



## Beyond Skepticism or Compassion: A Critical Pedagogy of Gender-Based Violence

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Gender-based violence is one of the most pressing social issues of our times. Yet undergraduate students often approach the problem from a place of either skepticism or compassion. Even when presented with startling empirical data and poignant first-person narratives, students tend to remain entrenched in these polarized—and frankly unproductive—positions. In this chapter, I discuss how experiential learning (EL) offers a pathway for deepened intellectual engagement by helping students to situate their own lives in relation to gender-based violence. This chapter is a case study of an EL project that I ran in a Sociology of Gender course. I partnered with a local domestic violence resource agency, and so I wrote the syllabus with a focus on this substantive issue. The EL project was comprised of multiple components, each of which enabled students to expand and apply their knowledge. In this chapter, I first describe the logistics of the EL activities, and then I discuss how this sustained engagement across different modalities pushed students to re-situate their

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own lives in relation to gender-based violence. Students reported that for the first time, they saw violence operating in the lives of their friends, family members, and even in their own families of origin. Prior to this pedagogical experience, many had simply not noticed. To be sure, this intellectual process was decidedly not about personal disclosure or therapeutic recuperation. However, by locating themselves *within* social systems of gendered violence—as opposed to maintaining positions as *outside* observers—students created richer knowledge.

This dude got a gun pointed to my boyfriend's head. I've got a restraining order on him. The police told me to call you when I see him. I gave you the address. Can't you just send somebody out there? I'm scared. He's got a gun. I can't talk. I can't talk. I'm in a bad situation.

—LaShonda Childs, phone call to 911 dispatcher

LaShonda Childs had been trying to sever ties with Trendell Goodwin, her ex-boyfriend, for many months. Eleven years her senior, Goodwin had bit, hit, slapped, burned, and held Childs captive at gunpoint. He had harassed her by social media and phone—texting or calling sometimes dozens of times a day, according to her mother—long after she broke up with him. Childs filed a personal protection order in February 2018, but she recanted two months later, saying that he was a good man even though he had made mistakes.<sup>1</sup> Despite evidence of severe violence and with the intervention of law enforcement, Childs had not been successful in deterring Goodwin's escalating aggression. On a Tuesday afternoon, Goodwin confronted Childs and her new boyfriend on the west side of Dayton. It was early October, just three days before Childs' eighteenth birthday. As Childs and her boyfriend attempted to drive away from the conflict, Goodwin fired a gun into the passenger side of the Chevy Impala. After a bullet struck her in the head, her boyfriend raced her to the nearby Grandview Medical Center. She died later that night.

One of my students told me about Childs' death the following week in class. We happened to be touring the Artemis Center, a domestic violence resource agency located in the heart of downtown Dayton, for class that day. I had scheduled the field trip to illuminate the intersection between our intellectual work on gender-based violence and its real-world connections. But I did not anticipate just how much those lines would blur over the course of the semester. My student had grown up on the same side of the city as Childs, and she was just a couple years older than her. It was a

case that hit close to home. As we were touring the Artemis Center, she wondered if Childs had ever sought services there. Our guide could not reveal this information due to client confidentiality, but the question itself revealed how our classroom space was not insulated from the horrors of violence.

Media coverage of Childs' death focused on a haunting social media post that she had made less than two weeks earlier.<sup>2</sup> Embedded in a long statement, she wrote, "If you see the signs don't ignore it y'all. Domestic violence is real not just in movies." Childs had an acute understanding of the reality of domestic violence. Yet with some notable exceptions, my undergraduate students do not understand its gritty reality when they arrive in my classes. They tend to approach the issue of gender-based violence from a place of either skepticism or compassion. Even when presented with startling empirical data and poignant first-person narratives, students tend to remain entrenched in these polarized—and frankly unproductive—positions. In this chapter, I discuss how EL offers a pathway for deepened intellectual engagement by helping students to situate their own lives in relation to gender-based violence. My students reported that for the first time, they saw violence operating in the lives of their friends, family members, and even in their own families of origin. Prior to this pedagogical experience, they simply had not noticed. To be sure, this process was decidedly not about personal disclosure or therapeutic recuperation. However, by locating themselves *within* social systems of gender-based violence—as opposed to maintaining positions as *external* observers—students created critical feminist knowledge.

## GENDERING VIOLENCE

Gender-based violence is a pervasive social problem. I define it as any sort of interpersonal, institutional, or symbolic violence that works to discipline individual's gendered selves. It may manifest as hate crimes, sexual assault, reproductive coercion, or relationship abuse. The World Health Organization estimates that 35% of women worldwide have experienced physical or sexual violence in their lifetime (WHO, 2013). In the United States, nearly 50% of female homicide victims are killed by a former or current intimate partner (Catalano, Smith, Snyder, & Rand, 2009), and young women who are racial/ethnic minorities are at disproportionate risk of lethal violence within an intimate relationship (Petrosky et al., 2017). The adverse effects of gender-based violence are myriad, including

economic, health, and social consequences. Yet while women and children comprise the vast majority of victims, men and boys also experience gender-based violence. For instance, sexualized hazing among teenaged boys maintains rigid hierarchies of masculinity through violent acts. In this chapter, I concentrate primarily on intimate partner violence (IPV), sometimes known as domestic violence (DV), because this was the focus of our community partner.

### CURRICULAR MECHANICS

I built this experiential learning project into a 300-level Sociology of Gender course. It was comprised of a three-pronged curriculum: (a) a tailored syllabus; (b) community engagement; and (c) project-based learning. The course enrolled 32 students who were largely social science or humanities majors, and we also had a sizeable minority of business, engineering, and education majors. The project could be scaled up for larger classes, although I would recommend against implementing it in large lecture-style classes, as the instructor needs to maintain bandwidth to do frequent check-ins with students due to the difficult content. I connected with the executive director of the Artemis Center several months before the start of the semester. Once she was committed to working with us, I designed the syllabus to focus significantly, although not exclusively, on gender-based violence. Students read cutting edge sociological research on gender-based violence, and in lectures, I directed them to consider competing theories on the role of violence in maintaining gender-based oppression. We watched the PBS Frontline documentary, *A Death in St. Augustine*, which tracks the often hidden problem of police officer-involved domestic homicides. My discussion below emerges from my vantage point as the instructor, and I also draw on students' voices based on their submitted coursework. Their identities are concealed with pseudonyms and by scrambling any potentially traceable details.

Community engagement was the second component of this EL project. The objective was to help students see how professionals and organizations in the community respond to gender-based violence. We had two guest speakers come to class, and we did a field trip to the Artemis Center. Our guest speakers were the executive director of the Artemis Center and a seasoned officer in the police department. Historically, feminist advocacy organizations and law enforcement agencies have often had contentious relationships with one another. In Dayton,

their working relationships are reportedly strong, but nonetheless, these two representatives offered competing perspectives on gender-based violence. I intentionally selected them to demonstrate to students that organizational structures and priorities impact tremendously how professionals conceptualize the issue, its victims, and its perpetrators. Our speakers attended class on different days, and the students swiftly picked up on the different ideologies at play. Because this class was comprised largely of advanced learners, they were prepared to engage with points of evidence that sometimes appeared incompatible. In turn, we used those disjunctures as teachable moments to think more deeply about the issue.

The field trip to the Artemis Center, which is located two miles north of campus, gave students the opportunity to see the actual workspaces in which their advocacy takes place. They occupy four floors of a downtown office building, and their rooms are furnished with comfortable yet ordinary materials. The students got to see the food pantry, the children's therapy room, and the telephone hotline desk. Seeing these spaces firsthand, and observing the security measures required, brought anti-violence advocacy to life in a way that sociological texts and lectures simply cannot accomplish. We did the tours in groups of eight students (two guides and two time slots), which facilitated questions and conversations as we moved through the space. We toured in the evening after regular business hours to minimize the likelihood of running into clients. Notably, our class met once per week for 2.5 hours; this longer block of time made it significantly more manageable to coordinate these special events.

In addition to the tailored syllabus and community engagement opportunities, I layered project-based learning onto our semester's work. Project-based learning facilitated deep engagement for students once they had gained foundational knowledge. I crafted two different projects that students completed in small groups of five. First, the course received \$1000 in grant funding from the university; \$200 went toward honorariums for our guest speakers, and the remaining \$800 was earmarked for donation to the Artemis Center. The student teams were tasked with conducting a needs assessment; developing a project plan; and then writing competitive grant proposals recommending how to use the funds. Grant writing was a new skill for most students, so they learned about a new genre of persuasive writing. Moreover, due to the friendly competition between groups and the fact that we had real money to spend, their engagement with our guest speakers was increased. Although modest in

relation to their annual budget, the financial resources also meant that we were able to achieve a greater degree of reciprocity with our community partner. Many critics argue, persuasively, that service-based learning too often perpetuates asymmetrical relationships between universities and the under-resourced communities (either domestically or internationally) with which they partner. Financial resources can help to mitigate these power differentials, to some degree. Second, the student teams created mini-documentary films that addressed gender-based violence. Like the grant proposal, most students had little experience with scriptwriting, filmmaking, or editing. Nonetheless, they were eager and industrious in approaching this new task. Their creativity was remarkable. We screened and discussed the 4–6-minute films on the last two days of class.

This experiential learning project held students to high expectations. They were immersed in learning about difficult material; they had to produce academic work in non-traditional formats; and they had to navigate the challenges of working in teams. Moreover, there were many unknowns at the beginning of the semester, which is an intrinsic feature of engaging external stakeholders. My personality type is such that I enjoy the pedagogical surprises, navigating challenges, and seeing the fascinating things that students come up with when they are given lots of latitude. At the same time, I recognize that some students are unaccustomed to self-directed learning. Thus, sustained student commitment requires intensive coaching and frequent narration about the process of discovery. I reminded students regularly that the open-ended nature of our projects was intentional, and I encouraged them to approach the work with a spirit of curiosity. Although this did not completely assuage the concerns of more regimented students, it did invite them to remain engaged in the course. Also, because the small groups were randomly assigned, it meant that personality types tended to balance out. I provided considerable time in class for students to workshop, which enabled them to develop their ideas and troubleshoot problems in a collaborative learning environment.

### SITUATING VIOLENCE

In 2001, therapist and activist Frank Baird organized the first Walk a Mile in Her Shoes event in southern California. The event featured men walking around in high-heeled shoes to understand, in some small measure, the difficult life experiences of women. Since that first march, the event has ballooned in popularity and become one of the most well-known

and successful campaigns against gender-based violence. Baird made it a flagship project under his nonprofit corporation, Venture Humanity, and organizations around the country—from college fraternities to anti-violence groups—use this model as their annual fundraising event. Indeed, much of the pedagogical literature on gender-based violence focuses on classroom methods to increase students' empathy (Clevenger, Navarro, & Gregory, 2016; Murphy-Geiss, 2008).

Despite the galvanizing potential of such events, this is decidedly *not* the kind of work that I envisioned for my students. Although the Walk a Mile model attempts to shift the focus from sympathy to empathy, which is important, it still stops short by locating violence at the interpersonal level. Wearing uncomfortable shoes may increase men's understanding of the pain of feminine subjectivity (although some critics question even this basic premise), but it still elides the structural dimensions of gender-based violence. Instead, my pedagogical objective was to create an understanding of "situated locations" with my students and our interlocutors (Lal, 1998): that is, we live in a social system that is structured by gender-based violence, so we need a knowledge of how these dynamics permeate our lives. It is wholly insufficient—not to mention alienating—to approach the issue by categorizing people as only victims, perpetrators, or saviors. Here, I discuss how students began to situate their lives in relation to gender-based violence over the course of the semester.

None of the students vocally expressed overt skepticism about the existence of gender-based violence (although this perspective certainly emerges in my lower-level courses), but many of them were also not necessarily cognizant of how close the issue was to their own lives. Two students in particular discovered new ways of understanding their own lives through the pedagogical process. First, partway through the semester, one student was engaged in casual conversation with a family member, and she was telling her about this course and our collaboration with the Artemis Center. This information prompted her cousin to reveal that she had been experiencing severe family violence and had sought support services. This family secret came as a complete surprise to my student. In her final reflection paper, she wrote, "Throughout the beginning of the course, IPV was just another social problem we discussed in class. I didn't have a connection to this issue at all...after my conversation with my cousin, the issue of domestic violence took on new meaning and significance for me. The final project became even more important because I actually knew one of the clients who would benefit from the resources

our \$800 grant proposal would provide. Domestic violence now had a face. A face of someone I love.” Here, the student’s increased knowledge and her willingness to insert the topic into casual conversation created a set of social conditions in which her cousin no longer felt compelled to hide her victimization. In a second case, a student’s understanding of her family of origin dynamics evolved over the course of the semester. “I do come from a home where verbal abuse was present during periods of my childhood, but it was never something I understood as unjust or abusive until taking this course. I can see now the inequality that women in my home and family have faced by aggressive and abusive partners.” Rather than normalizing it as ordinary (Hlavka, 2014), as she had done previously, this student was finally able to see and name the harm of verbal abuse.

In addition to re-conceptualizing prior life experiences, the pedagogical process also enabled students to see their current worlds differently. Partway through the semester, one student described a situation with her roommate whose boyfriend was excessively controlling. At first, the housemates had pegged the fifth roommate as shy and anti-social; she spent most of her time either in her room or with her boyfriend. Having not known her very well prior to living together, the remaining housemates had no baseline by which to assess her seemingly odd behavior. Finally, though, the fifth roommate revealed the stress that her boyfriend’s abusive behavior caused. Here is how my student described this moment in her final reflection paper and the group’s collective capacity to respond in a compassionate fashion.

At the beginning of the semester, I did not think that a class topic on IPV would have a direct impact on my life. However, this class aligned at the perfect time for my life...two of the roommates expressed their intense distaste for her boyfriend. A situation in the past had put them in a threatening encounter with Matthew...one night in particular, the roommates were all drinking wine and watching a movie. We had all finished our first glass and went to pour our second. Jane said that she could not have another drink...Jane said Matthew would be mad at her for drinking without him. Jane then had an emotional outburst about how she has been feeling all year. With tears flooding her face, she told us that she was in an abusive relationship. The conversation shifted and after she had explained all of his abusive behavior to us, a plan of action was created. Jane decided she would break up with Matthew the next day.

These students responded to Jane's narrative of victimization in a non-accusatory and open-ended way. This is crucial as research indicates that the recovery process for victims of violence varies tremendously based on the tenor of initial responses to their disclosure. To be sure, it is unknown how Jane experienced this interaction, and the situation most likely did not resolve itself as tidily as narrated above—it often takes women multiple attempts to disentangle themselves from abusive relationships. But nonetheless, these students had the capacity and nimbleness to respond to their roommate's disclosure due to their baseline knowledge about the patterns of abuse. The other important element of this case is that, based on my student's description, there is no evidence of physical abuse. Thus, it is a good reminder that emotionally abusive and controlling behaviors can be deeply traumatic and harmful. It can be all too easy to fixate on the sensational cases of severe physical violence, which effectively erases more subtle iterations of violence.

Students were not necessarily blank slates they when entered the classroom in late August. Several of them had previously been in abusive relationships, and they were able to name them as such. In these cases, they were already profoundly aware of the impacts of gender-based violence. Their prior experiences meant that their personal and intellectual reflections during the semester were deeply entwined. For instance, one student approached me after class at the beginning of the semester and revealed, nervously, that her ex-boyfriend had stalked her and repeatedly threatened her with severe violence. She had already sought support services on campus (and his threats were not current), but she was still anxious that some of the course material could be emotionally difficult for her. Because she was eager to stay enrolled in the course and seemed to have robust self-awareness, I agreed to be lenient on attendance. She decided, perhaps wisely, to skip out on our dialogue with the police officer and on watching a documentary film about domestic homicides. In her final reflection paper, she wrote:

My perception of IPV has changed drastically, and my understanding of my own connection to the issue has deepened. This class was almost therapeutic to me in several ways as it helped me to face some of the trauma I had experienced in my past relationship and move forward with a greater understanding of what happened and why.

Another student had been in an abusive relationship in high school, which I only learned about at the end of the semester, and she had largely come to terms with the trauma since it was some years in the past. Yet she also reported in her final reflection paper that the pedagogical process was therapeutic. She wrote, “Before this class, I never spoke of the abuse, or wrote my feelings down, for fear of being judged and the shame I still feel. After taking this class, I’m not afraid to talk about my experience any longer. Hearing student’s supportive comments and reactions over the semester made me realize that my experience is nothing to be ashamed of and that I am far from alone...after this class, I feel empowered. I know that I will never forget this experience; it is a part of me.” Although our intellectual work should certainly be distinguished from therapy, that the students were able to relate to the course material in this deeply personal way clearly enhanced their engagement and learning.

### ENACTING VIOLENCE

There is a paradox in deploying an EL approach to study gender-based violence. The process necessarily invites acts, images, and narratives of violence into what would otherwise be a nonviolent learning community. Typically, I strive to create feminist, non-hierarchical, student-centered classrooms, and this approach to pedagogy is premised on a foundation of peacefulness and deep respect for all people. Yet, in guiding students to dismantle their positions as external observers and situate themselves within systems of gender-based violence, we must engage directly with violence. Interestingly, students more readily aligned with victims of violence rather than perpetrators. In fact, by the end of the semester, I reflected that we had had very little deep dialogue about agents of violence—whether they were individuals or institutions. For instance, in their final reflection papers, no one wrote about enacting violence, even though many students wrote about observing and experiencing violence. Perhaps this is unsurprising, given the stakes involved in disclosing one’s own prior acts of violence. Yet this absence is revealing, and it underscores two moments of violence that did emerge in the classroom space over the course of the semester.

The first moment occurred when a police officer visited our class. I had invited her to speak about domestic violence from the perspective of law enforcement, and she joined us in early November. She ended up speaking about a range of issues, from domestic violence to women in policing

to finding one's vocation. The students loved her gregarious personality and no-nonsense approach to social situations. We organized the desks in a circle; the students peppered her with questions; and she regaled us with her stories from the field. She shared one story about arriving on the scene of a domestic violence call from earlier in her career. As she told it, the victim had clearly been physically assaulted, with a bruised and bloody face, and her batterer was still towering over her when police officers arrived. In a frenzy of violence, the batterer continued going after his victim, even with cops on the scene. He required restraint. Our speaker described how she stepped in, took hold of the batterer and pulled him back from his victim, and then threw him onto a nearby couch. The students chuckled as she described his landing on the couch with a flop.

The following week in class, the students and I debriefed our conversation with the police officer. Overall, the students were thrilled to dialogue with a professional who had so much experience in the field. But one student, who was particularly inquisitive, brought up this story about the seemingly violent restraint of an alleged criminal. He observed that she seemed to derive pleasure in taking down the batterer, and he wondered about that. In essence, he was asking which social conditions legitimate an act of violence, and he was asking about the possibility of experiencing pleasure in enacting violence. These are difficult and important questions. Of course, the logics of policing require the use of necessary force for the given circumstances (a politically contentious delineation, to be sure); unlike in feminist pedagogy, there is no expectation that police work will be nonviolent. Moreover, it is certainly possible that our guest speaker was embellishing the details to fit the proverbial "war story" genre. Yet in crafting the narrative in this way, a rather different characterization of violence emerged in our classroom space. We began to push beyond the dominant and over-determined narrative of domestic violence that commonly circulates in cultural discourse. We began to see acts of violence as more complex than can be accounted for with moralistic dichotomies of good versus bad. Inadvertently, our dialogue with the police officer opened rhetorical space for us to explore the epistemology of violence.

The second moment occurred at the end of the semester when students screened their mini-documentary films in class. I gave them broad parameters in this portion of the project; my objective was to create an opportunity for them to apply their knowledge in a creative format. How they went about doing this was up to each team of students. Most teams produced non-fiction films that focused on raising awareness of some specific

aspects of domestic violence. For instance, two teams took the initiative to return to the Artemis Center and interview staff members, which generated journalistic-style documentaries. One team, however, wrote a fictional script and then acted it out on screen. They crafted a plot intended to dispel the myth that heavy alcohol use causes (or excuses) physical violence. As such, they wrote a script that focused on two different heterosexual couples—one wealthy and one working class—that were experiencing struggles in their relationships. In the first couple, the man drank heavily, whereas the woman drank heavily in the second couple, and they made the non-drinking man be the violent one. Teams were comprised of four students each, so in this group of two men and two women, they each acted out one of the roles on camera. They filmed the domestic scenes in their own student houses on campus. By all accounts, the default leader of this team was the woman who ended up playing the fictional victim in their film.

Watching this film in class was difficult. The students portraying the wealthy couple played their roles particularly well. After showing the working-class couple peacefully resolve their economic challenges, the camera cuts to the wealthy man walking home from work. He strolls in the kitchen to find the woman cooking a spaghetti dinner in the kitchen. He immediately berates her for not picking up a mail delivery. As she defends herself, he angrily tosses some of her cooking ingredients into the sink. They move to the table and he describes his difficult work supervisor. The woman drinks wine and attempts to help him troubleshoot the work situation. Tension escalates as the man questions the wife's retelling of her hard day. He replies in a mocking tone, "So your day was really that tough? Dealin' with the children, oh my god. Bullshit! Your day was not tough at all. My day was way harder than yours, I go through way much more. Way tougher!" The woman drinks more wine, in big sips, and the man begins to complain about the quality of the food. At this point, the man gets up, grabs the wine bottle, and smashes it to the floor. Next, we see the woman on the floor, picking up the glass shards, and he stands over her shouting and insulting her. He yells, "Not quick enough! Let's go!" She begins crying. "I'm so disappointed in you. Hell, I'm not even disappointed, I expect this from you. You're so down and dirty. You're a punk, a low-life piece of crap." Deflated, the woman finally steals out the front door, and the film ends with fifteen seconds of domestic violence facts scrolling over a black screen.

I do not want to overstate the case: the four students in this mini-film were great, but they were by no means professional actors, and the production quality was what one might expect from film novices. Yet their enactment of violence in the classroom space sat heavy with me. Having been on the receiving end of irrational masculine anger and rage in my personal life, it was strange to see that same behavior portrayed my classroom. Aside from two experiences involving excessively angry man professors from much earlier in my own education, I have always experienced the classroom as a calm and structured space in a comparatively chaotic world. The two students enacting violence in the classroom vis-à-vis their documentary film broke the proverbial fourth wall in our learning community; they invited us to gaze squarely at violence that they had imagined anew. Indeed, they enthusiastically crafted their representation based on their collective intrigue regarding this question about the relationship between alcohol consumption and the perpetration of violence, which, incidentally, emerged after our September dialogue with the director of the Artemis Center. I suspect that I was not the only one in the room who found their enactment of violence unsettling.

### (UN)KNOWING VIOLENCE

The objective of feminist pedagogy is to uncover and respond to social inequities. There is no assumption that learners exist in a self-contained bubble, or that knowledge can be created by impartial observers who have no investment in the subjects of analysis. Yet in the day-to-day grind of university life, it can be easy to let go of this lofty goal. Experiential learning offers the tools to hold on and engage deeply with difficult topics. Through this process, students come to know gender-based violence in new ways. My hope is that by creating a collective space in which we can see violence in honest and unflinching ways, we can also begin to un-do it and remake a different world. In her final telephone call to 911 dispatchers, as quoted in the epigraph, LaShonda Childs stated repeatedly, “I can’t talk. I can’t talk.” Her voice was cut short, and we cannot speak for her. But we can push ourselves to know the structures of gender-based violence—and, importantly, our own roles in maintaining them—that contributed to her untimely death.

## NOTES

1. Childs' defense of Goodwin should not be read as evidence against the credibility of her allegations. Exiting an abusive relationship is often a long and arduous process. Moreover, it is not uncommon for victims to vacillate in their characterizations of the harassment and violence, due to a variety of logical reasons. These include love for their perpetrator, the impact of trauma on memory and narration, fear of retribution, distrust of the criminal justice process, and concerns about their own economic stability.
2. Local media in Dayton provided extensive coverage of Childs' death and the subsequent prosecution, and the case also received some national coverage in outlets such as *Essence*.

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