

## V I C I O U S

In this essay I will discuss Louise Bauschard and Mary Kimbrough's article, "Voices Set Free," by explaining how my father achieved his ALPHA status within our family by manipulating our minds through verbal and sometimes physical abuse. Based on my family experience, I can empathize with the women who spoke out in "Voices Set Free" because as a child, I not only had the misfortune of observing many heated arguments between my parents, but I also was the victim of my father's verbal and physical abuse. In addition, I will consider how "power struggles" within my family, as defined by Linda Gordon, resulted in my mother's nervous breakdown and the demise of my relationship with my father. Finally, I will argue that the label "battered woman" is problematic because it places its primary emphasis on the physical assault, while falsely dismissing the effects that repeated verbal abuse can have on a person. Therefore, I agree that psychological spousal abuse, as defined by Mary Alice Cleve, is: "(1) intentional (2) infliction of repeated, negative, noncontact conduct (3) of one spouse toward the other (4) resulting in a debilitating effect on the other spouse." Accordingly, I will argue, based on my childhood observations, and by way of understanding Cleve's definition, that verbal abuse should be included in the battered woman syndrome defense.

Often, my father came home in a foul mood, yelling and screaming about the finances or about my mother resigning from her position at the hospital and going to work at the family business. For example, I recall many times when my father violently screamed directly in our faces, "if your mother did not buy you all those toys, I would not be having all these problems," and "if you worked for me Jenny, I would not be having all these financial problems." Invariably, I would plead with them to stop fighting. As a consequence, he would drag me to my room and severely beat me. Thus, he declared his ALPHA status within the family by: (1) allegedly teaching me a lesson for getting involved; and (2) causing my mother to acquiesce to his wishes by verbally and physically abusing his children. These incidents often concluded with my father's final demand, "pick me or these damn kids," which primed me to begin a "power struggle" with my father at an early age. Furthermore, scholars have agreed that the behavior my father exhibited is a type of "rule making process," which focuses on the abuser obtaining more power and control over the individuals within the home.

Eventually, my mother resigned from her position and began working with my father at

the family business. Thus, my father succeeded in establishing his "male dominance" by molding the perfect wife, one that worked by his side on a daily basis, and one that was more obsessed with her man's success, rather than her own. As such, he often praised my mother in public and addressed her as the "quarterback" of our family. Even so, behind closed doors, she was yelled at, ridiculed, physically threatened, and blamed for most, if not all, of the difficulties that arose at the business or at home.

After reading Lenore Walker's article, however, it reinforced my belief that nobody had any idea of the abuse that was occurring inside my home. In fact, most people, including my mother, my sister, and myself, assumed that we were a "happy family," as defined by Walker. Thus, by employing Mahoney's "denial as a defense mechanism," we were able to hide the truth for about 20 years, thereby, albeit forcibly, protecting my parent's marriage and the reputation of our family.

Around the age of twenty, however, I was tired of lying to myself and therefore, left for college. My departure was not only hard for my mother to accept, but more importantly, it left her and my sister as the sole victims of my father's verbal abuse. Although my 17-year-old sister was no stranger to our father's verbal attacks, she had yet to be introduced to his fists. Nevertheless, on one occasion, she told me that "daddy threatened to knock my teeth down my throat, if I talked back to him one more time." Unfortunately, this type of treatment came with the territory; similar to our mother, my sister became trapped in the family business and thus, became the ill-fated recipient of my father's verbal, and what later became physical, attacks. Surprisingly, however, I learned that my mother began using the same aggressive conduct (sometimes slapping) with my sister that my father used with me. Consequently, my sister's self-esteem was rapidly stripped away because she was verbally abused by both parents and, on occasion, physically abused by our mother.

By this time, however, my mother's self-esteem and emotional well-being also began to rapidly deteriorate. For instance, one evening I found my mother trembling and curled up in the fetal position under our Victorian bathroom sink. I learned that my father had been yelling at her about the businesses's financial disarray. Upon questioning my father about the incident, a physical argument ensued between the both of us, which induced me to call the police. However, upon their arrival, but subsequent to my father's instruction, my mother assured the police that

she was not abused in any way and defined it as a "father and son argument." Since there were no visible bruises on my mother, the police were reluctant to take any action.

About two years later, the verbal abuse finally pushed my mother over the edge. Although she gathered enough courage to leave my father, a detailed letter elucidated her belief that she had failed the family in an attempt to "just make everyone happy." Similar to the first letter, she unequivocally accepted blame for the demise of our family, announced my father's innocence, and thus concluded that she "did not deserve to live." According to Bauschard and Kimbrough, however, this is not uncommon considering the treatment she received from my father, which robbed her of her self-esteem and self-worth. Thus, given the detailed circumstances, it is apparent that extreme verbal abuse does, in fact, result in tragic consequences.

Fortunately, however, my mother only entertained the idea of suicide and returned home three weeks later. Subsequently, the doctor ordered that she not return to work for at least three months or until further notice. Although my father conceded with the doctor's advice at the outset, the vicious circle of manipulation and psychological abuse began to repeat itself only weeks later. For example, my father began calling her obscene names, demanding that she return to work on a regular basis, and finally, he constantly expressed his belief that she was accountable for the bank foreclosing on our home and the family business. Consequently, she acquiesced and returned to the business. As a result, not only did my father re-establish his ALPHA status within the family, but he also reignited the vicious cycle of which my mother was the victim.

Unfortunately, my father's behavior did not only affect my mother. Today, my younger sister has also become a victim of the vicious cycle of verbal abuse. After witnessing both my father's and mother's behavior for her entire life, she presumably believes that such behavior is normal. Consequently, she married a man whose mannerisms are similar, if not the same, as my father's. I have learned from others and through my own observations that my sister's husband is verbally abusive and possibly physically abusive. For example, his 4-year-old son from a previous marriage was recently found with belt marks across his arms and back. Thus, my sister's choices in her adult life may add to the lack of data regarding the impact that one (or an occasional) incident of severe hitting may have on a person later in life, especially in their intimate relationships.

### Chronic Verbal Abuse is Battering: An Analysis

Based on the my childhood experiences, I contend that the label "battered woman" is problematic because it places its primary emphasis on the physical assault, while falsely dismissing the effects that repeated verbal abuse can have on a person. First, although the term "battered woman" seems to grasp a court's attention, it mistakenly connotes that women must be physically assaulted on a continuous basis. This, however, fails to take into account that some attacks, (e.g., strangling, beating, or threatening with knives or guns) although isolated, are in fact murderous, and therefore require the use deadly force as a defense. As a result, women who retaliate in these isolated incidents may, unfortunately, not be afforded the battered woman syndrome defense. Second, the term "battered woman " fails to consider the extreme emotional affects that verbal abuse can have on a victim's mind. For instance, an abuser may continuously threaten his victim's life, threaten to abuse her children, or threaten to severely beat the victim. For example, my father established his ALPHA status within the family through beating his children, verbally abusing my mother, and by using intimidation in order to force compliance with his wishes. In addition, he established household rules that facilitated his ability to gain total power and control over all of us. Thus, similar to a physically abused victim, a verbally abused victim is psychologically manipulated, mentally subdued, and made a prisoner of her home through intimidation and control. As a result of this derisive conduct, verbally abused victims often entertain acts of suicide or murder the abuser.

Consequently, however, if a verbally abused victim (e.g., the evening that my mother was trembling under the sink) retaliates with deadly force, she is likely to meet ignorance within the law enforcement system and the judicial system because of her inability to prove that she was abused. Firstly, verbal abuse does not leave evidence like bruises, welts, or scares. Thus, police are not able to determine whether or not a crime occurred and therefore, there is a lack of the probable cause necessary to make an arrest. A fitting example would be the evening that the police arrived at my home, but found no evidence of a physical crime and thus were reluctant to arrest my father. However, even if the police arrested my father that evening, a prosecutor would not likely have enough evidence (e.g., medical records) to prove his guilt beyond a reasonable doubt. Secondly, according to Mary Alice Cleve, "physical abuse is clearly defined in statutes

and judicial interpretations," while psychological abuse is not. In fact, psychological abuse "can neither meet the elements of a crime nor its burden of proof and, thus, cannot be a crime." Furthermore, because an exact definition of psychological abuse does not exist, abusers are not aware or put on notice that their conduct is "prohibited." In my opinion, this is precisely why the term "battered woman" is problematic.

Thus, based on my childhood experiences, and the need to recognize verbal abuse as an element of "battered women's syndrome," I contend that verbal abuse is a form of battering that should be recognized within the "battered woman syndrome" defense, and that Cleve's definition may best serve that purpose. For instance, my father's abuse was: (1) intentionally (2) inflicted repeatedly through negative, noncontact conduct (3) towards my mother or her children (4) resulting in a debilitating effect on my mother or her children. Accordingly, I agree that Cleve's definition covers the same abusive conduct that compelled my mother's nervous breakdown and her thoughts about committing suicide. As such, I argue that Cleve's definition should be included in the "battered woman syndrome" defense. Although inclusion may require a case-by-case analysis, it is critical that we start somewhere so that courts can begin to recognize another class of victims who live in daily fear and torment. Therefore, in order to prevent mothers and children from falling prey to this vicious circle, courts should act expeditiously.