



Critical Teaching Column

“Why doesn’t she just leave?” Tackling the most common student question about intimate partner violence victimization in the classroom

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Much has been written about critical pedagogical approaches as it relates to feminist content and the feminist classroom (Gore, 2003; Mayer & Tetreault, 2001; Shrewsbury, 1987). Yet, the enduring resistance of students to academic research that illustrates the embedded nature of patriarchy, in my experience, is particularly hardened in courses that tackle subjects of violence against women. Here, due to the dominance of heteronormative patriarchy within the broader society, students are often confronted with academic knowledge that challenges their everyday life-experiences and world view.

Included in many of my courses is the topic of intimate partner violence, a crime that impacts more than ten million people annually (Breiding, et al., 2014) and impacts women at a higher victimization rate than men (Garcia & MacManimon, 2011). Interestingly, and probably not surprising to those who also tackle this subject, there is one question that is guaranteed to be asked: “Why doesn’t she just leave?” While recognizing that the question itself is inherently problematic as it situates blame and responsibility with the victim and also reinforces larger structures of patriarchal privilege, having a principled response is not practical when the threat of violence still exists behind closed doors.

As many of you are aware, a victim’s decision to stay is complex and can be readily explained by examining the structural, institutional, cultural, religious, and personal barriers they face in making such a decision (i.e. lack of education, job skills, fear, economic dependence, children in common with their abuser, fear, love, PTSD etc.) (Garcia & McManimon, 2011). However, lecturing or simply telling students about the complexities of this decision often elicits a surface level understanding of these barriers, and sometimes evokes a subtle resistance to accepting that the decision could have terrible ramifications for both the victim and her children (many students are adamant that if they were in a similar situation they would “just leave”). As a result, I have developed an interactive exercise that coupled with the aforementioned lectures and discussion in class, allows the student to empathize and comprehend the difficulties associated with making the decision to leave an intimate partner who is abusive. It is not my suggestion that this exercise is prescriptive in tackling this question, rather, it is an approach that has generated organic pedagogical instances where students have transformative learning moments that then enable them to glean a deeper appreciation of the challenges battered women face.

The Exercise

I begin by telling the class that we are doing an interactive exercise that requires them to share information with their peers. I caution them that during the course of the exercise they will be asked a series of questions. They are under no obligation to include any personal information that they are not comfortable sharing. By this point in the semester I am usually aware of the students that may have triggers because of past-abuse and take a moment (privately) before class to explain the nature of the exercise so they may participate as much or as little as they want, offering an alternative assignment if they wish to leave. I then handout a questionnaire that contains the following questions:

1. Do you have a pet? If so, what type of animal is it, and what is its name?
2. How long have you been in school? If so how long do you have to graduate? Do you have career aspirations that are dependent on your degree?
3. Do you have children? If so, how many do you have and are you their primary caregiver?
4. Do you own your own home, or rent your own apartment? If so how long have you lived there?
5. Do you have a job? If so, is it part time, full time, and is it your primary source of income?
6. Do you have a cell phone, blackberry, or similar device? How often would you say you use it?
7. What is your favorite possession? Is it something you have had since childhood? Something a relative gave to you? What is it, and why is it important to you?
8. Do you have a car, or have access to a car you drive regularly?
9. Do you have photographs of your family and friends that are important to you?
10. Do you have a best friend? If so, how long have you known them and what is their name?
11. Are you close with your family? Do you see them regularly or talk to them on the phone frequently?
12. Do you have a hobby? Something you do regularly, like going to the gym, playing sports, etc? Do you belong to a club? If so, what is it?
13. What is your favorite thing to do? Do you have a favorite restaurant or bar you like to frequent? If so, what are these things?

After giving the students 15 minutes to complete the questionnaire, I then tell them to imagine themselves in the following situation.

You have been in a relationship with your significant other for the last two years. When you met this person they were charming, charismatic, caring and exciting to be with. Shortly after moving in with them, you found out that they had a temper, started calling you names, and began to be physically abusive. After they have hurt you they often apologize and promise not to do it again. However, despite these assurances the physical violence has increased both in prevalence and intensity. On a number of occasions you have felt very scared of your partner.

You wake up one morning and your partner is in a very bad mood, they start yelling at you, calling you names, and then punch the wall near your head. As you try to leave, your partner grabs a gun and holds it to your head and says “if I see you again, I am going to kill you.” Your partner waves the gun one more time and leaves the home. You believe the threat your partner made against your life, and leaving is your only option as you are certain they will kill you. You call the local domestic violence shelter who offer you a space, but there are a number of parameters and rules in place that you have to agree to in order to be eligible for a bed.

After relaying the scenario, I then ask the class to return to their surveys. Beginning with the first question, I ask all of the students who have a pet to raise their hands. I then ask for volunteers to tell the class about their pets. Many students go into considerable detail describing them, sharing their names, how long they have had them and some of the amusing things their pets do. I then tell the students that the shelter has a “no pets” policy, so they would have to leave their pets behind with the abuser. There is usually considerable protest from the students, so we then discuss why this decision evokes such a reaction, and how hard such a decision is especially if the abusive person has previously harmed their pet/s, or has threatened to hurt them in some way. I then ask the students how this would impact their decision to leave their abusive partner.

Moving on to the next question, I then ask the students when they are due to graduate, what their career aspirations are, and how long they have been in school. This often leads to conversations about time, resources and energy spent in pursuing a specific career. I then point out to the students that if they were to leave their partner, he/she would cut them off financially which would prevent them from continuing their education. Even if they were still able to attend, I inform them that the shelter staff are insistent that they take a semester away from classes as the abuser knows where they attend school and could show up there at any time. This poses a significant threat to their safety. Again, I ask the students whether and how this may impact their decision to leave their abusive partner.

The following question does not apply to all students, but for those who have children, I ask them to consider that if they leave their abuser, they would also have to make arrangements to take their children with them. For students who have older children, I point out that many shelters have strict policies about admitting teenage boys over the age of 15 years. I also point out that they would have to collect the children from their school or daycare before entering shelter and explain to their children that they have to leave behind all their toys, possessions and their home. In addition, it is a possibility that the abuser may have found out that they are planning to leave and has already collected the children from school. I inform the class that as there is no current custody or protective order in place, he has a legal right to do this. I then ask whether this would impact their decision to leave.

I continue down the list of questions with scenarios that make the students think about sacrificing certain possessions, adjusting familial relationships for safety reasons, and giving up many things that are important to their lives. For example, when students talk about their current jobs, I tell them that the abuser keeps showing up at their work threatening their boss and co-workers. Even though there are provisions that are supposed to protect them under the Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act, because of the abuser’s behavior their employer decides to let them

go. I also argue that during the course of their relationship with their abuser, he/she has gained complete control over their finances, only allotting them an allowance for specific tasks (i.e. grocery shopping). This means that their cellphone, vehicle and home are in the abusers name and when they leave for the shelter he shuts off the phone, repossesses the car (or worse reports it stolen), and prevents them from re-entering the home. In addition, I argue that the abuser knows what their favorite possession is and has threatened to destroy it if they leave. I often add in examples of real-life situations that women were confronted with when I worked as a victim advocate helping victims of gender-based violence. These examples include abusers destroying photographs of family members who are no longer alive, killing pets, and having the victim arrested for stealing a vehicle.

As we work through the questions, students become more and more conflicted in their choice between important things in their lives versus remaining safe and free from violence. The reality of making the decision to leave an abusive partner becomes more personal and has a greater meaning when they are forced to examine what they would have to give-up if they were in a similar situation. I end the discussion by asking the students to consider that they may have to give up multiple things they have listed on their questionnaires due to shelter rules, threats to safety, and because of the control the abuser has gained over their lives. Again, I ask how many students would “just leave” and very often, more students elect to stay and “risk it” than when we first started the exercise. This then provides the foundation for further discussion on the societal and structural response to intimate partner violence, and what resources victims need to leave an abusive situation.

References

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