dr. Oliver Williams conducted both focus groups and men's comments were tape-recorded. Dr. Williams and Dr. Becker independently reviewed the tape recordings, grouped responses and comments according to topics, and collaborated on the preparation of the report.

Subjects

A total of 42 African-American men participated in two focus groups. The following demographic information describes the men who participated. The following characteristics were of interest to the Family Violence Prevention Fund staff and/or researchers.

Cities of residence

The number of men who participated in the San Francisco and Oakland focus groups were 23 and 19 men, respectively. Please note that 20 of the 23 men attending the San Francisco group reported their city of residence as Oakland. All other men resided in San Francisco. For the Oakland focus group, one man listed his city of residence as Columbus. All the other men resided in Oakland.

Age

Mean age was 37.4 years and the youngest and oldest man was 17 and 54 years old, respectively.

Race

Men self-identified their racial group membership as:

Race	Percentage
African American	61%
Multiracial	2%
West Indian/Caribbean	2%
Black	31%
African	2%

Current partner relationship

Status	Percentage
Married	11%
Separated	11%
Never Married	31%
Lives with Partner	29%
Divorced	14%

Number of Children

Average number of children was 2.3 children.

Education

Average level of education (highest grade completed) was 12.8 years and 65% of men reported completing high school and 30% of men completed college.

Employment

Employment Status	Percentage
Employed full-time	39%
Employed part-time	24%
Unemployed	27%
Student	10%

Occupation

Men listed a variety of occupations. The vast majority were jobs requiring low to moderated levels of training and skills. The most common job title represented was maintenance or laborer. Less than 15% of men reported a position that represented a higher level of skill. These jobs included director, counselor, executive, and supervisor.

How serious is domestic violence in the African-American community?

Ninety one percent of men reported that domestic violence was at least a serious problem in the African-American community.

Level of Seriousness	Percentage
Not Serious	5%
Somewhat Serious	3%
Serious	26%
Very Serious	30%
Extremely Serious	35%

In the past year, did you know a man who was physically abusive to his partner?

Seventy-one percent of men said, "Yes".

Have you ever physically abused your partner?

Fifty-five percent of men said, "Yes".

Results

In preparing for this exploration, there were key questions of concern which were discussed between Ms. Mitchell-Clark of the Family Violence Prevention Fund and the two investigators, Dr. Becker and Dr. Williams. Based on what information was gathered, one might interpret the following from the responses.

How should an African-American man intervene with African-American men who batter?

- Confront only under the right circumstances

The respondents had mixed opinions about whether one should approach an African-American man who batters. Although the majority of men felt that it was appropriate to intervene, most men felt that confronting batterers should be done only under certain conditions. Many men were concerned about their safety. Accordingly, unless the circumstances were optimal, many men noted that violence was a likely consequence. If one was willing to confront batterers, the respondents recommended the following:

- Only friends should approach him

Most men stated that the prerequisite for approaching a man who batters was their relationship to him. If that person was a relative or a friend, the respondents were much more likely to confront him than if he were a stranger. Even though some respondents weighed the potential loss of the friendship, as well as the safety concerns, most stated they would confront him and risk it. They would be willing to confront him out of concern for both the batterer--their friend and the battered woman.

- Consider the best time to confront him

The majority of the respondents believed that the most appropriate time to approach a man who batters would be when he is less agitated. If the abuser would be confronted while he is already escalated, he may be at higher risk of exploding at anyone who is around. Timing would be important and the best time to confront him may be the day after the incident, on the weekend, or at a scheduled time later.

In contrast, some men thought it was important to confront men who batter at the time of the incident. Although they acknowledged the risk, some respondents stated they either would have or already had intervened. They would also use physical force to protect the victim.

- Consider what you should say to him

All the respondents recommended that friends and/or relatives use tact when they confront men who batter. They describe tact as demonstrating to the man who batters that a friend wants to listen to his point of view and is concerned with what is troubling him. They would do this without agreeing with his abusive behavior. Tact could also reduce the potential the batterer has of directing his abuse at his friend/relative or reduce his resistance to discuss the situation.

Next, respondents would express concern and attention for the man who batters. Doing this would show the batterer that a friend or relative is concerned for his well being. They recommended the following as phrases they might use with him: "I love you like a brother"; "I am concerned for your well being"; "I hate to see you going through this"; and "I hate to see you handling your business like that".

Finally, they would confront him about his behavior by saying: "If you have to abuse her then you can't use her"; "You need to handle your business better than that"; "Give her fifty

feet when you get angry with her and under no circumstances do you cross the line"; "You need to check yourself when you feel you are going to hurt her"; "Man, isn't that the woman you said you loved"; "Regardless of what you feel happened you should not hit her"; "If you abuse her eventually you'll land your ass in jail"; "Even though you may feel okay about hitting her, over a period of time that feeling is going to wear off and your behind will still be in jail"; and "You need to learn other ways to handle your business better than hitting on your women".

- Consider what you should do after you have spoken to the man who batters

The respondents suggested that community-based resources should be identified. They noted that often domestic violence resources do not exist in their community or that men did not know where the resources were located. It was important that men were directed to these resources. They suggested that friends/relatives must be informed about domestic violence services and their location and then, literally, take the abuser to the community-based violence intervention resource.

- Leaving and/or re-entering a friendship

Many of the men stated that if they expressed their concern to the man about his violence and he did not listen, they would be willing to withdraw their friendship. Leaving the friendship might be one way to demonstrate disapproval for his actions.

In contrast, what if it was the man who batters who leaves the friendship? Some of the men discussed how they had intervened and lost a friendship as a result. Many respondents felt that if a man who batters still held a grudge it was important to approach him again and explain their intentions of being helpful. They recommended the following as phrases they might use with the man who batters: "Man, I want to talk to you about your behavior because I am your boy and I want my friends and family to be healthy, and abuse is not a healthy way to respond to conflict."

What can the community do to stop domestic violence?

Several themes were discussed regarding what would stop domestic violence in the community. Several of the ideas stressed the importance of prevention and intervention. Other ideas highlighted how approaches must urge young and older adult men to change behavior through guidance by community models. But most of the respondents reported that children must be a focus of prevention and intervention efforts. "In today's world children receive violent messages from several places in their environment: home, neighborhood, friends, school, community, TV."

- It is imperative to address the denial of the problem among family, friends, and community

Respondents reported that like other communities, the African-American community was in denial about the problem. Many of the men debated where to lay the responsibility for the problem. They explained that family, friends, and community members find ways to ignore it, not intervene, not provide support or not address the problem with persons involved in domestic violence. They also reported there were few messages coming from the community that explicitly condemn partner abuse and give direction about what to do when

it occurs. Specifically they stated that "environments teach people to be violent, particularly children...but, there are few places people can go to learn nonviolence."

- The messages from the community

Regarding community messages, respondents were less clear on the specific message. However, they were clear that the community must develop a clear message about the inappropriateness of domestic violence. One possibility would be to conduct another focus group of African-American women and men to shape this message. Another possibility would be to draw from the various comments throughout the document.

- Who should provide the messages?

Another clear message from the respondents was that the messenger is as important as the message. Men noted that positive, adult, African-American, male role models exist in the community. The person(s) who delivers the message does not have to be a single community icon. In fact, the person(s) would have more credibility if they were not. This person and/or persons should be from the community and have similar background regarding education and social class. The person who delivers the message may have even been abusive in the past but would not be now. What would be most important was that this person would be living the "right way" for an extended period of time; he was someone who could relate to the men regarding their social context and problems, and he was someone who could confront them when they were inappropriate. In addition, the messenger would tell them how to be a healthy, African-American man, how to negotiate problems, and how to act and live right. Fatherhood groups, church or community-based mentoring programs, community-based newspapers, radio, and television were mentioned as vehicles to educate and inform the community.

- Educating children about how to handle conflict

Respondents remarked that children have a story to tell. If violence is happening in their home, they may be confused about what they have witnessed and how they should make sense of the situation. Some men stated that childhood exposure was how some men learned to be violent. Children need to have adults and peers who can talk to them about family violence experiences and provide some directions about what to do.

Another key theme was that children had not been taught to be nonviolent. In their home, neighborhoods and communities, many children are exposed to violence. There needs to be a place for children to go to obtain nonviolent coping skills. Some approaches, which attempt to address the needs of children exposed to violence, seem naive and too simplistic and are not indicative of many African-American children's social context which include poor, high-stressed communities, or other cultural realities. The men reported it is imperative that the approaches are created and shaped by the realities of the African-American children and their families.

- Educating boys how to view women as equals

Several respondents remarked that childhood was the best time to address domestic violence among males. Several men commented that the reason domestic violence was a problem had to do with the fact that young boys have been taught to treat young girls in

negative ways. Messages about women should be shaped for boys at an early age. Waiting to address domestic violence only among adult men who batter was a mistake. Many children and adults need to have guidance and positive role models.

- Utilizing community-based African-American male mentors who can teach young males about nonviolent ways to handle conflict

Many men stated that violence is influenced by the lack of healthy male role models to emulate. As a result, many young African-American men had role confusion. "They did not know how to behave in various situations including interpersonal relationships...therefore they developed a sense of hyper-masculinity which is an extreme stereotype of what they perceived manhood to be...more aggressive, more in control and tough." Respondents acknowledged the importance of having a loving mother in their lives who can nurture and guide them. However, they stressed how important it was to have a healthy adult role model who could provide direction. Some men reported that "if I had a person like that in my life when I was young...it would have prevented me from making poor choices and suffering the consequences, like losing a relationship with a woman, or friend, or ending up in jail." Other men stated that they still could use a man like that in their life.

- Community-based resources

Many of the respondents rejected the idea of utilizing only mainstream organizations which were located outside the African-American community to address problems in the community. Most of the respondents described the importance of increasing the capacity of neighborhoods to respond to domestic violence and offer services. They described the importance of turning to the community to address problems like partner abuse. Some suggestions included the following: creating an organization staffed and run by African-American men and "developing an 800 number for African-American men to call whenever there is a problem...or when an abusive man felt like he was getting out of control...he could call this number and the staff would work with the man." They also stated that a community of concerned men, who were knowledgeable about this problem, should be visible and available to the men who are violent. They emphasized the importance of advertising resources in the African-American community. Many people don't know what resources exist in the community.

- The use of sanctions to confront African-American men who batter

Respondents reported that sanctions were an important tool to confront a man who batters and hold him accountable for his behavior. Many men remarked "that there are some men who you just can't talk to about their violence and think that things will change...jail may be the best way to reach some men." "Court mandated approaches are important...but, there could be other sanctions that the community could employ such as putting the abuser's picture in the community newspaper."

Discussion

Writers who are concerned about maladaptive behaviors of African-American men attempt to discern the social realities and antecedents that produce this behavior among these men without

excusing their negative behavior. Although most writers in the area of African-American men and their maladaptive behavior chronicle other forms of problem behaviors, Staples (1982) and Taylor-Gibbs (1988) note that violence toward women may be one maladaptive behavior that results.

The themes of the respondents magnify what scholars have stated about African-American men who behave in maladaptive ways. That is, the destructive behaviors of some African-American men are influenced by societal oppression and hostile living environments. Respondents reported that directing intervention or prevention strategies in male social, familial, community, and educational environments is important. Directing services in these areas can help younger and older adult men or young boys to be re-educated about and rehabilitated from being violent and abusive. Such insights may result in more effective intervention strategies.

The major objective of this project was to learn what African-American men would be willing to do or what they could do to help other men stop their pattern of domestic violence. Overall, the respondents believed that most men were willing to intervene in domestic violence situations but only under certain conditions. However, it is less clear what form and shape these interventions would take.

Many focus group members felt that they have a responsibility to intervene with friends and with family members. The most commonly cited method was direct communication at a time when the abuser was likely to listen. Most men appeared willing to do this but they also appreciated the inherent risks. Men expressed their concern that their intervention may be seen as interfering in a very personal relationship. Furthermore, they were afraid that the abuser would view them as taking the woman's side. Many men felt that if they were viewed as agreeing with the woman, then the abuser would immediately reject their intervention efforts and more importantly, the abuser would reject their friendship. According to many group members, "you are either with me or against me." Group members described a facet of partner conflict where disagreements or conflict is seen by African-American men as rejection. One man explained this by saying "When my woman does not let me control the relationship, then she is not on my team and she has gone over to the other side." Some men viewed their partner as joining the "oppressors" (e.g. white establishment, police, etc). The perceived tendency of the abuser to feel rejected by his partner and/or anyone who would intervene, would deter some men from getting involved. However, most men appeared willing to risk this due to their concern for the woman's safety and potential consequences to their friend or family member.

Another important issue that seems to contribute to domestic violence is men's perceived lack of ability to communicate with women. Several men expressed their limited ability to verbally engage and debate with their partners. These men felt overwhelmed by their partner's verbal skills. Men justified their violence by seeing violence as the only recourse available to get "control of the situation". Men expressed their need for verbal skills training or instruction from adult role models. It seems plausible that some men wanted training so that they could control their partners as opposed to achieving equitable resolutions to disagreements.

Throughout the group discussions and across many topics, men expressed a deep loneliness for adult role models. Men gave many examples of being raised by loving and caring mothers and grandmothers, but talked about missing a father figure. Even when fathers were present during their childhood, men expressed a longing for guidance, mentoring, and companionship. Many men spoke about an identity crisis and talked about their need to learn from successful

role models. As children and even today, they apparently wanted someone to show them how to live, how to resolve conflict, how to treat women, and how to be a black man.

While it appears that most men are willing to try to help other men stop their pattern of violence, they viewed these interventions as complex and laden with risk. Group members also discussed several issues that may moderate or mediate intervention outcomes (e.g. friendship, role status, timing). It appears that abusers may want help and they give a fairly complete description of the messenger. The messenger would be an African-American male, peer or older, a member of their community, and not a professional, but non-traditional, knowledgeable and successful member of their social class, caring and understanding, a good teacher and a mentor, and available as needed.

Implications of the focus groups

This preliminary investigation begins to expand our present understanding about African-American men and their responses to confronting domestic violence.

Respondents gave their insights about what encourages African-American men who batter and what must be done to educate African-Americans about the problem. What follows are selected considerations for future educational campaign activities in addressing domestic violence among African-American men.

Promotional materials

One key message from respondents was that promotional/educational materials must be focused on multiple male targets in order to encourage attitudinal and behavioral change. These men stressed that there must be an integrated continuum of messages based on the age of the male and his level of involvement with domestic violence. They reasoned that substantive change would only occur if educational efforts reach young people who have not yet been abusive as well as adult men who have. Educational efforts focused on the young may reduce the level of domestic violence in the next generation. They recommended that the Family Violence Prevention Fund develop prevention-oriented messages directed at boys, young adult men, and adult men. These messages must not only stress that domestic violence is an inappropriate way to handle conflict with peers and/or a partner. Promotional materials must encourage men to speak to abusive friends and relatives about their violence. The materials must teach men what to say, when to say it, and where they should go for help and/or counseling for their friend/relative. In addition, messages must inform the community about where services are available.

In regard to the messenger, the messenger must have a history of touching people's lives in important ways. These persons should have credibility in the African-American community. Respondents recommended that the messenger should not be a celebrity who lacks a connection to and history with the community. Rather, they suggested that these men should be community or grassroots workers in neighborhoods and who provide an example of how to live every day.

Community building

One major theme of the focus group was that the African-American community must rally around the issue of nonviolence. Community collaborations with the Family Violence Prevention Fund seem to be the avenue that would encourage the community to buy into the promotional

campaign. Promotional and media efforts must coordinate with grassroots community efforts and direct practice efforts to address domestic violence in the African-American community. Again, to change how domestic violence develops in the community, community leaders should not only focus on the person with the identified problem but they must include males who have not demonstrated the behaviors. Boys, young men, and adult men must be targets for the intervention and education. These interventions should take place in neighborhoods, community centers, churches, schools, treatment programs, and the like. Again, methods that developed skill-building capacities in conflict situations were stressed by respondents.

It is imperative to identify trusted persons and places in the community to participate in providing the message and services. Persons who work with African-American males must have the capacity to relate to low income males living in high stress situations as well as middle and upper income African-American males. Helpers must have the capacity to discuss the range of issues these clients present and relate these issues to social class, social context, and violence.

According to the men interviewed, domestic violence is a serious problem. In addition, confronting, altering and re-shaping behavior is complex. But, it is clear that there are African-American men who are willing to address domestic violence within their community.

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