

Domestic Violence Information Community

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Catherine Pyun

San Jose State University

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Abstract

Domestic violence (DV) has lasting and detrimental effects that permeate well beyond an instance of violence. DV survivors are a unique information community with complex information needs and barriers due to the risk-filled situations through which survivors move daily. The purpose of this study is to describe the DV information community including the information-seeking behavior, needs and barriers of DV survivors. The article further assesses how well the information needs of survivors are currently met by available sources. The research methods employed include a review of the scholarly literature and community-based information sources for this community. LIS research of the information needs of DV survivors has progressed over the last 30+ years. Key researchers have built upon the work of colleagues and expanded the scope of the ELIS body of work. Over time, the LIS field and the larger DV information community has gained understanding of the specific situational needs of survivors of violence. Research findings are distilled into recommendations for LIS professionals to better meet the information needs of DV survivors and the larger DV information community.

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Introduction

Domestic violence (DV) is a pernicious problem in our society impacting the survivor well beyond the instances of violence and permeating into all areas of their lives. According to the US Centers for Disease Control, 1 in 4 women and 1 in 7 men have experienced severe physical violence by an intimate partner (Black, 2011). This statistic does not include other forms of abuse such as stalking, psychological/emotional, sexual, and economic abuse. DV affects people of all socioeconomic backgrounds, education levels, geographic areas and gender identities though certain segments of the population are impacted more than others (Dewdney, Harris & Lockerby, 1993).

Durrance defined information communities as “constituencies united by a common interest in building and increasing access to a set of dynamic, linked and varying information resources” (2001, p.164). The varied members of the DV information community are unified by an understanding of the importance of connecting survivors of violence to resources in service of a path to safety. Members of this community have unique roles in a web of services and sources of support for survivors of violence including: informal networks of survivors such as trusted friends, family, and community members; human service providers including non-profit/shelter advocates; the police; and other survivors.

This paper will examine the information seeking behavior of DV survivors including needs and barriers through a literature review of scholarly research. An assessment of the information sources available to the community follows. The paper ends with the role that LIS professionals can take.

The term “domestic violence” also encompasses abuse of the elderly and children in a

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household. Throughout this paper, “domestic violence” will be used interchangeably with the more specific label, “intimate partner violence” (IPV), when referring to abuse that happens within an adult intimate partnership.

Literature Review

By examining the literature historically, the changes observed over time show that the LIS field has built upon previous work for a deeper understanding of the information seeking behavior and needs of IPV survivors.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical frameworks that have guided LIS research about DV survivors are foundational in ELIS (Savolainen, 2010). Dewdney, et al. framed their analysis with Dervin’s (1983) “view of information as that which helps people progress through a situation” (p. 33). Dunne’s (2002) research applies Allen’s (1996) “person-in-situation” model that also accounts for an individual’s “situational” factors affecting help seeking (Dunne, 2002). “As situations become increasingly violent, help-seeking behavior becomes increasingly intense” (Dunne, 2002, p.351). Westbrook & Gonzalez’s (2011) work further builds upon Dunne’s approach by expanding upon with the “person-in *progressive* situation” model. As violence progresses, information gaps, the survivor’s response, and priorities of particular types of information needed also change (Westbrook & Gonzalez, 2011).

Information Needs and Barriers

The categorization of survivor information needs has both expanded and refined over time in the literature. Harris’ early study reported two general categories of information need: 1) community resource information and 2) information helping survivors understand themselves

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and their relationships (1988). In a subsequent 2001 study, categories of information needs became more specific and included counseling/emotional support, shelter, removing partner, arresting partner, health care, legal issues, safety and financial concerns (Harris, et al.).

Westbrook's (2008b) study was rooted in the "person-in-progressive situation model" and information needs were linked to specific situations a survivor might be experience in the process of leaving. For example, during the "affirming abuse/first police contact" situation, the information needs are "understanding social and legal norm of abuse" and using the criminal justice system (Westbrook, bb, p.244).

Westbrook's (2008b) study on crisis information needs of DV survivors, describes barriers survivors faced when seeking information. These included readiness to name the abuse; the normalizing of abuse due to generational trauma; documentation and legal barriers that include having insufficient documentation to "prove" the abuse; minimizing of abuse, victim-blaming or pressure from personal networks and larger community to stay in abusive relationship; and the de-prioritization of information seeking while a survivor is experiencing life threatening violence. In another study, Westbrook & Gonzalez categorize barriers as internal factors (embarrassment, fear) or external factors (safety, service capacity) (2011).

Information Sources

Harris, et al. (2001) study reports that survivors seek information from the following sources: general crisis service, informal networks, shelters, counseling, DV organizations, child-focused services, and other aid services. Because of concerns of how others will react to their situation, safety concerns, and the stigma of abuse, survivors tend to utilize informal networks such as friends and family as the first and most frequent information source (Dunne, 2002).

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Westbrook (2015b) reorganizes information sources into 3 categories: 1) public agencies, both governmental (police and courts) and non-governmental (non-profits, food banks); 2) information objects, both digital and physical (bulletin boards and books); and 3) social networks (friends, family, co-workers). This categorization allows for the inclusion of digital technologies and sources.

Westbrook's recent research explores digital information sources. The anonymity afforded users on the Internet makes digital sources desirable for survivors where privacy is a big concern. Digital sources often complement resources that already exist such as non-profit and hotline websites (Westbrook & Gonzalez, 2011). Online support groups and other digital sources of support are also easily accessible in terms of time and distance (Westbrook & Gonzalez, 2011). Westbrook's most recent study focuses on the Question & Answer websites and analyzes posts from 5 different sites (2015b). The crowdsourcing of information from the larger community is a new aspect to DV information provision. An interesting aspect of this source is the survivor's "desire for anonymity meet[ing] the desire to share" (Westbrook, 2015b, p.612).

Methodology

Having worked at a DV shelter and other DV advocacy programs, I began with working knowledge of the domestic violence field though predominantly through an advocate's lens. I started my research by delving into the scholarly, peer-reviewed sources on information seeking behavior of this community to inform an initial literature review. I began by searching the Library Lit and LISTA databases for articles specific to the DV community. The bibliographies of relevant articles were used to find additional sources. Such articles were found in peer-reviewed LIS journals including Library & Information Science Research, The Reference

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Librarian, Public Library Quarterly, and Journal of the Association for Information Science & Technology.

Because the help-seeking behavior of DV survivors has been studied through a number of disciplines, I also searched the Academic Search Complete database for relevant scholarly sources outside of the LIS field. Approached by social scientists, psychologists and social workers, scholarly journals such as Violence Against Women and Feminism & Psychology provided additional peer-reviewed sources.

Through Internet searches using the Google search engine, community-based sources including user-generated sources and online community sites were found. Other community-based sources included websites of non-profit and advocacy organizations, and shelters. These were found based on my past familiarity with the field and the landscape of service organizations on the national and statewide levels.

Discussion

“Useful” Information

What if the survivor does not or cannot act on the information that is provided? What if the information does not “fix” the abuse situation? “Librarians are taught to ensure that the information they provide is ‘useful,’ but the very ideal of a ‘solution’ assumes a social norm that, for the survivor may not be realistic or even valued” (Westbrook, 2015a, p.13). The decision of how to utilize information, whether to move to action, or what is valuable in an information interaction is dependent on the survivor and their given situation. “The ‘usefulness’ of any piece of information or information channel is inextricably intertwined with respect for survivors’ personal situations” (Westbrook, 2015b, p.602). The emphasis only on the utility or use of

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information overshadows other aspects of an information interaction that can be just as impactful if not more for someone experiencing violence.

Approach and demeanor. An important factor that affects whether or not a survivor has a positive association with a particular information source involves the manner in which information is provided. A source's "respect for and understanding of survivors' abuse situation are essential to developing trust in the information interaction" (Finn, et al., 2011, p.936). Even when the information provided is not relevant to their immediate needs, survivors find the demeanor of the person providing the information as being more important (Harris, et al., 2001). This illustrates the importance of a non-judgmental approach, openness, and respect that includes believing the survivor at their word. Also, the perpetuation of common information myths regarding DV often affects many information interactions and lead to well-meaning people engaging in victim-blaming or blocking the information-seeking process because of their stereotypes about abuse and abuse victims (Westbrook, 2009).

Role of privacy. Within the context of the DV information community, confidentiality and privacy is also a key component in the provision of service and information. Lack of privacy also becomes a potential information barrier. Privacy is inextricably tied to keeping a survivor safe whether they are in a shelter, still living with their abuser, or living on their own. In each of these instances, keeping their location and activities private is important so the abuser is not able to find them or use any related information against them for further control and manipulation. Further, telling others that they are abused brings much shame and embarrassment for survivors. These feelings become strong deterrents for reaching out for help (Fugate, 2005, p.305). Confidentiality also ensures the survivor is able to choose when to disclose their status as a

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survivor. “Such control engenders [further] trust in the information content” (Westbrook, 2015b, p. 612).

Information Source Types

Information sources that survivors utilized for help seeking include a range of entities. The following are sources that survivors access from most frequent to least: general crisis services including police; informal help or personal network of survivor (friends, family, community); DV shelters; counseling services; general DV service organizations; and child – focused services (Harris, 2001). With the Internet and emerging technologies, digital and online sources are becoming more relevant the in the information landscape. Westbrook’s (2015b) categorization of information sources is inclusive of digital technologies and provides a structure to examine the information sources that survivors access: 1) public agencies, 2) information objects both digital and physical, and 3) social networks.

Public agencies. Public agencies are comprised of both governmental (police) and non-governmental organizations (non-profits, shelters and libraries) (Westbrook, 2015b). The information provided to survivors through these sources range in delivery method and how well the needs of survivors are understood by each source type.

Police are often called upon when situations of violence escalate and there is a threat of injury. Upon contact with the police, the survivor receives information in a high-stress crisis encounter. Though there are officers who are effective in responding to DV situations, the majority lack training which discourages the help-seeking process of survivors. Officers do not provide adequate information about survivor rights, they minimize the severity of the abuse, and victim-blame (Harris, 1998; Harris, et al. 2001; Westbrook, 2009). Law enforcement e-

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government websites also are a source of information for survivors yet there are access issues including language barriers and cyber-safety issues (Westbrook, 2008a). The trust in this information source diminishes with encounters like these.

Non-governmental sources like non-profits and shelters are a source well utilized by survivors of DV (Harris, 2001). Their services often are backed by the most training and understanding of survivor realities and barriers. Survivors found information interactions with this source as meeting that their safety and emotional needs in addition to the advocacy for finding appropriate services and help (Harris, et al. 2001). Even so, issues like lack of funding that limit the availability of shelters beds, access issues, waiting lists, overcrowding and limited hours of operation are barriers to help-seeking (Westbrook, 2009; Harris, et al., 2001). To augment their services and meet the high need of abuse victims, many shelters and DV advocacy organizations have an online presence. These websites provide information on DV, crisis numbers and offer support through comments sections in blog posts and bulletin boards. Cyber security is also addressed through pop-up messages that offer on-the-spot digital literacy with warnings of possible monitoring and tracking (The National Domestic Violence Hotline, n.d.). The Internet and digital technology continues to be an integral part of our everyday lives. “Today’s young survivors and abusers take interactive online information exchanges as a given” (Westbrook, 2015b, p.613). The continued provision and revision of online sources is an important piece of meeting survivor information needs.

Information objects. Information objects include physical objects such as books and digital objects such as online bulletin boards (Westbrook, 2015b). The following focuses on the digital objects like bulletin boards and websites that are created by online communities.

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Online support groups and communities overcome barriers of time, distance, mobility and social status”(Westbrook & Gonzalez, 2011, p.141). The therapeutic effect of posting content online also contributes to why online sites are digital spaces that survivors flock to while healing from the effects of abuse (Shaw, et al., 2006). As emotional support is a highly sought after type of assistance by survivors, online community spaces meet this need. (Harris, et al., 2001). One example of such an online community is Fort Refuge (n.d.) created by and for survivors of violence as a safe digital space to create community. The website offers an online bulletin board for various violence related topics, chat rooms, and pages with user-generated content. The user-generated content includes personal stories, artwork and resources that users find helpful in breaking the isolation that abuse often generates. Users are more likely to contribute user-generated content if they identify with the online community in question (Flanagin, Hocevar & Samahito, 2014). The validation, relatability, connectedness and anonymity engender trust in this information source and are reflected in the high number of registered members (Fort Refuge, n.d.).

Social networks. Friends, family, and community members are one of the most utilized information sources (Harris, 1988; Dewdney, et al., 1993; Harris, et al., 2001; Westbrook, 2008b). Because of the sensitive nature and real dangers of disclosing abuse, survivors risk a lot to reach out for help illustrating the high rate of disclosure to trusted friends and family. The manner way in which social networks respond to a disclosure of abuse correlates to factors such as gender of person who is told and their relationship to the victim. Male family members tend to be less utilized as sources of help as opposed to female friends and co-workers (Edwards, et al., 2012). Friends and family were cited as being simultaneously the most helpful form of support

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and also the least helpful demonstrating the complexity of relationships and their affect on information interactions (Sylaska & Edwards, 2014). Of those in a survivors informal network who do provide support after a disclosure of abuse, emotional support is the most common type of help offered, followed by connections to formal help, and a small percentage offering tangible aid to victims (Beeble, et al., 2008). How helpful the survivor finds the support is an area for further research.

In the DV service field, there is a growing understanding that survivors will turn to informal networks first when abuse happens. In response to this, organizations such as Creative Interventions have developed tools for informal networks to support survivors through community-based responses to violence (Creative Interventions, n.d.). For some communities, the utilization of law enforcement is one fraught with fear of criminalization. Also, more formal support channels may not be able to meet survivor needs due to limited funding, lack of shelter beds, or training issues (Westbrook, 2009). Another example of a community-based group is the Korean American Coalition to End Domestic Abuse (KACEDA), a volunteer run group that focuses on community education campaigns, outreach and mobilization to change cultural and social norms that allow for violence to occur (KACEDA, n.d.). KACEDA represents the application of user-generated content for a community-based response to violence.

Conclusion

The information sources available and accessed by survivors range in their efficacy. Barriers to these sources often revolve around training issues, a lack of understanding of the shifting situations of an abuse survivor, and information myths about DV that hinder information interactions. Efforts within each of these information source groups to overcome these

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information barriers are yet not a pervasive occurrence. This is in part because the primary role of these sources focuses on other aspects of survivor support. LIS professionals with the training and understanding of information-seeking processes may have a role in ensuring the information interactions for survivors are more successful.

Role of LIS Professionals

Librarianship has been changing to accommodate the shifting LIS landscape. More and more, librarians are called upon to fill new roles such as educator, curator, experimenter, connector, and beacon (Murphy, 2013). Meeting the information needs of DV survivors is no exception. Another role to include is “information advocate.” LIS professionals are in a position to help patrons discover and pull from many information sources and to learn how to manage the varied information source types they will encounter. Librarians are primed to advocate for the information needs of DV survivors, more specifically, through approach, policies and procedures, training, partnerships, and programs.

Information as empowerment. An approach to information assistance that respects and supports survivor self-determination, is the “empowerment counseling” model. Often utilized by DV service providers, this model “values information as the primary resource for survivors to use in making their own life decisions” (Westbrook, 2015a, p. 19). Instead of trying to fix someone’s problem with a piece of information, an advocate assists with identifying, planning, and acquiring tools towards a patron’s self-identified information goals. It is a relationship built upon trust, respect and mutual learning. The process is iterative and increases a library’s social capital through the relationships and trust of patrons.

Policies & procedures. Safeguarding privacy helps all patrons feel safe in asking for

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information assistance on sensitive topics (Garnar, 2016). For public access computers, ALA guidelines (2016) state: “Appropriate policies and procedures [should] protect the privacy of patrons and their computer and network activity in the library.” The guidelines further suggest specific procedures such as anonymizing and in some cases destroying both physical and digital transaction logs, sign-up sheets and check out records (ALA, 2016). Steps such as these ensure that survivors visiting the library can do so with peace of mind. Their tracks won’t be recorded or accessed by their abusers. They are able to search for resources in a safe physical and digital setting. Because of the stigma of abuse, they also are able to control who knows about their status as a survivor. Self-determination and agency is extremely important for someone who has had many aspects of their life dictated for them by another.

Training. Training library staff about DV is a highly beneficial step in laying the groundwork to better serve patrons in crisis. Patron interactions will improve as will the confidence of library staff on what to do if a difficult reference question or situation arises. With this training, library managers can engage with staff in conversation in creating policies around how best to serve survivors. Staff is better informed for collection development when they further understand survivor needs. The process of organizing trainings builds relationships with DV service staff and other community information sources.

Partnerships. Staff training is a good entry point to build relationships with community-based organizations and other entities providing support for survivors. Building local partnerships allows for library staff to understand the role of service providers and in turn for other organizations to learn how libraries can augment their work. Building these relationships lays the foundation for a coordinated community-based resource network. Through these

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relationships, librarians can also offer support for both governmental and non-governmental organizations for improving the information interactions and artifacts that they provide for survivors.

Programming. When developing programs for survivors, it is important to remember that programming does not need to be directly geared for the survivor. Many have children who are with them while information seeking and they utilize children's programming. Job seeking, resume building, and financial literacy are skills that women who suddenly have control over their own lives are seeking to build. Lastly, community education and outreach can include participation in October's DV awareness month. This also advertises the library as a safe space that understands the needs of survivors.

In Closing

The DV information community is a diverse web of organizations and people who are connected in their collective goal of supporting survivors of violence. The complexity of information needs of survivors demonstrates how crucial it is for the members of this community to understand the unique information behaviors and practices of survivors. With the reach and connecting power of the Internet, the on-the-ground service knowledge of advocates, the LIS expertise of librarians, and the relationships and community-based knowledge in a survivor's informal networks, there is great potential for the increased quality and access to information for survivors of violence. The pieces are there for a more coordinated web of resources and a safety net for some of the most vulnerable members of our community.

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