

LITERATURE REVIEW: DOMESTIC VIOLENCE INFORMATION COMMUNITY

Literature Review: Domestic Violence 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).

Durance 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 for survivors of abuse and include: survivors of abuse and their trusted friends and family; community and faith leaders; human service providers including non-profit/shelter advocates and social service agencies; the health care system; lawyers or legal advocates; and the police.

In order to understand better understand the DV information community, a review of peer-reviewed literature as relates to the information seeking behavior follows. By examining the research historically, the changes observed in the literature show that the LIS field has built a deeper understanding of the information seeking behavior and needs of IPV survivors. The review examines what has changed over time in literature on the information behavior of this

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community including terminology, theoretical framework, information needs & barriers, information sources, role of privacy, and gaps. The term “domestic violence” also encompasses abuse of the elderly and children in a household. For purposes of this review, “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.

### **Review of Literature**

#### **Terminology**

One of the earliest LIS articles specifically addressing DV survivors was a study by Harris (1988) mapping the information needs of “battered women.” As late as 1993, the further exclusive term “wife assault” is used (Dewdney, Harris, & Lockerby). A transition begins as shown through Dunne’s article that uses the terms “domestic violence” in conjunction with “battered women” (2002). Most recently, Westbrook’s research has shifted to the use of “interpersonal violence (IPV)” which is neither gender discriminating nor prescribes marriage status (2008). “Originally, IPV was recognized as the severe physical abuse of wives by their husbands, but now...the victim may be a person of the same sex, a date, an unmarried person, or a person in a terminated relationship” (Finn & Westbrook, 2011, p.938).

#### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical frameworks that have guided LIS research in this area of research are foundational in ELIS (Savolainen, 2010). Dewdney, et al. (1993) identified the interchangeable use of “information” and “help” in survivor interviews when relaying their experiences in seeking help related to the abuse they were experiencing. Dewdney, et al. framed their analysis with Dervin’s (1983) “view of information as that which helps people progress through a

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situation” (p. 33). Dunne’s (2002) research applies Allen’s (1996) “person-in-situation” model that also accounts for an individual’s “situational” factors that affect their information-seeking behavior (Dunne, 2002). “As situations become increasingly violent, help-seeking behavior becomes increasingly intense” (Dunne, 2002, p.351). Westbrook & Gonzalez’s (2001) work further builds upon Dunne’s approach by expanding upon with the “person-in *progressive* situation” model. This model takes into consideration that 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**

“Survivors navigate between what is and what might be. That potential for significant change in their lives creates information needs concerning both the immediate basics of daily living and the decisions required for long-term change” (Westbrook, 2008, p.109). The categorization of information needs of survivors has both expanded and been refined over time in the literature. Harris’ study interviewing 40 domestic violence shelter residents reported two categories of information need: 1) information about community resources and 2) information helping survivors understand themselves and their relationships (1988). In a subsequent 2001 study, Harris, et al. interviewed 105 abuse survivors. The categories of information needs expanded to include counseling/emotional support, shelter, removing partner, arresting partner, health care, legal issues, safety and financial concerns (Harris, et al., 2001). Westbrook’s (2008) study utilized two data collection methods: interviews that were expanded to include shelter staff and police perspective, and analysis of survivor posts from an online bulletin board style website. Because the research was rooted in the “person-in-progressive situation model,” information

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needs were linked to a particular situation a survivor might be experiencing. 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, 2008, p.244). When “preparing to separate on a long-term basis,” survivor information needs would be along the lines of legal information, employment, housing and “self-efficacy growth” (Westbrook, 2008, p.244). Linking to the situation a survivor is experiencing provides further information with which service providers and LIS professionals can better meet information needs.

In Westbrook’s (2008) study on crisis information needs of DV survivors, she describes the barriers survivors faced when seeking information. They include 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 categorizes barriers as internal factors (embarrassment, fear) or external factors (safety, service capacity) (2011).

### **Role of privacy and confidentiality**

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 confidentiality is also a potential information barrier in multiple ways. Privacy is inextricably tied to keeping a survivor of abuse 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

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manipulation. Further, abuse is associated with shame for survivors and many have expressed embarrassment. “Shame and embarrassment were key reasons many victims gave for not reaching out for help from all the systems we examined” (Fugate, 2005, p.305). Being diligent about confidentiality also allows the survivor to choose when to disclose their abuse. “Such control engenders trust in the information content” (Westbrook, 2015, p. 612).

### **Information Sources**

The question of where survivors go for help is a big piece of the DV information community landscape. 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. An important factor that affects whether or not a survivor found a particular source of information is useful, involves the demeanor of the person providing the information. “Help seeking depends to a large degree on the resources available and the manner in which these resources are deployed” (Harris, et al., 2001, p.127). 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). Westbrook (2015) organizes 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.

The advent of the Internet and shifts in telecommunications has rendered some sources as obsolete and others as more relevant. Dewdney, et al. (1993) wrote of telephone directories as

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being a source whereas they are harder to come by today. 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 (2015). The crowdsourcing of information from the larger community is a new aspect to DV information provision. An interesting aspect of this "hybrid source" is the survivor's "desire for anonymity meet[ing] the desire to share" (Westbrook, 2015, p.612). No other information source provides this particular combination.

### **Gaps**

Though spanning 30+ years, LIS research specific to the DV information community still is not extensive. A particular gap in the literature involves the lack of representation of queer and transgender survivors. Further research exploring the particular information needs and barriers of queer and transgender survivors would be beneficial in serving an often under-represented part of this community. Another gap involves the theoretical frameworks within which past research has been conducted. There is any underlying assumption that the only path to safety is to leave. The gap in the information available and field-wide push for survivors to leave the relationship can be can be a information barrier for those who want to stay. In a Chicago Women's Health Risk Study, findings reported "some women said that they did not go to an agency because they weren't going to leave the relationship with their partner. It appears that these women may

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believe that to seek help from an agency or counselor they must end the relationship” (Fugate, 2005, p.300).

### **Conclusion**

LIS literature has progressed over the last 30+ years to understand the information needs of survivors of domestic violence. Key researchers have built upon the work of colleagues who have come before them and expanded the scope of the ELIS body of work. Over time, the field has gained understanding of the specific situational needs of survivors of violence resulting in more applicable models and new paths for further LIS research. For LIS practitioners and librarians, this base of knowledge is useful in developing library policies that facilitate information seeking for survivors and to spur ideas for more LIS engagement in the DV information community. DV situations are often a matter of life and death. The complexity of information needs of survivors demonstrates how crucial it is for the LIS field to assist the DV information community in understanding the unique information behaviors and practices of this population.

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