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# Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?

## Confronting Wife Abuse through Folk Stories

**W**IFE ABUSE is a problem that cries out for assistance. According to government reports, an average of 1,500 women per year in the United States are reported killed by husbands or boyfriends, and more than 2 million are badly injured in domestic quarrels (U.S. Department of Justice, 1986; U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1988). Because so many cases remain unreported, the actual incidence is considerably higher. Beatings, murder, threats, indignities, and psychological torment are surprisingly routine for women in a large number of partnerships. Although this situation has been shamefully neglected in the past, there is now a growing recognition that a vast and underserved population of battered women is greatly in need of support and assistance.

Battered women live with fear, guilt, frustration, shame, self-doubt, loss of self-esteem, and a lack of confidence in their ability to handle the future. Many feel powerless against their mates' aggression and physical power and experience psychological defeat both within their household and in the legal, economic, political, educational, and social world around them. Compounding the difficulties is the fact that many feel a sense of love for their abusive mates and also believe that their mates in some way love them. It takes superhuman ability for women to cope with the dangers to themselves and to their children, with the mental and emotional conflicts they experience daily, and with the physical and psychological injuries repeatedly inflicted on them.

Coalitions have been formed across the country to reach out to abused women and offer urgently needed services. Such coalitions provide temporary safe shelters; assistance in financial, legal, educational, child care, job hunting, and housing matters; and individual and group support sessions. Counselors, either members of a paid staff or, more

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*Because many world folk stories describe wife abuse with remarkable insight, these stories are useful in addressing the sensitive issues that arise when counseling battered women. Following the views of Milton Erickson and Joan Laird about the importance of stories as a therapeutic tool, techniques were developed in a regional Coalition for Battered Women in North Carolina to use folk stories as an aid in redefining problems, increasing self-esteem, decreasing resistance, and encouraging alternative solutions to difficult situations. A case study of the use of a story in a battered women's support group session illustrates the value of folk stories in the counseling process. On the basis of experience to date, additional uses of the stories to help abused women are suggested.*

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often, part-time volunteers, need great sensitivity and skill in dealing with especially complex and difficult problems.

Because of the confusion abused women face and their reluctance to discuss details of their painful experiences, new ways of offering support and assistance can be very valuable. Working with the Orange-Durham Coalition for Battered Women in North Carolina, the author piloted a training program for group leaders designed to introduce the use of folk stories as a valuable technique in counseling sessions.

Folk stories help both counselors and abused women explore critical questions that need to be resolved. Several world folk stories describe wife abuse in startling detail. Among stories about marriage, a large number portray husbands as batterers. Some folk-story wives are murdered, and many others are physical-

ly and psychologically tormented. Although the couples in the stories are always married, the stories' messages can be applied equally well to today's female-male relationships in which couples are not legally joined. The techniques described in this article are suitable for group sessions as well as one-to-one counseling.

### Value of Folk Stories in Therapy

Metaphors based on folk stories are especially suited to the counseling process. Both Freud (1950) and Jung (1971) described folk stories as symbolic representations of life's conflicts, struggles, and solutions. Bettelheim (1976) recommended the use of fairy tales in treating children because the stories simplified difficult issues and presented solutions in a way that children could grasp and understand. Heuscher (1974) found folk stories psychiatrically valuable because they reveal all human hopes, fears, and conditions and reach adults on a deep emotional level. Berne (1973) noted striking similarities between folk-story characters and his psychiatric patients.

More recently, Diamant (1985) found that using folktales in clinical social work practice contributed significantly to clients' improved handling of interpersonal problems. Greenbaum and Holmes (1983) recommended folktales as a way to bridge the cultural gap between minority and immigrant clients and their therapists.

Practitioners are increasingly relying on narrative and folklore as valuable psychotherapeutic aids. Barker (1985) detailed Erickson's noteworthy use of stories in counseling and stressed their importance in helping patients in the following areas: recognizing themselves, redefining problems, ego building, modeling a way of communicating, increasing motivations, reminding people of their own resources, decreasing resistance, desensitizing people from their

fears, and suggesting solutions to difficult problems. Stories are particularly useful in dealing with complex problems when direct communication may be difficult or ineffective.

In a chapter on the relationship of gender and genre in McGoldrick's *Women in Families*, Laird (1989) highlighted the importance of stories in counseling women. According to Laird, stories help a woman make sense of her life, especially when she has experienced unexplainable, shameful, or deviant events. Stories advance therapeutic goals by offering a choice of different interpretations of events, by fostering the rewriting of the script of one's life, and by creating new scenarios for future action. Laird noted, "Women are hungry for women's stories" (p. 439).

For the above reasons, folk stories were chosen as a particularly useful tool in working with battered women. This article addresses only one critical aspect of abuse, that of the wife-husband (or similar female-male) relationship. Many other issues, significant as they are, lie outside the scope of this article—for example, the difficulties faced when children are involved, problems in dating relationships, and violence in lesbian relationships.

Each woman, using her own survival skills, has to make her own decision about the future. She knows better than any counselor, any story, or any book of advice what the benefits and costs are to her of different courses of action. The role of the counselor is largely to help women understand the situation they are in, to assess as clearly as possible the complex reality they face, and to help them find the strength to make choices about appropriate future action for themselves.

### Illustrating Wife Abuse

Abused wives generally have trouble understanding the tragedy they face. Most experience a sense of isolation and a feeling that they alone suffer this terrible horror. Abused women live in fear of violent retaliation for seeking help, for confiding to others the details of the abuse they suffer, and for attempting to leave their men and work out a separate life for themselves (Davis, 1984). Women are often perplexed at the conflicting feel-

ings they experience of shame, guilt, powerlessness, insecurity, fear, low self-esteem, rage, and love for their tormenter (Carlson, 1977; Schuyler, 1976; Star, Clark, Goetz, & O'Malia, 1979). They feel stigmatized by a society that expects the woman to be a peacemaker in a house where the man is dominant and violent. As a result, women are fearful if they choose to remain with their abuser and guilty if they attempt to leave (Costantino, 1981).

Folk stories offer a way of creating safe space to address many sensitive issues without the need for uncomfortable self-disclosure. Wife abuse stories focus largely on the social and psychological stresses of the husband-wife relationship. As a result, counselors using folk stories can help women understand the prevalence and institutionalization of wife abuse throughout history and around the world, heighten women's awareness of men's attitudes and beliefs, recognize motivations and evaluate behavior patterns of men and women in abusive situations, and judge alternative outcomes in battering situations.

### Prevalence and Institutionalization

Shocked by her husband's violent attacks, a battered wife feels a sense of isolation and separateness from the world of other women. She often thinks that she alone is at fault and that if she somehow were a better person, she would not be abused. One of the battered wife's most immediate needs is to understand that wife beating is an all-too-common phenomenon and that she is one in a long line of women maltreated over the centuries and across the world.

A survey of folk stories (Ucko, 1990) clearly reveals the widespread incidence of wife abuse over both time and space. Folk-story husbands batter wives in tales from such countries as Germany, Italy, Russia, Britain, Norway, China, Vietnam, and the United States. Men who beat, kill, or otherwise torment their wives come from all classes and segments of society (for example, a young Italian courtier, the king of Spain, a Russian innkeeper, a Norwegian peasant, a Chinese mandarin, a Vietnamese soldier, an old British cobbler). Folk stories attest

to the existence and institutionalization of wife abuse as typical of many marriages in a great many times and places.

Folk stories provide evidence of the long-standing and common practice of abusing women. In the author's experience, some women respond with surprise or disbelief, but for all women, a story takes the feeling of isolation out of the abuse situation. The wife in the story immediately becomes a public figure and one with whom the other women can openly identify and empathize.

### Men's and Women's Attitudes

Wives often interpret the violence against them as having been caused by their own limitations. They tend to apologize for their actions, promise to do better, and adapt their behavior to what they think their husbands want, all in the often vain hope that the violence will cease. Women rarely examine the attitudes of their husbands. They take for granted the man's dissatisfaction with them and then try somehow to please him.

Battered women need encouragement to recognize and evaluate the man's point of view as well as their own attitudes in battering situations. From an examination of various folk stories, men's views of wife battering are as follows:

- Men regard wife beating as normal behavior.
- Men believe that the world at large, and especially other men, expect them to resort to wife beating to get their own way.
- Men see themselves as the final arbiters of women's behavior.
- Men do not feel accountable and are not held accountable for battering their wives.

Folk-story wives, on the other hand, tend to be controlled by abusive treatment from their husbands, apologize for their behavior despite the ill treatment they receive, and change their behavior to suit their husbands after being beaten. The following story illustrates many of these attitudes.

#### Animal Talk and the Nosy Wife (Italian Folktale)

A poor young married farmer worked for a priest in another town to earn a living. By accident, he learned to understand the

language of animals. He was warned by a cat not to reveal this secret or he would die. When he got home, his wife became curious when he laughed (at animal talk) without her knowing why. He at first postponed answering her constant questioning. Because of her persistence, he felt he would have to give in and tell her the truth. Expecting to die, but not telling her that, he asked her merely to run and fetch the priest.

While she was gone, he overheard the rooster in his yard taunting and rebuking him for not controlling his wife. He immediately recognized the rooster's wisdom. When the wife returned saying the priest was on his way, the husband took his belt and beat her into unconsciousness. The priest arrived, surveyed the scene, and left immediately. When the wife regained consciousness, she no longer cared about explanations or dared to be nosy (Calvino, 1980).

In this story, a husband who starts out being tolerant of his wife's demands ends up becoming violent. The complicity of the community in violence against the woman is evident in both the advice of the rooster and the priest's lack of concern for the woman's welfare. In the end, the wife changed her behavior to conform to the husband's wishes.

Support group participants recognize a woman's powerlessness and her inability to change her situation. Many are sure that a wife will give in many times and that the abuse will continue regardless of how friendly a husband seems. The participants tend to see the man as ungovernable and unpredictable, and they have trouble formulating a cogent reason for his actions.

### **Motivations and Actions of Men and Women**

Although popular thinking suggests that love and marriage fit well together, female-male relationships are a much more complex phenomenon. After extensive research on abuse in American families, Strauss, Gelles, and Steinmetz (1981) concluded, "the hallmark of family relationships is both love and violence" (p. viii).

What circumstances motivate intense conflict and violence against women? What creates such difficulties in a situation presumably based on love? These are questions that constantly confront

and confound women in abusive situations. Women often refer to the "Jekyll and Hyde" phenomenon in their husbands. They can be very loving and concerned one day and violent the next. Periods of "honeymoon" reconciliation regularly alternate with eruptions of hostility and violence. Yet many women continue to care about these men. Such contradictions in action and feeling are very confusing and distressing.

Folk stories offer some insight into the dilemma. The following story illustrates the seeming co-occurrence of love and violence.

### **The Flight of the Birds** (British Folktale)

A farmer living in a wild part of the country had a good and beautiful wife whom he loved deeply, and he was therefore very jealous. One night the farmer offered hospitality to a fine-looking stranger who sought refuge from a raging storm. Noticing the stranger glancing at his wife, the husband felt that anyone looking at them would think the guest and his wife made a very handsome pair, and that he, the farmer, made a poor appearance in comparison. When both started to yawn at about the same time, the husband was convinced that the two had been having an affair. Much as the farmer would have liked to kill the stranger, still he was a guest and therefore could not be harmed. When the stranger retired for the night, the husband grabbed his wife and took her out into the stormy night to kill her. He explained that to keep her a true and honest wife, he would have to hang her. Nothing the wife could say changed his resolve.

His efforts to hang her on nearby trees were repeatedly thwarted by a flock of birds, who followed them from tree to tree. He tried to escape the birds by going to a lone tree some distance away. But when he tried once more, the birds again appeared and prevented the hanging. As dawn was breaking, the continual interference of the birds combined with his wife's understated protests and her beauty in the early morning light made him realize tearfully that his wife was innocent. He then knew that the birds would have given him no peace had he succeeded out of anger and jealousy in murdering his wife. He took her home, holding hands with her, and never mistrusted her again (Briggs, 1977).

This is a story of a suspicious, jealous husband and a good and lovely wife. The

great love the husband had for his beautiful wife translated into extreme jealousy, anger, and attempted murder. The wife apparently excused her husband's violent act, as they held hands on the way home. The husband was not held responsible for his attempted criminal act. The story ends with a chastened and appreciative husband.

Love can have many meanings, but in this story it meant the following to the man: pride (at having so pretty a wife), insecurity (that he was not handsome enough to match his wife's beauty), poor self-image (regarding his inadequacy compared to the visitor), jealousy (of attentions of other men to his wife), shame (at feeling other people would think his wife and the stranger looked better together than he and his wife), a threat to his masculinity (assuming his wife had been and would continue to be unfaithful), and a reassertion of his masculinity (by judging and punishing his wife to make her "true and honest"). Nowhere is his "love" connected with any concern for her welfare, dignity, personhood, or testimony. His behavior indicates concern for himself, not love for her.

Thus, such "love" can easily go along with wife abuse and can actually inspire it. When one realizes that the man really was concerned about his own confused feelings and not his wife's welfare, his actions make more sense. Trust, respect, discussion, clarification, and compromise all are lacking from his worldview. Without these vital ingredients of "love," a different word is needed for his self-indulgent feelings.

What about the wife's attitudes? What is her outlook? She was powerless both physically and psychologically in dealing with her husband. She could not protect her life or welfare. She accepted her fate as subservient to him like a child, inferior, or servant. And finally, when he no longer planned to kill her, she seemed willing to forgive and forget. Did she love this man who showed so little respect for her as a person? Is being subservient to a brutal man the definition of "love"? Was she simply dependent on him for her livelihood and had to make the best of a questionable bargain? These are important questions that need to be addressed with many battered wives,

whose behaviors may be not unlike those of the woman in the story.

Battered women have difficulty evaluating their own and their husbands' motivations and actions. They often adopt generalizations about themselves and their men that distort their circumstances. They describe themselves as being at fault in goading their husbands to violence; as being insufficiently attentive, patient, and understanding regarding his stresses, needs, problems; and as "loving" their men and feeling they are "loved" in return. They see their husbands as enigmas they do not understand. Questions like "Why does he do it?" and "How can I get him to stop?" recur with remarkable frequency and attest to the mystery surrounding violence perceived by battered women.

In considering a particular story, support group women often view the violence as distinct from the love between the spouses. It is easier for them to understand how the woman can sustain abuse and at the same time hope for an improvement in her marriage. But it is very difficult for them to grasp what goes on inside the husband. In discussions, they seem to separate the man into two parts, the violent one and the loving one. Each part can be comprehended alone.

### Examining Alternative Solutions

A great challenge facing battered women is making decisions about the future. Along with clarifying the attitudes and behaviors of their spouses, folk stories provide scenarios in which women can consider different courses of action for the wife in the story.

Should wives stay with men who assault them? Is the economic security they need worth accepting serious danger to their life? Should a woman apologize, even though she did nothing wrong? Is there any alternative for a wife's giving in to her husband's wishes, regardless of what she may want? Can any of these women avoid being beaten again in the future? Can they trust these men in the future?

In considering options for folk-story women, it is important to recognize that the stories come from an earlier period of history when alternatives were great-

ly limited. There was little or no education available for anyone. Generally no jobs existed outside the home to enable women to be independent. Food stores, restaurants, day care centers, laundromats, and all similar services in today's world were nonexistent. Because everything was done inside the home, folk-story women could survive only by staying where they were or finding someone else's home to go to. Partly for these reasons, most folk-story wives do not leave their abusive men.

Survival outside an abusive marriage has become much more feasible, and more and more women consider ways of leaving violent men. Those who succeed are courageous survivors and important role models for others, and women being abused can use their example to consider alternative endings for folk stories.

Discussing story endings from the vantage point of contemporary life involves asking what-if questions. What if the beautiful wife who was almost hanged could enroll in a modeling course? What if the nosy wife could start a small business of her own? Through the what-if questions, a wide variety of options for leaving destructive relationships can be evaluated.

In looking at the outcome of stories, support group women tend to take a pessimistic view. They predict that women who run away in a story will run away again and again. They expect that women who return to their husbands will be beaten in the future. Discussions about ways to leave a husband's abuse tend to bring women to consider their own life story, rather than the folk story. The difficulty of leaving an abusive relationship becomes clear from the participants' pessimistic reactions to a folk story. Increased assistance and counseling and the opportunity to evaluate many different story situations are needed to help women confront the need to consider their options.

### Case Study

The author cofacilitated a support group composed of women staying at a women's shelter. The group's membership was somewhat different at each weekly meeting, and on this evening,

there were half a dozen women in their 20s and 30s; some were white and some were African American. All but one had a young child or children. Most women had left their husbands several times in the past but had gone back again and again. Some of the women were planning finally to strike out on their own. The two cofacilitators told the story "The Old Woman Who Ran Away" at the beginning of the session.

### The Old Woman Who Ran Away (Russian Folktale)

A man and his wife quarreled. After the husband pulled her hair, dragged her, and pushed her around on the floor, he stormed out of the room. She then decided to run away. Before she left, her husband removed all the food she had placed in a bag to take along and climbed into the sack himself. The unsuspecting wife ran away carrying the sack on her back. Whenever she wanted to stop and eat, the man called from inside, "I can see everything. I can hear everything." Afraid it was the Devil, the woman kept going. Finally, weary and hungry, she opened the bag and out came her husband. She begged his forgiveness and promised never to run away again. The husband forgave her, and they went home (*Russian Fairy Tales*, 1973).

This brief narrative was met at first with a hushed silence. However, a question by one of the facilitators about the woman in the story unleashed a flood of simultaneous comments from several women. One woman, who was new to the group and clearly struggling with her own feelings, offered many comments about the wife in the story. These comments were accompanied by much emotion and tears. Although she continued to participate throughout the session, it was only at the very end that she said something directly about herself. Both facilitators felt that the woman had participated because the story offered her an acceptable way to participate in the discussion without personal revelation. That she was making connections in her own mind, however, was clear from the emotional tone of her speech and her ability finally to share her own circumstances.

Once the story had been told and the discussion started, participants picked up on different aspects of the folk-story

woman's plight. The women expanded on the story line. For example, they felt the wife angered her husband by sneaking out to run away behind his back. This makes her "bad" in the eyes of her husband, as well as to family members, the minister, the psychiatrist, and others. There was general agreement that the wife's apology was absolutely necessary if she wanted to avoid being beaten again on the spot. The women felt that when the couple got home, the man would likely want to have sex and the wife would accommodate him, despite her feelings. He might or might not beat her again that day, but in any case, he "has her," and he would continue to be a terrible burden. They predicted that the man would be nasty to his wife and would beat her in the future. The wife would not go back to stay forever; she would try to run away again. Even when wives go back, the women agreed, they do not forgive and forget, and this wife would not either.

Throughout the evening, the discussion alternated between personal experiences and ideas about the folk-story wife. The story always remained available for illustration and was used as such by several women. Some women recognized the feeling of carrying a husband on one's back and wanting desperately to be rid of the burden. One woman suggested that the wife should have thrown the sack over the bridge into the water when the wife heard the voice from inside it. Others understood very well how the story wife became docile and lost her resolve once her husband confronted her. They recommended that for a woman to leave, she has to avoid seeing, talking, arguing, or dealing with her husband in any way. She must simply leave.

The women in the group referred to the story throughout the session, drew on it when they needed to, and left it when they did not, only to reuse it later. The facilitators found that the story helped the group make transitions from one topic to another. A woman would introduce a new idea by first referring to the story and then adding a personal account. When the discussion lost its direction and wandered off into irrelevant matters, the facilitators used the story to refocus the discussion.

The participants expressed positive feelings about including stories in future sessions. The following day, two participants referred to the story again during a personal discussion with each other.

This support group session provided benefits similar to those postulated by Barker (1985) and Erickson (cited in Barker). Using the story was ego building; it showed the participants that the prevalence and institutionalization of wife abuse are not the woman's fault. The story facilitated communication by providing important issues for discussion, encouraged the immediate participation of women reluctant to reveal their own stories, and eased transitions from topic to topic. Because the story was nonjudgmental, it helped women recognize themselves. No one needed to be defensive or confrontational, as can happen when one woman's personal experience differs from another's. By focusing critical or supportive comments on the folk-story wife rather than on each other, women were more secure in rethinking their own circumstances. Through each woman's unique identification with different aspects of the folk story, she could expand her perception of her own experience.

Folk stories provide women with an additional benefit—a "woman's story"—which they can use as they need. Facilitators always stress at support group sessions that personal revelations are strictly confidential and may not be discussed outside the group. This vital prohibition necessarily limits the use to which women can put the contents of the group sessions. A folk story, on the other hand, is available to women to discuss at any time and use in any way. The fact that the next day the story was already being retold supports Laird's (1989) comment that women have a great need for "women's stories."

Not every topic can be addressed in one session or from one folk story. Ideas related to understanding men were raised but could not be adequately probed at that session with that story. The story also did not allow enough opportunity to consider detailed options for what the wife could do.

Discussion about the folk-story husband showed that the women clearly recognized his actions but were confused about his motivations and emotions and

the rationale for his behavior. The facilitators felt the need to use other stories that focus more directly on questions of love and male behavior.

What a woman decides to do is based on her perception of her circumstances and of her husband. From the discussion about the story, it became clear that the uncertainty and confusion about the husband's feelings stood in the way of focusing on options for the future. Being able to fuse the "loving" husband with the violent one may ultimately clarify and ease decision making for many abused women.

## Conclusion

The author's effort to use folk stories in counseling battered women is new and is beginning to grow. As clinicians develop greater experience with the technique, they will improve and refine its use beyond the current piloting work.

In another story, three little pigs were afraid of the big, bad wolf, so they joined together to achieve their purpose—the elimination of a bully who threatened their existence. Support groups for battered women offer arenas for women to locate networks, to band together, to support each other, and to seek solutions to the problems they are facing. The problems faced by abused women, often too large for the women to solve on their own, may be easier to grapple with given insights and supports from the stories of others.

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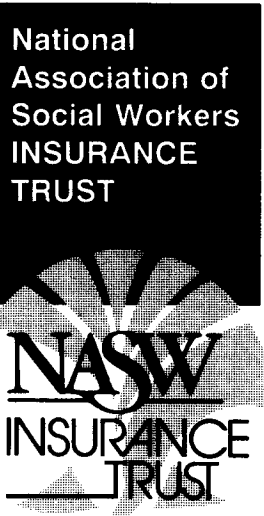
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