

**“Sometimes we take it too far”:**

**Resistant and Racialized Joking in a Batterer Intervention Program**

ABSTRACT

While much but not all recent research on batterer intervention programs suggest they are ineffective at stopping violence against women and inadequately serve men of color, little is known about what takes place inside them. Based on three years of fieldwork in one ineffective program, I examine how participants and social workers created a resistant and racialized joking culture. I show how this culture undermined defining the situation as serious, controlled participants' shame and resentment, challenged the programs' profeminist philosophy, bonded participants in opposition to the staff, enabled participants to minimize responsibility and avoid talking about their feelings, and produced a racial status hierarchy. I also show how participants and facilitators sometimes challenged but jointly protected the joking culture. This study shows how ethnographic research can uncover the processes through which attempted solutions to social problems may unintentionally harm the people such efforts aim to help.

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*I mean, it's all right to joke because, you know, you can be too serious. It's all right to have a little laughter here and there. But, I mean, maybe, sometimes we take it a little too far.*

– A White participant in a batterer's intervention program

In his recent *SSSP* presidential address, Gary Alan Fine (2006) advocates investigating how attempted solutions to social problems can have unintended and problematic consequences. In his historical analysis of the U.S. government's response to political subversion over eighty-six years, he argues that policies intended to solve problems often “have a way of boomeranging, harming those who smugly thought that they would be protected” (Fine 2006:8). In contrast to Fine's historical approach, I take an ethnographic look into the implementation of one policy intended to solve a social problem. More specifically, I show how participants and staff in a batterer intervention program (BIP) created a small group culture or “ideoculture” (Fine 1987) that contributed to harming those whom such programs aim to protect.

Over the past twenty-five years, judges have increasingly required men convicted of assaulting women to participate in BIPs. The stated goal of BIPs is to stop men's violence, but victim advocates often charge that they do more harm than good. Much but not all contemporary research shows that men's participation in BIPs does not significantly affect their use of violence and that men of color have an especially difficult time in the programs (more on this below). While evaluation researchers continue to debate and tweak statistical procedures (see Jones et al. 2004), they neglect looking to see how what happens in BIPs shapes their effectiveness.

Based on three years of fieldwork in an ineffective BIP, I show how participants created a “joking culture” (Fine and de Soucey 2005) that resisted program aims and produced a racial status hierarchy. My analyses show how participants used joking to subvert seriousness, oppose the profeminist philosophy, and resist facilitators’ therapeutic guidance. While the joking bonded men as an oppositional team, I also show how White men took the lead in joking, and that it often targeted minority participants yet affirmed and protected White men. Participants and staff occasionally challenged but ultimately preserved the joking culture.

### **BATTERER INTERVENTION PROGRAMS**

During the 1970s feminists increasingly focused on providing resources and services to battered women and holding batterers accountable (Schechter 1982). Many shelter workers became frustrated that some men repeatedly battered the same women or engaged in serial battering, and they believed abusive men needed some serious attention (National Institutes of Justice 2003). Some activists and their profeminist male partners worked together to create the first BIPs (Adams and McCormick 1982). Although a majority of state governments have recently created standards for BIPs, state governments do not closely regulate them (Arias et al. 2002). Courts usually require men—and increasingly women—convicted of domestic violence-related crimes to pay for and participate in BIPs as a condition of probation.

In many cities today there are strained relationships between the staff of BIPs and shelter workers, who often believe BIPs are ineffective. Victim advocates often complain that BIPs consume resources that should be used for victims and focus “more on helping men feel better about themselves than on getting them to acknowledge and come to terms with the suffering they have caused” (Mankowski, Haaken, and Silvergleid 2002:179). Community activists also fear

that BIPs give women unfounded hope that their batterers will stop, encouraging them to stay in dangerous relationships (Holtzworth-Munroe, Beatty, and Anglin 1995).

Early evaluation researchers often examined arrest rates of BIP completers and made dubious claims of success (see Rosenfield's [1992] review). Later, researchers began employing "quasi-experimental" designs that compared program completers to non-completers. Some of these studies found that program completion had no significant effect on reducing violence (Dobash et al. 1996; Dutton et al. 1997; Hawkins and Beauvais 1985; Newell 1994; Waldo 1988) while other studies found completers were between 10%-25% less likely than dropouts to continue violence (Babcock and Steiner 1999; Gondolf 1997, 1998, 1999; Taft et al. 2001; Morrel et al. 2003). Because programs generally expel participants who re-offend and voluntarily dropouts are less motivated to change, however, such studies likely "stack the deck in favor of finding program effects" (Davis and Taylor 1999:74). These studies' quasi-experimental methods thus appear to exaggerate the effectiveness of BIPs.

Researchers have increasingly used experimental designs that randomly assign convicted batterers to either participate in BIPs or do community service /serve probation. The four experimental studies based on partner interviews found that men assigned to BIPs were no less likely to stop their violence than men in the control groups (Dunford 2000; Feder and Forde 1999; Ford and Rgoli 1993; Taylor, Davis, and Maxwell 2001). Gondolf (2001), however, argues that because such studies lump together program dropouts with completers and compare them to men assigned to control groups, they likely underestimate program effects. Current attempts to employ experimental designs may thus underestimate effectiveness.

Research also shows that Black participants are more likely than Whites to re-offend (Gondolf 1999; Gondolf and Williams 2001), which appears to be due in part from being more

likely to miss meetings and drop out (Chang and Saunders 2002; Hamburger and Hastings 1989; Saunders and Parker 1989; Taft et al. 2001; Gondolf and Williams 2001). Oliver Williams and Lance Becker (1994) found that of 142 BIPs surveyed most did little or nothing to accommodate minority participants. They and others (Carrillo and Tello 1998) advocate for “culturally competent programs” that are connected to minority communities, receive specialized diversity training, use more activities designed for minority men, and employ bilingual counselors.

Little is known about what happens inside these programs that might account for the aforementioned results. Some researchers have interviewed BIP completers with the goal of understanding how BIPs are successful (Gondolf and Hanneken 1987; Scott and Wolfe 2000; Silvergleid and Mankowski 2006). They argue that BIPs create “safe zones” (Silvergleid and Mankowski 2006:156) in which men take responsibility, develop empathy, improve communication skills, and adopt alternative behaviors. Such accounts, however, may tell us more about how they manage stigma than what actually happens in BIPs or their effectiveness.

While I have only been able to locate a few academic articles on BIPs that employ field methods in even a limited way, they as well as other anecdotal evidence provide some clues about what might be happening on the ground floor. Varsha Pandya and Wallace Gingerich (2002) observed a dozen BIP meetings and interviewed its six participants and mentioned in passing that the two who dropped out joked and made sarcastic comments during meetings. A reporter writing about a California BIP graduate’s murder of his ex-wife found that a monitor observing the program wrote: “Facilitators laughing and joking . . . seemed to collude with lessening the seriousness of some of the discussion” (Mills 1997). In Florida, BIP monitors must assess whether: “Facilitator(s) confronted sexist, racist, ageist, and homophobic comments, and/or inappropriate joking” (Florida Department of Children and Families 2006). In a

theoretical article, Williams (1994) mentions that he observed a BIP facilitator equating anti-Black slurs with jokes degrading Italians, which alienated Blacks. These articles and guidelines suggest that interactional resistance, racism, and joking may subvert program effectiveness.

### **JOKING CULTURES**

By synthesizing research on joking and conducting comparative ethnographic research on two groups, Gary Fine and Michaela de Soucey (2005) argue that small groups often create joking cultures. They see joking cultures as interactionally constituted episodes of humor that are often linked to widely shared cultural meanings and the group or relationship's unfolding cultural history. They point out that joking reframes the situation as play, accomplishes status differentiation and emotion management, and can reproduce or challenge social order.

Joking can bolster group members' status by demeaning outsiders as well as create a hierarchy of status within the group. Groups of white boys may jokingly target girls and women as well as ethnic, racial, and sexual minority groups (Fine 1987). Jokingly targeting outsiders reduces status differences among group members and fosters cohesion (Yoels and Clair 1995). Research also shows that joking produces various forms of hierarchy among group members (Fine 1987; Robinson and Smith-Lovin 2001; Whyte 1955). Higher ups take the lead in joking and more often make inferiors the butts of jokes. Because targeting insiders or outsiders is "only a joke," members often defer even when they are offended (Eliasoph 1999).

Research shows that joking can suppress or evoke emotions as well as condition emotional subjectivity. Medical students (Smith and Kleinman 1989) and pornographic magazine employees (Dellinger and Williams 2002) jokingly mitigate their own feelings of disgust or arousal. Cancer patients (Waskul and van der Riet 2002) and sex workers (Sanders 2005) use humor to mitigate their families' and clients' fear or embarrassment. Such joking may

also condition emotional subjectivity, which refers to “individuals’ acquired habits of interpretations and emotion work” (Schwalbe et al. 2000:436). Jokingly putting down patients—outside of their presence—can condition medical students to interpret patients in ways that leads to poor “bedside manner” (Smith and Kleinman 1989).

Research also shows how joking can be a form of resistance and regulation. Student joking can momentarily take control from or embarrass teachers and define an otherwise serious situation as play (Everhart 1983; Thorne 1993). Shop floor workers can establish “vigorous countercultures” through joking that oppose institutional aims and philosophy and bolster union drives (Taylor and Bain 2003). While workers’ joking may symbolic resistance to higher ups, teasing each may establish defensive and superficial relationships, which limits collective resistance (Collison 1988). In addition, managers may allow workers to joke around or may initiate joking themselves in attempt to regulate workers’ behavior resistance (Collinson 2002).

### **SETTING AND METHOD**

The BIP was housed in a family services center in the downtown area of a medium-sized southeastern city. About ten groups, each comprising of ten-to-twenty court-ordered participants, met weekly with two group facilitators. The groups had a rotating membership; that is, one man’s first meeting could be another man’s last. About 50% of the participants were Black, 40% were White, and 10% were Latino. To complete the program the men had to attend twenty-six two-hour meetings. If they missed more than three times, it would be a violation of probation and they could be arrested and be required to serve their suspended jail sentence.

The program used the most widely used curriculum in the U.S., the “The Duluth Curriculum.” It is a feminist psycho-educational approach designed to teach men how they use economic control, emotional abuse, intimidation, and physical violence to maintain power in

their relationships (Pence and Paymar 1993). The stated goal is to teach the men to interact with their partners non-coercively, as equals. The assumption is that men's violence is a symptom of patriarchy. The facilitators also tried to teach men anger management strategies, assertiveness training, and communication and conflict management techniques. On the ground floor, however, the meetings were often run like therapeutic support groups than a class.

An unpublished evaluation study conducted for the director by a local university-affiliated psychiatrist and students found that, according to phone interviews with victims, that completers of the program were no less likely to continue their violence against women than were program dropouts. The director did not give me or group facilitators a copy of the study, which was completed during the first half of my fieldwork, even when we asked for one. It was only after my fieldwork ended that I was able to obtain a copy of the report from the study's interviewer. The director told me and the staff that the program was effective, citing arrest rates, but said that there was plenty of room for improvement.

The study contained no information on the ethnicity or race of the participants. Although the director made sure that each group had one Black or Latino facilitator and one White facilitator, the staff never discussed racial dynamics during the staff meetings I observed. In interviews, the director, facilitators, and participants said that they believed White, Black, and Latino men were treated equally in the program. As I did my fieldwork, I had a "hunch" that race and ethnicity shaped the interactions, largely due to the overt racism of one particular joking episode. It was not until I systematically coded and analyzed joking episodes with regard to race, however, that I began to see more subtle forms racialization.

Over a three-year period, I observed more than 100 group sessions. For the first eight months, I observed the groups behind a two-way mirror and was able to jot down dialog almost

verbatim. When they entered the program, all men signed a form indicating their consent to be observed for research purposes and the facilitators reminded the men that they were being observed at the start of meetings. For the rest of my fieldwork, I arrived about ten to fifteen minutes early and sat in the room with the men. During the start of each meeting, I reminded the men that I was doing research and that everything they said would be confidential. During the meetings I jotted down as much dialogue as possible and used this information to later construct complete fieldnotes. I also interviewed twenty participants, eight facilitators, and observed twenty days of domestic violence court (for more details see self-identifying reference). All names included in this paper are pseudonyms.

The facilitators were paid \$50 to run a group session, but most saw themselves as volunteers who took on this difficult task because they believed it was important. Domestic violence had touched all of their lives. Cindy, a Black co-facilitator of the group I observed who worked with disadvantaged children during the day, for example, had helped some friends and family members out of abusive relationships. She had three White men as co-facilitators during my fieldwork, Bill, Frank, and Art, all of whom had divinity degrees. Frank's step-father shot and killed his mother. The director of the program, Donna, had left an abusive husband. Many of the participants had witnessed abuse in their homes as children, and a few said that they had decided at an early age that they did not want to grow up to be like their fathers.

My analysis developed inductively. The first meetings I observed were orientation sessions in which facilitators seriously confronted newcomers about their violence and taught them anger management techniques. There was no joking during these meetings. The director told me in interviews that she believed that the tone of the orientation sessions sent newcomers an important message: You need to take the program seriously. When I first observed the

regular group meeting behind the two-way mirror, I was surprised to see men checking in with smiles on their faces and often joking around, and even more surprised to notice the facilitators occasionally joining in. I wondered what was going on. When I asked the facilitators about the joking, they said that it helped the men feel more comfortable and open up.

When I later began sitting in the group meeting room rather than observing through the two-way mirror, I learned that the men usually joked around for most of the ten-to-fifteen minutes they sat together in the room, usually without staff supervision. I became very interested in this pre-meeting joking and began to see it as setting the stage for joking during the regular meeting time. I also began writing analytic memos and talking with colleagues about the significance of joking. My first insights included that the joking was a kind of emotion work that mitigated uncomfortable feelings, that joking subverted defining the situation as serious, and that it seemed that White men and men of color played different roles in the joking.

I viewed these insights as hypotheses to be explored through more systematic analyses of the data. I began by going through all of my fieldnotes and sorting all of the episodes of joking into one file. I then coded these joking episodes according to the aforementioned insights as well as others that emerged as I carefully read and reread the “joking file” numerous times over the next several months. This additional coding noted whether the joking occurred before or during the regular meetings, the race of joke tellers and targets, the content of the jokes (gender, violence, race, etc.), the emotional and conversational functions (bonding, diversion, etc.), and how joking was sometimes challenged and preserved. Comparing and contrasting the different joking episodes along these codes led me to develop the following analyses.

## FINDINGS

While the director of Dispute marketed the program as educational to the general public, funding organizations, and clients, program facilitators (with the director's consent) usually ran the meetings more like a therapeutic support group. During the check-in period, which sometimes lasted most of the two hours, facilitators tried to coax the men to talk about their lives. Most of the educational lessons also had therapeutic components. When teaching the men to recognize the tactics abusive men use to maintain power and control in relationships, for example, facilitators also tried to get the men to share personal stories. While the men often did not comply or participate seriously, the facilitators believed that stopping the men's violence required, to some extent, therapeutic work. As Cindy said in an interview,

I don't see any point in doing education if the guys aren't going to use it. . . . We know that behavior change is more than skills and more than teaching exercises. We need to build up in them a will to apply this, which I think goes to the therapeutic value of the program.

Cindy echoed others when she emphasized the importance of "building some group cohesion and trust" as "the most fundamental aspect of the group process" for the men's self transformation.

One way facilitators tried to build trust was by letting the men joke around, which enabled them to feel more comfortable and, ideally, be more willing to open up and take the program seriously. After Frank, a facilitator, mentioned in passing that the men often try to get him to align with them against Cindy, I asked how they do it and he brought up joking:

Like pointing to something Cindy said, and saying, "See Frank, this is how women act. See how they are?" You know, and usually I take it as humor. I don't just attack them

for it. I allow them some free expression sometimes. . . . It seems like joking makes the men comfortable. I think it's healthy.

Similarly, after Cindy brought up in an interview that the men often felt "humiliated" and I asked her how they "worked through it," she replied:

People find a way to joke about it. . . . When we're uncomfortable, we try to make ourselves more comfortable. . . . I want them to feel free talking in front of me, especially because sometimes they'll find that they're going to laugh. . . . So I do give them the okay on it. But I'd like to see that it's respectful at least.

The facilitators thus believed that allowing the men to joke around within limits ultimately helped make the program successful.

Although the facilitators often condoned joking, they did understand that it could be taken too far. Art, for example, said, "I have to caution the men about getting too humorous" by saying "Look, this is a serious situation" because "once in a while, they can use it to try to change—or not talk about something." Because they believed that joking helped the men feel more comfortable, a necessary prerequisite to opening up and therapeutic work, facilitators let the men do it despite their fears that the men sometimes took it too far.

### **Backstage Joking**

When the clients walked into the Family Center each week they entered a place designed for seriousness. The institutional flooring, off-white walls, efficiently arranged chairs, and the chest-high receptionist counter set the stage. Entering men sometimes greeted each other with a subdued "hey" or a nod, but they usually kept quiet as they moved forward in a line to pay the woman at the receptionist counter. The receptionist was very direct and professional with the

men. The men had entered into and, at least on the surface, adopted the institutionally-promoted frame of seriousness that marked them as batterers needing rehabilitation.

Sandwiched between the time men spent in the lobby and the start of regular group meetings, however, was about ten to fifteen minutes in which the participants usually sat unsupervised in the meeting room. During this time, the men joked around in a way that resisted framing the situation as serious, opposed the program's profeminist philosophy, and bonded them as an oppositional group. At the same time, however, such backstage joking reproduced a status hierarchy. White men most often facilitated the joking, sometimes alluded to their ability to tell racist jokes, and occasionally targeted men of color with their humor.

*Subverting seriousness.* Ending a moment of silence before one meeting started, Dan, a White working class man in his mid-thirties, asked loudly, "Anybody hear any good jokes?" Phil, an unemployed White man, deferred, "I got one." Another man goaded him, saying, "Let's hear it." Two men of color, Lester and Martin, sitting across the semi-circle immediately began smiling in anticipation. Then Phil started, "This insurance salesman calls this house and a little boy answers." Lester interrupts, asking, "Hey, is it about that one guy who used to be in the group?" "Yeah, what's his name, the insurance guy who graduated last week?" replied Dan. Lewis and I said, "Dave" and Lynn said, "David" within a few seconds of each other. Lester agreed, "Yeah, it's probably him." Phil continued:

"Anyway, this insurance guy is talking to this kid on the phone and asks if there was an adult in the house he could talk to. He first asked if his dad was there and the boy said, 'Yeah, but he's busy.'" Dan broke in again, saying, "Yeah, I've heard this one before. It's cute." Phil replied, "It is cute isn't it?" Lewis said, "I haven't heard it" and two or three other guys added "Yeah" and "Keep going." Phil continued, "Then the insurance

guy asks if his mom is there and the boy said she was. He asked if he could talk to her but the boy said she was busy. Then he asked if there were any other adults that he could talk to. The boy said that there was a fireman and a policeman there, but they were busy too.” A few of the men started to crack up. Phil went on, “Then the insurance salesman asks, ‘Well, what are they so busy doing?’ And the boy said, ‘They’re looking for me’.” Most of the men smiled, a few let out snorts, huffs, and subdued giggles. A couple others said, “Yeah, that was cute,” and, “That was a good one.” (fieldnote excerpt)

As this typical example shows, pre-meeting joking was a *social* event that not only provided relief from seriousness, but engaged most everyone in the room. Dan started with some joke soliciting, and his request was met by Phil, the joke teller. Lester interrupted the particular joke but amplified the joking culture by referring to a former group member. Dan aligned himself with the frame by saying he heard the joke, while others pressed for the joke’s continuation. After Phil gave the punch-line, most men affirmed the joke either through smiling, laughing, or making affirming comments. This joking ritual was typical of pre-meeting joking exchanges in that it generated a sense of camaraderie while subverting a serious frame.

As the facilitators walked into the room one week, the jovial atmosphere changed dramatically when newcomer Mark asked loudly, “Does anybody know anything about David?” It became quiet, some men shook their heads, and the facilitators said they had not heard anything. The previous week the director told the group that David was in jail because he had severely beaten his wife, adding that she hoped he would receive help with his addiction. It was one of the most serious moments I ever witnessed, and the men’s bodies seemed to effuse shame. But in response to Mark’s question about David a week later, Lynn, a White middle class recovering alcoholic, jokingly said, “I wonder if he was the one who tried to burn down [a local

mental health facility].” Then Jerry, a White retail manager, said, “It looks like David’s trying to go down in flames.” Pat, a White middle class man provoked more laughter when he added loudly, “Like the fourth of July.” The facilitators cracked smiles during the joking and did not address David’s violence or the issue of re-offending during the meeting. Regardless of how the men really felt, they used joking to define themselves as different from David and masculine enough to avoid expressing sympathy for his wife, while subverting the program’s serious frame.

*Undermining philosophy.* As the men were sitting by themselves before the start of one meeting, the BIP director stuck her head in the door and told the men to go move their cars if they had parked at a nearby martial arts facility. When she left, Mark, a White mechanic, said, “Just think if we all parked over there and they wanted to make something of it. I can see the headlines now, ‘Abusive men whomp on karate students’.” A few men snickered. Then Frederick, a Black janitor, added, “And their instructor too.” Mark added, “Yeah, all that black belts are good for are to hold up your pants. I think we could probably take them, no problem.” More men in the room laughed as Mark pretended like he was going to get up from his chair. In response to the directors’ intrusion, the men thus joked in a way that valorized violence.

Other pre-meeting joking expressed a lack of sympathy for victims (in general) and women in particular. After someone brought up the deadly fire in Waco, Texas, that killed seventy-four members of the Branch Davidian Church, the men began joking about it. Mark announced, “You know what Waco stands for don’t you? We ain’t comin’ out.” A few of the men laughed. Then Pat, a White man, said, “I got one. How do you pick up one of those Waco chicks? With a dustbuster.” This made more of the men laugh, and made them laugh harder, clearly in opposition to the program’s philosophy.

Heterosexist jokes were also popular. Before one meeting started, after another man told a joke, Jerry, a White retail store manager, said, “I heard a really good one earlier this week. It was about these two homosexual roommates.” This perked up Al, as he bounced up and down in his chair while making a huffing sound. Jerry went on, “One of them was going away for a week on a business trip. After he left, the other one started thinking that he wanted more hair on his chest.” Al laughed some more and was joined by Pat. Grinning, Jerry continued,

He went to the doctor and asked what he could do to grow hair on his chest. The doctor said that he should put Vaseline on it. So, all during the next week he did it, but no hair grew on his chest. When the other guy came back he asked him why there was Vaseline all over the place and after the other one explained what the doctor had told him, he said, “You dummy, if that was true, you’d have hair growing all out your ass.”

All three of them burst out laughing. The joke’s homophobia expressed opposition to the philosophy of the program and made them feel better about themselves as “real men.”

Joke tellers can often get away with saying things for which they would normally be held accountable (Fine and de Soucey 2005). Similar to research in work settings (Taylor and Bain 2005), subverting seriousness enabled the men’s symbolic opposition to the nonviolent and feminist philosophy of the program. The joking culture thus looked similar to what men construct in fraternities and sports teams (Curry 1991; Lyman 1987).

*Opposing Authority.* In addition to expressing opposition to framing the situation as serious and the philosophy of the program, the men used pre-meeting joking to express opposition to the staff. Corroborating the findings of resistant joking in schools (Everhart 1983; Thorne 1993) and the shop floor (Collison 1988), participants expressed their opposition to authority figures in part by joking outside facilitators’ earshot.

When I walked to the meeting room one evening early in my fieldwork, I noticed the door was closed and wondered if the meeting had been canceled. When I opened the door, eight men silently looked up at me from their chairs. One of the White men waved me in and after I closed the door behind me he turned to the others and said something about a wedding ring. Everyone, except me, erupted in laughter. As my fieldwork continued, I found that they often used the door as a barricade to protect their joking culture. While the jokes they told with the door closed did not seem more risqué than when it was open, a closed door fostered the sense they were getting away with something and implicitly defined the staff as the enemy.

The men's opposition to the staff via joking was sometimes gendered. For example, before one meeting began, Bill, the male facilitator, was in the room trying to set up a VCR while Cindy entered and exited the room several times with supplies and equipment. Nathan, a White working class man, asked no one in particular, "You want to hear a joke?" Several men said "yeah" or "let's hear it." "There's this nine-year-old boy and he's going to the drug store [and] pulls himself up to the counter. Then he asks the woman behind the counter if he can buy some prophylactics." Some of the men started chuckling. At that moment Cindy walked back into the room with an easel. Swooping his hand downward, Nathan said, "Forget it."

But after Cindy left the room a minute later, he continued:

So he asked her for some prophylactics, right. And she says that she could sell them to him but that she didn't know if they would fit. At that point, as he was holding himself up to the counter, his body was pushed back away from the counter, you know, by his thing, and he says, 'Don't those things stretch?' (field note excerpt)

There was scattered laughter around the semi-circle, and even Bill, the facilitator, turned away from the VCR and cracked a smile. This joke not only helped the men bond with each other, but enabled them to define themselves in opposition to the female facilitator.

*Racialization.* While expressing opposition to the program's seriousness, philosophy, and staff fostered a sense of togetherness among the men, the pre-meeting joking simultaneously divided the men along racial lines. As the previously quoted joking scenarios show, White men usually played leading roles in the comedic drama while men of color played bit parts. More specifically, White men were almost always the joke solicitors and tellers while men of color were relegated to affirming jokes with laughter or adding one-liners. Joking also occasionally reproduced racial stereotypes while targeting men of color.

For example, Al, a Black participant, came to one meeting even though he had bronchitis. When he spoke, his voice was abnormally low and gravelly, and three White men, Chris, Steve, and Bob, sitting close by, stared at him wide-eyed and chuckling. Chris said Al sounded like Mr. T., the only Black character on an old TV show about a group called "The A Team," which carried out vigilante justice. Bob goaded Al, "Say, 'I pity the fool'," a line that Mr. T. often said prior to beating up some evildoer. When Al met his request, all three White men erupted in laughter. Chris then turned to the other White men and said, "We need to get some gold chains to hang around his neck." "And he needs a mohawk," added Steve. Looking at Al, they all burst out laughing again. As other White men entered the meeting room, one of them would ask prod Al to talk and the whole drama would repeat itself. Although Al always performed in a good humored manner, none of the other Black men in the room laughed.

Besides turning men of color into objects of humor, White men sometimes made it clear that they liked to hear or tell racist jokes in other settings. After someone asked if anyone had

heard of any good jokes before one meeting began, for example, Sam said, “I know a couple of good ones about Mexicans.” Others looked at him in anticipation, but then he said, “But Javier over there is a pretty sturdy dude.” This brought a smile from Javier, a rather stocky Latino man who worked as a roofer. Carlos, a Latino man of slight build sitting beside Javier, seemed to force a “grin and bear it” smile. On another occasion, White men criticized the political correctness of not being able to tell jokes targeting women and people of color while a Black man silently listened. For them, these jokes were okay as long as they did not really mean it. Such joking likely limited the degree of trust that men of color had in the White men while at the same time positioned Whites higher up on a status hierarchy.

Overall, the men used the pre-meeting time as a backstage to establish a joking culture each week before the group facilitators stepped foot in the room. Symbolically, the joking signified opposition to the program’s seriousness, philosophy, and staff. As emotion work, such joking often bolstered feelings of togetherness, mitigated shame, and enabled them to express yet control resentment. However, pre-meeting joking also created divisions between White men and men of color, showing that the emotional benefits of the culture were differentially allocated.

### **Frontstage Joking**

Each meeting started with men “checking in,” which entailed explaining why they were there and if they took any “time outs” to control their anger during the previous week. A newcomer once asked why they had to explain what they did to their victims because doing so made him “feel bad.” Cindy then asked men to raise hands if they felt ashamed for what they had done and everyone raised his hand. Frank, the facilitator, responded, “I guess we’re doing something right.” Bringing the joking culture into the regular meetings helped keep their shame or anger under control. As I will show, the men also used joking during the regular meetings to

resist facilitators' therapeutic guidance and, with the facilitators' deference, to continue racialization. I will also show how the facilitators and newcomers occasionally challenged but ultimately preserved the joking culture.

*Extending Playfulness.* Although one might expect that the men's admission of violence during the check-in would be serious, men often checked-in with smiles on their faces, embodying their commitment to playfulness (see Katz 1996). While men checked in, audience members also embodied such commitment by smiling, sometimes chuckling, and occasionally belting out laughter. The men seemed primed to find humor in the situation.

If someone, especially facilitators, misspoke during check-in, the men usually quickly responded with laughter. At one meeting, for example, Art, a facilitator, tried to clarify a newcomer's story about abusing his wife when he said, "You said that the kitchen was in the sink—." Then men interrupted him with one the loudest bouts of laughter I ever witnessed. Coming out of the laughter, many of the men smiled and started talking with each other. When the facilitator, who was unaware of the gaffe, asked what was going on, most of the men belted out laughter again. Similar to how students collectively express humor when teachers make mistakes (Everhart 1983), the men's laughter also expressed opposition to institutional authority.

When men checked in, the facilitators directed them to clearly describe the abuse which led to their arrests and participation in the program in order to indicate that they "took responsibility" (self-identifying reference). Doing so could evoke shame or anger. Extending the play frame into the check-in, however, helped men keep these emotions under control. Many men smiled and chuckled, for example, when it was Malcolm's turn to check in. Malcolm, a Black man, usually checked in by saying, "I'm Malcolm and I'm here for fondling my wife's

breast to make her mad.” The men responded as if Malcolm was telling a dirty joke rather than describing a sexual assault. Facilitators never brought attention to such reactions.

When men checked-in, they were supposed to say whether they had taken any “time outs” or “cool downs,” which staff believed were crucial anger management techniques. The men often and the facilitators sometimes found humor in such stories, even if the men did not seem to understand how to use these emotion work tools. James, a Black man, never mentioned time outs or cool downs when checking in, but instead said whether he had any “heat ups,” a term he coined to describe if had felt particularly angry. Whenever it was his turn to check-in, a handful of men would grin and look at each other in anticipation, and often chuckle when he mentioned heat ups. Occasionally facilitators smiled also. I never observed facilitators trying to clarify the issue for James, who even spoke of “heat ups” on his graduation night.

White men also sometimes took marginal risks to extend a more resistant form of playfulness into the regular group meeting. When Dan checked in at one meeting, for example, he said, “I just have to warn you all, Donna (the director) might be coming here in a minute to give me hell.” Taking the bait, Cindy asked rather sarcastically, “Well, why would she do that?” Showing opposition to the BIP’s feminist philosophy, he replied:

A girl walked up and stood in line and paid for somebody. She had on a mini skirt—no, not a mini skirt, it was barely that. I mean, it was butt level. It was a *mini* mini skirt.

Anyway, while I was paying Donna asked the receptionist about who paid before me and I said it was a woman with a really short mini skirt on, nice legs, blond hair, about five foot six and 118 pounds. Donna looked at me and said, “Dan, how would you feel if you were being looked at like a sex object by three or four women?” I said, “If that

happened, I'd be flattered and I'd probably have to go home and take a cold shower.”

(field note excerpt)

Everyone laughed raucously. As participants subsequently checked in and described their abusive behavior, the smiles on their faces from Dan's joke lingered. Such joking and the lack of intervention aligned the group against the curriculum, which defined sexual objectification as part of men's power and control over women.

We can see from the above typical examples of check-in joking that the men extended the playfulness established backstage into the frontage. In general, the men were primed to read humor between the lines of others' words, laughing quickly when others misspoke or said something that might not otherwise be seen as humorous. There was a kind of “frame lag” of playfulness that flowed into the check-ins, although the men actively produced this with their reactions. The men's embodied expressions of humor encouraged others to define the situation as playful, as did their regular insertion of humorous stories and one-liners. Most importantly, however, it was the facilitators' deference to and sometimes active participation in joking that ultimately enabled playfulness to be extended into the regular group meeting.

*Resisting Therapy.* Extending the play frame into the regular group meeting created the conditions under which men could use joking to resist therapeutic guidance. More specifically, participants sometimes inserted jokes at strategic dialogic moments to derail facilitators' attempts to get the men to talk about their violence and related issues. When a facilitator was cornering one man into discussing a sensitive issue, other men would often come to his rescue and disrupt the line of inquiry, offering him an emotional shield. Because the facilitators legitimated and participated in bringing the joking frame into the regular meeting, they were more obligated to take men's more overtly resistant humor as “just a joke.”

A typical example follows. At one meeting John, a White man sporadically employed in low wage temporary jobs, said his wife wanted a divorce. He seemed genuinely saddened by the event; he talked slower and quieter than usual. In a sympathetic tone of voice, Cindy asked why he wanted the relationship to continue. After pausing for a few seconds, he said he did not think he could afford to pay alimony. Brad, a White working class man, then blurted out, “Do you know what the definition of alimony is? The fucking you get for the fucking you got.” Regardless of his intentions, Brad’s joke sent a message to facilitators: “Don’t expect us to open up to you.” Most of the other participants in the room affirmed the message by belting out laughter. The facilitators retreated.

The men also used humor in ways that undermined more formal therapeutic work. During one meeting, the facilitators encouraged Milton, a middle class Black man, to role play an argument he had with his wife after she spent an evening with a friend of hers, a single woman. He said he had worried that she might be flirting with other men and this argument ended when he pushed her down. After expressing reluctance about the role-play, he said, “Okay, I’ll do it. But only if *Cindy* plays my wife.” Everyone burst out laughing. With a big smile on her face, Cindy sarcastically replied, “I’m tired of always playing the wife. Who’s man enough to play a woman?!” Everyone laughed even harder. Frank, the facilitator, advised Milton, “You better propose to your wife.” Cindy added, “Stand up for your rights as men and play the woman.” Everyone burst out laughing again. After the laughter subsided, Cindy agreed to play Milton’s wife but she, Milton, and the audience broke out laughing several times during the role-play. Facilitators and men thus collaborated to transform Milton’s violence into a comedy. They also avoided talking about the roots of jealousy and its links to men’s violence.

At another meeting about a year later, facilitators and men similarly collaborated on some homophobic joking that undermined the seriousness of a role play of an argument that Anthony, a Black man who worked as a prison guard, had with his wife. Mike, a middle class White man attending his last meeting, eventually agreed to play his wife. The actors occasionally cracked up during the role play, which ended when Anthony said nonchalantly with a smile, “I’m mad. I’m hungry. I’m leaving.” Then something unexpected happened. Cindy asked Anthony if that was all he said to his wife, and he said it wasn’t. She then asked, “You probably said, ‘You sat on your ass all day while I was working,’ or something like that, didn’t you?” He said he did use some choice words and she asked him to role play the event again. This time, Anthony raised his voice and spoke in an intimidating manner:

Why are you sitting on your ass! Dammit! I’m hungry and you didn’t cook me dinner.

Why didn’t you cook the fucking chicken! Fuck it! I’m going to group.

Anthony then turned to the group and said in a normal tone of voice, “Then I went upstairs, took a shower, changed clothes, and went to group.” No one laughed. In fact, almost everyone applauded. Anthony then asked if he could role play how he made amends. Cindy cracked a joke, “When you make up, don’t try to kiss him.” Everyone laughed. But the playful frame was not carried into the subsequent drama:

Anthony walked up to Mike and said with a sympathetic tone, “Let me see your feet. I guess you do seem to have a bruise. We talked about what happened in class and I’m sorry. I apologize.” Cindy asked, “How did she receive it? Was she surprised?”

Anthony said, “Yea. I very seldom apologize.” Mike asked him how it made him feel and Anthony said, “I felt bad about it. I mean, I never even asked to look at her toe when she first told me it was hurt.” (fieldnote excerpt)

We can see here that while men often initiated joking to undermine therapeutic goals, joking did not necessarily preclude talking about their abuse and feelings. While the joking undermined the initial role play, Cindy's request for a more authentic performance led Anthony to "get into the role." Even after Cindy's joke, the situation proceeded seriously as Anthony presented a reformed self by describing his shame about his verbal abuse and his apology to his wife.

*Racialization.* While men inserted jocular comments or laughed while both White men and men of color told their stories during the regular meeting, this joking was racialized. Joking as White men checked-in most often affirmed the White speakers' oppositional talk. In contrast, men and facilitators more often teased men of color about their violence or other issues. Furthermore, men jokingly targeting particular Black men, but not White men, with nicknames.

The following example shows, in a typical fashion, how participants infused humor into White men's stories. John, a White man, said he was in the middle of a time out when he checked in one evening: "Today we were coming home and I was driving. Well, she wanted me to take the Kaplan exit. . . . But she didn't tell me until after we passed the exit." Another White man, Craig blurted out, "You're *supposed* to read her mind." About half a dozen men chuckled and he continued his story, receiving advice from others (talk to her, bring her roses, etc.). The humor thus supported John's interpretation that his wife was at fault; no one challenged this or made him account for why he was so angry.

Although storytellers of color occasionally received humorous support from White men, the White jokesters more often targeted men of color, especially Black men's violence and infidelity. White men often teased Barry, a Black man who revealed he hit his wife after she caught him having an affair. Other men often teased him when he checked-in, saying such things as: "How's your love life going nowadays?" or "Still caught in the love triangle?"

Sometimes he played along while other times he said the affair was over. Although other men of color were similarly teased about infidelity, White men never were.

While I never observed participants teasing White men about their violence or anger, they sometimes made Black men's violence part of the joking culture. For example, when Cliff, a Black man, attended his first meeting he said his wife asked him to mow the yard when he got home from work. He said he would do it later and then went to the store to "get me a beer." Dan, a White working class man, said sarcastically, "Just *one* beer?" A few men laughed. Adrian, a Black sales clerk, added, "I bet it was one of those forty ouncers." Several men laughed and he continued his story, eventually saying, "I slapped her and she went through the door." In response to a facilitator's question, Cliff said that he had never been violent before in their twenty-six years of marriage, but added "well, not to her anyway." Lester, a Black man, provoked much laughter when he asked, "You mean you slapped your girl on the side?" This episode is typical in that both White and nonwhite men would poke fun at minority men's (but not White men's) violence and question the truthfulness of their accounts.

Class did not appear to protect Black men. For example, Eddy, a Black entrepreneur said that after he came home from a business seminar his wife began complaining about the computer being in the bedroom. The argument escalated:

I don't know what happened, I just snapped. I grabbed that computer monitor and I was going to throw it out the door. She was still sitting on the bed, and I lifted it up and was going toward the door, and I'm serious I was just going to throw it out in the hallway. And I don't know if it was the weight of the monitor or what, but she got up and got in the way and the monitor came down on her.

Sam, a White man, sarcastically said, “Oh, so it was her fault, huh? She just ran in the path of the computer you were throwing.” Four or five men laughed. Another man provoked guttural laughter among just about everyone in the room, including facilitators, when he added, “Yeah, right, just like our wives accidentally ran into our hands.”

The teasing of Black men sometimes took the form of nicknames. For example, the men called Henry, a soft-spoken Black man in his early 60s, “Teapot” because it was his weapon of choice during the assault that landed him in the program. He was well-liked by the other men, who would often say things like, “You’re up, Teapot” when it was his turn to check-in, or “You must have stayed clear of the kitchen” after he said he didn’t have any time-outs or cool-downs during the week. Similarly, men called the aforementioned Eddy, “Computer Man.” They occasionally called Malcolm, who “fondled his wife’s breast,” “Loverboy” and Barry, who had an affair, “The Player.” And participants often called Martin, who was earning a graduate degree in social work, “Professor.” Participants did not use any nicknames for any White men.

While participants sometimes questioned and confronted White men about their violence and abuse, they rarely joked about it. Participants usually brought humor into White men’s stories in ways that supported the men’s attempts to distance them from their actions or support the White speaker’s resistance. In contrast, the men’s joking with men of color often drew attention to their abuse and sometimes called into question the truthfulness of their stories.

*Challenging and Preserving the Joking Culture.* Although all facilitators sometimes challenged the men’s joking, Cindy did it the most—often when the director of the program, Donna, sat in on the meeting—by jocular innuendo, confrontation, and revisiting the issue.

After Ben, a working class White man, interrupted the facilitators’ attempt to get another man to talk about his feelings with a crude one-liner, Cindy responded with sarcasm: “Now Ben

I know you don't really mean that. You did so good last week that I was about to graduate you early." Frank smiled and a few men mumbled, "Uh Oh." Cindy's maintenance of the playful frame with her own joke signified she could be trusted to take a joke, but also implied that there were limits—and he was getting close. However, by continuing the playful mood, she backed off the therapeutic goal of getting Don to open up and preserved the joking culture.

During a meeting when Donna, the director, was filling in for an absent male facilitator, she wrote "I Feel \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_" on the board. She then said that this is what all the men must learn to do. Referring to Matt who earlier said he had been furious at his wife but did not express it, she asked the men what he should have said. No response. She then prodded, "He should have said, 'I feel' what?" Several men initially responded seriously, saying "humiliated," "scared," "angry," and "mad." Then Chris, a White middle class man said in a high-pitched voice, "I'm afraid." Most of the men burst out laughing. Donna confronted them, however:

"I'm serious, most men in our society don't think it's okay to talk about their emotions. You showed exactly what I'm talking about. Men think they have to be tough and all and don't think that they can ever be afraid but that is just not how things really are." She then asked the men, "Why do you feel you can't say something like, 'I feel embarrassed or humiliated when you say that to me?' Terrence replied by saying, "Because it's like saying she's got the best of you." Other men agreed. (fieldnote excerpt)

By confronting them, Donna was able to get the men to talk about a key belief related to men's violence: they envisioned their relationships with women as a zero-sum game and that they defined expressing shame as losing the competition.

Although rare, in addition to jocular innuendo and confrontation, facilitators occasionally challenged men's joking by revisiting rather than dropping the issue that men were trying to

avoid. When Bob checked-in at one meeting, he said he and his wife had been arguing all week and that he often left their mobile home to sit in his truck in order to cool down. Explaining one particularly intense argument, he said, “But she wouldn’t get out of my face, and I *almost* had to push her or something.” About half the men chuckled or cracked smiles. Bob continued talking about the arguments and taking time outs for a few more minutes. When he finished,

Cindy, said, “Wait, before we move on, I want to go back to the comment that Bob made. . . . I wonder why we all thought that was funny. How many of you have daughters?” About half the men raised their hands. “Well, what if you heard your daughter’s boyfriend say she was a real bitch last night and I almost had to smack her one?” One guy said that as long as he said “almost” then it wouldn’t be a big deal. A few of the guys nodded . . . Cindy pressed, “Now I don’t believe all of you would think it would be no big deal if some guy said that to your daughter.” Ralph agreed, “I think that I would tell him to get out of my house.” Bob said, “I don’t even know why I said it, it just sort of came out.” (fieldnote excerpt)

Cindy’s strategy of coming back to Bob’s one-liner did seem to persuade at least one man to agree, in so many words, that the joke was inappropriate. Cindy’s challenge taught the men that there were limits to their joking and also gave them an opportunity to distance themselves from the implications of the joke and affirm the program’s curriculum.

While the previous examples show that facilitators occasionally challenged particular jokes, the joking culture itself was left intact. The following example details how the men and facilitators worked together to preserve the joking culture the only time it was challenged in a more serious fashion. When Carlos introduced himself to the group for the first time, he described the details of his violence with unusual candor and, through tears, he said he hated

himself for being violent and wanted to change. Carlos framed the program as a serious opportunity to change himself—just what the facilitators allegedly desired. A few minutes after this introduction, the others began cracking jokes as usual. At one point, when Jarrod was checking-in, Nathan and Cindy, the facilitator, whispered to each other. Sporting smiles, they bounced up and down a little in their chairs, trying to “keep a lid on it,” as people say.

After Jarrod finished Carlos surprised everyone by tentatively speaking out of turn:

I’m not sure I understand what everybody is laughing about. I mean, I think this is really serious. I don’t think there is any reason to be making fun of what we have done. I mean, maybe I shouldn’t care, but, I don’t know. I mean, it just doesn’t seem right.

After a few moments of silence, facilitator Art said, “You know, I’m glad you pointed that out because sometimes I think we do go a little overboard on things.” However, Art then attempted to deflect Carlos’ challenge by saying, “I think that sometimes it might look like people are making fun of somebody, but we aren’t really doing that.” He explained that “when Jarrod was talking a few minutes ago and a couple people were laughing over in this direction (gesturing toward Cindy and Nathan), I can bet you that it wasn’t that they were making fun of him.”

Carlos, still resisting said, “But still, I don’t know, it just didn’t seem that respectful.” Cindy at first excused her behavior by saying “Nathan and I may have whispered a thing or two back and forth but it wasn’t like we were making fun of Jarrod or anything.” But then she admitted, “I think you’re right, it really wasn’t too respectful” and “I think we do have to work on that.”

The batterers picked up where the facilitators left off by claiming that joking played an important role. Bob, a White man, spoke first, “With the joking around and stuff, it’s never like we’re laughing at you, man.” and Dave, another White man added “It’s always *with* you.” Bob then explained that their laughter resulted from knowing each other so well. Nathan, a White

man, then said, referring to Henry, “It’s like old Teapot over there. It’s not like we’re making fun of him . . . a lot of times I think when we joke around it’s, like, camaraderie, you know.”

Another man gave an affirming “Yeah,” and others—including the facilitators—agreed. “And another thing,” said Paul, a middle class White man, “I think that we joke a lot of time, just to ease the stress. It’s like a release.” Art, the facilitator, agreed and added, “Sometimes a lot of tension builds up and it just has to come out somehow” in “tears or in laughter.”

Here we can see what happened when a participant appeared to challenge the joking culture, rather than a particular joke. The facilitator Art began a defense of the joking culture by avoiding addressing Carlos’ observation that people were “making fun of what we have done” and instead insisted that they were not making fun of Nathan. Cindy agreed but said it “wasn’t too respectful” and they needed to work on it. White participants affirmed the facilitators’ point, and denied that branding Henry, a Black man, with his weapon, was making fun of him. The men, with the help of Art, also pointed to the culture’s emotion work functions, implying that humor was an appropriate way abusive men should deal with emotions. Carlos did not challenge the joking culture again. He spent much of his last five months in the BIP smiling and laughing.

### **CONCLUSION**

Before meetings began, the men’s joking subverted seriousness and the program’s feminist philosophy while signifying opposition to authority. When the authorities arrived and initiated the meetings, the men were primed to bring playfulness into the new situation, which they accomplished by reading humor into others’ behavior, using their bodies to make public such interpretations, and inserting jokes into the ongoing dialog. Joking during the regular meetings often derailed facilitators’ attempts to get the men to talk about their feelings and

violence. Staff usually deferred to the joking, believing it helped the men open up. Although occasionally challenged, facilitators and men jointly preserved the culture.

Joking not only brought the men together, however, it also divided them along racial lines. White men played leading roles as joke solicitors and joke tellers while men of color played bit parts in the comedic drama, affirming jokes with laughter and smiles and occasionally adding one-liners. White men used humor to protect other White men from facilitator prying while targeting men of color with teasing and nicknames. White men also occasionally alluded to telling racist jokes in front of men of color and jokingly reproduced racial stereotypes. The facilitators and director did not challenge or ever talk about the racialized joking.

Much but not all contemporary evaluation research suggests BIP's do not significantly decrease men's violence against women. Research also suggests that participants of color are more likely than Whites to feel alienated, drop out, and eventually be re-arrested. However, little is known about what goes on inside BIPs to produce such results. Most qualitative research focuses on how the programs allegedly transform the men. Based on completers' accounts, researchers argue that BIPs' create "safe zones" (Silvergleid and Mankowski 2006) that enable the men to let down their defenses and engage in transformation. In contrast, my analyses suggest participants used BIPs to safely create a masculinist, resistant, and racialized joking culture. This joking culture likely played a role in undermining program effectiveness.

In addition to undermining facilitators' therapeutic guidance, subverting seriousness, and creating a racial status hierarchy, the joking culture emotionally conditioned participants in ways that likely contributed to continued violence against women. Smith and Kleinman (1989) show how medical students' joking culture conditioned them to view some patients in derogatory ways, which limited empathy and contributed to poor bedside manner. A similar process likely

occurs with BIP participants. Participants' joking often hindered empathy with victims of violence and women more generally while boosting their own feelings of worth. Such joking maintained social psychological conditions that play a role in men's violence against women.

Participating in the BIP put the men in an emotional bind. Many felt shame for having harmed women they claimed to love, anger and powerlessness for being coerced to pay for and attend the program, and fear of incarceration. The small group culture conditioned the men to use joking to suppress but not reflect on or talk with others about undesired emotions. Research suggests that due to their victimization as children, batterers are prone to shame (Dutton 1995) and that not acknowledging shame experienced in domestic relationships fosters relationship violence (Retzinger 1991). In addition, men who feel they have less power in their relationships with women and who adhere to traditional gender ideologies are more likely than others to enact masculinity, in a compensatory fashion, by abusing women (Atkinson, Greenstein, and Lang 2005). The BIP's joking culture reproduced traditional gender ideology while conditioning the men to avoid talking about feelings of powerlessness and shame.

If men in relations with women manage their own feelings of shame, anger, fear, and powerless through joking, is this not better than abusing women? Probably, but joking and abuse are not mutually exclusive. In the only study I found that focuses on joking and violence, Ximena Arriaga (2002:600) found that all of the college students who indicated on a survey that current romantic partners physically abused them also reported "they had been the target of at least 15 physically forceful joking behaviors." Arriaga (2002:600) found that 32% percent reported "'jokingly' being kicked, beat up, or struck with a weapon." The remaining 68% reported what Arriaga categorized as "ambiguous" behaviors which may or may not have been abusive, including being nudged, pushed, strongly pushed, grabbed and shook, slapped, punched,

bit, or struck with a non-weapon or projectile. The establishment and affirmation of a masculinist joking culture in batterer intervention programs is not in the best interests of victims.

If victims of domestic violence understood that their abusers were allowed to create resistant joking cultures inside of BIPs, they might feel differently about such programs. In-depth interview studies with victims of domestic violence indicate that if their abusers participate in batterer intervention programs, they feel safer, better about themselves, and more informed about domestic violence (Austin and Dankwort 1999; Gregory and Erez 2002). One study found that the single most important predictor of whether residents of battered women's shelters returned to their abusers was if their abusers sought treatment (Fisher and Gondolf 1988). While relatively limited, this evidence backs up victims' advocates concerns about BIPs.

The previously mentioned unpublished evaluation study of the program I observed found that 42% of program completers' victims stayed with their abusers, compared to only 14% of dropouts' victims. The researchers also found that while victim interviews revealed the program was ineffective at stopping violence, police reports indicated that only 11% of graduates were recharged compared to 42% of dropouts. Graduates' victims were apparently less likely to call the police or press charges, perhaps because they lost faith in the system. This BIP was thus an effective "safe zone" for batterers, protecting them from both incarceration and divorce.

My study's limitations point to the need for more research. While there is anecdotal evidence that similar joking cultures exist in other BIPs, researchers interested in generalizability need to use or collect other kinds of data as well employ random sampling techniques. Furthermore, one should not assume that all joking necessarily undermines effectiveness. The present study suggests that it might depend on jokes' content, emotional functions, and placement in unfolding dialog. Comparative ethnographic research of joking cultures in

effective and ineffective BIPs might prove insightful. In addition, while I tried my best to document verbatim exactly what happened in meetings, videoing BIP meetings would generate more nuanced data on interactional exchanges and the embodiment of humor (see Katz 1996), although such recording might minimize the most resistant and racialized forms of joking.

As Gary Fine (2006) argues, attempted solutions to social problems can have unintended consequences. They can be ineffective, counterproductive, or spawn other social problems. My analyses suggest that ethnographic research can uncover the processes through which such efforts may unintentionally harm those whom such efforts aim to protect. Batterer intervention programs were developed and instituted by battered women's advocates who believed something should be done to stop the silent epidemic. The director of the program left her first husband after he hit her and dedicated her life to stopping men's violence. The facilitators were personally touched by friends and family members who had been the victims of batterers. And the participants themselves often had witnessed their own fathers' violence against their mothers and were sometimes victims themselves. They wanted to stop hurting those they loved. The joking culture, however, offered an easy way to feel good about themselves without seriously addressing why they abused women.

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