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## Interpreting Community Accountability: Citizen Views of Responding to Domestic Violence (or Not)

Jacob Z. Hess  
*Utah Youth Village, jzhess@gmail.com*

Nicole E. Allen  
*University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign, allenne@illinois.edu*

Nathan R. Todd  
*DePaul University, ntodd@depaul.edu*

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### Abstract

In spite of common public condemnations of domestic violence, survey research suggests that citizens aware of actual abuse often believe they cannot or should not personally respond. Through in-depth interviews with 20 local citizens across the political spectrum, we sought to explore this dynamic more carefully by better understanding community interpretations of domestic violence and its appropriate response. This paper explores ten specific views identified in these interviews as potentially relevant to citizen action (or inaction) in response to known abuse. After examining subtle consequences of each belief, we explore broader implications for community mobilization and propose several ways of facilitating a more thoughtful and extensive deliberation about domestic violence among the general public.

### Keywords

Domestic Violence, Intimate Partner Violence, Community Accountability, Hermeneutic Philosophy, Qualitative Research

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## **Interpreting Community Accountability: Citizen Views of Responding to Domestic Violence (or not)**

Jacob Z. Hess

Utah Youth Village, Salt Lake City, Utah, USA

Nicole E. Allen

University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign, Champaign, Illinois, USA

Nathan R. Todd

DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois, USA

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*In spite of common public condemnations of domestic violence, survey research suggests that citizens aware of actual abuse often believe they cannot or should not personally respond. Through in-depth interviews with 20 local citizens across the political spectrum, we sought to explore this dynamic more carefully by better understanding community interpretations of domestic violence and its appropriate response. This paper explores ten specific views identified in these interviews as potentially relevant to citizen action (or inaction) in response to known abuse. After examining subtle consequences of each belief, we explore broader implications for community mobilization and propose several ways of facilitating a more thoughtful and extensive deliberation about domestic violence among the general public. Key Words: Domestic Violence, Intimate Partner Violence, Community Accountability, Hermeneutic Philosophy, Qualitative Research*

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My brother-in-law did something like that to my sister. I went over to talk to him and told him, "Look. You're a man; I'm a man, and we're going to talk, me and you." I said, "You [are with] my sister. Love her. Respect her . . . because if I ever see that you hit her again, you're not going to have to deal with my sister; you'll have to deal with me. (Klevens et al., 2007, p. 150)

In contrast to a time when women typically "dealt with" domestic violence on their own, the last 50 years have seen the emergence of a national and international infrastructure of support for victims. In the United States, for instance, shelter programs, community-based advocacy and professional collaboration have all been developed and continue to expand (Hart, 1995; Pence & Shepard, 1999; Sullivan, 2000; Sullivan & Gillum, 2000). Similar progress has occurred with criminal justice accountability for perpetrators, including mandatory arrest policies, evidence-based prosecution, increased access to protective orders, mandated sentencing and more batterers' intervention programs (E. S. Buzawa & Buzawa, 2003).

In spite of such improvements, a general awareness exists that formal institutional responses, however well-coordinated, will likely remain insufficient to address the

problem of domestic violence<sup>1</sup> in a comprehensive way. Logistically, for instance, shelters and services continue to work with limited funding and are most likely to serve low-income women. And just as the ranks of formal counselors have long been forecast to be exceeded by the amount of individuals needing help (Albee, 1959), the sheer numbers of law enforcement personnel will arguably remain a serious constraint in their collective ability to hold batterers accountable across communities. More nuanced institutional challenges have also been noted, ranging from subtle limitations of police in relating to the complexities of domestic violence (E. S. Buzawa & Buzawa, 2003) and a double bind faced by women of color/immigrant status in relation to the formal systems response (Richie & Kanuha, 2000), to a shift in shelter services away from survivor-centered, empowerment-orientated emphases toward individual-level conceptualizations (Goodman, & Epstein, 2007; Lehrner & Allen, 2008; Sullivan, 2005).

While continuing reform to human service and criminal justice systems may lead to an ever more effective professional response, constraints such as these have lead some to propose a larger role for more informal, natural support systems in what Shepard and Pence (1999) call the “coordinated community response to domestic violence” (p. 20; see also, Gracia & Herrero, 2006; Khawaja, Linos & El-Roueiheb, 2008; Klevens et al., 2007). From extended family, friends and neighbors, to co-workers, clergy and hairdressers, “average” citizens are being increasingly highlighted in their potential contribution to addressing domestic violence. This mixed empirical and theoretical article aims to sharpen our understanding of citizen views on their own role in the coordinated community response to violence.

Typically, discussions of informal, citizen participation refer to basic efforts to educate, raise awareness and organize community members in supporting victims of domestic violence. Another less common, but especially promising form of citizen engagement is known as *community accountability*, defined as follows:

The ability of communities to intervene directly when violence occurs, so acts of violence are stopped not only by the police, but by community members and institutions. It relies upon the responsibility and capacity of the community to confront abusers and provide a process for abuser accountability which can include reparations to their victims, monitoring future abuse, and long-term measures that prevent violence. (Kim, 2005, p. 34)

As illustrated in the opening epigraph, community accountability entails a willingness of friends or family to go beyond mere awareness of abuse, to *doing something about it personally*. In addition to reporting and getting other authorities involved (which may not always be appropriate), this can also involve communicating clearly to a perpetrator that abuse is “not okay” in our family or to a survivor that she has unconditional emotional and instrumental support from the same family. Of course, mobilizing this informal citizen response to domestic violence, especially that aspect reflected in community accountability, is not without its challenges. In addition to the

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<sup>1</sup> Although relevant to other forms of domestic violence like child abuse, primary attention in this paper is given to intimate partner violence. While violence can obviously be enacted from all parties in a relationship, we are also limiting our focus here to male toward female abuse, given its striking prevalence.

well-known skill of batterers to systematically isolate survivors from family and friends, Trotter and Allen (2009) document the tendency of some survivors to hide abuse from members of their social networks in order to maintain privacy and manage safety. In the absence of directly observing abuse, some family and friends may thereby often remain unaware that it is even happening.

Beyond such practical challenges, however, even deeper barriers to community accountability for domestic violence exist. In cases where surrounding family and friends *are* aware of abuse, for instance, they can be notoriously avoidant of *any attempt* at intervention. For those personally exposed to violence against a woman, one U.S. public survey documents the most common response by far (73.3%) was *not reporting it* (Gracia & Herrero, 2006). Another study of abuse cases concluded that although surrounding friends and family generally want to be supportive, “most often it appears that family members prefer to remain uninvolved,” with victims reporting that their neighbors had primarily “ignored the problem, tried to minimize it, or told her that it would work out” (Klevens et al., 2007, pp. 150-152). Even where a willingness to act exists, what may enhance safety for one survivor may not for another, highlighting both the complexity of needs in a given situation and the importance of an individualized process accounting for a given survivor’s unique circumstances (Allen, Bybee & Sullivan, 2004). In light of survey evidence confirming trends of minimal citizen action within communities internationally (e.g., Chan, Chun, & Chung, 2008; Haj-Yahia, 2002; Hindin, 2003), it becomes important to examine more carefully what underlies the hesitations of surrounding community members to intervene in a case of known domestic violence in their own family, church or neighborhood. To date, research has underutilized qualitative explorations of meaning, interpretation and attitudes regarding domestic violence among members of the community at large. More systematic attention to these dynamics may surface relevant insights, as suggested by Lamb (1991) in her study of how language can obscure batterer responsibility:

Change [relative to domestic violence], then, must be addressed not only at the level of behavior (preventing male violence against women), but in the *perception of reality* and, more particularly, *in the construction of a language with which to talk about that perception.* (p. 250)

Kettrey and Emery (2006) likewise have proposed qualitative research as an important tool to clarify and parse out specific patterns in the broader discourse about violence. More careful exploration of citizen language, then — specifically, how they construct and perceive domestic violence — might help better explain their hesitations in personally responding to the same in a way that holds batterers accountable. Where explicit qualitative examinations of perception and belief exist, however, they typically have centered on those most immediately involved in violence, including batterers (Brammer, 2006; Dragiewicz, 2006), victims (J. Hightower, Smith, & Hightower, 2006; Nash, 2005; Panchanadeswaran & Koverola, 2005; Trotter & Allen, 2009), and surrounding professional support (Trinch & Berk-Seligson, 2002; Cary, 2006; Mildorf, 2002). When research has paid explicit attention to community views, it typically relies on large-scale surveys with set questions across many individuals (e.g., Haj-Yahia, 2002; Chan et al., 2008). While providing a general picture of community perceptions and beliefs about

violence, these studies do not always convey the full nuance and diversity of citizen belief necessary to understand, for instance, the particular ways that public attitudes may function as barriers to community accountability (for exceptions, see Enck-Wanzer, 2006; Ponterotto, 2002). It is examining the variety of these potential interpretive barriers that is this study's aim. By doing so, we hope to better flesh out and articulate the role that citizen perceptions and beliefs may play in the surprising degree of community inaction to stop domestic violence. Through "surfacing" and clarifying the nature of citizen views and tracing out their implications, we ultimately hope to contribute to the kind of critical thinking about ideas that can shift community practices in relation to violence. Alternatively, where assumptions go unquestioned and unexamined, a real danger of status quo community *inaction* remains, as citizen willingness to act continues diluted and disabled, in part, by a number of questionable views held to be "reality."

### **Current Study**

To better understand the nuances of how community members think about responding to domestic violence, we conducted in-depth interviews with 20 local citizens from varying socio-political backgrounds, from a conservative pastor to a leader of a feminist organization. In order to connect with the rich vein of related studies and highlight salient themes across the growing literature, public survey research on these questions (both American and international) was also reviewed. In this way, our paper aims to summarize existing research regarding beliefs, attitudes and interpretations relevant to community accountability as well. Rather than waiting until the discussion section to mention these findings, however, we have opted to juxtapose relevant insights from this literature review directly alongside many of our own results. Doing so is a deliberate attempt to make our paper more accessible to a broader audience, including to citizens themselves. Given the complexity entailed in reviewing a series of ten views, we also hope that interweaving results may better facilitate exploration of these issues by any in our audience.

After a brief section on methodology, the bulk of our examination takes up a series of citizen views identified as relevant to the general willingness of friends and family to intervene in domestic violence — this, once again, set against the wider backdrop of survey findings. In the final section, we consider the broader implications of these views in relation to citizens rising to the occasion to enact community accountability for domestic violence (or not).

### **Method: Hermeneutic Inquiry**

#### **Analytic Approach**

In this study, we take a particular philosophical hermeneutic approach to analysis (Martin & Sugarman, 2001; Hess, 2005; Polkinghorne, 2000; Rabinow & Sullivan, 1987). In its emphasis on the critical role of interpretation<sup>2</sup> in both the object and process

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<sup>2</sup> Although definitional nuances exist in the philosophical literature, "interpretation" is used here in its broadest definition of general "sense-making"—reflecting, for our purposes, other related practices (perceiving, believing, assuming, viewing and holding an attitude).

of research, this approach shares meaningful links with interpretive phenomenology (Benner, 1994), constructionist revisions of grounded theory (Charmaz, 1990) and discourse analysis, such as those recently conducted on public attitudes towards domestic violence (Coates & Wade, 2007; Enck-Wanzer, 2006; Ponterotto, 2002). Similar to these approaches, a hermeneutic analysis moves beyond the objective experience of violence itself towards investigating more closely how individuals frame and interpret that experience.

These interpretations, rather than a mere “subjective” overlay upon our lives, are understood here to be directly relevant to the practicalities of citizens’ actual experience and “lived out” moment by moment in tangible ways (Fay, 1996, p. 178). Philosophical hermeneutics steps back from over-emphasizing the role of interpretation and language, differentiating this approach from what domestic violence researchers Coates and Wade (2007) call “discourse determinism” — i.e., “the view that discourse constructs reality, marks the limits of thought, forms and incarcerates the subject, and ultimately drives individual conduct” (p. 520). In this way, hermeneutics reflects a viable middle ground between essentialist realism and strong constructionism (Bernstein, 1983), highlighting the powerful role of interpretation in *partially constituting* particular experiences (Taylor, 1985), while insisting on meaningful roles for other (non-interpretive) contributors as well.

Ultimately, the goal of this approach is to make subtle interpretive patterns, especially specific “problem definitions” adopted by citizens (Seidman & Rappaport, 1986), more accessible to public view — patterns and perceptions that might otherwise remain largely implicit, unconscious and “hidden” (Slife & Williams, 1995). By surfacing and clarifying these patterns in the community discourse, we propose such inquiry will facilitate a more thoughtful public and professional deliberation about domestic violence (Schwandt, 1996).

## Participants

Participants were purposively sampled from community members and students associated with the research team. The particular recruiting aim was to maximize variability of political identification across the liberal-conservative spectrum (as defined by participants themselves). Consequently, ten citizens inclined towards social conservatism (seven males, three females) and ten to social liberalism (five males, five females) were interviewed. Given recruitment objectives primarily focused on diversity of political views, we did not intentionally sample across other categories of difference (e.g., race/ethnicity, SES, age)<sup>3</sup>; participants were predominately White with the exception of two participants identifying as Latino. Participants ranged from mid-twenties to fifties in age and included a member of a campus Christian ministry, a participant in the socialist party, a conservative lobbyist and a feminist activist. Recruiting this kind of political diversity served to ensure that citizen interpretations shared reflected variation on the one area of most interest: socio-political beliefs. A

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<sup>3</sup> This decision hinged on the nature of our research questions focused on interpretive diversity between liberal and conservative political orientations. Although there are meaningful variations and cross-correlations across other demographic indicators (race, SES, age), systematic attention to these connections was not justified given our sample size and the smaller scope of our interviewing project.

variety of occupations were reflected among citizens, including students (five undergraduate, four graduate), a janitor, computer technician, lawyer, homemaker, teacher, professor and two ministers. The more socially-conservative participants all identified as religious and Christian across several denominations. The majority of participants identifying as more socially-liberal also referred to religion as a meaningful aspect of life, including those with backgrounds in several Christian denominations, Catholicism and one with Jewish heritage. The remaining three liberal participants were atheist or agnostic.

**Ethics.** As customary for any study, informed consent explanations were provided to all participants to review the details of participation before participants agreed to be interviewed. Part of this process was an assurance to all participants that their responses would remain confidential, with identifying information removed and documents stored in locked filing cabinets. Each person recruited was assured that “there are many other people we can interview,” and given space and explicit allowance in the document to decline. This protocol was reviewed and approved by our university Institutional Review Board to ensure we were in compliance with all requirements.

### **Interview Structure and Analytic Process**

Interviews were completed over a period of six months, each lasting between one and two hours. Two of the investigators completed the interviews at a location most convenient to the participant. Some occurred in places of employment, while others took place in a variety of other locales, restaurants, homes, parks, etc. Rather than attempting to “saturate” a particular theme, we designated 20 as a number that would inform us sufficiently of the diversity of views to answer our own research questions.

As part of the consent process, the nature of interview questions was reviewed with participants. Questions centered around understanding how citizens were framing “root causes” and solutions for specific issues such as domestic violence and sexual assault (see Table 1 for interview schedule). We began by asking an open-ended question, such as “Domestic or family violence is being talked about more and more. What are your thoughts about this?” We then followed up with multiple probes into a variety of related areas, such as the perceived source of domestic violence, its best solutions and occasions where they have witnessed community action (or inaction). This same process was followed for other issues raised during the interview.

Interview transcripts made by undergraduate research assistants were reviewed and checked against audio recordings for accuracy. These transcripts were then content analyzed to identify the range of ways citizens were thinking about a variety of issues—in this case, regarding the role of the community in responding to domestic violence. When a comment relevant to citizens and domestic violence was found, it was cut and paste into a document with similar comments using NVIVO coding software (QSR International, 2006). After gathering all such comments, they were reviewed to identify the range of possible ways citizens were thinking about their own role in accountability. This approach is similar to Berg’s (2004) characterization of open-coding, where the goal is to engage the text with attention to salient themes. After all authors discussed the range of citizen views documented by the first authors’ analysis, the second author



subsequently reviewed interview verbatim with the same overarching question in mind. In each process, the authors sought both positive (i.e., affirming) and negative (i.e., not supporting) cases for each viewpoint identified. The final set of views and over-arching meta-themes reflect those confirmed by the authors’ collective engagement with the material.

Given our purposive sampling approach and small sample size, our analytic strategy remained explicitly qualitative in nature. That is, rather than assessing the *prevalence* of themes and framing patterns in the data, our focus was documenting the qualities and dimensions of distinct themes and patterns in this single set of citizen responses. Given the small sample size, “theme” and pattern refers to any comment that reflected and elaborated “views regarding citizen response to domestic violence”; whereas it would be ideal to find many examples of any given view, our aim was simply to document the variety of views within one bounded sample. While we could have reported associated percentages within our sample of twenty, this addition seemed neither very interesting nor informative. Instead, questions of prevalence seem better left to larger scale public survey studies well-positioned to answer *how frequently* a particular view arises in a community. In what follows, citizen responses are presented verbatim, except where minor changes would serve the purpose of space or clarity [ellipses (. . .) indicate material has been removed]. Participant emphases are marked with *italics* and researcher emphases, via underscore. Quotations from other studies can be differentiated from our own participants based on whether the parenthesis includes a page number (“p. 420”) or a participant number (“105”). Although focused on patterns in citizen views, victim or perpetrator comments from other studies are sometimes referenced to elaborate on a particular view.

Table 1. *Interview schedule: Excerpt from domestic violence portion*

<p><b>Introduction:</b> “The purpose of this interview is to better understand your perspective on a few social issues in the specific area of sex, gender and family relationships. What I’d like to do is to start by hearing your perspective on the topic of domestic violence. Next, I’d like to hear your thoughts on one or two other related issues.”</p> <p>[The protocol aimed to first, access citizens’ general, raw thoughts on the issue without much guidance. Next, we sought to probe around specific areas].</p>
<p><b>“Domestic violence”:</b> Domestic violence or family violence continues to be a major problem. What are your thoughts about this?</p>
<p><b>Probes:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>--How would you define domestic violence?</li> <li>--Have you ever had to deal with anyone in your own family, church, neighborhood or work, facing domestic violence? If so, can you tell me about the experience? What did you do? What did others do?</li> <li>--[If people saw an opportunity to help that they or someone else did not take advantage of:] Knowing what to do in these situations are very difficult. Help me understand how you or others decided to not get involved. How do these people talk about the situation now?</li> <li>--Have you ever had to deal with anyone in your own family, church, neighborhood or work, who you knew was <u>perpetrating</u> domestic violence?</li> <li>--How do you think the community should respond to a situation like this? How well do you think your own community is currently responding/has responded in the past?</li> <li>--So help me understand some more details of how your community responds to something like this in practice? Are there specific processes, expectations, or guidelines that help guide the response.</li> <li>--Where does domestic violence come from? What do you think is going on with it—you know, like ‘root causes’?</li> <li>--How would you explain why there appears to be an increase in domestic violence? What’s going on?</li> </ul>

--What do you think is the answer? How should we be responding to this issue? What are possible solutions?  
 --Do you know about the domestic violence shelter in town? What have you heard about it?  
 --[For clergy]—Have you ever referred anyone with the shelter or collaborated with it in some other way? Why not?/What was your experience like?]

“Domestic/family violence is one of several difficult issues related to sex, gender and family relationships. Other issues include, for instance, sexual violence, sex education in local schools, pornography, sexual orientation, gender roles, etc. Now I’d like to ask you to share your thoughts on one or two other issues you think about the most.” You may share about other issues you think about as well. [Interviewer continues to ask and probe into other issues].

## A Review and Discussions of Findings: The “Why Not” of Community Accountability

In what follows, citizen interpretations regarding the potential of community intervention into an abusive situation are reviewed — specifically, those views associated with *hesitancies* in this response: Why would members of a community resist intervening in a domestic violence situation? What perceptions and attitudes might mitigate or prevent such action and accountability? These views are organized below into three meta-themes: Framing a situation in ways that minimize or deny abuse; Questioning the general “rightness” of intervening; and Questioning the personal effectiveness of intervening.

### “This can’t be happening”:<sup>4</sup> Framing a situation in ways that minimize or deny abuse.

Across citizen views, one salient theme was a fundamental questioning of the abuse itself — from questioning whether it really existed, to whether it deserved to be framed as “abuse.” Included in this theme are the following views: (1) Difficulty conceiving of violence in general due to past well-being; (2) Disbelieving another’s assessment of the violence; (3) Normalizing violence; and (4) Difficulty conceiving of violence due to personal optimism.

**1. “I just can’t imagine”:** Difficulty conceiving of violence in general due to past well-being. For many interview participants, abuse was not something with which they had any first-hand experience, “never experienc[ing] it at home” (105) and “not being very familiar with the subject” (106), with one admitting “my only exposure would be Law & Order” (100). Elaborating on their own backgrounds free of violence, several acknowledged the difficulty of even conceiving of its reality:

You know, I was raised in a very loving home. . . . So, it’s hard for me to imagine how there could be domestic abuse . . . where people are mistreated or children are abused. You know, that’s just – it’s almost – I am unable to comprehend how someone could *be* that way. . . . It’s hard

<sup>4</sup> Rather than a direct quotation, these snippets included in thematic titles reflect our own summary of a particular view identified in participant comments, drawing on colloquial expressions commonly heard in the surrounding discourse. These titles are intended to capture something of the essence of each view.

for me to imagine how someone could get to the point where they would abuse their *family* members. (202)

It's such a strange concept to me to be violent, to be angry and to hit people . . . in a lot of ways that's something that I've just been so sheltered from; it's hard for me understand why people are violent. (209)

While not doubting the actual occurrence of violence elsewhere in the world, the perceptions reflected in these comments can obscure its reality in more subtle ways. Taken to an extreme, for instance, a difficulty in imagining the reality of violence may explain trends within some communities to perceive family violence as “nonexistent” — i.e., “our community is not like that.” In their review of domestic violence research within Jewish communities, for instance, Steinmetz and Haj-Yahia (2006) note:

The phrase *violent Jewish man* is almost unheard of because the image of Jewish men usually does not include husbands who beat their wives. In addition, Jewish men are considered calm, quiet, and mentally healthy. Thus, it is inconceivable that a Jewish man would ever beat his wife, much less abuse her verbally or emotionally. (p. 526)

Certainly, the same dynamic could be found in many other communities — religious or otherwise. One Christian man in our own sample denied the prevalence of violence in his own faith community, noting that typically “the problem won't ever get that bad” (100).

Taken to its logical conclusion, such an attitude can have obvious implications for citizen actions taken (or not) in response to violence. Indeed, Gracia and Herrero (2006) document a significant link between *perceived frequency* of partner violence against women and positive reporting attitudes. Even when not denied outright, abuse may come to *feel so* abstract, unreal and experience-distant to some citizens that, in an almost literal sense, it *becomes* unreal or, at least, not real and urgent enough to do something about it. An atmosphere of naïve optimism, in particular, may obscure to family and friends the full extent of actual abuse happening in their own circle of loved ones, and additionally, reinforce the tendency of victims themselves to resist disclosure as victims sense the incredulity of loved ones at even the *possibility* of abuse.

**2. “She must be exaggerating”:** **Disbelieving the victim.** Disbelief may manifest in other forms as well. In one interview, a pastor described a woman reporting to him, “I am really scared of my husband. I'm afraid he may kill me. . . [that] he may do something *to me*.” While the pastor proceeded to get law enforcement involved, he noted in retrospect, “it might have been more that she was probably exaggerating. I don't think he would've ever killed her . . . but for her to *say that*, you know, we felt like we had to be responsible to protect her” (202).

The pastor did go on to act on the concerns raised by the woman. However, after emphasizing the surprise and shock of the accused husband, the pastor reflected as follows:

I would probably say when it was all said and done, she probably *imagined that* more than — I don't think she had any real . . . *basis* behind

viewing him as *violent* or *hurting her* . . . but she just got that in her mind!  
 . . . and, so I think she just finally got over that. I think she saw through  
 that it was more of her . . . um, faulty thinking. (202)

This one comment illustrates vividly how victims making specific and serious accusations can sometimes be questioned in their own assessment of danger. While the individual harboring such questions may still proceed to act and respond to the claims, it is not hard to imagine ways this kind of disbelief and doubt could stifle and prevent any response at all. As with a general difficulty conceiving of violence generally (view #1), difficulty believing claims of abuse *in a particular situation* may thereby have a direct impact on citizen action as well. While not going as far as victim blaming (Ryan, 1971), this kind of victim-disbelieving does share its same emphasis on seeming short-comings *in the one making claims of abuse*, rather than in the one being accused of its perpetration. Where victims are held in suspicion to any degree, there are obvious consequences as to whether community accountability for violence materializes at all.

**3. “A little conflict is not unusual, of course”:** Normalizing violence. Where some struggle to comprehend *any degree* of family violence, in general or in a particular situation, other citizen comments seem to reflect the reverse: an insistence on justifying and defending *some degree* of conflict within families. One man, for instance, expressed concern with the notion that “every time a man yells at a woman he’s abusing her.” Referring to that idea, he said:

I mean, just, you know, [that is] *totally out of bounds* [as a] claim . . .  
 People need to be able to *discuss* and they need to be able to *disagree* —  
 and raising voices is as much as a phenomena of culture and personality as  
 it is of anything else. (204)

This man went on to argue that in many cases, claims of abuse within relationships are simply overstated exaggerations of normal “conflict” within families. While this perception could certainly be true in some instances, as with previous views, this kind of an emphasis on anger in families as “normal” or “healthy” could have unfortunate implications when taken to an extreme. Among other things, such normalization could similarly dissuade individuals from intervening in actual situations of violence (Gracia & Herrero, 2006) or to believe (as this participant certainly did) that claims of abuse, in most or many cases, simply reflect deceptive exaggerations of normal conflict within families.

Here, we highlight only one such example of this perception in a small community sample. Ahmad, Riaz, Barata and Stewart, (2004) point to a similar trend in cultures with high levels of abuse, where victims themselves frequently minimize the seriousness of each other’s experience of abuse: “If the abuse occurs to another woman, they may negate the other woman’s experience by telling her that it was something other than abuse” (p. 276).

**4. “He’s not always like that”:** Difficulty conceiving of violence due to personal optimism. Accompanying these tendencies toward disbelieving victims (view

#2) and accepting a certain level of “healthy” harshness in relationships (view #3) is the disturbing parallel of *over-believing* and *not-being-too-harsh* with perpetrators. As reflected in the following exchange, this attitude sometimes manifests in a well-intentioned inclination to focus on the better side of a person and not believe the negative:

Participant (P): My sister finally divorced after thirty years of marriage; no one wanted to say very much, but she had a husband with a very hot temper. And uh, I would put that in the category of emotional abuse.

Interviewer (I): So no one wanted to say very much?

P: No, because of um, you know . . . the person wasn't *always* like that.

I: Can you help me understand that?

P: Well, the person had another side to his personality. He could be a nice guy and he loved children and seemed good with children . . .

I: So for that reason, wanting to give the person the benefit of the doubt?

P: Yeah, 'cause I don't think anyone wanted to say “he's a bad person, you shouldn't be married to him.” (206)

Similar to the general belief that *our community is not really like this*, friends and family may thus cling to a companion belief that *this individual is not really like this*. Beyond a sense of mercy that may be justified on occasion, such optimism may potentially cloud and blind the judgment of surrounding family and friends to some degree. Contributing to the problem is a well known tendency of abusers themselves to paint a picture of their own innocence. As noted by Coates and Wade (2007):

Perpetrators use language strategically . . . to manipulate public appearances, promote their accounts in public discursive space, entrap victims, conceal violence, and avoid responsibility. . . . Thus, extreme violence can continue undetected for many years while the perpetrator builds a reputation as a model citizen. Where this occurs, professionals, family members, and friends who want only to help, unknowingly base their interventions and advice on incomplete and inaccurate information. (p. 512)

Coates and Wade further note that the same narrative of “perpetrator responsibility for ostensibly positive acts such as having a job, possessing a ‘good character,’ and being of ‘no on-going danger’” have been documented to play a role in domestic violence trials (p. 520; see also Coates & Wade, 2004). An attitude of “they couldn't do such a thing” among family and friends, then, may inadvertently reflect and collude with perpetrators' own impression management efforts, in turn, disabling the power of community accountability.

A similar dynamic may emerge when a man's lack of control receives primary emphasis. In their study of violence discourse, Coates and Wade (2007) similarly found judges using “passive and agentless grammatical constructions, causal attributions, and mutualizing terminology in a manner that obscured perpetrators' agency and responsibility,” wherein “it then appears that the perpetrator is responsible for an

‘isolated incident’ during which he temporarily lost control and acted against the grain of his otherwise good character” (p. 520).

Similar de-emphasis on perpetrator agency and responsibility was evident in our own study. After discussing the pull of gender “power differentials,” one man suggested that “[perpetrators] may not mean to hurt them, but [they]’re just kind of following part of the [societal] model” (105). Another participant discussed her criminal defense work with men charged with domestic battery — “I see . . . just very limited self-reflective abilities and sort of a lack of self-understanding as to what’s going on and that they’re sort of driven by this” (103). A third individual emphasized lack of insight as potentially limiting agency, “I’m sure they don’t understand it . . . they just feel it’s some sort of solution to their problem or some sort of action that they just can’t help themselves from doing” (209).

As with previous views, the view of perpetrator responsibility taken by citizens naturally has corresponding implications for corrective actions that are taken (or not). Where batterers are seen as having no control, it makes little sense to hold them accountable, let alone expect individual change.

### **“Is this really a good thing to do?”: Questioning the general rightness of intervening.**

Laying aside the questions of whether abuse is occurring, a second meta-theme of citizen views concerns the moral/ethical appropriateness of intervening in actual violence. This theme includes three distinct views evident in the interviews: (5) Emphasizing the potential of an intact family; (6) Framing abuse as a private matter; and (7) Questioning the universality of the cause.

**5. “Isn’t keeping the family together still ideal?”: Emphasizing the potential of an intact family.** The woman cited earlier as describing her sister’s abuse, noted “the marriage appeared worth . . . keeping intact” and referred to an exchange where she told her sister, “oh Kari, you gotta take care of your marriage first” (206).

The sacredness of marriage and family is a well-known part of traditional faith across many religions. While such an emphasis undoubtedly inspires positive impulses to support and encourage families through difficult times, taken to the extreme it may also arguably contribute to the reverse in some cases— even to the point of “enabling” abuse to continue. In such circumstances, an extreme commitment to the ideal of marriage and family may lead friends and family to see *any effort* to intervene in abusive situations as *negative*, since it appears to “threaten” the marriage. Speaking of an event early in her sister’s abusive 30-year marriage, the same woman continued:

P: Well, she did decide, she took . . . a business trip. . . . And, she was with a family who was very loving and kind and reached out to her and she came back just glowing from that experience and she wanted to divorce her husband. And his family and my family . . . said “look this marriage is worth preserving” . . .

I: And that dissuaded her?

P: Mmm hmm it did. It did. (206)

Similar to convictions about (a) the *goodness of one's community* and (b) the *goodness of particular individuals* (and their capacity to change), an overwrought conviction regarding and (c) the *goodness of the family* may come to have detrimental consequences when held rigidly and without question. When taken out of context, this belief in the family, embraced by many as a foundational building-block for an enduring society, may literally become a building-block for long-years of violence in a family. Even after looking back and acknowledging the seriousness of the abusive man's problem, this participant commented:

There should be a solution *for that* because marriages are worth preserving. And a fractured family is *never* good and even now today I think we can all look at the situation and say "we would rather see them *married* and have *him* overcome his problem." (206)

Reflecting the same impulse, other participants spoke of fear that a "successful intervention" in domestic violence would ultimately undermine families. Two pastors, for instance, both of whom emphasized the importance of stopping domestic violence, shared similar concerns with likely post-intervention outcomes. One of them said:

It just doesn't seem that *restoration is accomplished* through our current counseling methods or court systems. It just seems to aggravate it sometimes . . . to worsen it. . . . It always seems to end in *separation*, rather than a restoration – it seems to end in a *breaking up the family*; it is rare to ever see the community really help people through it and . . . *get back together as a family*. I just — I seldom see that happen. (202)

As reflected here, formal efforts to provide accountability for domestic violence may be viewed as potentially *aggravating* conditions over the long-term. As with other attitudes, the prevalence of this one among citizens may have important implications for both whether women living in such contexts feel pursuing external assistance is acceptable and whether the community offers help at all. Ultimately, victims may face the dangerous irony of subtly being discouraged to seek "outside" assistance while also not being assisted within their own communities.

Fortunately, as noted previously, there appears to be a growing general awareness, within both progressive and conservative communities, that keeping a family together does not outweigh the safety of victims. Indeed, it is worth noting that all interview participants espousing a religious faith, regardless of political persuasion, also emphasized the need to preserve the option of separation. One conservative Christian, for instance, commented:

P: Another thing that is taught in our church community is that if you're in a situation like that and your spouse is being abusive and . . . you're not seeing any positive change, then you should leave the situation — leave that spouse and get help from your family or from others in the church community.

I: Leave the spouse? Would that be separation? Like a divorce or-

P: Yeah. I mean, certainly it depends on the situation . . . I don't know if "zero tolerance" would be the right catch phrase, but that's my perspective on it. That you just shouldn't let it happen, you know . . . We also believe that people can change — they can overcome and they can "repent" is the terminology. But the victims are first priority; protection of the victim is our first priority. And so, yeah, we would try to take them out of the situation first, and not let the abuse continue. (101)

While it is heartening to see a priority placed on the victim of violence, issues related to staying or leaving remain quite complex. This kind of a willingness to support a woman's right to leave, for instance, must also be understood in light of a woman's right to stay if that is her choice. It is unclear whether the formal system's response is well-positioned to support women who choose to stay (even if they choose to leave at a later date). In addition, the role of the community (religious or otherwise) in supporting women if they choose to remain in their abusive relationships has not yet been fully articulated.

#### **6. "It's none of my business, really": Framing abuse as a private matter.**

Closely related to concerns about family structure being challenged is the familiar refrain that domestic violence is a private, family matter and that as such, it is actually *not right* to "get involved." Referring to an abusive situation in her extended family, one woman was asked, "How did the community respond to the perpetrator?" She answered, "I don't think the community did *anything*. . . . *I don't*, I'm *not aware* that any . . . anyone even *said anything* or . . . *I don't know*." She went on to relate her own concerns about the broader trend:

For the most part, you know, people *don't want to get involved* . . . it's *none of their business*. . . . It is not, you know, that's not something that we *do anymore*. We . . . don't speak up against people who *mistreat* other people. We don't speak up about that very much anymore. . . . It's just, you know . . . you think . . . I don't want to stick my *nose* in there. (203)

This comment echoes the sentiment of focus group participants in another study who reported concerns of getting involved "if it's a couples' problem. . . . if the family or neighbors get involved, you can already hear them saying, 'It's none of your business,' and that's where the problems begin" (Klevens et al., 2007, p. 152). The researchers in this study remarked, "basically, the feeling elicited . . . was a common saying, 'Nobody should come between a man and his wife'" (p. 152). In another sample, Yick (2000) documented a conflicting emphasis that domestic violence was a crime, but also that "family matters such as wife abuse should be kept private" (p. 29). The same general sentiment is evidenced in various international studies (e.g., Chan et al., 2008; Haj-Yahia, 2002).

In addition to influencing the community response, this attitude has distinct implications for whether a victim feels open to sharing problems with others. As one man recounted:



When . . . I got married my mother-in-law told my wife . . . “Well you married him now so if you have any problems you go to him. Don’t come tell me about them.” Because that would be in an essence trying to build a wedge and trying to get her family on her side. (100)

This kind of an insistence on privacy may be related, in some cases, to a belief that domestic violence largely reflects individual deficiency within a family. As one participant reflected, “as far as why [domestic violence] happens? I have no idea . . . people are screwed up. That’s what I think” (109). When viewed in this way, abuse may naturally come to be seen as “that family’s problem” a private matter to be solved and something individuals just need to “deal with.” Furthermore, as elaborated in the discussion section below, an emphasis on the problem *being in the person* and *in the family* leaves little room for conceptualizing the community’s role in allowing and perhaps even facilitating violence. Friends and family may subsequently feel justified in denying responsibility for addressing the violence, in turn, contributing to the very isolation of victims that perpetrators often seek to maintain.

**7. “Isn’t this kind of a ‘liberal’ issue?”: Questioning the universality of the cause.** As evident above, while interpretive barriers to accountability exist across diverse citizens, there are several perhaps unique to conservative communities. Beyond specific emphases on family preservation and individual responsibility, we have observed conservative citizens sometimes assume that addressing domestic violence is part of a “liberal agenda.” This concern is reflected below in comments from two conservative women about domestic violence shelters:

I: “Do you know about the local women’s shelter?”:

P: I don’t think I’ve heard...any...oh wait a minute . . . [*recognizing its name*]. Well, it’s umm...it’s a *negative thing*, should I comment on it?

I: That’s fine

P: Well, and I don’t even know if it’s true. It’s just what I’ve *heard*. It was . . . *mentioned to me*, that at [the shelter] . . . umm . . . women *are counseled* to have abortions; if they find out . . . while they are residing there that they are pregnant . . . they are counseled to have abortions . . . which I would disagree with. (203)

A lot of the people who gravitate to be helpers at the shelters — the non-professionals, primarily – but a few of the professionals — are people who have other agendas. An awful lot of them are feminists. (204)

Rather than accept the broader fight against family violence as a universal battle or a human cause, this issue has unfortunately become politicized sometimes and seen with suspicion as a “liberal cause” (Fontes, 1998; Maguire, 1999); motives presumed to underlie such efforts may range from breaking up families to challenging parental authority and even attacking fathers. In this way, explicit and direct efforts to fight violence can be inadvertently minimized within some conservative communities. Although broader religious ministries and family enrichment efforts are promoted by conservative communities as a way to reduce violence indirectly, it is unfortunate that

views such as the one described above might sabotage additional efforts and collaboration on this issue.

**“Am I really the one to do this?”: Questioning the personal effectiveness of intervening.**

Even individuals who otherwise accept the importance of intervening in domestic violence generally may have specific practical concerns about *their own involvement*. Such concern may ensue from various worries regarding the effectiveness of one’s personal efforts, including (8) Assuming accountability requires friendship; (9) Fearing anger or aggravation of the situation and (10) Feeling unsure about how exactly to intervene. In each case, beliefs may become barriers to specific action even for citizens who otherwise possess a conviction regarding the importance of intervention generally.

**8. “I don’t have a good enough relationship with him”: Assuming accountability requires friendship.** Some, for instance, emphasized lack of close relationships as a potential limiting factor in the extent of their own willingness to intervene:

If I lived in an apartment . . . and I heard that there was abuse going on across the street or next door, I mean, you know, I probably personally wouldn’t get involved. I mean it might . . . depend on the situation; certainly, I would get involved to the extent of calling the police or something like that – um, yeah, I mean, I don’t know. (104)

In speaking of intervening with emotional abuse, one man said:

Well, it really depends on the situation and it also depends on the level of rapport that you have with the person. For instance . . . if I have a fairly good rapport with them, well you say, “that’s mean — I don’t like that. I don’t even like being around that.” . . . It depends on the rapport. But if it’s someone I don’t know very well . . . I’m probably either not going to know what to say or I’m just gonna be more lenient. (100)

He went on to relate a memory of a friend of the family approaching his own abusive father and saying, “You have to love your wife and not say anything bad about [your family].” The participant went on to describe:

And so he would tell my dad . . . “that’s not, that’s not appropriate.” And of course, that’s because they had the type of rapport where he could say that. So it really depends on the situation and the amount of good you could do versus the amount of damage. (100)

From this standpoint, a certain level of intimacy is required to intervene, with the absence of a close relationship seemingly precluding even having a conversation with someone. In other words, if not based on a prerequisite friendly relationship with the abusive

individual, this perspective might support a blanket assumption that intervention is unwise. More positively, this view may also reflect the real need to proceed cautiously and think carefully about how intervening will affect the safety and well-being of the survivor. That is, there are crucial considerations of how to go about intervention, including ways to ensure the safety of victims. While beyond the scope of this paper, such details are clearly meaningful to effective citizen intervention and accountability.

**9. “I don’t want to ruin our relationship”:** Fearing anger or aggravation. For others, concerns about “doing damage” stems not from a *lack of a relationship* – but from *the presence* of what appears to be a positive connection already. One participant spoke of seeking ways of confronting the abuser without hurting their relationship. He suggested, “Try to . . . refer to [abuse] in a round-about way; instead of coming out and saying, ‘Ya know . . . are you abusing so and so?’ Um, and see if, you know, and sort of maybe try to become their ally in a way and . . . not antagonize them” (104). More broadly, this impulse may be reflected in a fear to offend:

I’ve noticed this . . . over past twenty years or so, I’ve noticed that people don’t want to get involved in *a lot* of different things because we don’t want to offend people, I mean, even if somebody is *hurting* somebody we don’t want to offend people. (203)

Similar motives may reinforce silence on the part of a victim. One neighbor commented, “I know of women who are abused but never tell their families so that they [the families] won’t get angry or hate their partner” (Klevens et al., 2007, p. 150). In fear of ruining an existing relationship, both victims and their surrounding friends and family may simply conclude that it’s easier to not do anything and attempt to “zone it out” rather than risk personal offense. Thus, while some emphasize a good relationship as prerequisite to intervening in an abuse situation personally, for others the very presence of such a “good” relationship may function as a tangible barrier to the same.

For still others, the concern goes beyond anger to the actual risk of physical harm. Speaking of his own concerns with getting involved, one man said, “I don’t want to get myself hurt in the *process*” (203). Others may naturally fear that an attempt at intervention could lead to a worsened situation for the victim, herself. While sincerely concerned for victims and wanting to get involved, these citizens may be justifiably worried at provoking even greater harm.

These are certainly more than empty fears. Kim (2005) notes that advocates have often “warned community or family members from confronting or engaging the abuser for reasons of safety including the possibility of increased endangerment to the survivor” (p. 34). Regardless of the actual degree of risk, it seems clear that in some cases such fears may effectively prompt family and friends to distance themselves further from the abuse and contribute to a veritable isolation for the family (Trotter & Allen, 2009). In a disturbing way, this dynamic mirrors the behavior of family and friends who are openly threatened by a perpetrator. Even where no warnings are verbalized, it appears that the fear of the surrounding community can all too easily allow a perpetrator to exert his control over them, as well. Thus, in subtle fashion, the lack of community response out of fear (justified or not) can once again serve as a form of collusion with abuse.

**10. “I just don’t know how I would go about it”: Feeling unsure about how exactly to intervene.** Certainly, some may be willing to act, no matter the difficulty. Others, however, although open to intervening, may face a final barrier of simply not knowing how to go about it (i.e., what to actually say or do). Speaking further of her sister’s abusive marriage, one woman acknowledged her parents’ desire to intervene, but noted, “they aren’t . . . pros at dealing with things in a verbal way. . . . it’s difficult for them to communicate in a way that would gain a correct response” (206). She then lamented:

Well . . . if I was my age and 25 years ago, I would have known things to say to my sister because I’ve lived 25 more years and have learned a lot over these years and I have grown and matured. And, I could have intervened or advised her differently. But, I didn’t know very much myself way back then. But *somebody* must have known! (206)

She concluded, “It would be nice if we had a culture where people knew . . . what to say, what to advise” (206). Another person similarly commented, “Education, I think is a huge thing . . . things like what, what the role of a *friend* is. Like if you know someone who is being abused, *what do you do with that?* [*exasperation in her voice*] That’s incredibly challenging” (210).

In the absence of such know-how, citizens’ best efforts to help either a perpetrator or a victim may have problematic consequences. In the case of supporting victims, for instance, Trotter and Allen (2009) detail how friends and family may initially offer advice freely, but convey suggestions that do not “reflect a survivor’s real needs.” As unhelpful counsel is unheeded over time, community members may become frustrated and distance themselves from a victim presumably “unwilling” to do what she needs to do. The importance of supporting citizens in their efforts to bolster victims and act as accountability agents for perpetrators is, we believe, a crucial next front in the battle against domestic violence.

## Discussion

In November, 2009, on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon launched an expanded network of leaders to mobilize the international community against domestic violence. On that occasion, he stated:

In every country, women and girls continue to be plagued by violence, causing tremendous suffering. As I launch this network, I call on [individuals] everywhere to join us — break the silence. When you witness violence against women and girls — do not sit back. Act. Advocate. Unite to change the practices and attitudes that incite, perpetrate and condone this violence. Violence against women and girls will not be eradicated until all of us...refuse to tolerate it. (UN News Service, 2009)

In a speech to the General Assembly on the next day, he recapitulated: “Our goal is clear: an end to these inexcusable crimes” and “do all it takes to end these horrific assaults once and for all.” Notably, as part of the Secretary General's call for more comprehensive and careful accountability, he entreated for more attention to the “roots of this violence,” including “changing the mindsets that perpetuate it” (Ki-moon, 2009).

As a complement to explorations of more overt, practical constraints on a broader community response, this paper joins other studies in investigating barriers on a more subtle level: interpretations of domestic violence and its appropriate response. Alongside more common attention to the mindsets and attitudes that *directly* support, rationalize and justify violence, this paper takes up a second set of mindsets that *indirectly* do the same, by distracting, immobilizing and silencing those individuals best positioned to make a difference. That is, we have explored the possibility that the presence or absence of accountability within a community is, at least in part, *constituted by distinct views or interpretations* within these same communities.

In the research literature to date, studies of community interpretations of violence have focused largely on how citizens fall into various forms of victim-blaming (Ryan, 1971). For instance, in studies across the world, researchers have documented citizens tolerating violence when a woman is accused of infidelity (Haj-Yahia, 1998a, 1998b; Heise, Ellsberg & Gottmoeller, 1999;), neglecting children (Hindin, 2003), refusing to have sex with her husband (Haj-Yahia, 1998a, 1998b; Hindin), challenging his manhood (Haj-Yahia, 1998a, 1998b, 2002), reminding him of his weaknesses (Steinmetz & Haj-Yahia, 2006), disobeying her husband (Haj-Yahia, 1998a, 1998b; 2002), going out without telling him (Hindin), arguing with her husband (Hindin), squandering money (Haj-Yahia, 2002), causing problems with arranging a marriage for their children (Steinmetz & Haj-Yahia) and not respecting her husband's parents or siblings (Haj-Yahia, 2002).

While victim-blaming is a crucial interpretive pattern that deserves continuing and vigorous challenge, our focus here has been to explore even more broadly, the larger genre or “universe” of possible interpretations that could have similar negative constraints on citizen action. From our small sample, we have identified ten distinct views. Admittedly, the sample out of which we have identified this range is small and the illustrative quotations limited. Both on the level of detail and larger prevalence of views, this study leaves many questions unanswered.

Nonetheless, the findings as a whole give some pause. Individually or taken together, these community perceptions are proposed to cultivate and feed into a milieu of more likely inaction, in at least three ways: (a) a denial of the abuse itself (*This can't be happening*), (b) a denial of the need to intervene (*Is this really a good thing to do?*) or (c) a denial that *they* should be the one doing the intervening (*Am I really the one to do this?*).

### **Consciousness and Intention: The Hidden Implications of Citizen Beliefs**

At this point, it is important to clarify one important point. In the above analysis, we detail a series of views that arguably play a role in citizen action or inaction in the face of violence. If this is the case, we do not believe the connection is largely or entirely conscious to citizens themselves. That is, typically these views are not *actively*,

*consciously, or intentionally* leading to a minimization or denial of abuse among citizens. Since we believe majorities of individuals are genuinely opposed in principle to violence, our contention is that a series of implicit views or beliefs may inadvertently dilute or sabotage, in practice, their capacity or desire to intervene in a domestic violence situation. Such beliefs may therefore often be linked *subtly or unconsciously* to personal inaction against violence, within an individual (or group) who otherwise condemns violence. Among other things, we propose this as a potential explanation for the discrepancy between a seeming broad, public sentiment against violence and the manifest lack of corresponding wide-spread engagement to stop it.

Rather than overt, explicit conflict between competing goals, then, a more subtle and complex tension between implicit beliefs and explicit commitments is at issue: one pitting stated commitments against violence with even subconscious beliefs and views. To illustrate, individual appreciation of a tranquil, joyful family life, while valuable in its own right, may subtly distract and obscure one's view of the full extent of societal violence (see again, view #1). One's faith in the goodness of people generally and in family institution may likewise serve to justify inaction when a family or person has become abusive (see views # 4 & 5). Likewise, we identify citizen desire to "not make things worse" (view #10) as a key view that may, in fact, *make things much worse* by justifying inaction (creating an insidious paradox where, depending on the specific needs of the victim, both action and inaction are potentially problematic outcomes). Finally, one's desire to *not disrupt* a seemingly positive relationship (with the batterer) (see view #9) may ultimately function to *perpetuate* an even more destructive relationship.

In all these ways, certain beliefs may lead one to simultaneously condemn violence while effectively diluting, distracting or confounding citizens from doing anything about it. Taken as a whole, we propose that these assumptions may play a significant role in effectively *immobilizing* large numbers of citizens in the fight against violence. Like a veil that cultivates complacency, their blinding effects may remain largely unseen to communities. As perpetrators and victims alike are "left alone," abuse may subsequently be permitted to continue unchecked for years tragically upheld in large part by the inaction of the community itself. In light of this, our aim has been to surface and illuminate the nature of this invisible interpretive "veil" and investigate the ways it may underwrite the extensive and alarming inaction of citizens on this issue.

While many friends and family would no doubt be shocked to think they were subtly contributing to abuse by their inaction, the fact remains that on multiple levels, citizen beliefs reviewed above mirror the typical perpetrator narrative of abuse, that is, "it's her fault; I'm not as bad as she says; this a private family matter; it's none of your business," etc. As Dragiewicz (2006) concludes in relation to batterer narratives:

Much of the [public] rhetoric . . . emulates abuser's statements about why their violence is not their fault, or is not really violence. . . . mimic[ing] the minimization, justification, denial and excuses that batterers use to avoid accountability for their violence. (p. 1)

In all these ways, the surrounding community may unwittingly play a *central and primary role* in allowing the abuse to continue aided and abetted by the beliefs explored above. Where awareness of some kind of a problem emerges, surrounding friends and

families are inclined to conclude it is the “victim’s problem” or the “family’s issue.” Where a sense of urgency for action emerges, surrounding friends and families may be inclined to decide that *someone else* needs to intervene.

**Deliberation and Mobilization: The Hopeful Implications of Citizen Awareness**

By surfacing citizen views about domestic violence more openly, we hope this kind of study may contribute to a more thoughtful community deliberation about the issue (Schwandt, 1996). As surprising as this mass inaction about domestic violence among citizens continues to be, to the extent they have opportunity to critically examine the actual consequences of their own beliefs for victims, we believe that many citizens may also be *surprisingly* willing to adjust and “upgrade” these beliefs. That is, if given the opportunity to learn and gain new awareness, we hold that communities can still rise to the occasion. Such a shift in community practice, however, necessarily follows a shift in citizen views and beliefs.

Of course, raising attention to the kinds of beliefs reviewed above is not, alone, sufficient to facilitate critical thought. As Slife and Williams (1995) emphasize, the provision of viable, legitimate alternative views is critical in cultivating an atmosphere of true critical exploration. Toward this end, we close this paper briefly presenting ten alternative interpretations of citizens’ own response to domestic violence (see Table 2).

Table 2. *Alternative interpretations of a community response to domestic violence*

The purpose of this table is to provide a tangible illustration of contrasting views to those identified above. For each citizen belief identified above, we have listed the alternative view. That these views are not as prevalent across interviews underscores, we believe, the dominance of the interpretations reviewed in this paper.

Views identified as potentially mitigating against citizen accountability for domestic violence (see paper body)	Viable alternative views proposed as potentially bolstering citizen accountability for domestic violence
1. “ <i>I just can’t imagine</i> ”: Difficulty conceiving of violence due to past well-being.	<p>“<i>I can imagine</i>”: Seeing beyond one’s own happiness to the true scope of abuse.</p> <p>Rather than being incredulous at the extent and reality of violence, acknowledging and attending to the actual scope of abuse within families.</p>
2. “ <i>She must be exaggerating her situation</i> ”: Not believing the victim.	<p>“<i>If she is making these claims, there is something going on that I need to take seriously</i>”: Believing the victim.</p> <p>Rather than minimizing or questioning claims against an individual with whom one has a friendship or positive perception, hearing and taking seriously (always) the possibility that abuse is actually occurring.</p>
3. “ <i>A little conflict is not unusual, of course</i> ”: Normalizing violence.	<p>“<i>No amount of violence is acceptable, of course</i>”: Ab-normalizing violence.</p> <p>Rather than asserting and insisting on a <i>place</i> for a certain amount of harsh conflict, insisting emphatically that <i>no amount</i> of violence can be tolerated within any given family or community—“Zero tolerance.”</p>

<p>4. “<i>He’s not always like that</i>”: Difficulty conceiving of violence due to personal optimism.</p>	<p>“<i>He’s may not always be like that . . . but he’s like that some of the time and that is not okay</i>”: Seeing beyond personal optimism to the true intensity of abuse.</p> <p>Rather than only emphasizing the hidden goodness and potential of an individual perpetrator, emphasizing that for whatever reason that same individual has acted in destruction of another human being’s good potential—and until the latter reality (for the victim) changes, the former potential (of the batterer) matters little.</p>
<p>5. “<i>Isn’t keeping the family together still ideal?</i>”: Believing in the potential of an intact family.</p>	<p>“<i>In an abuse situation, keeping the family together may not be ideal</i>”: Believing the potential and power of an intact family evaporates in the presence of abuse.</p> <p>Rather than highlighting and acting in reference to the <i>potential goodness</i> of an intact family where abuse is occurring, acknowledging and acting in reference to the <i>actual anguish and destruction</i> implicit in an intact family where abuse is occurring.</p>
<p>6. “<i>It’s none of my business, really</i>”: Framing abuse as a private matter.</p>	<p>“<i>It is my business, actually</i>”: Framing abuse as a collective issue.</p> <p>Rather than framing abuse as a private matter centering exclusively on family responsibility, acknowledging any instance of violence as a <i>community issue</i> with <i>citizen responsibility</i> to address.</p>
<p>7. “<i>Isn’t this kind of a liberal issue?</i>” Questioning the universality of the cause</p>	<p>“<i>Isn’t this kind of a human issue?</i>”: Asserting the universality of the cause.</p> <p>Rather than presuming that abuse is a “liberal issue,” considering it as a <i>human issue . . . period</i>.</p>
<p>8. “<i>I don’t have a good enough relationship with him</i>”: Assuming accountability requires friendship</p>	<p>“<i>I don’t have a good relationship with him, but that’s not necessary to intervene</i>”: Understanding that accountability does not require friendship.</p> <p>Rather than presuming that one must have a strong personal relationship with a batterer in order to step in, understanding that a) the likelihood of an authentically healthy relationship with a batterer is nil and what’s more b) effective intervention does not require an active friendship anyway.</p>
<p>9. “<i>I don’t want to ruin our relationship or make things worse</i>”: Fearing anger or aggravation.</p>	<p>“<i>I don’t want to ruin our relationship or make things worse for the victim, but doing nothing risks even more</i>”: Not allowing fear of anger, offense or aggravation to stifle accountability.</p> <p>Rather than focusing personal worry on one’s own relationship with the batterer and personal comfort, consider prioritizing one’s relationship with the victim and their own level of comfort (acknowledging, of course, that intervening <i>could potentially</i> make things worse and consequently looking for the best ways to enhance safety using appropriate community resources—see #10 below).</p>
<p>10. “<i>I just don’t know how I would go about it</i>”: Feeling unsure about how exactly to intervene</p>	<p>“<i>I don’t know how I would go about it, but I’m going to find out!</i>”: Community learned helpfulness.</p> <p>Rather than seeing one’s lack of knowledge as a reason to not intervene in a domestic violence situation, making that a reason to go and learn the best way of doing so.</p>

Surfacing the contrast between views creates an opportunity to move beyond paralyzing dualisms reflected in this study, such as, “if we do something to intervene with abuse, we are encouraging the break-up of the family” or “people who are abusive are not all bad, so it is better to leave well enough alone.” The alternative views presented here invite us to consider the complexities of the issue of domestic violence as they are engaged by the community. Intervening in an instance of abuse, for instance, need not be equated with breaking up the family or confirming that the abuser is unworthy of care or



support. At the same time, it is critical that tangible guidance and support be provided to aid community members in taking action. While we may *call* for community accountability, what this means in practice for the average citizen, family member, friend, etc. is still under-articulated. This was reflected in study participants' comments at not being sure what to do and how to act without making things worse (see views #9 & 10). A follow-up study will be gathering documented reports of *actual community accountability*—examining themes and patterns in the literal practice of citizens holding abusers accountable.

While there remain more questions than answers regarding what would facilitate a broad focus on community accountability, a good place to start is the centralization of women's wants and needs: seeing them as experts on their own lives (Allen et al., 2004). Indeed, in terms of general practice, it is worth noting that providing survivor-centered, survivor-informed support may actively disrupt the isolation and entrapment that often characterizes abusive relationships (Goodman & Epstein, 2007). In many cases, this survivor-centered approach involves providing support while women are still with abusive partners and not making the provision of such support contingent on women leaving abusive partners. By prioritizing the wants and needs of victims, both citizens and professionals will more effectively provide an atmosphere of accountability and safety explored above.

More broadly, these calls for expanded attention to and awareness of community beliefs regarding violence (and their implications) reflect and streamline with other efforts to fight domestic on a larger "public health" scale. Similar to the effective "truth" campaign to fight tobacco, several have called recently for large-scale initiatives to change the way the public thinks about domestic violence *as a way* to prevent and combat this same violence (Ahmad et al., 2004; Campbell & Manganello 2006; Chan et al., 2008; Klein, Campbell, Soler, & Ghez, 1997). In addition to bolstering the response to ongoing violence, surrounding family and other community members may thus become a larger and more effective part of campaigns to prevent violence (Klevens et al., 2007). An ensuing "greater public sense of responsibility and accountability" would likely signify "greater public involvement" in addressing this violence (Gracia & Herrero, 2006). Beyond direct forms of intervention with those affected, a renewed focus on community accountability would require more conversation about the broad range of actions community members might take. The community-at-large, for instance, could play a critical role in addressing the cultural norms and practices that support violence against women and misogyny in its various forms. The current paper begins to amplify the kinds of issues that need to be addressed as we call the community to action in response to domestic violence.

To be clear, a focus on community helping is not in competition with formal systems interventions. An effective, coordinated systems response may indeed be a vital component of fostering women's safety and encouraging batterer accountability. Even when women do not want to separate from their abusers, police are still called in ongoing incidents of violence and remain a contribution to survivor safety (Klein, 2008). Yet absent a broad community infrastructure of support that actively fosters survivor safety and batterer accountability, a criminal justice response will likely remain effective in only ameliorating, rather than eradicating domestic violence.

To the degree that communities are supported in embracing such alternative views, their own response to domestic violence may come to look much different. Rather than a “victim’s problem” or “someone else’s responsibility,” surrounding friends and family may come to see violence as *their problem* and *their responsibility*. Supported by a broader collective deliberation on the topic, we anticipate that citizens may thus be mobilized to act as powerful accountability agents in their own communities. As the “sleeping giant” of citizen action arises, batterers may increasingly find “zero-tolerance” reflected across their community, among their own friends and family, rather than only in those engaged in the formal response to the issue (e.g., law enforcement, advocates). Indirectly, this may also be a particularly powerful mode of intervention given evidence that support for violence against women within one’s social network is related to one’s own perpetration of violence (e.g., Raghavan, Rajah, Gentile, Collado, & Kavanagh, 2009). In the context of a broad citizen movement, batterers might consequently come to understand that domestic violence will not be tolerated within the confines of their own communities. Ultimately, we propose that it is within these tight spheres of influence (i.e., families, clubs, civic organizations, faith-based settings, work settings) that we best stand to challenge and change the community norms that support the perpetuation of domestic violence.

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### Author Note

Jacob Z. Hess, Ph.D. is Research Director at Utah Youth Village, a non-profit for abused children in Utah. His research examines competing narratives and their implications for practice in two areas: severe emotional problems (depression, eating disorders, ADHD) and socio-political issues (domestic violence, issues dividing liberal/conservative communities). Associated with this, he is currently involved in tracking long-term outcomes for a variety of youth psychological interventions, creating internet-based recovery courses and working to promote intergroup dialogue between liberal and conservative communities in the U.S. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed to: Dr. Jacob Z. Hess at E-mail: [jzhess@gmail.com](mailto:jzhess@gmail.com)

Nicole E. Allen, Ph.D. is Associate Professor of Community Psychology at the University of Illinois Urbana Champaign. Her research examines community collaboration and systems change processes with a focus on the community response to intimate partner violence. To engage these community phenomenon at multiple levels of analysis, Dr. Allen consistently employs mixed method designs including quantitative and qualitative approaches and has contributed to the scholarly literature via numerous papers and presentations. She is committed to bridging scholarship and action and building community capacity to respond to complex social issues by working closely with community partners in her research and action. In addition, she directs a survivor-centered advocacy program for women and girls. Her e-mail is [allenne@illinois.edu](mailto:allenne@illinois.edu)

Nathan R. Todd, Ph.D. is Assistant Professor of Community Psychology at DePaul University in Chicago Illinois. His research examines contextual factors that influence individual and group engagement with social justice. He focuses on how religious settings and Whiteness influence engagement in social justice with specific attention to multiple levels of analysis. His e-mail is [ntodd@depaul.edu](mailto:ntodd@depaul.edu)

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