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# The Unhappy Marriage of Theory and Practice: An Analysis of a Battered Women's Shelter

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> My husband beats me This time he hit me in the face and then started breaking furniture He is like a volcano, he just explodes, I never know when it's coming He's ruining my house now I've been sleeping on the floor I'm so tired I can't sleep I'm sick and I never get sick Last time, he beat me really badly Half my face was swollen My brother was there and he just watched my husband sit on me and beat me When I woke up in the morning and looked in the mirror I didn't recognize myself I want him to stop beating me I don't know what I do to make him beat me I just want to stay home and raise my kids and be happy I love him but I am afraid for my life I have no place to go
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> *—Anonymous Caller*

Women who are beaten by their husbands now have a place to go Battered women's shelters provide immediate and safe shelter for women who are being abused by their partners The problem, however, does not end there Shelters are a response to the problem of violence against women in our society, not a solution What was once thought of as a means to an end has now become an end in itself Both the problem and the response warrant a critical reexamination [1]

The theme of this essay is one of contradictions After briefly examining the battered women's movement and the shelters the movement has spawned, it moves to an examination of one shelter organization in northern California and presents the findings of one year of research there Observations have revealed a number of contradictions between feminist ideology and reality, and between feminist ideology and practice, and these reflect even greater contradictions within the battered

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women's movement  The suggestion here is that this rift between feminist
ideology and practice occurs both at the local organizational level and at
the national level of the battered women's movement  The ideology of the
movement is grounded in an analysis of violence against women which
implies that the problem of violence against women affects all women,
while the practical response of providing shelters only involves a portion
of those women  In both instances — the shelter under study and the larger
movement — the original feminist vision has been blurred in the transla-
tion from theory into practice  Not all feminist organizations and
feminist-oriented shelters are characterized by a gap between ideology
and practice, but enough of them are so as to create serious obstacles to
social change for all women

Prior to the 1970s there was little or no social recognition of the
problem of domestic violence  it was a "private trouble " Subsequently,
women began to speak out about the violence in their private lives, and
the battered women's movement began  It grew out of the civil rights
movement, the women's liberation movement, and the anti-rape move-
ment, all of which laid the groundwork for an analysis of violence against
women grounded in social and political causes  If such violence against
women is seen as caused by social relationships of power and domination,
it can be redefined as a "social problem "

The battered women's movement is inspired and informed by feminist
analyses of violence against women which contend that male violence
against women has been condoned throughout history  Although it is now
illegal for men to beat their wives, the legal sanctions against such
behavior are undermined by institutionalized sexism in the economy, the
polity, in organized religion, in the media, and in socialization patterns
which stress gender differentiation  The battered women's movement
grew out of the realization that efforts at eliminating male violence
against women must encompass wide-ranging structural transformations
of society [2]

From the larger issues articulated by the movement came the need to
combat violence on a day-to-day level  In her pioneering study of
domestic violence, Lenore Walker, writing in 1979, estimated that fifty
percent of all women in the United States would be or were being beaten
by their husbands or boyfriends [3] Many of these women had no place to
go to escape abuse, for these women shelters have provided immediate
relief

The first U S  women's shelter opened in Minneapolis in 1973  By

[2]See Susan Schechter, *Women and Male Violence* (Boston  South End Press, 1982), and Schechter,
"Speaking to the Battered Women's Movement," *Aegis*, no  32 (Autumn 1981) 41–45, no  33 (Winter
1982) 36–43
[3]Lenore Walker, *The Battered Woman* (New York  Harper & Row, 1979), ix

1982 there were approximately five hundred shelters operating in this country Initially, many of these shelters were started as grass-roots feminist collectives They advocated a philosophy which rejected bureaucratic forms of dealing with problems Instead, they

> articulated a theory in which specific non-hierarchical organizational forms and self-help methods were logical outcomes of an analysis of violence against women        Patriarchy [was] seen not only as a system that oppresses women, but also one that structurally and conceptually creates, sustains, and justifies hierarchies, competition and the unequal distribution of power and resources [4]

Self-help methods, undertaken in collectives organized under democratic principles, teach women to take responsibility for themselves Shelters organized in this form empower women by allowing them equal participation in decision-making and thus demonstrating that they (and women like them) can help themselves In such shelters, women learn skills which enable them to lead independent lives, if they return to their domestic situation, they are in a better position to avoid violence.

Over time, many of these shelters underwent a process of transformation, from organizations supported by a feminist analysis of violence against women and a self-help practice to organizations characterized by a more narrow individualized analysis of the causes of violence and a "professional" practice Violence was associated with individual problems involving such factors as stress or alcohol abuse, and the women became clients in need of professional help from therapists or counselors The goals of such organizations were oriented toward fixing the women rather than empowering them This shift was recognized and sharply criticized by feminist writers Three assumptions central to these critiques are that the original vision of shelters as movement organizations was not realized, that while shelters are necessary and worthwhile, they are costly and time-consuming and thus vulnerable to take-over, and that the rise of shelters hinders more widespread structural transformations because they alleviate the most visible and "emotionally charged" aspect of the problem the plight of the beaten and abused woman who has no way to escape her batterer [5]

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[4]Schechter, *Women and Male Violence*, 44

[5]Lois Ahrens, "Battered Women's Refuges Feminist Cooperatives vs Social Service Institutions," *Radical America* 14 (May/June 1980) 41-47 Patricia A Morgan, "Constructing Images of Deviance A Look at State Intervention into the Problem of Wife Battery " in *Marital Violence*, ed Norman Johnson (London Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), 60-77 Patti Roberts and Carol Lopes, "Battered Women Who Will Define the Solution?" *Aegis*, no 30 (Summer 1981) 24 Susan Schechter, "Speaking to the Battered Women's Movement " For a more detailed analysis of the battered women's movement and the external and internal pressures underlying the transitional process, see Ahrens, Morgan, Schechter, *Women and Male Violence*, and Women's Advocates, *Women's Advocates The Story of a Shelter* (St Paul, Minn The Advocates, 1980)

So, while domestic violence is now defined as a "social problem," the most tangible response to it has been at the individual level [6] Shelters organized as feminist collectives, and which were supposed to represent microcosms of needed structural reforms, often proved short-lived External pressures from funding sources and internal pressures for efficiency led to bureaucratization, depoliticalization, and a re-individualization of the problem Feminist responses have consisted largely of accusations of government cooptation and professional takeover of shelters

Much of the literature argues that domestic violence cuts across social class and racial barriers and is a problem rooted in history and affecting everyone [7] But in practice shelters cater only to a specific population of women, that is, poor women who have no other means of escape from abusive situations Middle- and upper-class women often have financial resources available which allow them access to alternative housing The analysis includes all women, but the response is directed at only a portion of those women who are battered

The main objective of this study is to discover how the contradictions summarized above are in the daily reality of one particular shelter The focus of the analysis is the role of the shelter itself as a social world and the ways in which the dynamics of this world undermine the feminist ideology which frames it

The shelter studied was founded in 1977 in a suburban community in northern California For most of the time from May 1986 to June 1987 the author was a participant observer in the role of a volunteer Having been trained as a shelter advocate and a crisis-line worker, I attended staff meetings, case management meetings, and monthly trainings, worked three crisis-line shifts a month and two shelter shifts a week and also conducted formal and informal interviews with selected staff, residents, volunteers, and administrators

The shelter has two main goals The first is to provide immediate and safe shelter for battered women who are in crisis situations Agency records confirm that this goal has been accomplished in the fiscal year 1984-1985 the organization provided shelter to 229 women and children The second and less tangible goal of the shelter is "empowerment" of shelter residents This goal, consistent with the feminist analyses of violence against women, is seen by staff as a need of the shelter residents

    [6]See, for example, Donileen R Loske and Spencer E Cahill, "The Social Construction of Deviance Experts on Battered Women," *Social Problems* 31 (1984) 296-310

    [7]Emerson R Dobash and Russell Dobash, *Violence Against Wives* (New York The Free Press, 1979) Richard J Gelles, "Family Violence," *Annual Review of Sociology* 11 (1985) 347-67 Mildred D Pagelow, *Women-Battering Victims and Their Experiences* (Beverly Hills Sage Publishing Co , 1981) Murray A Straus and Gerald T Hotaling, eds , *The Social Causes of Husband-Wife Violence* (Minneapolis University of Minnesota Press, 1980)

the women must recognize their place within the cycle of violence and simultaneously recognize their own power to end this cycle if they so choose According to this view, entering a shelter represents the first interruption of the cycle of violence, a complete break with the cycle involves a recognition of the internalized behavior patterns each partner possesses and, simultaneously, an understanding that no one deserves to live under the constant threat of violence

In sharp contrast, shelter residents themselves say they have needs of a more practical sort "I need a place to live and a job" If these needs are not met and a battered woman has no money, family, or friends to turn to, then returning to the abusive situation seems to be the only viable alternative Since most of the women who come into the shelter are in desperate financial circumstances, the priority of these needs become apparent This poses a conflict between the ideological goals of the shelter and the reality of residents' needs

Another contradiction exists between ideology and practice The stated goal of empowerment is inconsistent with the actual working structure of the shelter The vehicle for empowerment is peer counseling In peer counseling, the role of the battered woman is one of expert who knows her situation better than anyone the complementary staff role is that of active listener helping the woman find the answers which exist within her Peer counseling is grounded in the assumption of symmetry between partici-pants, however, the actual working structure of the shelter fosters the formation of asymmetrical relations between shelter staff and residents

As of August 13, 1986, the board of directors of the shelter approved and adopted the following mission statement

> To recognize and support all women of color, ethnicities, classes, ages, sexual
> preference, disabilities, spiritual and political orientations and their families in
> a process of growth through clarity and strength, to create lives free of violence
> and all forms of oppression To empower women by increasing their self-
> reliance and self-sufficiency [8]

While these are certainly worthwhile goals, one may ask how such goals are, in reality, implemented How does an agency support a "process of growth through clarity and strength," and further, how does this "create lives free of violence and all forms of oppression"? In this shelter, empowerment is offered as the vehicle for ending violence and oppres-sion, and empowerment is said to translate into an increase in self-reliance and self-sufficiency Underlying this notion of empower-ment is the feminist assumption that women must learn to take control of their own lives

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[8]The name of the shelter has been omitted, and all the names appearing in the text have been changed to preserve the confidentiality of those involved

While this notion of empowerment offers a feminist context for the work undertaken at the shelter, staff are still faced with the practical problem of how to make sense of women's behavior  The theory routinely drawn upon by staff to interpret their clients' reality is the cycles of violence model developed by Lenore Walker [9] Briefly, Walker describes a cycle in which a battering incident is followed by a honeymoon period during which a husband apologizes profusely and a wife makes some changes in behavior relating to the battering incident  Then a tension building period follows which eventually culminates in another battering incident  Battering incidents become increasingly severe, and without some type of intervention may result in death  This model assumes a family system closed to outsiders

The agency utilizes Walker's theory to support its goal of empowerment  According to Walker, a woman must recognize her place within the cycle before she can begin her journey down the road to self-reliance and self-sufficiency  This theory accurately depicts both what occurs in the case of women who leave battering relationships and those who remain  Individual women may use this description to "make sense" of their own experiences  On the other hand, because a resident's stay at the shelter is not guaranteed and because it is in part dependent upon staff members' perceptions of her "progress" through the program, a resident may strategically acknowledge an acceptance of the cycles theory and her place within it in order to ensure a continuation of her residence at the shelter

The shelter uses Walker's analysis both to justify its own existence as necessary to break the cycle and to justify specific policies and rules  For example, a woman is not allowed contact with her batterer while in shelter because it is assumed that he will be in the honeymoon phase of the cycle and will "sweet talk" her back into the relationship  Having contact with her batterer constitutes a major infraction of the shelter rules, and a woman who does this is subject to immediate dismissal  Recognizing that many women do want to have contact with their batterers, the shelter does allow it in some cases under staff supervision  In such cases, Walker's account is then used in subsequent staff/resident interactions to interpret her behavior and his  Staff also cite Walker's theory to discount a woman's own perception of her experience, as the following example illustrates

> A woman who comes into shelter is not guaranteed a 30 day stay, which is the limit  Her length of stay is determined on a weekly basis at case-management meetings  All shelter staff are present at the meetings as well as one of the agency's professional counselors  The procedure is to have a client fill out a form stating her needs  This is then read by staff in these weekly meetings, followed by a general discussion of the client with each staff contributing her "take" on the

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[9]Walker, *The Battered Woman,* 55-70

client So, in reviewing the case of Wendy, the staff member gives some background information on the client "Wendy came into the shelter last Thursday with her three year old son She is a transfer from another shelter " Staff then reads from the client's form "She is very clear about her needs, she wants a place to live, a job, contact with social services, and counseling and support for her and her son " The staff goes on to state, "She also has been having contact with her batterer all the time she was in the last shelter and wants to continue talking with him Her rationale is that she needs to keep reassuring him that she is ok so he will not come looking for her " Another staff then comments that Wendy mentioned to her that she has long range plans to get back with this man Someone else then commented "She is still in a lot of denial She is still caught in the cycle " The decision was made to let Wendy stay another week and for someone to "explore with her the reasons she feels compelled to continue talking with her batterer "[10]

In this case, the client's long-range plan to return to her batterer is rationalized and interpreted by staff through reference to Walker's analysis of denial by the client of the reality and severity of her situation In contrast, the client still believes things can work out She wants to maintain the option of returning to the relationship, according to staff, she cannot see the larger perspective beyond the cycle in which she is trapped The implication of this reasoning is that staff members know her situation better than she does

The first step to a woman's enpowerment, according to staff, is recognition of her place within the cycle, she must talk about her experiences and her feelings about these experiences In this way, she can come to grips with the reality of her situation and begin her journey down the road to self-sufficiency, self-reliance, and ultimately self-empowerment The staff makes decisions concerning a woman's length of stay in the shelter based on such perceived progress

In contrast to this goal of empowerment, shelter staff are presented with a competing reality rooted in the socioeconomic background of the women coming into the shelter Most of the women who enter the shelter have children, are unemployed, and are on welfare They enter the shelter because they have no immediate alternatives If they do not wish to return to the battering relationship, and they do not have the option of staying with friends and family, their first needs are financial security and a place to live, in contrast to the priority of empowerment set by staff As one shelter resident explained

the staff aren't realistic enough about your situation I am a woman with four kids and I'm basically out on the street They come in here all dressed up and smelling of perfume and ask me, "how are you feeling today?" "What did

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[10]This quotation and those following are taken from the author's field notes, May 1986–June 1987

you do today?" They think I should put my kids in counseling and I've been to
a counselor I think it's important In the last shelter, I went to a few group
meetings but all I could think about was that I needed to get resettled I need a
place to live and I need to get my kids in school I don't think they are realistic
enough about how difficult is it to do this When you come in they tell you
everything is going to be ok, but they don't follow through Look at Kate
[another resident], look at Mary [ditto] Kate is now staying at her sister's, Mary
is staying there too Betsy's mother came and got her

The situation described by this resident is representative of the
situations of most of the women who stay in this shelter During the
twelve months of the field study, well over seventy-five percent of the
women who came into the shelter left after their thirty-day stay without
securing permanent housing The emphasis on empowerment does not
mean that staff does not recognize the economic needs of the women with
whom they work Such needs are often noted as an "ongoing concern,"
but staff also admit they are relatively powerless to do anything in this
area The agency has no money for follow-up and no resources to
establish a low-income transition house for residents To compensate, the
staff concentrates on the more manageable psychological "needs" of
residents

The battered women's movement focused its responses on shelters, and
thus on battering in poor and working-class families At the same time,
the movement espouses a philosophy that embraces all women of all social
classes Similarly, this shelter espouses an ideology of empowerment
addressed to all women while failing to account for the fact that for many
shelter residents economic needs are more pressing than psychological
empowerment

In order to accomplish the often difficult and amorphous task of
empowerment, staff members believe that women must turn to other
women for support, encouragement, and as examples Shelter residents
must first acknowledge independence as desirable and then recognize
independence as attainable Recognition comes from seeing their peers as
self-reliant and self-sufficient women, hence the importance of peer
counseling

The role of crisis intervention workers and shelter advocates is one of
peer counselor Workers and advocates are not to advise women or to
solve their problems As the staff member in charge of volunteer training
put it "She knows her situation better than anyone She has the answers
Our job is to get her in touch with those answers, however, because of her
involvement in the cycle of violence she cannot see her options clearly "
Consequently, the staff member's role is to help her see them The
battered woman then decides her own course of action and is "empow-
ered" by the decision-making process The ideology explicitly enjoins

staff members to avoid dominating power relationships with the residents by not encouraging the choice of one option over another  To assume an advisor role would simply be reproducing a relationship of power and control identical to the one from which the woman has escaped  Her dependency will have shifted from her previous relationship to the present one with shelter staff

Additionally, throughout the volunteer training various tactics are used to normalize the battering relationship in such a way as to minimize the differences between staff and residents  The message staff members receive is that all women are raised to be victims and all men are raised to be batterers, thus, we all have the potential to end up in relationships of this type  Everyone is seen to be united under a common oppression

Peer counseling as a vehicle for empowerment assumes power symmetry between participants  Power symmetry means that each participant recognizes and acknowledges that the other has a wealth of life experience, that this experience is valuable and should therefore be respected, moreover, in the more traditional sense of the word "power," it should be assumed that each has an equal potential ability to influence the other  And, most important, one participant should not have "sanctioned" control over the other's immediate life situation

Access to the shelter and shelter life itself undermines peer counseling as a vehicle for empowerment  Most battered women gain access to the shelter through the agency's crisis line  Crisis-line workers screen callers who present themselves as potential shelter residents  Initially there are three main criteria used in screening women eligible for entry  1) those who have just been beaten or are in danger of being beaten (or both), 2) those who have no alternative safe place to go, and 3) those who have not been previous residents of this shelter within the last year or have not been previous residents who had been asked to leave  In the staff office at the shelter, directly above the staff desk, there is a list of ex-residents who are not to be readmitted to the shelter  Following each name is an abbreviated notation indicating the reason for non-admittance  Placement on this list typically results from dismissal due to an accumulation of major and/or minor infractions

Women enter the shelter because they do not have power or control over their immediate situation  For those women without resources, shelters and the conditions under which they operate must be accepted, at least initially  Because of the highly confidential nature of the location of the shelter and the often elaborate procedures for getting women there, women must agree to enter the shelter, either on the phone or in person at a neutral place, before they actually see it  A story told by a resident of her experience in a previous shelter in Oregon illustrates this point  "They told me they would have to blind-fold me or else I would have to sit down

in the back of the van away from the windows while we drove to the shelter They didn't even want me to know how to get there It was the same [procedure] when I left "

In the particular shelter studied, after the crisis-line worker has done the initial screening, the caller is connected with the shelter intake worker for additional screening Shelter policy states that an intake worker should not admit to a potential resident that they are being screened The rationale is that staff is not supposed to convey the idea that callers are being pre-judged They do not want to discourage potential residents who may need shelter This assumes that if "screening" is not mentioned then callers will not realize what is going on This assumption of naïveté is in all likelihood, unwarranted

During the screening process the woman is informed of the rules governing her shelter stay, and she must agree to them, both verbally and in writing These rules include but are not limited to the following 1) residents must maintain complete confidentiality about shelter location, and they are not allowed visitors while in the shelter, 2) residents must not have any contact with their batterers, 3) no drugs or alcohol can be used by residents during their shelter stay (both inside and outside the shelter), 4) residents must keep their activity to a minimum for the first seventy-two hours of shelter stay — including not going to work if possible, 5) they must participate in the shelter program including group meetings and daily chores

Women cannot pick and choose between shelters and in their state of crisis they have few options Shelters provide the only intervention strategy designed specifically for battered women While there is the possibility of relocation to another shelter, a woman does not know whether the conditions in the next shelter will be different To illustrate

> An ex-resident calls on the crisis line two weeks after leaving shelter She is in another town, she has no money and no place to live I asked her "What about _____ shelter, I thought you transferred there?" She replied "Well, yes I stayed there, they had a 5 00 pm curfew every night They wouldn't let me use their phone number for messages [for jobs, housing, etc ] I liked your shelter better " At which point I reminded her that once a woman leaves our shelter she cannot return

Another resident relates a story about her previous stay at a different shelter

> Mary had been staying at a shelter in _____ She said the other residents were really abusive to her At that shelter they had no staff on weekends The other women staying there were getting drunk on weekends and threatening Mary She said "they would walk down the hall and bang on the walls They were loud and abusive I was afraid to tell staff because I would have to be alone with these women and I was afraid of them One night it got so bad I wanted to call the

crisis line [from a shelter¹] but this one woman used to listen in on my conversations [pay phone in hall] and so I couldn't I finally did tell this one staff She told me to write it down, to document everything that happened to me I wrote it in the dark because I was afraid the women would see my light and barge in on me Before I left I told another staff about it        She said "Nobody [meaning the other residents] is leaving this shelter " After this incident Mary came to our shelter

Because shelters are often a last resort, and because prospective residents cannot engage in comparison shelter shopping, they are decidedly at a disadvantage in that they have no grounds for asserting or assuming control over the shelter environment Nor do residents have any means of contesting the policies and rules of the shelter As one staff member put it, "If they don't like it they can leave " Just as residents perceive that they do not have control over the shelter environment, they perceive that staff members do have control

Residents' perceived lack of control over the shelter milieu is, of course, compounded by issues of race and class Social roles in these contexts are often those of the professional expert and the obedient client Women entering the shelter who have had previous experience in professional/client relations may draw upon this experience during their shelter situation

Once the screening interview is done by the shelter intake worker and the prospective resident agrees to the conditions laid out for her, she is taken to the shelter The shelter is located on a quiet residential street, a house like any other house on the block No one other than shelter residents and staff know the location of this house, not the police, fire department, or the surrounding neighbors The confidentiality of the shelter's location and its inaccessibility to anyone other than the staff and residents dictates that individuals identify themselves and others in terms of specific labels Within the shelter there are only three appropriate labels any given individual may offer in response to another's inquiries or just simply as a means of identifying oneself counselor (i e , staff), volunteer, or resident It should be noted that the difference between a volunteer and a staff member may not be readily apparent to residents Staff members work on a rotating basis as do volunteers Often the only distinction made is between "residents" and "people who work there " Additionally, many staff members began as volunteers, and some women functioned in both capacities as volunteers and part-time staff

To illustrate the primacy of this type of identification procedure one need not go farther than the front door of the shelter Staff and a few select volunteers are the only ones with keys When someone arrives at the shelter, whether she is a resident, a volunteer, or a staff member who has forgotten her keys or has her hands full, the procedure is to knock on the door If the woman knocking is not recognized, she must identify

herself before being allowed to enter  In this case, a simple first name obviously will not do, instead an individual must identify herself in terms of the three available categories of persons allowed in the shelter  "I am a volunteer," "I am a resident," "I am a staff member "  Given that there is only space enough for five or six residents and their children in the shelter at any given time, one might assume residents would be able to identify one another  Because shelter intakes are done on a twenty-four hour basis, however, it is possible for one resident to miss the arrival of another and thus not recognize her  If someone does have keys to the shelter and bypasses the above procedure, she still cannot remain in the shelter for very long without being asked to identify herself  The following example illustrates this point

> After I had been at the shelter for about an hour or so two of the residents returned from wherever they had been that day  I was sitting at the kitchen table smoking a cigarette  About five minutes after they came in one of them [the other walked back to her room] asked me  "Are you a counselor?" I replied  "No I'm a volunteer "  A little while later the other woman walked into the kitchen and immediately asked me  "Are you a client?"  The one who had already asked me replied  "No, she's not  After all she doesn't look very abused "

The shelter environment mandates the labeling of individuals in terms of "appropriate" roles  These roles are then used to separate categories of individuals from one another in the course of interaction  One simply does not launch into a conversation with another without first in some way placing that individual  Both within and outside the shelter the label of "staff" carries with it both implicit and explicit meanings  To both lay people and professionals alike the label of "staff" implies the role of someone who supervises, someone in charge, someone who is assuming some type of responsibility  Similarly, the label of "resident" or "client" is commonly used to designate someone who is receiving services from another  Asymmetrical power relations are contained within these roles regardless of the individuals who fill them  In the shelter milieu, when individuals are assigned these roles in interaction, they simultaneously inherit the power or lack of power these roles carry — whether or not they explicitly acknowledge it  An incident recounted by one shelter resident illustrates the point

> Nancy [client] went into the backyard of the shelter to get her child  Betty [staff] was out there and so were some other residents' children  As Nancy came into the yard Betty said  "Oh you're here to watch the kids "  Nancy said  "No not really  I only came out to get Jennifer [her child] "  But Betty just ignored her and walked out of the yard  I queried  "Like she expected you to babysit?"  Nancy  "Yes I know they want us to get out on our own fast but most people want to leave because of the way staff treat them         There's something about the way they look at us and the way they talk about us "

Another client comments similarly

> When I got there they [staff] told me I couldn't let my kids go to school I
> believed them Yesterday I mentioned to another staff that I regretted that my
> kids have had to stay out of school She told me that it wasn't necessary — that
> they could have gone to school all along I guess I should have said something
> earlier but I didn't feel like I was in a position to

When residents enter the shelter, they are first taken to the staff office in the back of the shelter for their intake interview Since residents typically arrive in crisis and sometimes in the middle of the night, and because the interview entails many detailed questions, it is sometimes put off until the following day Regardless of the woman's condition, however, before she can stay the night in the shelter, she must sign several release forms These forms are typical of most agencies' forms They release the agency from legal responsibility should the woman or her child injure themselves while in shelter But the release forms also include a provision which gives shelter staff the freedom to contact and discuss a woman's case with any other professionals she may be seeing Although the staff are not professional counselors, these forms indirectly place them in the role of professional experts in contrast to the residents' client role

The intake forms, which ultimately constitute a resident's file, reinforce the separation between staff and residents The forms elicit seven pages of detailed information ranging from questions about the immediate crisis, to the resident's mental health background, her childhood history, and her batterer's childhood history Typical queries include "As a child, how close did you feel to your mother?" and "Did/do any members of his (batterers) family have problems with alcohol — including maternal and paternal grandparents?" At the most obvious level, questions of this depth imply that staff members have the ability and the resources to analyze this information, in reality they do not Similarly, residents may come to expect that the depth of these questions reflects the depth of the services residents can expect from shelter staff, but if so they will be disappointed Staff and volunteers are not professionally trained counselors or psychologists The staff is not qualified to engage in in-depth psychological counseling Even if they were so trained, it is doubtful that such in-depth therapy could be accomplished within the thirty-day limit of a resident's shelter stay Finally, while all this information is described as confidential, it is routinely made available to all staff and volunteers

In addition to the information gained in the intake interviews, daily entries are made in a resident's file noting her progress through the program Is she seeing a counselor? Is she filing a Temporary Restraining Order? Is she looking for housing? Any infraction notices she receives are noted, as is her general well being The women housed in the shelter do not have access to their own files When a woman gives this information

to staff, she simultaneously gives them control over it  Control over
personal information involves power  For example, on her first day a
volunteer can walk into the shelter and look at the clients' files  At the
same time she can withold information about her own life so residents
know nothing about her beyond what she shares on an individual basis
This situation sets the residents apart from the staff and reinforces
asymmetrical power and hierarchical relations

While there is an organizational rationale for this type of information
management, it has unintended consequences for relationships between
staff and residents  Because the staff members rotate so often, the daily
file entries function to ensure that everyone knows what is going on with
each resident  In this way the staff members learn how they can best help
each resident during their shift  The shelter is also accountable to funding
sources and must keep a record of the services it renders each client
These records are logged in minutes and include such things as the time
staff members talk with or counsel each client, as well as time spent in
community advocacy (going to the welfare office, going to court, and so
on)  On the one hand, informational control is necessary to the continu-
ation of the shelter and serves its long-term organizational needs  On
the other hand, the arrangement contributes to the asymmetrical power
relations between staff and residents and undermines the short-term
empowerment needs of residents

After an initial seventy-two hour holding period, residents are free to
come and go, however, the shelter is both a program with policy
guidelines and a communal living space with explicit house rules  The
enforcement of policies and rules is done through the application of
negative sanctions by staff  This creates another asymmetrical role
relationship between staff and residents — that of rule enforcers and rule
breakers  The shelter has a list of rules governing everyday life  For
example, residents must sign in and out when leaving and returning to
the shelter, they must be in by curfew (6 00 pm weekdays and 10 00 pm
weekends), they must do their chores (residents rotate meal preparation
and each is responsible for one daily cleaning chore), and residents must
discipline their children according to shelter policy  In addition, a daily
schedule is set up for eating times, quiet times, and times for watching
television  If a resident fails to abide by these house rules (and gets
caught), she receives an infraction notice from the staff  On having
received four infraction notices the resident is asked to leave the shelter
During the intake interview staff members go over the rules, and the new
resident signs a form agreeing to abide by them  Theoretically it is her
responsibility to adhere to these rules, but in reality it is the staff's
responsibility to enforce them

Staff members work on rotating shifts and each staff member makes an
entry into the communication log so the next person can know what is

happening with residents  Rule infractions are noted in this log as well as in a woman's file, again, the information is available to all staff and volunteers  Because a number of infractions can result in a woman's dismissal from shelter, and because these infractions are so easy to accumulate, they cause antagonism between staff and residents  While both staff and volunteers recognize this contradiction, nothing has been done to alleviate it  In the volunteer training, one evening was unintentionally devoted entirely to this subject  Several shelter staff members came to the session to discuss life at the shelter  When they mentioned the rules, several of the newly trained volunteers immediately responded that these rules seemed to run counter to a context of empowerment  A heated discussion followed

The staff rationale for the rules followed a negative case model  "Before we had the alcohol rule we had a resident who kept coming into the shelter really drunk  It was disruptive to the other residents " Or, "before we had the TV rule a lot of the women would spend all day watching soaps " Where the staff had "experience" to back up their rationales, the volunteers had none  It is obvious who "won" the discussion  The following excerpt from field notes illustrate the problem

> Sarah [resident] comes walking into the back yard of the shelter  Her children are playing on the swing set and I am watching them  We say hello  I ask her about her plans — like when she was planning to leave  She replies "Well I was going to leave today after what happened last night  You heard about it didn't you?" "No " "Oh, well we [she and another client] got into a fight because they said I didn't do my work  They gave me an infraction  I said I don't care because I still have two more before they can kick me out  I know this is a bad attitude but I don't care  I'm not going to stay around and have someone call me a liar [Sarah claims she did do her dishes]  But later I was talking to Martha [staff] and she said 'Sarah, where are you going to go? You don't have any place to stay '  So I stayed but I'm not going to talk to them [other clients] anymore and I'm not talking to any counselors [staff] anymore "

This incident was again related to me two days later by a staff member in the staff office

> Joan [staff] got up and closed the door to the office  Presumably so we would not be overheard  She then proceeded to talk about an incident between Sarah and another resident, Betsy  Evidently Sarah and Barrie [another resident], having received infractions for not doing their chores, thought Betsy had "snitched them off" to staff  Joan had told her that Betsy had not done this but that Joan and Helen [another staff member] had noticed that they had not done their chores and had told the night person to give them infractions  Joan went on to say that even if Betsy had told on them it was her right to do so, in that shelter is communal living and everyone is expected to do her part

The field notes are full of anecdotes where staff and residents refer to one another as "us" and "them " Such language conveys the assumption that there is something qualitatively different about "them" which separates "them" from "us " We continually recreate the world through the use of specific language in interaction In this case, the world being recreated is one which contains perceived asymmetrical power relationships between participants

To avoid painting too bleak a picture of shelter life, something must now be said of the shelter residents and the extent to which they give strength to one another, emotionally as well as economically Perhaps it can be acknowledged that one consequence of the asymmetry of staff/ resident relations is a sense of solidarity in the relationships among residents As a result on the in-group/out-group gulf between staff and residents, and also as a result of a deepened awareness of shared experience, shelter residents often do relate to one another as peers

It has been noted in the literature that a common feature of abusive relationships is isolation—isolation of the family as a whole, and in particular, isolation of the battered woman from friends, family and other support networks [11] The shelter experience may offer a battered woman the first opportunity she has ever had to meet other women who have lived in fear of violence The shelter offers a safe and supportive environment in which to talk about the abuse she may never have disclosed The residents then are truly peer counselors Residents are frequently found sharing with one another their experiences and the ways they cope with them Some discussions focus on what "caused" their partner to beat them "We were arguing about John Lennon " "We were at a [drug] dealer's house and I wouldn't smoke with them " "I got a phone call from a [girl] friend and he got jealous " "I was sleeping and he just attacked me " Others talk about how they escaped "I told him I was going to the bathroom I went in, locked the door, then crawled out the window I ran to the 7/11 and called the cops " "We were staying with some friends I told them what was going on They distracted him while I escaped " The women offer mutual understanding and support "Yea, my man beat me for not having dinner ready too " And practical strategies "I escaped while he was on the phone talking to his boss " Even if a woman has little contact with other residents, just seeing so many other women come and go from a shelter demonstrates that there are others who share her experiences

Given the scarcity and high price of single-family dwellings, women who complete their stay at the shelter often search for housing together Similarly, they drive one another to court, job interviews, the welfare office, and housing possibilities So in spite of the inequalities built into

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[11]See, for example, Del Martin, *Battered Wives* (San Francisco Volcano Press, 1981)

the shelter environment, it continues to offer a safe sanctuary for those in need of help to help themselves

## Conclusion

Shelters are both necessary and worthwhile in that they provide the only intervention strategy designed specifically for the abused woman and offering her immediate safety At the same time, it should be recognized that shelters have inherent limitations, both as contexts for empowerment and as political organizations for the battered women's movement The movement has been informed by a feminist analysis of violence against women, an analysis suggesting that battery is a problem created and sustained by the institutions of society The first agenda item for this movement was the development of emergency shelters, often organized as collectives in hopes of exemplifying the kinds of structural reforms necessary to end violence against women Over time, however, many of these collectives — reacting to internal and external pressures — evolved into more hierarchical forms With the status hierarchies came the unequal power dynamics and the compromise of feminist principles

The shelter in this case study is caught in what could be termed mid-transformation It began as a grass-roots feminist collective but quickly underwent a process of bureaucratization Although the organizational form of the shelter is a hierarchy, it has retained its initial feminist ideology Though the focus of this research has not been an analysis of the organizational form within which the shelter operates, there are clear parallels between the power relationships of management and staff and those of staff and residents What we have then is a hierarchical organizational structure, with a board of directors, an executive director, a team of managers, and a staff of shelter advocates — a power-laden practice and an unsupported feminist ideology As this organization continues to change, it seems likely that of all the components, feminist ideology will prove most vulnerable to erosion

While this outcome seems likely, it is not inevitable There are practical strategies which can be implemented to minimize the power differentials between staff and residents First, the shelter organization could make it a priority to hire former residents These women, sharing similar experiences with current residents, would have a firmer basis for a peer relationship The shelter's present policy is that ex-residents must wait a year before they can apply for a staff position, there are no ex-residents on staff now Because of heavy reliance on volunteers, the fact volunteer work is a luxury for most women and due to the practice of hiring mainly volunteers, the staff is composed primarily of middle — class women So, class differences further exacerbate the tensions and inequalities of staff/resident relations

Second, the shelter intake forms could be changed  The information elicited should pertain only to the women's immediate situation and the health and safety concerns of herself and her children  The right to privacy concerning other aspects of the women's lives should be upheld  Third, the house rules of the shelter should be rewritten in such a way as to protect the health and safety of residents rather than emphasizing their control  Rules which relate to lifestyle—eating times, quiet times, TV-watching times—could be changed to guidelines carrying no official sanctions or simply left to the residents to determine collectively  Fourth, a woman should be granted an automatic length of stay rather than have this time limit negotiated weekly  Meeting weekly to decide whether a woman may remain gives individual staff members an inordinate amount of power  Guaranteeing the length of stay would put the burden of proof on staff members when they seek a dismissal, rather than making the resident continually prove her need to stay  Such a change would minimize the opportunity for staff members to abuse their power in cases of personal animosity and bias

Finally, there should be a mechanism whereby residents can give anonymous feedback to staff concerning their shelter experience without jeopardizing the possibility of staying in the shelter again  Moreover, this feedback must be systematically reviewed and used by the organization where appropriate  Shelters must be made accountable to the women for whom they provide services

The problem of woman battering involves all women, while shelters cater only to the needs of those with no alternative options  And shelters may be more or less accessible to particular groups of women insofar as racism, ageism, classism, and homophobia affect their spirit and practice  Nonetheless, we must find a way to mobilize all women around the issue of battering  If shelters are to be used as a locus for movement recruitment, practical needs of residents must first be met  A homeless woman with three children may not have a lot of time for political activism  Shelters, while necessary and worthwhile, are a response and not a solution to the problem of violence against women in our society  They may be a good means of mobilizing and organizing women, but they also consume a great deal of time, energy and money, draining potential political energy from the women working in them  Shelters must be a beginning  They are definitely not an end