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# Rhetorical Resolutions to the Tension Between Issue Ownership and Agency OR What do you do with an old social movement?

## **Cover Page Footnote**

Sincere thanks to reviewers for helpful feedback and generous guidance. And, as always, to Amy Hirsch, Kathryn, Eleana, Avyn and Colin Courtney.

## Rhetorical Resolutions to the Tension Between Issue Ownership and Agency or What do you do with an old social movement?

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This paper applies Gusfield's theory of issue ownership to one specific social issue: domestic violence. It briefly traces the evolution of the issue as a social problem, looking at the battered women's movement. It presents a case study of a specific, localized issue owner—Boulder County Safehouse, now SPAN (Safehouse Progressive Alliance for Nonviolence) as it attempts to reframe the problem and expand its control of the issue. Finally, the case study and paper serve as an exemplar for how other issue owners might meet the challenge of expanding the power of ownership to reframe an issue—to keep it current and viable.

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The question this paper addresses is how advocates for a group with problems maintain agency for that group when they secure issue ownership – that is, public recognition – for the problem. The paper focuses on both organizational and client agency. *Organizational agency*<sup>1</sup> is the means or instruments used by the issue owner to act in such a way as to keep the issue current and vital in the minds of the public or publics, once initial social action has been taken. In the case of domestic violence: how do issue owners maintain public perception of the issue as significant, worthy of time and attention, still requiring public awareness and remediation after laws have been passed thus “resolving” the issue? *Client agency* is a paradox that occurs when victim or sufferer is not the issue owner and, thus, does not have the means or instruments to act out of their choice. For domestic violence victims, others (in this case, the “issue owners”) speak for and of them. Thus while engaging in a sincere and earnest attempt to provide agency for the “client,” the organization/issue owner “speaking for” can serve most ironically to rob the sufferer of voice. The paper examines how the rhetorical construction of issue ownership can negatively affect the very persons it is designed to serve or empower. In the case of domestic violence, the construction of “victim” can have serious repercussions for the real-world actions and choices available to those women and children so designated.

The paper focuses on one specific organization, Boulder County Safehouse (BCS), now called Safehouse Progressive Alliance for Nonviolence (SPAN), as it wrestles with the exigency of issue ownership and agency in the area of domestic violence. The tension between ownership and agency is symbolically and materially represented in SPAN: its buildings, their function, and audience. Attention is paid to the ways SPAN has rhetorically re-created and reinvented both its issue ownership and the agency of the “victim.” While SPAN is a unique organization, the study can serve to expand the range of possible rhetorical options available for other social action/service organizations as they, too, face the challenges of issue ownership and agency.

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<sup>1</sup> The definition of “agency” is that provided by Burke (1945) in *A Grammar of Motives*, p. xv.

## Social Movements and Issue Ownership

All social movements have a purpose: to enact social change. Like waves that break upon the shore of public life, social movements are “called into being” to address a problem, or *exigence* (Bitzer, 1978). They gather momentum, in the form of publicity; they create what Hauser (1998, 1999) calls vernacular public spheres—groups of citizens called together to render judgment on issues of importance. The moving wave crests magnificently, hopefully changing the landscape of society for the better, and then retreats, to become once again part of the ocean of human interaction.

In our immediate lifetimes, we have all witnessed the waves of multiple social movements: battered women’s; drinking and driving; and gay pride. Some are still gaining momentum or cresting (e.g. gay marriage). Some have formed their issues and deposited them on the public’s shore (like battered women’s; and drinking and driving). Each movement has attempted to force acknowledgement of a social problem, to name the cause and demand some form of remediation—usually *at minimum* through legal means, sometimes through broader attitudinal changes. For each of these “successful” social movements, there is a clear evidence, in the form of laws and social mores, that change has taken place.

To carry the metaphor to its more-than-timely death: what happens after the wave has receded? When the clamor and groundswell of public opinion has faded; laws have been created; society is arguably more aware of the wrongs and apparently more committed to righting them—what then? Have we eradicated violence between intimates? Have people stopped drinking and driving in record numbers?

For many who “own” social movements, who are seen as sponsors of the issue, as authorities on the issue, as advocates for persons, groups or institutions impacted by the issue, social change is not the “end” of that problem. Alterations in the way we speak about, and acknowledge, those issues unarguably indicates changed social awareness. The most obvious, and immediately consequential, social action is often the passing of laws designed to protect vulnerable populations, create or force equity, and render society safer. However, legislation does not, in and of itself, “solve” problems. Legal remedies can correct symptoms, call attention to consequences, and indeed focuses attention and condemnation towards unsafe, unhealthy, and/or immoral actions. But remediation is rarely, if ever, a “cure” for the social ill. Legal remediation allows concerned citizens to turn back to their own lives, unhampered by the burden of constant awareness of the still-enduring obstacles of battered women, of young lives lost in alcohol-related automobile accidents. Creating awareness and passing legislation is not to be minimized—it is how we, as a society, evolve; it is the means by which we reaffirm what is important to us as citizens.

Real, measurable social change cannot take place without rhetorical action and challenges to the status quo in the public sphere (or spheres). Many of the social movements discussed involve bringing a “private” issue into the light of public scrutiny. We are called to face and redress the attitudes that view women as less than men; that say women and children are chattel of the provider; that say drinking is a private act, a private choice. Activists and advocates who are able to win the attention of the public, who are viewed as

authorities on the issue, and who can name the injustice and demand change, become what Gusfield (1981) calls “issue owners.” These “owners” bridge public and private realms. Owners attempt to provide a public voice for private individuals, to create agency for victims of social wrongs, for those who cannot act for themselves. At the same time, owners still agitate vigorously – make waves if you will – in the public eye, demanding change. But since the problem is not “solved” even after awareness is created and legislation is passed, the question remains: what do the activists do? How do they continue to maintain ownership of an issue that is “fixed” in the mind of the public?

This paper attempts to address the issue: how advocates for a group with problems maintain agency for that group when they secure issue ownership – public recognition – for the problem. I will do that through an examination of one particular social issue, domestic violence. Specifically, this paper will examine one shelter, the Boulder County Safehouse (now Safehouse Progressive Alliance for Nonviolence, or SPAN), as it attempts to maintain both agency for its clients, and a continued focus on domestic violence as a still-urgent social problem.

Boulder County Safehouse (BCS) was founded as a shelter for battered women in 1979. For over 30 years it has provided a physical shelter for abused women and their children. At the same time, it performs valuable community educational outreach and serves as a resource for those who have questions about domestic violence. In 2004, Boulder County Safehouse changed its name to more accurately reflect what it was actually doing. The new name is Safehouse Progressive Alliance for Nonviolence, or SPAN.

This paper will examine how BCS/SPAN has managed to balance providing shelter and agency to the women it serves, while still attempting to keep the issue a current focus of attention in the public domain. While this is the story of one organization, it resonates with other issue owners who find themselves straddling boundaries between public and private, and who juggle the responsibilities of continuing a valuable service mission in a public sphere where the issue has been adjudicated, where action has been taken but the issue remains. Finally, it represents a case study of rhetorical reinvention and re-creation: of the organization, of the issue, and of the public and private audiences it serves.

### **The Rhetorical Construction of Ownership for the Issue of Domestic Violence**

Gusfield (1981) examined the movement from private to public by tracing how drinking-driving became a public problem. He is concerned with “How ... an issue or problem emerges as one with public status, as something about which ‘someone ought to do something’” (p.5). He provides a vocabulary that allows us to speak about ownership of public problems:

The concept of “ownership of public problems” is derived from the recognition that in the arenas of public opinion and debate all groups do not have equal power, influence, and authority to define the reality of the problem. The ability to create and influence the public definition of a problem is what I refer to as “ownership.” (p. 10).

Ownership carries power: “At any time in a historical period there is a recognition that specific public issues are the legitimate province of specific persons, roles, and offices that can command public attention, trust, and influence. They have credibility ... Owners can make claims and assertions ... they are looked at and reported to by others ... They possess authority in the field ... They are among those who can gain the public ear” (p. 10). In order for domestic violence to be framed *in a specific way*, as a *specific sort of problem*, ownership is essential.

Ownership is also contested. Interested parties often passionately strive for the right to control, and thus to shape, the issue. Framing is critical in society’s acceptance of a legitimate public problem: “ ... the status of a phenomenon as a problem is itself often a matter of conflict as interested parties struggle to define or prevent the definition of a matter” (Gusfield, 1981, p. 10) requiring public intervention.

Gusfield (1981) theorizes the relationship between ownership of a problem, and the assignment of responsibility, causal and political. “Owners” of a problem are perceived as having the authority to assign causal responsibility, to allocate the blame for the existence of the problem (“a matter of belief or cognition, an assertion about the sequence that factually accounts for the existence of the problem” [p.23]). Owners may also attempt to assign political responsibility for addressing the problem: “ ... political responsibility is a matter of policy. It asserts that somebody or some office is obligated to do something about the problem, to eradicate or alleviate the harmful situation” (p. 13). In the case of domestic violence, those who attempt to own the issue (for example, feminist victim advocates, shelters, SPAN) also attempt to assign causal responsibility (domestic violence is a result of patriarchy) and political responsibility (all of society should hold perpetrators criminally and morally responsible for harm).

Lest we think ownership is not at the heart of a serious struggle, of, in some cases, life and death, Gusfield reminds us that “what happens on the public stage is made the standard of legitimacy, of what are the canons of the society. To grant acceptance to... behavior when it emerges in the light of public reports is to create the societal rule; to generate the perception of living in a society in which such action is legitimate” (1981, p.181). If we, as a society, accept that, for example, domestic violence is only of concern when physical battery is evidenced, how are we valuing, or more accurately, ignoring those acts whose culmination is battery, but whose collective weight provides such harm that women, and men, are trapped in a spiral that all too often ends in death, through murder and/or suicide? Moreover, these public presentations of the issue do not spring fully formed before a pre-ordained audience. They are carried on the back of narratives and statistics—vehicles which lend credibility and shape the parameters of the issue. Narratives describe a worldview which calls an audience to see itself within that frame, which resonates with an internal fidelity and coherence, which requires an action on the part of that audience.

## A Brief History of the Battered Women's Movement<sup>2</sup>

Interest in, and focus on, domestic violence/battery arose out of the Women's movement of the late 1960s and 1970s. Consciousness raising groups brought women together and opened discussion on topics such as rape and sexual violence against women. As women shared experiences, they realized that domestic violence and sexual assault had many ingredients in common. The battered women told of violence, isolation, and "victim-blaming" common to rape narratives, and more: sheltered within the sacred bonds of the family, home and the private, they were also unable to cry "rape," even though rape was often involved in battery; they were tied to their abuser by social, economic, emotional, and religious bonds; family members were often unwilling to deal with the stigma and told the victim to "go home, he's a good man, he loves you." This was compounded by the system, which did not want to interfere in the bonds of family. Even today, the social welfare system is designed to keep families intact, and the stories are legion of children who have been returned to abusive or neglectful situations because the "family" should remain together.

Perhaps more disturbing for victim advocates, tales circulate of courts who have awarded child custody to the (most often male) battering partner, since that parent is often most willing to "facilitate interactions with the absent parent," usually a woman who fled the relationship specifically to avoid that contact and unhealthy dynamic. Women who stay in battering relationships are also caught in the catch-22 of having "failed to protect" their children from violence, thus calling into question their ability to be a strong parental figure.

### ***Grassroots action***

Part of second wave feminism's cry "the personal is political" was converted into grassroots action, as feminists created and staffed the first shelters, opened in the late '70s and early '80s, for women and children victims of domestic violence. Shelter staff and organizations such as NOW (National Organization of Women) began working within the system to agitate for legislation that placed blame and punishment on the offender. At the same time, they offered education to police forces in appropriate ways to deal with domestic violence situations.

Feminist attorneys began to file class action law suits, on behalf of groups of battered women, against court officers and police departments, to compel them to enforce laws against assault, arrest perpetrators, and help victims press charges in court. Multiple court actions charged police with "... failing to protect them as they would protect other crime

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<sup>2</sup> This very abbreviated history is based on an outline provided by Davies, Lyon, & Monti-Catania (1998), but informed and shaped by a comprehensive overview of literature on women as victims, domestic violence as a social issue, and the battered women's movement, including the works of Anderson (1997); Cloud (1998); Davidson (2000); Engel (1990); Evans (1992); Ferraro (1981); French (1992); Gelles & Strauss (1988); Gerdes (1999); Imbrogno & Imbrogno (2000); Jacobson & Gottman (1998); Jaffe, Wolfe & Wilson (1990); Jensen (2000); Jones & Schechter (1992); LaViolette & Barnett (2000); Lloyd & Emery (2000); Lloyd (2001); Loseke (1992); Meyer (2001); Meyers (1994); Meyers (1997); Miller (1995); Rennison & Welchans (2000); Rennison (2003); Roleff (2000); Rudd, Dobos, Vogl-Bauer & Beatty (1997); Sabourin (1995); Sachs & Rodriguez (2000); Schechter (1982); Shamai (2000); Stalans & Lurigio (1999); Supriya (1996); Tjaden & Thoennes (2000); U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary Report (1992); Vangelisti (1994); Walker (1979, 1984, 1989); and Whalen (1996).

victims, a violation of their civil rights” (Jones, 2001, p.23). The move to frame domestic violence as more than battery, but a violation of a woman’s civil rights, was masterful and consequential. Courts began to uphold the rights of women to be protected – even if the abuser is her husband.

Jones tells us of a particularly troubling, landmark case:

...One woman, Tracey Thurman, won a suit against the police of Torrington, Connecticut, who had stood by and watched while her estranged husband stabbed and slashed and kicked her nearly to death. Awarding her substantial damages, a federal district court ruled that "a man is not allowed to physically abuse or endanger a woman merely because he is her husband. Concomitantly, a police officer may not knowingly refrain from interference in such violence, and, may not automatically decline to make an arrest simply because the assaulter and the victim are married to each other" (2001, p. 23).

### ***The Violence Against Women Act***

In 1990, Senator Joseph Biden proposed the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), which made domestic violence a crime against women's civil rights. The change of public attitudes was, and remains, the burden assumed by feminists, advocates and agencies engaged in proactive support of battered women: it is the burden, the responsibility and the right of “owners” of public problems. Biden's proposed VAWA was ratified and signed into law in 1994. Since that time, the Act has been continuously renewed, most recently in 2013.

### **The Rhetorical Construction of Agency for Battered Women**

Domestic violence, then, has come to be seen as a public problem: no longer something from which society turns away. We, as a society, have said that this is a real problem (facticity); that it can be cured (remediability); and that we support the cure (in the form of legal sanctions against perpetrators, and federal support for education and training for police forces and courts). Society acknowledges the moral responsibility to redress a wrong directed at its citizens.

Ownership, as described, places the power to speak for and about an issue into the hands of the owner. If the owner is a victim of the wrong, there is an unarguable moral authority. This victim is now ultimately empowered: s/he has the public voice, the agency, to assign blame and demand action. There is a public presence. Instead of hiding in the shadows, like the family member no one wants to acknowledge, this individual has, in a sense, been “redeemed” from a place of shame and has moved into the light of the public life of a citizen. In the case of Mothers Against Drunk Driving, even though mothers/members still feel pain, that pain serves to reinforce their “right” to speak on the issue. For proud Blacks who marched in Selma, there is a sense of restored dignity, of pride in their authority, in their ability to call for change. Even viewing their individual and collective pain is acceptable, as it serves, again, to prove their authority and remind us that we made the “right” choice to support them.



In the case of victims of domestic violence, there is a paradoxical twist. As a consequence of its construction a dichotomy has been created: victim *or* survivor. While one can survive as a victim, there is an either/or disjunction between the two terms: a woman cannot be *both* a victim and a survivor, and the line between the two is quite clear. A survivor is one—almost always a woman, since up to 98% of DV is perpetrated by men against women—who has escaped from a relationship where abuse is being committed. She is a “former victim.” She can tell her story and be heard and acknowledged. She assumes her role, her voice, as a participating member of the public. One might feel *sympathy* for a survivor, but she calls up respect rather than pity. She has left the abuse and so does not have to face the question “why are you still in that situation?”

The “victim,” however, remains in the abusive relationship: she is still being abused, still suffering, still silenced. She requires our protection, our pity, our efforts to save and redeem her. A frequently quoted statistic, highlighted in the 1994 Oscar winning documentary *Defending Our Lives* (Lazarus & Wunderlich, 1993) is that, “on average, a woman tries seven times before she is able to leave” her abuser; and that she is most vulnerable to injury and death during the process of leaving. The victim appears almost beyond most help—other than emotional support—*unless and until* she chooses to leave the abusive relationship, thereby earning the label of “survivor.” While in shelter, even as she is supported with physical and mental care and nurturing, she is presented with a forced choice: she has thirty days to six weeks (depending upon individual shelter rules, victim situations, shelter availability etc) to render herself (and her children, if any) separate and independent from her abusive relationship. This usually involves finding employment, housing, legal advice, financial assistance, access to public services or transportation, uprooting every aspect of her life and that of her children. Even as this momentous series of actions is taking place, she is often mourning the loss of her home, her security, her stability (yes, even the abusive devil one knows can seem more predictable and less frightening than such a massive change).

Of key importance in terms of seeking and receiving shelter—she must first and foremost sever the relationship with the abuser as much as humanly possible, including ending communication. If she will not—or cannot—make that decision, she returns to the relationship and remains isolated in the realm of the private. When/if she returns to her abuser, the shelter workers refer to her as “lost” (Hirsch, unpublished study, 1996). Most poignantly, s/he has no “voice.” The victim’s narrative of pain is only carried into the public by a “survivor.” Even today, in 2016, there is little sympathy or willingness to hear the stories of those who self identify as current “victims.” Stories that make it into the public sphere almost always begin with the words “I *was* a victim.” They are past-tense stories of what *has* happened because there is still little credibility for those who remain in an abusive relationship since there is an oft-unspoken assumption of complicity—again, refer to the frequently asked “Why didn’t she just *leave*?” as though remaining means she “ask(s/ed) for the abuse.”

The owner of the issue of domestic violence, then, is not the victim herself: she still has no voice, no agency. She has people who speak *for* her, on her behalf. They are very often *former* victims. But out of respect and the very real desire to protect, victims remain silenced, both by a society that cannot understand her continued victimage (“Why doesn’t she just *leave*?”) and by the safehouses and shelters that seek to keep her hidden from her

abuser. In a most ironic twist, the issue owner's very protectiveness denies agency to the one they attempt to represent.

### **SPAN's Efforts to Reconcile Issue Ownership and Agency**

Control of public perception, indeed of any perception, is fundamentally a rhetorical issue: because of public perception, discourse frames the world in a way that invites assent, influences choice, judgment, and reality. To that end, problems with perception, with ownership, with social change, with agency, are rhetorical problems. I will examine how the ongoing tension between issue ownership and providing agency—and rhetorical attempts to manage that tension—is symbolically and materially represented in SPAN: its buildings, function and audience(s). I will then look at ways the organization is attempting to address those tensions, in the structures, in the mission and goals. Finally I will examine how SPAN has rhetorically re-created and reinvented its ownership of the issue, and the agency of the “victim.”

### ***The Public Face and the Private Heart***

The tension between issue ownership and client agency reflects the tension between public and private. In the case of SPAN, the structure of the organization echoes the public/private balancing act that the organization performs. This feminist organization is located at the boundary of public and private spheres: it has both a public face and presence, (as it attempts to assert and maintain ownership of the issue of domestic violence), and it has a private identity, as it shelters, responds to the needs of victims of abuse, and attempts to empower those victims. The organization also sponsors and runs two buildings: the Outreach (Administrative) building, and the Shelter, which correspond to the public and private functions, respectively.

There is a symbolic and symbiotic relationship between the two physical structures. The administrative hub—“Outreach”—is a large pink brick building located at 835 North Street in Boulder, Colorado. Outreach is actively engaged in public contestation for issue ownership, control, definition and framing—clearly a strong public voice—yet a great deal of its public *ethos* comes from work done in the Shelter. SPAN Outreach volunteers and staff provide the organization's public audience with the statistics and data required to make rational arguments about the continuing severity of domestic violence. The following segment, from “SPAN 2006 AT-A-GLANCE” [bold, theirs] illustrates:

- In 2006 Safehouse Progressive Alliance for Nonviolence sheltered **192 women and 79 children** for a total for 5, 829 days of service
- **Less than 1%** of the women residents returned to the relationship while the vast majority moved to independent living situations.
- SPAN responded to **10,912** crisis line calls through the 24-hour crisis line
- Safehouse Progressive Alliance for Nonviolence DART (Domestic Abuse Response Team) Advocates responded to **466** emergency response calls.

- **346** people used our Legal Advocacy services
- We provided counseling services to **1,814** women, youth and children ... (Reach Out, 2007, issue 1, p. 5, retrieved from <http://www.safehousealliance.org/index.cfm?objectid=B62DEC3F-D614-E19E-22D3E64FE387748F>).

SPAN public and outreach programs include staffing and physical responsibility for management of the Shelter and the 24-hour crisis line. In addition, SPAN provides advocacy services, including crisis intervention, a legal advocacy program, protection order clinics, drop-in clinics for general legal advocacy and a biweekly Immigrant Legal Advocacy Clinic for battered immigrant women. SPAN support services include its Outreach Counseling Program, including individual and group counseling, and a variety of support groups for women and children; the Transitional Services Program, which works to provide longer term assistance as women leave shelter and establish their independent lives; and a Spiritual Support Team, which represents “Christian, Quaker, Wiccan, Muslim and Buddhist perspectives” (Reach Out, 2007, 1, p. 3). Its Education Program focuses on school-based education for K-5, peer education for middle and high schools, and community education for adults. The Training and Community Education Program includes SPAN’s vigorous 50-hour in-house volunteer training. Additionally, it offers external community presentations and education, with topics that include (but are not limited to) “The Dynamics of Domestic Violence” and “Health Implications of Domestic Violence.” SPAN has recently added a six-month “Anti-Racism Institute” and provides in-depth consultation and training “on understanding white privilege and ‘Building A Multi-Racial, Anti-Racist, Inclusive Organization’” (Reach Out, 2007, 1, p. 4).

Obviously, the work of many hands requires financial support. SPAN fundraisers include events like the “Chocolate Lover’s Fling,” “Spring for SPAN” and “Jam for Justice.” In addition to fundraisers, raising money from community and local businesses, SPAN receives support from private foundations, the United Way, the City of Boulder, Boulder County government, and state and federal monies.

Thus the Outreach building, with its proud pink brick, is the public aspect of SPAN: here is where important decisions are made; here reside the offices of the executive and program directors and most of the paid staff; here is the home of the training sessions, meetings, outreach counseling sessions. This is what the public sees as it interfaces with SPAN. This is the face of the issue owner, the literal “head” of the extended organization, the planner, the generator of statistics and data and appeals, the community resource, the public access to information about domestic violence in Boulder and surrounding counties, in the state and in the nation.

While Outreach is the public face of SPAN, the private heart and soul is the shelter, a “private residence”—a large but not unremarkable house located on a regular street, in an average neighborhood in Boulder. The shelter provides the *raison d’être* for the administration building. At the same time, it also represents an emotional and ethical boundary whose parameters cannot be breached: people who visit are sworn to secrecy, narratives engendered or shared cannot cross into the public—no matter how persuasive

and helpful an appeal it might make—because the shelter is as it is named: a haven. Women must be protected there. Women are heard in that protected space.

Physically and emotionally, the shelter is a place where abused women flee from the isolation, from the dark closet of their abusive relationships. In the most private realm of the home, of intimate interpersonal relationships, these women have been betrayed, emotionally, spiritually, and/or physically battered, wounded. They may have tried to escape the relationship before; some have told close others of the abuse, but violence in the sanctity of the home is not a narrative the general public wants to hear. Leaving an abuser is difficult, on more levels than this paper has the ability to discuss: emotional, financial, and social dependence upon the abuser are only the tip of the iceberg. Intellectual and emotional abuse can cause the victim to doubt her ability to make rational decisions. Financial abuse can keep her chained, without access to the currency required for any sort of life for her and/or her children. Social, cultural and religious norms that mandate marriage or (heterosexual) partnering can cause the woman to believe that she cannot make it alone in a world of pairs, that her children will suffer socially and spiritually, as well as emotionally and economically, without the presence of the abuser. And physical battery generates the kind of terror – rational, real, inescapable – that results in common diagnoses of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in both the woman and her children.

Shelter is a temporary safe space: it is a place where women and their children flee, many in the dead of night, some after careful planning, almost all in turmoil, confusion and pain. Here, women are nurtured and supported. Almost as importantly, women's stories are heard and validated, their narratives of pain, their fears of the future, their torment over choices made and decisions to be made. It is also a (temporary) space where, if successful, women move from an identity of "victim" and non-rhetorical life in the private, to a public identity—where their stories as "survivors" can be heard.

It is, however, in some ways a *quasi*-private space, at once both public and private. Women are guaranteed protection from their batterers, yet members of the public (e.g. volunteers and trainees in SPAN's support programs) are allowed access, can meet and interact with the women and their children. The 24-hour crisis line is housed there, constantly staffed by volunteers. Paid staff spends the night. The rooms are shared, the chores are shared, the resources are shared. There is no residential phone service, but a pay phone: no perpetrators can call residents, but residents can call out to make job appointments. Privacy is a scarce commodity, and fellow residents are very often transient strangers, yet it is a "home"—a dwelling place where women and children shelter from the often-nightmarish private world they fled. It is a place largely free of men: the mission statement reads: "The mission... is to provide safe shelter, support, and advocacy for battered women and their children..."(Boulder County Safehouse, 1994). The shelter's secret location, requires residents' promise not to divulge. While men may enter the Outreach location, where meetings are held, business conducted, training offered, I have never seen a man (other than perhaps a repairman) at the shelter itself. Men may be accepted as Domestic Abuse Prevention Project Advocates, or Speaker's Bureau Presenters, but will probably not be Crisis Line Workers, or Relief Counselors as that would require their physical presence in Shelter.

In a sense that is both ironic and paradoxical the shelter is one [again *quasi-*] public place where the voice of the victim is heard—but the “voices” and their narratives stay in the shelter. The voices of *victims* are internally heard and validated, but to make the transition into the public, the narrative must be carried by another (with all key details disguised to protect the victim) or must be the first-person narrative of a *survivor*. The message: “Come to the shelter to be heard, but know that no-one outside these walls will hear your story unless *you* change yourself from *victim* to *survivor*.”

In an ironic twist, an organization that believes domestic violence is a matter of life or death offers a victim a bitter choice: change, or else. The victim *must* leave the abuser, permanently: all else flows from that decision, including her access to survivor identity and voice. Moreover, for those advocates and volunteers who have committed their lives and time to combating domestic violence, there is a wealth of rhetorical opportunities inaccessible to them: they are bound by ethics to protect the vulnerable and thus are an ironic part of silencing them, of denying them the choice so necessary to agency. Thus shelter provides safety, security and nurturing to victims, but agency—in terms of a public face, voice, choice, and identity—only to survivors, whose goal is to leave, never to return again.

### ***From Micro to Macro: Consequential Rhetorical Changes***

Constructed as a victim/survivor dichotomy, agency for women who seek shelter from abusive relationships is curtailed. If the “survivor” is “not victim”—if becoming a survivor means one must leave an abusive relationship—then “victim” has no viable option, no choice but to leave, else remain victim. Remember, that assessment of victim/survivor was originally made by the issue owners, the “authorities” who construct and speak to the issue in the court of public debate. It has remained the rhetorical construction, the public presentation, used to own and control the issue. But if that dichotomy is removed, if somehow a woman can rationally, logically, acting in her own best interests, return to a relationship, then a woman can have agency, she can *have the means or instruments to act out of their [her] choice*. No longer battered, buffered, defined merely in opposition to, she becomes an active agent in her own chosen method of survival.

By 2002, Boulder County Safehouse had adopted and promoted the acknowledgment that returning to an abuser/abusive situation might be an option that a coherent, rationally-thinking woman could choose. Over the past few years, Safehouse had come to rely on a text which, according to Lisa Olcese, Training and Community Education Director, has “radically changed our outlook and ways of dealing with victims” of domestic violence (private conversation, June 11, 2003). The book is titled *Safety Planning with Battered Women: Complex Lives/Difficult Choices* (Davies, Lyon, & Monti-Catania, 1998). It is presented as a key, recommended reference for any and all activists and volunteers.

Prior to the adoption of the Davies book, the recommended text was *Next Time She’ll Be Dead* by Jones (1994). Jones’ book was the “bible” of Safehouse training in 1995: it was one of the first mass market, trade-sized paperbacks that attempted to outline, define, and assign responsibility for the issue of domestic violence. Written by a former victim, it

presented statistics and stories, arguing for the facticity and remediability of domestic abuse. It also, presented, much like the aforementioned documentary, *Defending Our Lives*, a particular construction of the victim, what would later come to be called the “pure victim” (Davies et al., 1998). In the book, and others by Jones (1994, 1996; Jones & Schechter, 1992), and in the documentary, women victims dealt with severe violence, and victims were severely debilitated by that violence, torture and terror. It was a particular rhetorical construction of victim, created to present her as suffering but sane, as motivated to violence only in self defense, as terrorized but not mentally ill. Indeed, there is a large section in Jones’ book (one out of six chapters, and one of the longest at 32 pages) which deals with the “story” of Hedda Nussbaum, a woman so severely debilitated that she was unable to stop her partner, Joel Steinberg, from murdering their foster daughter. Again, Hedda is almost a perfect stereotype for the pure victim model, which focuses on the physical torture and mental abuse suffered by victims. She was altogether helpless and pitiable.

By virtue of the presentation in the Jones’ text, victims who left shelter and returned to relationships were reified as women to be pitied, lost souls, helplessly disappearing into the mist of pain and punishment. Thus it was not surprising to view victims as without agency, hope, choice, or options. However, Davies' et al. 1998 book challenged that outlook: sometimes women make “rational” choices to return to an abusive relationship. Women are capable of making assessments of batterer-generated and life-generated risks.

Batterer-generated risks involve seven broad categories: physical injury, psychological harm, risks to and involving the children, financial risks, risk to or about family and friends, loss of relationship, and risks involving arrest or legal status (Davies et al., 1998, p. 2). Life generated risks, often called social or environmental risks, include (and this is considered a partial list) "financial, home location, physical and mental health, inadequate responses by major social institutions, and discrimination based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or other bias" (p. 53).

The adoption of the book and its attendant “woman-defined advocacy environment” (Davies et al., 1998) might seem like a micro-level change in terminology, but actually involves a sea change in terms of the way that change rippled throughout the private and public aspects of BCS.

One of the first things Safehouse staff began to analyze was the nature of their relationship to the women they sheltered. In choosing to become women-defined advocates, their job was to partner with those women, and the question became “how best to help the woman actualize *her* choices?”—whether to go, or to return—rather than act upon the assumption that leaving was always the best and only answer. Adopting a woman-defined advocacy model, as Safehouse did, means that, as Davies (et al., 1998) instructs:

Separation will no longer be seen as the only real answer to domestic violence. Hiding women will become just another option, and no longer the primary focus of advocacy. Advocates will respect and understand battered women’s needs and desire to stay in their relationships. (p.165)

Additionally, was it enough to help victim/survivors navigate what they recognized was a broken system? Again, Davies et al. provide the answer:

Advocacy that helps guide women through systems that offer few, poor, or no options ... ultimately only makes the best of a less-than-ideal-situation. If a system does not respond, or responds poorly, then battered women have fewer options for their safety and the safety of their children. Therefore, a natural part of advocacy for individual battered women is advocacy to enhance systematic responses to battered women. (1998, p. 139)

Moreover, the focus moves from micro to macro in a manner that challenges the definition of the *issue* of domestic violence. It is no longer enough to expect mere legislation to “solve” domestic battery, because the violence isn’t just about what happens between two people. The “real” issue is fundamental injustice and social inequities that foster and implicitly or tacitly support a culture of violence. Davies et al. assert:

The conscious inclusion of life-generated risks in risk analyses will lead advocates to consider a broader range of issues and work toward more comprehensive solutions. The mission to end batterer’s violence will be placed in the context of larger issues, such as poverty and discrimination based on race, ethnicity or other characteristics. ... Advocacy will then include efforts to achieve economic justice, end racism and other discrimination, and respond to the range of life-generated risks. (1998, p. 166)

Thus, to help the individual woman, on a micro-level, one must adopt change on a macro level: even the language used to discuss the issue has changed. The issue moves from *domestic violence*—ending battery and dominance of women by men, to one of *social justice*—ending systemic inequities that subordinate on the basis of race, gender, economic status, and ethnicity. As evidenced in SPAN’s new motto, the focus turns to “Promoting economic, racial and social justice.” In this particular organization it is, additionally, no less than an organizational decision to move from “merely” a service orientation to an organization that focuses on enacting social activism on a far larger scale, beginning with their own internal review, re-visioning, re-prioritizing, hiring and staffing decisions. Not only will SPAN continue to serve and shelter women, but it will reclaim for itself the ownership of “social justice” that served grassroots feminists in the beginnings of the movement.

### ***Reclaiming Social Justice***

Ann Tapp, Executive Director of Boulder County Safehouse, and now SPAN, detailed the progression of the organization’s re-creation, reclamation, and rhetorical re-visioning of its mission and focus:

In August, 2004.... After 25 years of serving the community, Boulder County Safehouse announced a new name and an expanded social justice agenda. Safehouse Progressive Alliance for Nonviolence (SPAN) would carry its vision of a just and equitable world for women and their families into the future. SPAN has affirmed its mission as a human rights organization committed to ending

violence against women, youth and children through support, advocacy, education and community organizing. Promoting economic, racial and social justice would be the focus, and equal balance of direct services and social impact projects would be the method. (Tapp, 2006)

In “Reach Out,” the organization’s new e-newsletter, Tapp explains that, prior to the organizational redirection:

... the organization looked and functioned like many battered women’s programs: a predominantly white staff provided shelter and counseling services to a client base of 40 percent people of color; advocacy services centered on the criminal legal system; prevention efforts focused on ‘family violence’; and the agency’s referral network depended on mainstream human services organizations and government systems. (ReachOut, 2006, issue 2, p.1 retrieved from <http://www.safehousealliance.org/index.cfm?objectid=B62DEC3F-D614-E19E-22D3E64FE387748F>).

After the reorganization, the change was more striking:

Fifty percent of the staff, 50 percent of the leadership/management team, and 40 percent of the board represented communities of color.... Programs had been reorganized in response to client needs. Client-defined advocacy... was the norm. Prevention efforts were broadly focused to include race and gender-based violence.... In the two years since the 2004 public unveiling of the transformed SPAN, the organization’s social justice focus has matured, deepened, and informed every aspect of our work. (ReachOut, 2006, issue 2, p.1)

The change, begun in response to a new way of thinking about women’s needs, had radically changed the internal structure of the organization itself, and refined its ownership claims and agency. On large levels – name change, ownership claims, internal structure, external focus, mission—and on small but significant ones – the preferred term is “interpersonal violence” not “domestic violence”—SPAN has altered its own issue ownership, agency, and that of the women and community it serves. Because, as Tapp explains in the newsletter:

... providing a battered woman and her children with shelter responds to their immediate basic need for safety, but does nothing to address the economic inequities that keep her reliant on her partner’s income for survival and vulnerable to his future abuse... Without equal investment in addressing the roots of an injustice, we inadvertently confuse the quantifiable task of *servicing clients* with the immeasurable charge of *preventing injustice*. [italics theirs]. (ReachOut, 2006, issue 2, p. 3)

### **Lessons Learned**

While the experience of Safehouse/SPAN is the experience of one organization, the implications resonate to other issue owners, charged with bringing issues before the public, seeking remediation on behalf of harmed or disadvantaged citizens. In terms of the agency of issue owners, Tapp’s tale of re-visioning an organization committed to



social change is poignant and cautionary: “In championing these efforts to reclaim our social justice organizations, I have no illusions about the personal and professional challenges faced and the toll taken when embarking on this journey. Being part of the transformation of SPAN has been both the most enriching and the most agonizing experience of my career” (2006). As with all changes, it can begin with a simple question:

How is it that a movement that began with such determination and passion has become a network of agencies whose services are questionably relevant to those who need them most? The answers, and there are many, have little to do with the dedication of staff and volunteers in domestic violence and sexual assault programs. This is not a problem of commitment. Rather, it is the predictable consequence of a social movement’s slide from activism to service-delivery. (Tapp, 2006).

Her conclusion is that “the evolution toward meaningful and sustainable social change requires that we take a boldly honest look at the fundamental problems of our social justice movements” (Tapp, 2006). Examination of the changes made by SPAN provide valuable insights and lessons for other owners and organizations caught in the tension between ownership and agency, between commitment and delivery, between social action and service mission. In Tapp’s words:

Key lessons learned through SPAN’s transformational journey:

- Expect conflict—it means people are paying attention
- Maintain humility—it makes it easier to live through mistakes
- Acknowledge fundraising anxiety—it helps keep paranoid fantasies in check
- Communicate frequently—it reduces conjecture and helps people relate to the changing organization
- Implement necessary structural changes—it removes operational barriers to change
- Assess the organization’s formal and informal culture—it identifies barriers to organizational inclusivity, particularly for people of color  
(Reach Out, 2006, issue 2, p. 4, retrieved from <http://www.safeforcealliance.org/index.cfm?objectid=B62DEC3F-D614-E19E-22D3E64FE387748F>).

### ***Rhetorical Resolution***

SPAN’s decision to walk the path of social justice involved changes in the language used to discuss the women it serves, its mission, and even the issue over which it extended ownership. It was certainly not an easy process, nor should other social justice organizations anticipate such, but that process, from examination through commitment, has allowed SPAN to, as they would surely say, more ethically manage the tension

between issue ownership and agency, for the organization, its members, and for the population it/they represent. With the creation of client centered advocacy, and the addition of community centered, community building initiatives like the Anti-Racism Institute, SPAN has initiated changes from internal to external audiences. Every change involves an increased focus on both issue ownership and agency, as issue owners reclaim their mission of “promoting economic, racial, and social justice” while continuing their focus on giving presence and voice to victims.

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