

Shifting narratives may slow healing process for domestic violence survivors

April 28 2014, by Christine Metz Howard

(Medical Xpress)—Across the country, domestic violence shelters provide a safe harbor for women and children fleeing terrifying predicaments and abusive relationships. However, research at the University of Kansas shows that survivors' overall recoveries may be impeded when they are forced to "box" themselves into certain narratives in order to receive assistance.

Adrianne Kunkel, a professor of communication studies, found survivors' stories could shift several times while navigating the constraining labyrinth that exists to rescue and serve them. This may slow the emotional healing process, which is linked to having people portray their individual struggles as personal narratives.

Kunkel has spent several years as a volunteer and advocate at a women's domestic violence shelter, collecting data on employees and survivors. Analysis of 28 interviews with women who stayed at the shelter shows that a survivor must accommodate her story of abuse relative to who is listening. That story varies depending on whether she is calling 911, seeking help from a crisis hotline, asking for shelter, obtaining a protection from abuse order, seeking housing or providing proof that she is fit to parent.

"It's not that they aren't telling the truth. It is just that they are in a position, depending on the audience, to have to tell their stories in different ways to acquire the particular resources they need," Kunkel said.

Kunkel, along with Suzy D'Enbeau, assistant professor of communication studies at Kent State University, and Jennifer Guthrie, one of Kunkel's former graduate students who is now an assistant professor of [communication studies](#) at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas, is working on a research program that examines the empowerment and disempowerment processes associated with domestic violence centers and with survivors sharing their narratives to center staff. Led by Kunkel, the team will present on the topic throughout the year.

As a volunteer, Kunkel observed advocates coaching women to share their experiences and stories in such a way so criteria could be met to receive assistance such as housing or an extension at the shelter. Unfortunately, this coaching process can marginalize the survivor's perspective and her role in her own recovery.

For Kunkel, this coaching contradicted the organization's mission of empowering the survivor to represent herself and make choices to improve her own life.

"Throughout the training, we were told again and again, trust the survivor. It is her story, her lived experience, and we are there to listen and be supportive," Kunkel said. "Yet there is a lot of coaching that goes on and changing of what might have actually happened."

For example, Kunkel points to a series of questions that volunteers and staff ask when women seeking shelter call the crisis hotline. A woman who may be scared of her abuser, but in a safe location, may not meet the checklist for staying at the shelter. However, if the woman says she feels endangered, that could be enough to receive refuge.

"They have to change the way they construct their story just to get into the shelter, but really it goes even beyond that," Kunkel said.

While it's beneficial in that survivors receive the resources they need to move past [abusive relationships](#), Kunkel claims that requiring survivors to adapt and fragment their stories can be detrimental to processing their experiences and reaping the subsequent mental and emotional health benefits.

"The stories are getting told in so many different ways, you don't actually know what the real story is anymore. Part of that is just life. But when survivors tell their full, unedited story, they actually get a chance to heal and make sense of the potential trauma they have endured," she said.

Kunkel's work on survivors' narratives is just one of several research areas she has explored since volunteering at the women's shelter.

In 2013, with D'Enbeau, she published an article in the *Journal of Applied Communication Research* that identified the paradoxes of a domestic violence center, which espoused empowerment for survivors but whose policies actually hamstrung them and the staff that tried fervently to assist them. They also studied the shelter employees, who work long hours, receive low wages, experience burnout and have high turnover rates.

In addition, she is working on a first-person account of what it is like to deal with the support dilemmas and dialectical tensions faced when volunteering at a domestic violence shelter as a feminist scholar and professor of communication and gender studies.

At the heart of Kunkel's research is studying ways for survivors to use social support networks to break out of the cycle of violence. Kunkel would like to see an environment where survivors can fully and accurately express their experiences and feelings without jeopardizing their chance of receiving assistance. Kunkel hopes to share her findings with [domestic violence](#) centers across the country so that they may then

best help the survivors they serve.

Provided by University of Kansas

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