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Wife Assault: An Information-Seeking Perspective

As noted in previous chapters, one cannot effectively understand a person's information needs and information search behavior without considering the situation in which that person finds herself or himself. This is particularly true of complex social problems, of which wife assault is a good example. In this chapter, research findings on the prevalence and impact of woman abuse are reviewed in some detail, in order that the information problems faced by assaulted women can be explored.

THE INFORMATION NEEDS OF CRIME VICTIMS

Few studies of crime focus on the information problems encountered by victims. This is somewhat surprising, since studies of "conventional" offenses reveal that, in comparison with other difficulties that victims may face, their need for information is "the most common need of all" (Maguire, 1985, p. 545).

Conventional offenses are those that are usually committed by strangers and are reported to the police. According to Maguire, victims of these types of crimes often request

advice on crime prevention, insurance and compensation; information about police progress in investigations; and, if an offender has been arrested, information on whether he

is on bail or in custody and the likely dates of court hearings. Moreover, if the victim has to appear as a witness, there is a common desire for a general briefing on court procedures and quite often a need for specific legal advice. (pp. 545-546)

Unfortunately, the majority of these victim information needs are never met. In the case of one of society's most frequent crimes, wife assault, the experiences of victims suggest a similar pattern: a nearly systemwide failure to provide timely, relevant responses to the information requests of assaulted women.

What are the information needs of battered women, and how are these needs responded to (or not) by the human-service system? As is the case with research into the experiences of victims of other types of crimes, the information problem has received little attention in the study of wife assault. Instead, in the rapidly growing literature on violence against women, much of the focus has been on other issues, such as estimating the prevalence of woman abuse, understanding the factors associated with violence, examining the impact of abuse on women and children, and assessing the efficacy of various interventions for women, children, and abusive men.

THE PREVALENCE OF WIFE ASSAULT

If one were to use Maguire's criteria to classify the offense of wife assault, it would be considered an unconventional crime because it is ongoing and seldom reported to the police, and the perpetrators not only are known to the victims but also are, in fact, their intimates. On the other hand, if one were to use the criterion of prevalence as an indicator of conventionality, wife assault might be considered one of the most conventional of all crimes due to its high rate of occurrence across the population.

Although largely ignored by policymakers and service providers until the 1970s, wife assault is now increasingly acknowledged to be an extremely widespread problem that has a profound impact on its victims. It has been reported, for example, that "One-third of battered women are hurt to the point where they have to seek medical care" and that "From 18 to 21 percent of women admitted in emergency departments of hospitals have been battered" (Comuniqu'elles, 1991, p. 42). While the physical aspect of men's violence against their female partners has the most visible impact, sometimes resulting in death (Radford and Russell, 1992), the psychological and social consequences of abuse are also serious. "Some of the most destructive effects are anxiety, depression, social isolation and loss of self-esteem, children witnessing violence and often being abused themselves" (Rinfret-Raynor et al., 1992, p. 13).

Despite growing interest in the issue, obtaining precise estimates of the prevalence of woman abuse is difficult. Straus and Gelles (1986), for instance, in a national survey of family violence in the United States, found an 11.3% annual incidence rate of husband-to-wife violence. In an earlier telephone survey conducted in Kentucky, one woman in ten reported that she had been abused by

her male partner at least once during the past year, and 21% said that they had been abused sometime during their marriage (Schulman, 1979). In Canada, MacLeod (1987) reported that approximately 1 million women, one in seven or eight, are battered each year. However, even this estimate has been criticized as being too low because it relies heavily on women who have been identified through helping agencies, particularly the shelter population (see, e.g., Greaves, 1988).

Using a somewhat different approach, Smith (1987) found even higher prevalence rates through a random telephone survey in which he inquired about the physical abuse of women by a male intimate. In the city of Toronto he found that not only did one woman in seven between the ages of 18 and 50, who was currently or recently married or was cohabiting with a man, report having been physically abused during the survey year (1987) by their present or former husband or partner, but that fully *one-third* of the women sampled reported having been physically abused at some time by a husband, partner, boyfriend or date.

Despite these high numbers, which suggest that a very significant proportion of women are abused by men in intimate relationships, underestimation continues to be recognized as a significant problem by researchers who are concerned with understanding the scope of woman abuse in the community. DeKeseredy and Hinch (1991), for example, noted:

A major problem confronting researchers is eliciting accurate wife abuse data. No matter what research technique is employed, sociologists cannot avoid the problem of underreporting. Many women will not communicate their victimization to doctors, social workers, police, family, friends, researchers, and others because of embarrassment and shame, fear of reprisal by their partners, memory error, or they perceive some abusive acts as too trivial or inconsequential to mention. . . . Furthermore, many "helping professionals" . . . infrequently record incidents of wife abuse that are reported to them. . . . For example, when many doctors and hospital workers treat abused wives' cuts, broken bones and other injuries, they disregard the sources of these injuries. Other medical professionals recognize the causes but prefer to record them as "accidents" or "of unknown origin." (p. 13)

Underestimating the level of occurrence of wife assault is a significant problem in that it allows the issue to be trivialized in the minds of some policymakers and service providers. Those who assume that battering has little impact on victims or that it is a problem for only a relatively small number of women are not likely to be persuaded of the necessity for a comprehensive reexamination of the formal help network's response to battered women.

WHO ARE BATTERED WOMEN?

Despite the problem of underestimation, existing prevalence studies do make it clear that the abuse of women occurs with frightening regularity and that it

affects a large number of those who are involved in intimate relationships with men. However, in the study of woman abuse, prevalence is only one of several issues concerning researchers. Considerable attention has also been paid to the identification of factors associated with abuse.

Until recently, the demographic data kept by agencies with which abused women often come in contact, such as women's shelters and police departments, suggested that wife assault was more commonly experienced by lower-income, less-educated women than by other women in the population. However, this profile has been subjected to a vigorous challenge by researchers such as Greaves et al. (1988):

Police blotter and shelter statistics yield a skewed profile of battered women, representing them as disproportionately low-income, under-educated, working-class, or welfare mothers with few resources (financial or otherwise), who routinely frustrate the best efforts of service workers by electing to stay with their battering partners. (p. 40)

According to Greaves et al., this portrait of battered women is not only false but also potentially damaging, as it perpetuates "attitudes that isolate and silence battered women" (p. 40).

Contrary, then, to stereotypes that suggest that battering is restricted to certain classes of women, the evidence suggests that women who suffer abuse at the hands of their partners cannot be easily characterized and that the complexity of the situations they endure should not be underestimated. Data gathered from more than 500 women who used the services of a noncrisis, nonresidential counseling service that provides emotional support and legal information for battered women revealed, for example, that these women are representative of "women in the general population with regard to education, employment, and a range of other standard demographic variables" (Greaves et al., p. 41). This study and others make it clear that violence against women occurs across social categories. In other words, it can happen to any woman. Not surprisingly, therefore, the circumstances in which abused women find themselves are diverse, and the decision-making processes through which they must work defy simple categorization.

To understand the choices battered women make in dealing with the violence in their lives, and therefore, the information they might need in order to manage their situations, it is essential to consider "the relative loss of economic or social status and security that informs a victim's assessment of the risks and benefits associated with various options for response (e.g., leaving, taking legal action, seeking other forms of help or intervention)" (Greaves et al., 1988, p. 44). Similarly, "The relative degree of risk to violence (measured against the continued risk of known and thus far survived violence) . . . informs a decision to leave, not any absolute measure of victimization" (Greaves et al., 1988, p. 45).

This analysis effectively supports Brenda Dervin's theoretical stance on in-

formation-seeking that was outlined in Chapter 2 (see, e.g., Dervin, 1983). Essentially, Greaves et al. argue (as Dervin does) that one cannot predict a woman's help-seeking and other problem-solving actions by looking only at demographic variables. Instead, it is essential to take into account situational determinants of a battered woman's behavior in order to understand the ways in which she manages her problems. As Greaves et al. point out,

It is the pragmatic weighing of the risks and benefits (or potential for improvement) on all dimensions—psychological, social, economic, physical—that determines the decision to stay or leave. This means that explanatory models of battering must be sensitive to context and individual circumstances, and must recognize that these are dynamic. The need to build an appreciation of this complexity into our understanding of violence against women is reinforced by the further finding that battered women cannot be treated as an anomalous population . . . women in virtually all socioeconomic categories are potential victims of violence at the hands of their partners. (1988, p. 40)

Understanding battered women as "ordinary" women in extraordinary situations makes it possible to draw some useful insights from the research literature on the help- and information-seeking patterns of other ordinary people.

EXPANDING SPHERES OF HELP: PERSONAL, INFORMAL, AND FORMAL HELP SOURCES

As noted in Chapters 1 and 2, when considering the information-seeking behavior of ordinary people, the following patterns seem to hold: First, situational factors influence information needs more strongly than do sociodemographic characteristics; second, when people need coping information, they tend to turn first to their informal network, that is, to people like themselves, family and friends; and third, people follow habitual patterns in seeking information and are largely uninformed about formal information services. What is known of the help-seeking strategies of abused women offers little in the way of contradiction to these well-documented patterns, although informal contacts, particularly with family members, may exacerbate a battered woman's problems rather than help her, as may contacts with service providers who are part of the formal help system but who may not always be prepared or willing to assist a battered woman in her search for help and information.

There is little documented evidence about the relationship between abused women and "information services" *per se* with respect to the help-seeking process. Studies of help-seeking by battered women do suggest, however, that in dealing with ongoing abuse, the sphere of help consulted (i.e., the type of help sources women contact) moves outward from the self. In other words, women begin by tapping their inner or personal resources as they attempt to problem-solve; if this fails, their contact with help sources progresses outward as they consult first with members of their informal social networks, such as friends

and family; if this also fails, they may then begin to contact members of the formal help network, such as police, health professionals, and clergy.

The pattern of consulting first with informal sources and only later with formal helping agencies or professionals seems to hold whether abused women live in urban or rural locations. Although the initial contact with a formal help agency may not be made until several incidents of abuse have been experienced, there is evidence that actual help-seeking, at least within the informal network, begins very early after the first abusive episodes. In one study of a nonmetropolitan community in the southeastern United States, a questionnaire aimed at the victims of abuse was distributed through a local newspaper as well as various public and private human service organizations (Grayson and Smith, 1981). Nearly 60% of those who returned the survey reported that they sought help or someone to talk to after the *first* incident of abuse they had experienced. Consistent with other studies of help-seeking, the type of help sources consulted most frequently by these respondents were informal, that is, family members and friends, followed by formal sources of help, most often doctors and ministers.

Similar findings were reported by Gondolf and Fisher (1988), who reviewed a number of studies of battered women's help-seeking. Not only did they find that a significant proportion of battered women do, in fact, seek help from informal and formal sources—they are not silent about the abuse, as is frequently thought—but they also reported that battered women, in choosing whom to consult in their informal help network, turn most often to their own family members: "The women's own relatives were more likely to be asked for help in connection with battering than any other help sources, except the police" (p. 28). Similar findings were reported in a study of women who believed that they had been successful in dealing with wife assault (Bowker, 1983). After their most recent incident of battering, these women sought help (in descending order of frequency) from friends, family members, lawyers, social services, women's groups, police, shelters, and, least often, clergy.

Not only do the sources change as battered women expand their attempts to obtain help and information in coping with their partners' violence, but the nature of the help they are looking for shifts as the women undergo more and more abuse. According to Dobash and Dobash (1982), for instance, as the violence persists in an abusive relationship, not only do battered women tend to shift away from their initial contacts with friends and relatives—their informal helping network—to contacts with formal helping sources, but they also begin to focus their efforts more on controlling the man's violence and less on their own emotional needs. After the first assaults women tend to seek sympathy and personal support, whereas following later, more severe, assaults they are likely to request direct intervention and specific means of escape.

It is well known that the dangers women face from their abusive partners tend to escalate as time goes on (see, e.g., Wilson and Daly, 1992). Therefore, part of the reason for the shift in emphasis on the type of help needed and, as

a result, the types of help sources consulted, may be based on a woman's analysis of the level of risk to which she is exposed.

As the violent episodes increase in frequency and severity, injuries become worse, silence becomes more difficult and dangerous to maintain, and more and different types of help are needed, the intimate and informal sources of assistance are augmented by the more formal social agencies. (Dobash and Dobash, 1979, p. 179)

These patterns of help-seeking do not, of course, apply to all battered women. Many abused women never acknowledge their victimization to others, while others have the means to avoid some of the conventional and visible sources of help usually associated with the problem, such as social welfare agencies, shelters, and the police, and may look for what they need elsewhere in the formal network from sources such as private therapists or lawyers.

SILENCE: WOMEN'S CHOICE?

In a discussion of police responses to abused women, Edwards (1989) noted that "Official figures on crimes reported to the police represent only a minute fraction of the extent of the problem. Some women report their victimization elsewhere—to rape crisis workers, self-help groups, Women's Aid,¹ doctors, hospital staff, friends, or family. Many women remain forever silent" (p. 154). Silence, however, may not be simply a matter of a woman's reluctance to disclose information about the abuse she has experienced. For some, speaking out may be assessed as too dangerous to risk, while for other women the opportunities to consult with help sources are extremely limited. As one woman in MacLeod's (1987) study put it:

If there had been somewhere to go to ask questions right there, right close to where I live, I would have done something sooner. You know, if I could have just been out taking the baby for a walk and could have dropped in to ask some advice, my husband wouldn't have been the wiser and I would have known my rights. *It was just too hard to find out the information I needed.* (p. 100; emphasis added)

Silence about wife assault cannot, however, be attributed entirely to battered women themselves. It is widely assumed that many assaulted women choose not to speak of the violence they experience, either to control the risk of even greater abuse from their partners or because of their discomfort at disclosing such unsavory information. Increasingly, however, as will be discussed at length in a later chapter, evidence gathered from hospital emergency departments and other nodes in the formal help system reveal that women often do disclose the abuse, only to be met with the silence of so-called helpers who are unwilling to acknowledge or to follow up on what a woman has told them. Failing to get any kind of acknowledgment of the situation in which she finds

herself may contribute to a battered woman's need to continue her search for help and may force her to widen her contacts within the help network. In other words, lack of system response following the disclosure of violence may account for some of the patterns of help- and information-seeking that have been observed in studies of abused women.

PATHWAYS TO HELP SOURCES

For many women who pursue help from formal sources, transition houses (also called interval houses, hostels, refuges, or battered women's shelters) have played an extremely important role, offering women a safe haven from the violence and time to consider their options in a supportive environment. Not surprisingly, then, many studies of help-seeking by battered women have been based on samples of women drawn from the shelter population. As a result, their findings are somewhat misleading, in that what they suggest about the needs of abused women tends to be specific to this group.

Battered women who use the services of shelters are a distinct group within the general population of battered women, many of whom require services other than emergency housing. In fact, women who need shelters may comprise only a relatively small proportion of all battered women. One study revealed, for example, that among the clients of a nonresidential advocacy service for battered women, 89% "never made use of and feel no need for emergency housing" (Greaves et al., 1988, p. 42). Instead, these women were interested in counseling, referral, legal and other information, as well as court accompaniment, that is, they wished to have the support of a knowledgeable person when they faced their abusers in court and someone close by who could explain the legal process.

The needs of women who require the services of shelters may also differ somewhat from those of other battered women because of their financial status. Not surprisingly, the paths used in help-seeking are affected to a considerable degree by the types of assistance one is able to afford. Surveys undertaken by Statistics Canada (1990), for example, reveal that

Women from lower income families are more likely than those from upper income families to use the services of the police in the event of wife assault. . . . The greater resources available to upper income women may enable them to pursue avenues of support outside the criminal justice system and to escape or terminate the abuse without police assistance, whereas calling the police may be one of the few options open to women from less affluent families. (p. 6)

The services of lawyers and professional counselors in private practice are very expensive and therefore beyond the means of many women. As a result, some battered women may turn to the police for legal information and other forms of help because they can't afford to purchase this type of help elsewhere.

Unfortunately, this strategy is often unsuccessful; police officers are seldom either willing or sufficiently prepared to deal effectively with women who make such requests.

PASSIVE VICTIMS OR ACTIVE HELP-SEEKERS: THE HELP-SEEKING PATTERNS OF ABUSED WOMEN

In one of the few studies that looks explicitly at the information problems encountered by assaulted women, Harris (1988) reported general types of questions posed by women who chose to leave their battering partners. The women in this sample were drawn from the shelter population, and their questions therefore may not typify those of all battered women. Nevertheless, the categories of information need revealed by this study give some important clues to the complexity of the problems faced by women who find themselves in abusive relationships.

The questions the women posed were clustered into eight categories: how to manage the immediate circumstances surrounding a battering incident (for example, "How can I get away?"); questions about safety and predicting the severity of the violence likely to be inflicted by the batterer, that is, risk assessment (for example, "Will he kill me?"); questions reflecting the woman's confusion about the motivation for her partner's violent behavior (for example, "What is wrong with him?"); questions about her own responsibility for the violence (for example, "Is something wrong with me?"); questions about the implications for her social circumstances, that is, her future plans and what life would hold if she stayed with her husband or left the relationship (for example, "How am I going to manage financially?" or "What will people think of me?"); questions about the impact of her decisions on her children (for example, "What will happen to the kids if he kills me or if I leave?"); questions about her legal rights (for example, "Why can't the police help me?" or "Can I get things from my home?"); and questions about what to expect from battered women's shelters (for example, "How long can I stay?" or "Is there food there?").

In attempting to get the answers to these questions, many of the women in Harris's study reported that they had encountered great difficulty in their efforts to negotiate their way within the social-service delivery system. For example, 60% of the women who had contacted the police found them unhelpful because, among other things, they failed to provide relevant information. Despite these and other obstacles, however, the women persisted in their help-seeking activities and all were successful, eventually, in finding their way to a shelter.

The persistent help-seeking observed in these women is at odds with one widely held view of battered women that has been heavily informed by the work of Lenore Walker (see, e.g., Walker, 1984). Within this perspective it is argued that, as a result of ongoing abuse by her partner, the battered woman becomes psychologically paralyzed. In this state of "learned helplessness" the

woman is passive and submissive, feels there is nothing she can do to exert any control over her circumstances, loses her self-esteem, and may blame herself for the abuse. As a result, she is no longer willing or able to take action to help herself. Therefore, it is seen to be a reasonable response on the part of formal help providers to offer battered women psychological counseling as a means of assisting them to overcome any "resistance" they may have to helping themselves.

As the Harris study suggests, however, the evidence does not support this view of battered women. For instance, the "learned helplessness" theory predicts that with repeated abuse, women will become increasingly submissive and self-blaming, having been "trained" to passivity. Contrary to this prediction, interviews with battered women reveal that instead of increased self-blame accompanying ongoing abuse, as the number of incidents of violence increases, women's perceptions about their responsibility for the abuse may actually shift in the other direction. In other words, while some women may blame themselves for their partners' behavior during the first episodes of violence, they may come to see over time that the problem lies with their batterers and with the failure of the social-service delivery system, including the justice system, to assist them in finding a remedy.

In a large-scale study of battered women in Texas who had made use of shelters, Gondolf and Fisher (1988) found that rather than displaying the passive characteristics of victims, the women were instead assertive and logical in response to the abuse they had experienced; they actively sought help "but with little result" (p. 2). This led Gondolf and Fisher to conclude that it is not the battered woman who is deficient in some way, and therefore responsible for the abuse she experiences or for failing to escape her abuser; rather, the system often fails her. In other words, deficiencies lie in "the helping sources to which . . . women appeal and confide" (p. 2). Indeed, Gondolf and Fisher suggest that "Battered women remain in abusive situations not because they have been passive but because they have tried to escape with no avail. . . . In this effort to survive [they] are, in fact, heroically assertive and persistent" (p. 18).

Other studies, too, point to the active help-seeking engaged in by many battered women. Borkowski et al. (1983), reporting on a study of women who used shelters in Britain, noted that the women made an average of five attempts to obtain assistance from individuals and agencies, but that repeated failure to get the type of help they needed left them feeling demoralized. As a result, Borkowski et al. concluded that "if appropriate help is not found early the woman tends to give up the search for it until there is an emergency" (p. 186). Similarly, Dobash and Dobash (1982) reported that battered women actively struggle to get help but that their efforts are often thwarted by poor agency responses.

Gondolf and Fisher (1988) found that the battered women in their study had made an average of six different types of efforts to stop the abuse prior to turning to a shelter. Included among these strategies was seeking professional

treatment for injuries (42% of the women they studied had sought hospital care). And, in a detailed analysis of help-seeking per incident of abuse, Bowker (1983) found that women "received, on average, from six to eight instances of help per incident of abuse from informal sources such as family, friends, and neighbors, and they received from eight to nineteen instances from formal sources of help such as social services, lawyers, clergy, and women's groups" (cited in Gondolf and Fisher, 1988, p. 31).

Bowker's findings confirm, once again, the tremendous complexity of the help-seeking process for women who have been abused by their partners. All of these investigations reveal that battered women are, just as Gondolf and Fisher claim, resourceful, active help seekers. In their sample,

The majority of the women (71 percent) had previously left home before becoming shelter residents . . . in 63 percent of the cases, the women had contacted the shelter or a lawyer; and over half (53 percent) had called the police at least once. A substantial portion of the women had also taken legal action against the batterers. (1988, p. 30-31)

Consistent with the argument made by Greaves et al. (1988), Gondolf and Fisher point to the necessity to contextualize battered women's help-seeking behavior, noting that while women increase their help-seeking behavior as the abuse intensifies,

It does not appear . . . that the helpseeking is a direct response to increased abuse by itself, but rather increases in the context of other batterer behavior. The helpseeking is apparently an effort to gain safety from generally dangerous men. (1988, p. 37)

As is true of help- and information-seeking by people who are coping with other types of problems, the difficulties encountered by battered women who seek assistance are often derived more from deficiencies in system responses than from the failure of the women to look for help in an "appropriate" manner. Thus, as Gondolf and Fisher observed, understanding the battered woman as an active agent, a survivor, "implies more of a 'system failure' than a failure on the part of the battered woman" (1988, p. 38). One of the reasons for this failure is that although the women contact a variety of helping sources to assist them in coping with dangerous situations, "the helping services have apparently not been able to stop the abuse or assure safety" (p. 38).

SHIFTING THE FOCUS TO SYSTEM FAILURES

Sadly, as suggested by the examples in the first chapter, what accompanies system failure in human services is a corresponding pattern of blaming the victim. In responding to battered women, formal help sources are inclined to fall into the "bad user" syndrome described by Brenda Dervin. This is mani-

fested in a tendency to "psychologize the abuse" (Gundolf and Fisher, 1988, p. 38). According to these authors, an alternative to the pointless exercise of victim-blaming is to shift the emphasis in system response away from, for example, treating the symptoms of learned helplessness in women who have been battered, to helping women "better appreciate dangerousness and intervene more decisively with antisocial men" (Gundolf and Fisher, 1988, p. 38).

Gillian Walker (1990) extended this analysis in her discussion of the depoliticization of violence against women, in which she suggests that the management of the problem of wife assault has become increasingly bureaucratized, professionalized, and focused on the problem of solving "domestic violence" or "family violence" rather than addressing the imbalance of power between men and women, of which the physical abuse of women by men is only one manifestation. Walker's analysis seems, in fact, to carry the warning that even those who are committed to working to end male violence against women are in danger of losing sight of the women and their needs.

CONCLUSION

The research evidence reviewed in this chapter clearly indicates that rather than being passive victims of violence, battered women are active help- and information-seekers. In fact, if learned helplessness is displayed at all by abused women, it is likely to derive not from repeated acts of violence by their partners but from an unresponsive "help" system that fails to provide the information and assistance these women have legitimate reasons to expect. If battered women do give up, it is probable that they will give up on the system rather than stop their efforts to manage the violence in their lives.

To explore more fully the way in which system failure operates with respect to the information needs arising from wife assault, it is instructive to look at the ways in which members of the public understand men's violence against their intimate partners, what they believe about the role of the formal helping network in relation to this violence, and to what extent their understanding about what they can expect from formal help sources matches the expectations of those who deliver services through the formal help system. A research project in which these issues were explored is described in the next three chapters.

NOTE

1. Women's Aid refers to British shelters for abused women.

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A Community Analysis of Information Need and System Response

This chapter describes a study of the relationship between the need in the community for information about wife assault and the information response offered through the social-service network. Although service or formal helping networks can be thought of as communitywide information-exchange systems, virtually no studies have examined their impact from this perspective. Through our research we have been able to map the degree of overlap between community members' need for a particular type of information and the social-service system's response to this need.

In the preceding chapter, a study of the information needs of battered women was described in which eight categories of questions were reported by women who had attempted to leave their violent male partners (Harris, 1988). That investigation was limited to a small sample of women who had sought assistance from a shelter; as a result, the findings are necessarily skewed, not only because women from the shelter population are distinct from the general population of assaulted women, but also because the women who participated in the study had been successful in finding at least partial assistance in coping with their situations. Despite its limitations, however, the present study was designed to build on that earlier work. Specifically, the research described in the following chapters addresses more broadly the problem of the match between

Missed Connections: What to Do When Systems Are Unresponsive to Citizen Needs

The past few chapters have repeatedly shown that the barriers to information- and help-seeking arising from wife assault are varied and complex. In this chapter, we will use the principles of information-seeking that were outlined in Chapter 2 to explain how these barriers are erected and what might be done to overcome them.

THE NATURE OF THE INFORMATION PROBLEM

The results of our research reveal that female neighbors and friends to whom a battered woman might turn for advice not only have a high level of awareness of the incidence of battering, but also are well informed about places and people who can help, and are resourceful in thinking of strategies to gain access to this help.

The women who participated in the household survey were, for the most part, long-time residents of their communities, well educated, and aware of the kinds of assistance a battered woman might need. In fact, many had been asked to provide such help themselves. They were able to identify a multitude of possible help sources, often by the correct name of the agency. From the standpoint of information delivery, however, the formal social-service system appears to pose serious barriers to the public. Many of the participants in our

study had difficulty locating relevant sources of help in telephone directories and mentioned nearly 200 different headings under which such help might be sought. And when their recommendations about whom to contact for assistance were followed up in our interviews with agency respondents and professionals in practice, the results revealed that many of their suggestions would not result in the types of help they anticipated.

Overall, our findings suggest that in the case of wife assault the information problem, at least for women, is *not* one of uncertainty about the nature of the problem or the type of help needed. As Dervin has often argued, people who feel trapped in a particular situation *do* know what kind of help they want, even though they may not define this help in system terms. Instead, the most significant barriers to service are due to the difficulties that arise from

1. Locating and making contact with potential help sources
2. Matching the type of help needed with the type of help available, that is, obtaining relevant help and information.

Troubling findings to emerge from our study indicate that some agency representatives, as well as many professionals in private practice, are not aware of the high incidence of wife assault in their communities, do not always interview abused women callers to determine whether they are safe, and do not always know how to make appropriate referrals. Obviously, the consequences of this lack of awareness on the part of service providers could be extremely serious for women who are seeking help. Our results indicate an urgent need to better educate those who work in helping organizations and in the helping professions about the problem of woman abuse, with particular emphasis on developing appropriate procedures to be followed in situations where abuse is identified, including how to make meaningful referrals.

THE THEORY OF INFORMATION-OR HELP-SEEKING

The results of our study corroborate much of the theoretical and empirical work that has been undertaken in different social-science disciplines on the problem of help- and information-seeking. Our findings are also consistent with those reported in evaluative studies of government and community services. For example, they support Levinson's (1988) conclusion that "The average citizen often incurs great difficulty in gaining access to needed services" (p. 3), as well as the results of the Ontario Ministry of Culture and Communication's (1992) study, in which a significant number of citizens indicated that they did not find human-services information they received from government sources to be readily accessible or relevant to their needs.

In the following section, the ways in which information barriers arise and can be overcome are outlined according to the six principles of information-seeking described in Chapter 2.

Principle 1. The Nature of an Information Need and the Type of Help Needed Depend on the Help-Seeker's Situation

Battered women do not have a single set of generic needs. Agency workers and professionals who encounter abused women must be sensitive to the fact that battered women come from every walk of life and, therefore, have problems grounded in myriad unique circumstances. Also, the kinds of questions they ask differ, depending on their individual perspectives on the situation as well as on their stage in the help-seeking process. As a result, they may require assistance from a variety of sources, including the criminal and civil justice systems, the health-care system, and other social services. They may need housing, financial assistance, and/or counseling for their children. They may be in search of things as basic as furniture, clothing, and food or as complex as employment or civil damages from their abusive partners. As a result, helpers who anticipate or diagnose prematurely—who assume that they know what a woman needs—are likely to contribute to her problems rather than to help her solve them. Patience, particularly the ability to listen and wait for an understanding of what is being sought, is essential to overcoming barriers in service to battered women.

Unfortunately, it appears that some of the agency and professional respondents in our study, especially those in private professional practices, fail to inquire into the situations that may prompt a battered woman's call for help, or even to determine what kind of help is wanted.

Principle 2. The Decision to Seek Help or Not Seek Help Is Affected by Many Factors

In an attempt to catalog the types of questions posed by people searching for help in coping with abusive situations, Borkowski et al. (1983, p. 197) suggested that there are several basic questions people will usually ask themselves before approaching a formal help agency:

- Will I get a sympathetic, supportive response?
- Will the service be able to alter things for the better?
- Will they treat my affairs in confidence?
- Will they treat me fairly?

According to Borkowski et al., these are fundamental questions that address "social support, privacy, social control, and fairness in approach, all of which influence the individual's decision to seek help" (1983, p. 197). Agencies and professional practices that intend to serve abused women and their families should examine the signals they send to their potential clients with respect to these qualities.

Even more specific to the problem of wife assault is another set of questions that Harris (1988) identified in a study of former residents of a women's shelter. These questions arose when the women were deciding whether to move to the shelter:

- What is the shelter like? (Do criminals stay there? Do men and women stay there? Is it safe?)
- What should I take with me to the shelter? Is there food there?
- Will the shelter take me if I don't have bruises (if I haven't just been beaten)?
- How do I get to the shelter? What hours is it open? How much does it cost?
- How long can I stay at the shelter?
- Will someone have time to talk to me (to my kids) at the shelter?
- If I go to the shelter, where will the kids go to school? (p. 66)

The detail and specificity of these questions indicate that agencies hoping to make their services accessible to battered women would do well to learn more about the particular concerns likely to be on the minds of women who are coping with abuse, and to take these into account not only in their publicity materials but also in their intake procedures and in their staff and volunteer training.

Being helpful to abused women also requires a mental shift on the part of any formal helpers who assume that battered women are helpless, passive, or unwilling to accept assistance. On the contrary, Gondolf and Fisher (1988) found that severely abused women seek help very extensively.

They have a "drive to survive" that must be acknowledged, reinforced, and honored. However, many of these women appear to "fall through the cracks"; therefore, shelters need to intensify their advocacy role [and] other community services need to be taught to effectively detect and aid battered women. (p. 38)

One group in particular that falls through the cracks in the service network is immigrant women. Pulling (1990), for example, reported that although the problem of wife assault "has reached epidemic proportions" in Toronto's large South Asian community, the women "often do not seek help because mainstream social-service agencies do not meet different language or cultural needs" (p. A8) or because they are not aware that services exist for battered women. And even when the services are known, some women may choose not to make use of them due to previous negative experiences with formal help agencies. Native women, for instance, are often reluctant to use services for abused women because of cultural differences and past discrimination (Lepischak, 1992).

Principle 3. People Tend to Seek out Information That Is Most Accessible

One of the most commonly cited principles of information seeking is that people tend to consult sources of help that are close by, convenient, and known. In other words, we all have a tendency to use the "easiest" rather than the "best" resources. When buying a car, for instance, many people ask the opinions of friends and family members rather than turning to the much more reliable *Consumer Reports*. Similarly, in the case of personal problems, many of us will turn to a help source with which we are familiar and comfortable rather than reaching out to a person or agency that is unfamiliar.

Among all the formal helpers in the community, one of the best known is the family physician. It is not surprising, therefore, that in coping with the problem of wife assault, many women turn to their doctors for help, not just with injuries incurred as the result of the violence but also for support, advice, and referrals. Indeed, a significant number of the respondents in our study suggested physicians and hospitals as good sources of these types of help. However, as noted in the previous chapter, it is not at all clear that physicians are prepared to give the type of assistance a battered woman may be seeking. If they see the problem as falling outside the appropriate scope of their practice, they may respond only with the kind of help they consider to be "relevant," where relevance is determined not by the client but by what are judged to be the medical aspects of the client's problem. As a result, battered women who turn to their doctors may receive treatment for their injuries but little other acknowledgment or help with the abuse.

Whether or not a relevant or helpful response will be received from a professional helper depends, then, on whether the help-seeker's conceptualization of the problem is consistent with that of the potential helper. As Borkowski et al. put it,

The client's perception of need has to accommodate sufficiently well with the practitioner's if some course of action acceptable to both is to follow. Sometimes practitioners accept at face value what the clients tell them, but very often they make their own judgement about need. The meeting between a client and a practitioner thus often starts with some kind of negotiation about the client's needs . . . this is a tricky business for the practitioner, since it depends first on obtaining all the relevant and accurate information about the client's circumstances; second on the application of relevant professional knowledge; and third on the practitioner being conscious of his or her own professional and personal values and prejudices. (1983, p. 183)

All too frequently, it appears that helpers do not understand at all what help-seekers want. This problem was highlighted in a study of genetic counseling, an information-exchange process designed to help clients decide whether to have a child. Wertz et al. (1988) found that in nearly half of the more than 400

counseling sessions they observed, "neither client nor counselor was aware, after the sessions, of what the other most wanted to discuss!" (p. 329; emphasis added). Clearly, such a process is doomed to failure if neither party understands what is wanted by the other, particularly if the helper doesn't make an effort to grasp what is needed by the information- or help-seeker.

For a helper to respond with relevant information or help, it is essential to learn how the help-seeker conceptualizes the problem. This is a critical determinant of the success of any exchange between a formal help source and a person who reaches out to that source. What seems to prevent this from happening, however, is a reluctance on the part of some "helpers" to look beyond the narrow roles defined by their training or profession, to consider what might actually have brought a person to their office or service. This is not to suggest, of course, that helpers should provide service outside their areas of competence. Physicians and ministers, for example, should be dissuaded from engaging in psychotherapy with abused women. On the other hand, if a battered woman is looking for advice or referrals, it is not inappropriate to tell her about shelters and other services that she might find useful.

One implication of this principle for the design of formal help systems is that a priority should be placed within the social-services community on educating those who are most frequently perceived by members of the public to be "close by, convenient, and known" sources of help, such as family physicians. It also suggests, however, that if people in a particular community regularly turn to organizations such as the Salvation Army for information and referral rather than to, say, the public library or a stand-alone I&R center, it may be appropriate to relocate the community's I&R services directly in one of these familiar agencies.

Principle 4. People Tend First to Seek Help or Information from Interpersonal Sources, and Especially from People Like Themselves

When trying to solve a problem, most people tend first to review their own experiences, then reach out to people close to them, especially friends and family, turning last to formal help sources. To a large extent, the research on help-seeking by battered women supports this pattern, although the circumstances faced by these women often preclude the easy use of informal help sources. For example, a woman may fear an unsympathetic reaction from family and friends if she discloses the abuse. Thus, the cost of help-seeking from the informal network may be higher for abused women than it is for others. Furthermore, woman abuse often includes not only physical violence but psychological abuse as well, wherein a man may set out to isolate his partner from support systems in order to increase his control. He may, for example, forbid her to see friends or family members, he may cut off telephone conversations,

and he may insist on always knowing her whereabouts and activities. As a result of her isolation, a battered woman may find herself having to expend even more effort to seek help than do people searching for help and information for other types of problems.

In spite of these difficulties, Bowker (1983) found that, for the most part, battered women's search for help progresses from the use of sources that are less formal to those that are more formal. He pointed out, however, that as women add more informal and formal help sources, they do not abandon their personal efforts, "but integrate . . . these into an armada of forces individualized to be most effective in their own situations" (1983, p. 104). Borkowski et al. (1983) observed the same phenomenon, but noted that as abused women reach further into the formal network for assistance, they run the "progressive risk of loss of privacy" (p. 186). According to these authors, this risk becomes acceptable as the conflict escalates, in which case "Help is likely to be sought from an agency of social control, such as the police, in the hope that the aggressive partner will be challenged, restrained, even punished" (p. 186).

In view of these patterns, redesigning the helping network should take into account that the search for information and help typically broadens away from the help-seeker, with formal sources consulted last and often reluctantly. Because of the heavy reliance on personal resources (e.g., one's own knowledge) and informal help sources (even if contacts with these sources may be constrained), there is considerable value in education campaigns that inform the general public about social problems such as wife assault. The more ordinary citizens know about a problem, the more empowered they become in their own decision-making and the more likely it is that when others in their social network experience difficulties, someone will know what to do. However, this requires public education campaigns to go beyond messages that focus exclusively on conveying a value judgment about undesirable behavior. Instead, it is important that these campaigns include advice about specific, practical ways to handle particular problems.

For example, a major public education initiative was undertaken by the provincial government in Ontario that focused on the message "Wife Assault: It's a Crime." Posters and pamphlets were widely distributed, most notably in all provincial liquor outlets. Other than including a help-line telephone number, however, the posters carried little additional information. Recently, this education campaign was altered to include strategies for change, although it still builds on the theme that wife assault is socially unacceptable. For example, one television advertisement depicts a small group of men who chastise their friend after learning that he had blackened his wife's eye. The ad's message is that hitting your wife is socially unacceptable and will lead to your friends' disapproval. It further conveys the message that men should take responsibility for stopping other men from abusing their wives and provides a model for how to do this. This is just one example of how systems can be designed to take

human information-seeking principles into account; in this case the strategy involves "infiltrating" the informal network and attempting to change the general level of citizen knowledge with respect to a social problem.

Principle 5. Information-Seekers Expect Emotional Support

Harris's (1988) study of abused women revealed that regardless of whom they turn to for help, battered women hope for a nonjudgmental reaction as well as emotional support to assist them in coping with their situations. This was corroborated in our study, in which the respondents repeatedly indicated that members of both the formal and informal networks ought to provide abused women with emotional support. Echoing this theme, Borkowski et al. (1983) argue that a key determinant in choosing which helpers or agencies to approach is whether clients believe they will receive emotional support and be treated in a respectful fashion. This principle serves as an important qualifier, then, to Principles 3 and 4, since people will not confide in others, no matter how closely related or easily available, if they are not perceived as trustworthy.

This need for nonjudgmental support seems so basic that it is surprising to think it may be lacking in the responses of those who make their living as "helpers." Nevertheless, the evidence of women's experiences with the health-care system, legal system, clergy, social workers, and other helpers suggests that it is often missing. Indeed, it appears that one of the reasons women's shelters and other feminist-run services for women are often so highly regarded by battered women is that they consistently demonstrate warm, nonjudgmental concern. As one of the women in Harris's study said about shelter staff, "They made me feel like a somebody instead of a nobody and helped me see the strengths I have and focus on them instead of the weaknesses" (1988, p. 68). It is clear that the implication of this principle of human information-seeking for the design of formal help systems is that helpers of all kinds need to be selected and trained to address the affective as well as the substantive needs of those in search of help.

Principle 6. People Follow Habitual Patterns in Seeking Information

The habitual behavior patterns of information-seekers are not well understood by most helpers, who tend to design their organizations' practices and procedures on the basis of what is efficient in organizational rather than in client terms. Throughout the book, we have commented on the somewhat hit-or-miss nature of information- and help-seeking, that is, the serendipitous process by which people sometimes stumble onto sources that can provide them with timely and relevant help. Responsibility for the haphazard nature of this process is usually assigned to the help-seeker, who uses "poor" information-

seeking techniques. However, a good portion of the problem should be attributed to the poor design of formal help systems, which are generally constructed with little attention to client needs.

With respect to information exchange, this system- rather than client-centeredness is due, in part, to a widely held view in our society that information is a context-free, neutral commodity that can be transferred from one person to another. Using Dervin's (1983) bucket analogy (described in Chapter 2), if a help-seeker does not present the right kind of problem (or bucket) to a formal service provider, the helper is unlikely to dump in any information because it seems to be the wrong kind of container. Our research revealed, for example, that if a battered woman called a public-health unit for help in one of the communities we studied, she would be told, "We don't deal with that kind of problem here."

When an information exchange is initiated by the formal help system (in a public education campaign, for example) the bucket reappears in another form. Here the public is seen as a large container into which "appropriate" information can be poured, again without regard to what might be needed. When large-scale public education programs are mounted at the city or state level, the information they contain is usually generated by experts, and the intended consumers of the programs are seldom consulted as to their content. As Rohde says,

System design, whether for an information system, a health care system, an educational system or any other kind of system, is based on . . . professionals' views of the world. It is assumed that the professionals have the expertise for which individuals come to the system. (1986, p. 63)

The unfortunate consequences of basing systems on professionals' worldviews, rather than on those of clients, are evident in the difficulties encountered by the household respondents in our study who attempted to locate helping sources through the telephone directory. Entries for helping agencies, and even promotional materials such as pamphlets that describe agency services, are rarely designed with direct input from potential service users. Not surprisingly, therefore, information- and help-seekers cannot easily locate the help they need. Even specialized listings of government services in the telephone directory (which supposedly exist to help the public) have been found to be inadequate and unhelpful because they are poorly organized, require an unrealistic level of knowledge of the government bureaucracy, and include many irrelevant listings (Ontario Ministry of Culture and Communications, 1992).

The significance of consulting with the intended users of services cannot be underestimated, particularly in the case of such a complex problem as wife assault. As numerous researchers have pointed out, the multifaceted nature of wife assault almost guarantees that women who are seeking assistance will

encounter barriers and that even a "good" referral, such as linking women with a shelter, will not guarantee an end to their difficulties. Indeed, as Greaves et al. (1988) observed,

The process battered women must go through to break the "pattern of violence" is lengthy and requires broad, integrated support on a number of levels; as crucial as they are, short-term crisis-intervention facilities are not in themselves an adequate response to battering. (p. 39)

In an interesting section of their book headed "Treating Social Services," Gondolf and Fisher (1988) describe the "troublesome" problem that wife abuse poses for social service providers because it simply doesn't fit easily into the crisis-oriented or specific service mandates of most agencies. Because it is an ongoing problem that requires different kinds of interventions over a long period of time, short-term solutions and fragmented interventions are ineffective. Furthermore, many community service providers are already overworked and face staggering caseloads. As a result, they are "inclined to dismiss or avoid abuse cases" (Gondolf and Fisher, 1988, p. 99).

Tragically, Gondolf and Fisher's research also points out the serious consequences of system failure and the lack of recognition within the system of the variety of problems that abused women may encounter. For instance, a significant proportion of women who make their way to shelters must contend "not only with abusers but also with seriously antisocial and even sociopathic individuals" (p. 94). What this means is that even arresting batterers may not be an adequate control mechanism to ensure that women are protected from further violence.

Arrest for abuse may not be sufficient for the type of men who have repeatedly had previous contact with the law and not been deterred from repeating violence or other unlawful behavior. . . . there appears to be at least a portion of . . . "sociopathic" batterers who may need intensive psychiatric treatment as well as restraint . . . [and] the majority . . . are not likely to be responsive to batterer counseling programs, given the complexity of their problems. (Gondolf and Fisher, 1988, p. 95)

IGNORING THE PRINCIPLES OF INFORMATION-SEEKING

As we have seen, system effectiveness depends on a number of factors, two of which are particularly critical. The first is what might be called an "interacting problem analysis," in other words, a common understanding on the part of both the help-seeker and the helper with respect to the problem situation and the type of assistance being sought. It is obvious that a knowledge of the habitual information-seeking patterns associated with different types of situations and a willingness to understand the problem from the help-seeker's perspective are essential if responsive systems are to be designed. The second factor crucial

to system efficacy is a willingness on the part of formal helpers to offer concern, support, and respect to the help-seeker.

Given these preconditions to effectiveness in the help/information exchange, it is little wonder that the responses of some who work in the formal help system are judged to be inadequate, inappropriate, or even damaging to abused women. This is often true, for example, of the police.

The problems described in the following section are not unique to the police, nor are they true of all police officers or departments. Nevertheless, the encounters between battered women and these formal helpers provide a good illustration of the problems that can arise when the information or help exchange goes awry.

As predicted by the second principle of help- and information-seeking, many people turn to the police when wife assault occurs because the service is so easily accessible. As Gelles and Straus (1988) explain, the police

are on call twenty-four hours a day, are capable of making a swift response, are able to impose certain and severe sanctions, and do not charge for their services. Thus, it is not surprising that the police and the criminal justice system are frequently expected to provide effective and immediate response to violence in the home. (p. 167)

Unfortunately, the outcomes of exchanges between police officers and battered women are often frustrating and disappointing for both parties. This appears to be due, in part, to police officers' conceptualization of the situation in which abused women find themselves. According to Hatty (1989), there are three ideological constructs underlying police officers' beliefs about women's responsibility for male violence. The first is the extent to which women depart from traditional gender roles, that is, "the police conceptualize any departures from the accepted standards of mothering and housekeeping as contributory factors towards violence" (p. 78).

Hatty gives as an example an officer's comments that "A lot of women could've avoided the violence by being a bit more generous---doing a better job of the housework and taking better care of their appearance" (1989, p. 79). Furthermore, there are members of the police force who believe that male violence against women is, essentially, inevitable because women are more physically vulnerable than men. "This belief in the biological inevitability of women's physical and social dependency underscores concern over women's failure to conform, providing the violent male with a justification for his behavior. It also provides the police with a rationale for nonintervention" (Hatty, 1989, p. 79). As one officer put it, "Men have always dominated women---just like in the animal kingdom" (p. 79).

The second ideological construct that dictates police response is their belief about the woman's "perceived degree of responsibility, that is, the degree to which she is seen to have 'provoked' the man" (Hatty, 1989, p. 80). One officer observed, for example, that "Some of the women . . . are a problem.

They continually nag. If they're dissatisfied, they should go, not cause trouble" (p. 80). Zoomer (1989) made similar observations about police attitudes in the Netherlands:

In most situations that the police encounter, the man's behavior is at least somewhat excused and the woman is at least partly to blame. In other words, he is not really seen as an offender and the woman is not seen as a victim of violence and is not taken seriously as such. (p. 137)

The third of Hatty's ideological constructs, which she sees as the most powerful, is that of the assumed psychopathology of the abused women, or what Gondolf and Fisher (1988) refer to as "psychologizing" the abuse. According to Hatty, many police officers believe that battered women are "psychologically abnormal" and "psychiatrically disturbed." Unfortunately, they do not consider these "conditions" to be symptoms arising from the abuse; instead, many officers consider this "abnormality" to be a catalyst that provokes a man to violence (1989, p. 80).

Given these beliefs, it is not surprising that the police often express ambivalence about their roles as potential helpers in situations involving wife assault, particularly if this role means advocating on behalf of a battered woman. In fact, Hatty reported that the police see battered women's requests for help to be motivated by a

desire for revenge on the male partner; a wish to manipulate either the partner or the police; a need for immediate cessation of the violence coupled with an unpredictable or inconsistent intention toward the abuser; and a pronounced reliance on external authority to solve individual problems. (1989, p. 83)

In other words, they tend to suspect women's motives in asking for help and do not see them as necessarily deserving of assistance.

With such a conceptualization of the problem of wife assault, is it any wonder that police responses to battered women often appear to be callous and ineffective? As noted in an earlier chapter, Harris's (1988) study revealed that abused women who had contacted the police for help "usually hoped that their husbands would be removed from the home after a violent incident or that they would be offered some other form of protection from further beatings; however, more than 60 percent . . . reported that they were not helped" (p. 67). Instead, they reported that the police often failed to provide them with relevant information, did not recognize or take seriously the danger of the situation, and made derogatory and blaming remarks about them.

Hatty's analysis is a very effective demonstration of the ways in which a helper's ideology can prevent successful information or help exchanges. However, ideology also can facilitate this exchange. For example, Kurtz (1990) described a female physician's assistant who worked in a hospital where there is

an institutionalized intervention system that includes ongoing training in responding to the needs of assaulted women. This woman "made herself knowledgeable about battering and its signs and symptoms and believed that women battered by men were a legitimate medical concern" (p. 251). With her leadership the culture of the emergency department in her hospital changed, and other staff members began to take the issue of wife assault more seriously; they are now much more likely to help abused women beyond simply treating their injuries.

Although Kurtz's example is encouraging, as it suggests that committed individuals can make change in organizations that may have been inhospitable to abused women in the past, it also illustrates, once again, that help- and information-seeking is often a serendipitous process. In other words, whether a formal help source turns out to be of any use to the help-seeker appears to depend not only on its mandate but also on its particular culture and/or whether the help-seeker has the good fortune to encounter a sympathetic helper who happens to understand the problem that is presented.

OVERCOMING THE BARRIERS: PROVIDING THE INFORMATION LINK

How important is information? In his review of the needs of crime victims, Maguire (1985) argued that

The need for information should . . . receive much more serious attention than it does. Not only may it be important to the peace of mind and psychological recovery of the victim, and to his or her satisfaction with the police or criminal justice agencies, but it is a prerequisite for access to many other kinds of service. (p. 546)

Clearly, the importance of information-seeking and use should not be underestimated by those who are concerned about wife assault. Indeed, Gondolf and Fisher (1988) emphasized the significance of improving information, referral, and advocacy to ensure better services for battered women, and pointed out that "The ideal would be that the woman's contact with any help source promptly activates referral to a variety of services. This in itself would begin to offset the piecemeal responses which are by themselves doomed to failure" (p. 100).

The current state of human-services information delivery is, however, far from this ideal. The magnitude of the information barrier is illustrated in the Ontario study of access to human-services information, in which it was reported that one-third of all the province's citizens had looked for such information in the last year, and that *before they could locate the information they needed, they had to make, on average, nearly seven contacts* (Ontario Ministry of Culture and Communications, 1992). This finding should raise an important question for all who are concerned about human-service delivery: What can

be done to assist formal helping agencies in making meaningful contacts with individuals who are in need?

Strategies for Change

There are, it seems, two possibilities for coordinating the flow of information between help- and information-seekers and the formal helping network. The first is to develop the information advocacy and information coordination roles of information-mandated institutions, specifically public libraries and I&R centers. Included in the advocacy function of such agencies should be an outreach role, whereby information workers make connections with the informal networks consulted by community members (e.g., community opinion leaders, neighborhood activists, etc.). Alternatively, information coordination could be performed by information workers specifically hired by social-service agencies and (larger) professional practices to create interagency linkages and to facilitate information exchange with community members, as well as to function as advocates on behalf of members of the public who make contact with the formal helping network.

Regardless of the strategy used, however, removing the roadblocks from the information- and help-seeking process will not be easy. Helper attitudes and practices do not change quickly, and the mechanisms for improving the public's access to information take time and money to build. Nevertheless, system improvements could be made, particularly if the principles of information-seeking were to be incorporated into system design. If the second of the two approaches outlined above were to be adopted, for instance, consideration of these principles should influence agencies' education and promotional activities, intake procedures, and information provision and referral, as well as the actual practice of service delivered.

The Role of Libraries and I&R Centers

Any organization that, in its mission statement, defines itself as providing information to the community necessarily has a role to play in improving the linkage between citizens in need of help and the social-service delivery system. The results of our study clearly indicate that there is a need for a greater matching of information needs to information delivery. However, the results also show that, at least in the case of wife assault, the success of libraries and I&R centers in making this link to date has been, at best, minimal. Furthermore, despite the recognition of the importance of information linkages and advocacy throughout the wife assault literature, there is a complete lack of awareness of the role of formal information services, such as I&R centers, in providing this connection.

Regardless of the location of such services, agencies with a mandate to assist people in locating human-services information have essentially two options for

overcoming barriers that may be encountered by the help-seeking public. The first is to try to influence or change the ineffective habitual patterns of the information- or help-seeker. Examples of such an approach are attempts to promote existing or new formal information sources more vigorously, perhaps by reaching out to underserved communities or by conducting needs assessments to create more salient community profiles. Unfortunately, this marketing approach has shown little evidence of success with the various special needs populations with whom it has been tried (see, e.g., Carlson et al., 1990). There is no reason to expect that such an approach would fare any better in increasing the efficacy of information services for women who are coping with violent male partners.

The second option for improving access to information is not to change the habitual information-seeking patterns of the public but to supplement them (as Durrance, 1984, suggests) or, better yet, to change the nature of information services in order to accommodate or fit these patterns (see, e.g., Paisley, 1985, cited by Faibisoff and Ely, 1976). Barugh (1984) has suggested, for instance, that library-based services are often unsuccessful in reaching the large numbers of people who need information to solve everyday problems because libraries avoid rather than take part in the public's informal networks of communication, and, when people are unable or unwilling to use their informal networks, formal information services could play a significant role. In circumstances in which people wish to avoid disclosing compromising information about themselves, or when others in the immediate social network pose a threat or are unable to provide reliable information, formal information providers could offer a welcome source of help.

As noted earlier, when searching for information or help, people tend to consult sources that are familiar and accessible. As a result,

Among the first-contact agencies to whom people frequently turn . . . are clergy, doctors, lawyers, and teachers, many of whom have need for information and referral services to carry out their professional and occupational service roles. Unaware of appropriate resources, community helpers tend to underutilize existing services or overutilize those services with which they are most familiar. (Levinson, 1988, p. 11)

Clearly, expertise in information exchange is desperately needed by both service providers and the public. Public library and I&R center staff possess this expertise.

The notion of "one place to call" emerged during the 1960s and 1970s from precisely this kind of concern and continues to be promoted through such documents as the strategic plan for Ontario public libraries, *One Place to Look* (Ontario Public Library Strategic Planning Group, 1990). In this plan it is pointed out that "Access to the right information, at the right time, is essential to the individual's ability to cope, to achieve, to excel. It must be a basic right of all members of a democratic society" (p. 10). To this end, two of the goals

in the plan are that "Every Ontarian will have access to the information resources within the province through an integrated system of partnerships among all types of information providers" and that "Every Ontarian will receive public library service that is accurate, timely and responsive to individual and community needs" (pp. 10-11).

These goals indicate a commitment, at least in this jurisdiction, to the I&R function of public libraries. I&R centers have a similar mandate (see, e.g., the standards published by the Alliance of Information and Referral Systems, 1991). In fact, as Levinson points out, "As an organized access system, I&R represents a universal doorway for both consumers and providers of services" (1988, p. 11). Furthermore, such centers "have considerably more accurate information on services in individual communities than do many government departments" (Ontario Ministry of Culture and Communications, 1992, p. 33).

In many rural areas in the United States and Canada the information-exchange system, especially with respect to sensitive social issues, is not particularly well developed. Citizens living in these areas are faced with isolation, a lack of accessible services, and lack of privacy when they use the services that do exist. In such areas, regional public library systems could, potentially, provide a useful link between service providers and those in search of help. Not only do libraries already have in place an infrastructure through which information can be easily disseminated but also, and just as important, they are "neutral" places that afford some privacy because of their all-purpose mandate. In other words, a public library is a nonstigmatized type of agency in the sense that one's purpose in using it is not immediately apparent to everyone in the community.

So why aren't public libraries and I&R centers more pivotal in the service-delivery network? One reason is that they are not very well known for their referral function either by the public or by other service providers. Furthermore, some service providers may be reluctant to add what they perceive to be another level of bureaucracy to the service-delivery equation and/or they may have some doubt as to the capacity of librarians and other information professionals to manage the needs of their particular client groups.

Another reason that libraries are ignored in the information exchange between citizens and the social services network may be due to the passive nature of information-delivery strategies that characterize most public libraries. Many librarians consider an optimal response to the public's need for information about a pressing social problem to be developing a good and "balanced" collection of materials on a given topic; ensuring that the collection is well organized and cataloged, thereby enabling easy access to the items in it; perhaps preparing a special display and developing help sheets or book lists to facilitate access to topical materials; and/or occasionally hosting a program or panel on the topic or renting space to a speaker. Although one may point to positive patron response or increased circulation of materials as indicators of the value of these activities, there is little other evidence to suggest that this approach to informa-

tion exchange has much of an impact on the community. Hence, one finds results such as those reported by Chen and Herron (1982), that citizens rarely think of the library as a place to go for information.

Service Directories

If libraries do not develop specialized I&R services, they should at least be involved with other community information services that do so, whether these are independent organizations or part of another social-service organization. One particularly valuable type of resource that libraries (and I&R centers) can help to develop by working with other agencies in the community is the community services directory. Several agency representatives and professionals in our study commented, for example, that they found such directories very useful when they were trying to assist abused women. In fact, for complex problems such as wife assault it may be a good idea to develop specialized directories. One such directory is the *Family Violence Services Directory* compiled jointly by Information London (a local I&R center) and the Coordinating Committee to End Woman Abuse (a citywide coalition of social-service, health, and legal agencies in London, Ontario).

For directories to be effective, however, it is important to design them with the clients' needs in mind. First of all, it is essential that they be kept up to date in order to prevent unnecessary delays and frustration on the part of the help-seeker. Furthermore, they should be organized or at least modified so that they are not just lists of potential help sources, but so that they describe the types of help that various sources can offer. This will facilitate the information exchange, allowing helpers and their clients to match the type of help being sought to the type of help available.

The questions posed by battered women in the Harris (1988) study are a clear indication that it is not enough simply to direct abused women to agencies and professional practices. Rather, to be useful, such referrals must be accompanied with specific information about how these sources can help, that is, they must include information that will help a woman to decide whether the recommended service would, in fact, be right for her.

Setting the Stage for Eliminating Barriers to Information

Service providers, in both libraries and information centers, as well as in other agencies that are part of the formal help network, must begin to understand how they are perceived in the community, where and when people start looking for help, how they search for information, what questions they have, and what kinds of help they want to find. In other words, eliminating barriers requires an understanding of the principles of information- and help-seeking. Furthermore, librarians should accept the special responsibility of ensuring that professional social-service workers and researchers have access to the increas-

ing body of knowledge on information- and help-seeking in order to guide the development of more appropriate and user-responsive I&R strategies.

The suggestions made earlier in this chapter require a willingness on the part of information workers to take on advocacy as a regular component of their roles vis-à-vis those in search of help. Further, these suggestions assume a recognition by all those in the formal help network of the need for greater information coordination as well as an understanding that the expertise and institutional structures of information agencies might be of some value in facilitating the information-exchange process between help-seekers and helpers.

CONCLUSION

We began this study to explore the responses of social-service systems to the information needs of people who need assistance in solving personal problems, focusing on wife assault as an example of a common, yet complex and grave, situation that can generate a multitude of information needs. Our interest in viewing the social-service network as an information-retrieval system arose from the observation that our own field, library and information science, appears to hold a great deal of promise for helping to design systems that could meet the human-service information needs of ordinary people. Workers in this field have the necessary expertise to design systems that can facilitate the process of information-giving and information-seeking, and to develop strategies for evaluating those systems.

Unfortunately, a search of the literature in this discipline and in others reveals a paucity of research on the information needs of ordinary people, especially from the user's point of view. The relatively small amount of theoretically based research that does exist on the problem of help-seeking is spread over many disciplines, and there is little evidence of interdisciplinary consultation. Furthermore, there seems to be little communication between researchers and practitioners. Not surprisingly, therefore, it seems that formal help systems continue to be developed without taking into consideration some of the most basic knowledge about information- and help-seeking. It is also not surprising, then, that these systems are not always effective and may, indeed, thwart the efforts of the very people they are designed to help. The results of our research repeatedly demonstrated that there is often a collision between the mismatched expectations of ordinary people and the responses of organizations and professionals whose job it is to help.

Although those who must cope with the problem of wife assault might be considered a special population with special needs, it is important to remember that demographic variables are poor predictors of who will be assaulted and that the needs of individual women are unique. Furthermore, no two communities are identical in dynamics or resources. Thus, the problem of designing cost-effective systems to meet such specific and individualized needs would appear to be insurmountable unless we take account of the underlying princi-

ples of information- and help-seeking. System design needs to be based on a model of information-seeking that is user-centered rather than system-centered. This requires conceptual frameworks that put the user first, that is, models in which it is understood that information is not an end in itself and that information needs (and, indeed, requests for any kind of help) arise out of particular situations and vary according to the individual's perspective. As Dervin has repeatedly pointed out, the degree to which information needs are met can be judged only in the context of what the information helped the user to do, and how it has helped the user to progress through a particular situation. We hope that by focusing on wife assault we have provided one illustration of the necessity to consider the perspective of the help-seeker in designing effective human-service information systems, which ultimately exist, after all, for their users.

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Appendix I

Tables