

Defying (Dis)Empowerment in a Battered Women's Shelter: Moral Rhetorics, Intersectionality, and Processes of Control and Resistance

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Power has been fruitfully conceptualized as a relationship between two or more actors or groups (Janeway 1980; Lukes 2005). Much of this work has treated power relations in generic terms (e.g., Foucault 1978; Scott 1990), paying little attention to how actors' positions in structures of inequality shape the interactional resources available to them as they devise strategies of control and resistance in interaction with one another. Here, I argue that we can better understand processes of control and resistance by examining how actors leverage their positions in structures of inequality and employ strategies likely to most deeply resonate with their (raced, classed, and gendered) target audiences. I explore these issues by analyzing how power struggles unfolded at a battered women's shelter. Using ethnographic data gathered over a ten-month period, I show how staff developed a gendered structure of control designed to obliquely manage shelter residents, while residents developed strategies of resistance that drew on resources available to them as poor and working-class women, and were directly responsive to the particular actors and structures of control they encountered in this context. The locally valued moral rhetoric of women's "empowerment" functioned as a key resource in this struggle. I aim here to broaden current discussions of control and resistance by highlighting the locally dependent, audience-specific, and profoundly intersectional nature of these interactions. Keywords: empowerment; intersectionality; resistance; battered women; power relations; reproduction of inequality.

In the 1970s, feminist activists began opening shelters to protect women fleeing abusive homes. These grassroots, shoestring operations were founded on feminist principles, imposed few rules and policies, and scraped by on donations. In these early days of the movement, shelters were run largely by volunteers who were formerly battered women themselves using egalitarian and inclusive decision-making processes. However, as they succeeded in expanding their funding base, shelters increasingly adopted a professional service delivery model as funders demanded the hiring of paid staff with professional degrees and certifications. This led to increased bureaucratization and a compromise of earlier feminist commitments (Dobash and Dobash 1992; Loseke 1992; Reinelt 1995; Schechter 1982; Stark 2007).

Today, while the language of feminism is still frequently invoked, much of the political activism inherent in the goals and operating principles of these early organizations has faded as staff focus on short-term individual change rather than long-term social change. This shift has had consequences for women who seek shelter services, as some have argued that many shelters are coming to replicate the controlling environments women are attempting to flee (Bumiller 2008; Stark 2007). While most shelter staff are cognizant of the power dynamics of abusive homes and wish to

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provide women with safe, respectful, and “empowering” refuge, professional commitments and the organizational need to maintain order frequently conflict with these goals.

Here, I explore the consequences of this dynamic for the women at Recourse,¹ an 18-bed battered women’s shelter in a mid-sized city in the Southeast, and suggest that data from this setting can help us better understand dynamics of power, control, and resistance. At Recourse, staff managed residents through a seemingly progressive (and well-intentioned) program of “empowerment.” The empowerment rhetoric masked a contradictory, paternalistic structure of control, and relied implicitly on popular notions about women as dependent and lacking interpersonal power that would have rendered this approach nonsensical in other settings with differently classed and gendered actors. While this rhetoric was accepted by the residents, and thus relatively effective in this setting, it simultaneously created openings residents could exploit to resist unwanted interventions and demeaning interactions with staff. Through their resistance, residents were able to derive self-efficacy within the constraints of a structure of control (Gecas and Schwalbe 1983), protect their identities as capable and autonomous adults, and defend themselves against subordination to shelter staff by imbuing their life experiences with equal or greater value.

Yet, by taking advantage of the openings provided by the staff’s gendered empowerment rhetoric, residents inadvertently legitimated its underlying assumptions about their basic needs and shortcomings (see also Haney 2010), and the structure of control these assumptions supported. Staff met women’s resistance with an increased conviction that they knew best, leading them to escalate their control efforts. Both sets of actors relied on gender- and class-based ideologies, and their own raced, classed, and gendered experiences, as they devised the most locally effective strategies of control or resistance available to them. Exploring this dynamic at Recourse, where a largely white, middle-class staff sought to manage a racially diverse group of mostly poor and working-class women² reveals the need to think intersectionally about how actors tailor structures of control and strategies of resistance for specific audiences, selecting strategies that fit their own (and their audience’s) positions in systems of inequality across race, class, gender, age, and family status. As these processes play out in interaction, social actors must develop counterstrategies that are directly responsive to those they are confronting on the ground, in the moment—often embracing rather than rejecting assumptions about their race, class, and gendered social positions. Locally valued moral rhetorics—like that of the empowerment rhetoric at Recourse—become key resources each side can strategically deploy to legitimate their activities of control or resistance, maximizing their effectiveness in the moment, but making long-term, structural change unlikely. Here, I show how this dynamic operated at Recourse, and why it’s important to pay close attention to how race, class, gender, and other social statuses shape processes of control and resistance.

Women, Control, and Resistance

Battered women’s shelter workers have long employed multiple strategies to cope with the difficulties of shelter management, from pathologizing troublesome residents and using formal rules and counseling sessions to keep them in line (Ferraro 1983), to constructing suitable “victim” and “nonvictim” categories in order to limit admission to women deemed deserving of help and keep out those who might cause trouble (Donnelly, Cook, and Wilson 1999; Loseke 1992). Upon entering a shelter, women are often subjected to control and surveillance (Loseke and Cahill 1984; Pitts 1996), despite the fact that these are often the very conditions many women are attempting to flee. Shelter residents who violate house rules or refuse the help offered by professional staff are often seen as ungrateful or unworthy of services, and in need of even more stringent control.

1. A pseudonym, as are all names used throughout.

2. See Brush 2011 for an analysis of the relationship between poverty and violence against women.

Battered women, then, may experience a revictimization process similar to the one rape victims encounter upon contact with the criminal justice system (Martin 2005). Social service agencies may take their children away if they fail to leave the abusive home, or if batterers accuse them of wrongdoing. Police may arrest batterers despite their victims' wishes, and women may be arrested for defending themselves (Bumiller 2008; McDermott and Garofalo 2004). The information gained through the surveillance of women in shelters may also be provided to others (i.e., child protective services), further entangling women with intrusive state agencies (Appell 1998; Pitts 1996).

In an effort to avoid perpetuating this cycle, many shelters and victim advocates attempt to operate based on an "empowerment" model. Within domestic violence programs, this has generally meant offering choices to women who have been denied freedom and agency within abusive relationships (Kasturirangan 2008). These choices, however, may be limited, largely illusory, or insensitive to other constraints women face (Kasturirangan 2008; McDermott and Garofalo 2004; see also Liebow 1993). The notions of personal choice and individual power at the root of the empowerment frame inadvertently imply blame, and shift responsibility for change onto battered women, and away from abusive men, social service and criminal justice agencies, or a broader culture of violence (Berns 2004; Haney 2010; Leisenring 2006). The power imbalance inherent in the concept of empowerment, particularly when invoked by professionals, can ultimately mean a coercive relationship initiated by more-powerful "experts" who believe they know what's best for the less-powerful groups they are ostensibly trying to empower (Cruikshank 1999).

Ironically then, empowerment can be used as a tool of control. This has been made most clear in studies of girls' and women's penal institutions. In a study of feminist-driven Canadian prison reforms, Kelly Hannah-Moffat (2000) showed how officials used an empowerment program as a "tool for governing," regulating women prisoners through the "choices" they made, and punishing them if they failed to make the choices considered responsible by those in charge. Women who resisted the program (through self-injury, escape, and assaults on prison staff) were deemed "unempowerable" and sent to harsher settings. Similarly, in a study of two juvenile detention programs for adolescent girls, Sara Goodkind (2009) found that a program of empowerment allowed those in charge to resolve the tension between "helping and controlling because it allows the programs to *do both simultaneously*" (p. 399; emphasis added).

Women also have a well-documented history of resisting allegedly benevolent institutional control. Jill McCorkel (1998) found that women in a drug-rehab program fought staff attempts to redefine their identities and break down their "addict" selves by carving out "critical space" in which they could present and affirm alternative identities. In her study of a quasi-feminist home to keep teen mothers out of juvenile detention, Lynne Haney (1996) found that girls evaded staff control by threatening to call high-level authorities, flaunting their dependence on government programs, and escaping. Haney (1996:773) noted that the girls "appropriated and inverted" institutional messages to legitimate their noncooperation.

In their review of the literature on resistance, Jocelyn Hollander and Rachel Einwohner (2004) address definitional debates (see also Brown 1996; Rubin 1996; Scott 1990) by offering a typology of resistance to clarify the core disagreements involved. Some have argued that to qualify as resistance an act must be *intended* as resistance by the actor and *recognized* as resistance by the target and/or an outside observer. Others suggest that resistance can occur unintentionally, or go unnoticed. Hollander and Einwohner's typology categorizes each combination of possibilities from "overt resistance," which is intended by the actor, recognized by the target, and recognized by outside observers, to "no resistance," which is not intended by the actor as resistance, nor recognized as resistance by anyone.

Women at Recourse engaged in what Hollander and Einwohner would call "covert resistance." This was *intentional* resistance that may be observed by an outside party, but that goes largely *unrecognized as such* by its target. Although at times this resistance seemed obvious, it remained covert because the women risked being kicked out if they were openly rebellious, and, importantly, because they selected strategies that made use of the openings provided by the empowerment rhetoric and appeared to be "natural" interactions appropriate to their gender

and class status. Residents invoked the program rhetoric as needed to legitimize their resistance, “appropriating and inverting” it, as did the girls in Haney’s setting.

Hollander and Einwohner emphasize the need to treat control and resistance as part of a recursive process that unfolds with both intended and unintended consequences. Resistance can serve to support structures of domination rather than undermine them (see also Gal 1995; Weitz 2001), and attempts at control may backfire by providing subordinates with resources for resistance. Here, I examine how both actors’ and audiences’ locations in systems of inequality influence the selection of control and resistance strategies. My analysis highlights the importance of understanding resistance and control as localized interactional phenomena, and how the moral underpinnings of local interaction orders, made explicit through locally valued moral rhetorics, set the parameters within which participants can most effectively act.

Thinking Intersectionally about Control and Resistance

Prominent scholars of power have explicated many of the processes involved in control and resistance, from the centrality of surveillance and the inculcation of self-discipline (Foucault 1978), to the “hidden transcripts” of subordinate groups (Scott 1990). These broad conceptualizations often pay little attention, however, to how actors’ positions across race, class, and gender shape these processes, or how actors might leverage their social identities, and resources derived from these social positions, as they craft strategies of control and resistance. Conceptualizing power as a relationship between two acting parties (Janeway 1980; Lukes 2005) is an important starting point for recognizing how that relationship is colored by a host of *other* relationships between the actors involved, including gender, class, age, race, and so on. As social actors construct strategies of action (Swidler 1986) in this interactional context, they must draw from the culturally specific repertoire of resources available to them (see Goffman 1983). Candace West and Don Zimmerman (1987) conceptualize gender as the “interactional scaffolding” on which all of our interactions with others are built, and in the years since their original work, scholars have come to understand race, class, and other axes of difference similarly, illuminating how these intersecting structures pervasively and simultaneously shape our interactions with others (Fenstermaker and West 2002). Relationships of control and resistance are no exception.

Tim Hallett’s (2007) ethnographic study of how deference and symbolic power were cultivated—sometimes successfully and sometimes unsuccessfully—by a high-school principal points to the complex dynamics involved in this process. Mrs. Cox, a first-generation Chinese immigrant, was held in high-esteem by the local school council, which was made up largely of white men. Yet her cultural capital failed miserably in her attempts to manage the racially diverse group of (mostly women) schoolteachers she supervised on a daily basis. Meanwhile, the assistant principal, a middle-aged white man, used an interactional style that resonated with the teachers and led him to accrue symbolic power that enabled him to implement changes that had failed when previously attempted by Mrs. Cox. Hallett’s analysis suggests that interactional nuances rooted in one’s access to cultural capital acquired through raced, classed, and gendered life experiences—and the “fit” between one’s own and one’s audience’s cultural capital—can dramatically affect one’s ability to successfully wield power with different groups; and not always in easily anticipated ways.

Building on this foundation, I suggest that processes of control and resistance operate similarly, and argue that we can deepen our understanding of how social actors strategically develop structures of control and (directly responsive) strategies of resistance by paying close attention to how actors mobilize the particular set of resources available to them by virtue of their position in structures of inequality. Strategies of control and resistance may in turn be most effective when carefully tailored for specific audiences, whose age, race, class, and gender are also taken into account.

In *Powers of the Weak* (1980), Elizabeth Janeway argues that women’s “acts of courage” (read: resistance) are most effective when they “affirm woman’s proper role . . . [and] proper sphere.” Otherwise, she suggests, they “carry an aura of strangeness and deviance and raise questions”

(p. 294). Steven Lukes (2005) reminds us that power is “most effective when least accessible to observation.” Linking these two ideas, strategies of control and resistance may be most effective when they are congruent with one’s social position, seem “natural” for members of that group, and thus draw less attention to themselves. Paying closer attention to how the cultural resources differentially available to social actors along lines of race, class, gender, and other social statuses are deployed in this process may be key to better understanding the possibilities, and limits, of resistance and control.

The working-class men in Michael Burawoy’s classic study *Manufacturing Consent* (1979), for instance, resisted the piece-rate system on the shop floor by turning it into a competitive game of “making out.” Each man tried to game the system by doing the best he could without spurring management to lower the rate for everyone. While “making out” provided the men with status among their shop mates and bolstered their feelings of self-efficacy, it posed little threat to managerial control (Gecas and Schwalbe 1983). Resistance among the men in Burawoy’s study took the form of a competitive game—drawing on hegemonic notions of masculinity that were decidedly absent at Recourse. The strategies of control and resistance that were effective in Burawoy’s almost exclusively male setting would seem humorously out of place among the women at Recourse—as would an “empowerment” program for the men on Burawoy’s shop floor.

We can begin to see, then, that those who seek to manage or resist others must select strategies that are both materially and conceptually available to them, and likely to emotionally resonate with their audience. In doing so, they draw on the cultural resources, or “toolkits” (Swidler 1986), available to them given their life experiences and positions in structures of inequality. For instance, some of the girls in Julie Bettie’s (2003) ethnography of a California high school—especially those who were not white—rejected school-sanctioned white middle-class femininity by wearing dark lipstick and emphasizing their sexuality. In her work on youth subcultures, Amy Wilkins (2008) showed how the adolescents she studied faced a number of both practical and identity-related problems, and drew on “cultural resources including gender, race, and class to craft plans of action” to *solve* these problems (p. 4). Wilkins shows how race, class, and gender both constrained the choices available to the Goths, Christians, and wannabes she studied, and became resources for solving the very challenges these social positions presented.

Residents and staff at Recourse confronted the problems they faced by drawing on resources derived from their positions in structures of inequality. The staff at Recourse had a handy and deeply symbolic gendered resource available to them in the empowerment rhetoric, one steeped in assumptions about women as victims and about women’s basic needs for agency and strength—which, presumably, women lack. This rhetoric—which may have been more difficult to implement had the staff not held a shared gender status *vis-à-vis* residents—proved effective in allowing staff to obliquely manage the residents while appearing to be egalitarian and progressive. At the same time, this rhetoric offered residents openings they could exploit to resist the shelter staff, as was the case with the rhetorics of independence and desire used in Haney’s (1996, 2010) penal settings. Yet, while the staff in Haney’s (2010:130) settings effectively “sidelined” inequality, at Recourse, residents *highlighted* the inequalities³ between themselves and staff, which were less easily justified outside of a penal context. Below, I show how staff and residents at Recourse exploited the locally valued moral rhetoric of “empowerment,” highlighted inequalities, and drew on other resources derived from their raced, classed, and gendered social positions to most strategically control or resist one another.

Setting and Method

For ten months I observed the weekly house meeting and support group at Recourse, an 18-bed battered women’s shelter located in a mid-sized city in the Southeast. Recourse was housed

3. Both the institutional inequalities between residents and staff, and broader inequalities between them along lines of race, class, age, education, and family status.

in a large, older, residential home in a general state of disrepair. Most residents came from the local metropolitan area or nearby counties. Approximately 45 percent of the residents were black, 40 percent were white, and 15 percent were Latina, Native American, or of other non-Western nationalities. The shelter usually housed six to nine women at a time, along with their children.

The shelter was staffed by a director, an assistant director, two child-family counselors, a house manager, and several night and weekend counselors who “covered” the house during non-business hours. The assistant director was black, the rest of the full-time staff were white. Three of the part-time staff (night and weekend counselors) were black, three were white. All of the staff were women. The shelter operated as one program under the umbrella of a larger domestic violence agency, which provided additional services to nonshelter residents at a separate location.

Women were permitted to stay in the shelter for up to eight weeks, by which time they were expected to have secured alternative housing. Extensions were rarely granted. If residents violated house rules and were asked to leave before eight weeks, they were generally given only a few days to do so. Residents were also required to attend two weekly meetings facilitated by staff, referred to colloquially by staff and residents as “Group.” Monday’s group meeting focused primarily on domestic violence. Thursday’s group meeting began with announcements, chore assignments, and other logistical issues (referred to as “house meeting”), and was followed by a staff-facilitated group session on self-esteem or parenting. I primarily observed the latter group.

During my first four months in the field, Beth, a white woman in her late-twenties with a master’s degree in social work, facilitated these sessions. She had formerly worked as the assistant shelter director, but left that job when she began her graduate program. She stayed on to facilitate the group and came in only on the same nights I did. When Beth took a full-time job that precluded her group facilitation, Gloria, a black woman in her late forties with an associate’s degree in psychology, took over. Gloria also worked as a weekend manager. While Beth and Gloria’s personal styles, mannerisms, and approaches to group facilitation differed markedly, leading to clear variations in the respect and deference they were offered by residents (see Hallett 2007), the overall tug-of-war process that occurred during group remained relatively unchanged in important ways.

Parenting groups, when they met, were facilitated by one of the children’s counselors, either with, or instead of, the regular group facilitator. The two original children’s counselors left around the same time Beth did, and after a few months without children’s counselors, were replaced. During the time the positions were vacant, no formal parenting groups were led. All of the children’s counselors were white, under the age of 30, and held a bachelor’s or master’s degree. Only one of the four was a parent herself.

I introduced myself to new residents before each group meeting. If there were many newcomers, I reintroduced myself at the beginning of the session, assuring them of the confidentiality of my observations.⁴ I took jottings throughout each session, which were used to construct full field notes later. In general, I simply observed the group and listened to the conversation, but participated in games or activities as appropriate. After Group, I chatted with residents and/or staff on my way out. Group sessions typically lasted about one hour, though my visits to the shelter sometimes extended for three or more hours.⁵

4. My presence did not particularly stand out given the number of volunteers and interns commonly circulating, and no one objected to my presence. Confidentiality of my observations was also generally not a concern to the residents, as confidentiality is so thoroughly woven throughout all aspects of shelter life. Reassurance of confidentiality was far more important during interviews, where women shared thoughts about staff and program shortcomings, and their own behavior that might violate program rules. As a white woman in my late twenties who identified myself as a student at a nearby university—a social location similar to other staff and interns—it was important that I emphasize that I was not a counselor or intern who would be sharing information with staff.

5. Over the course of my observation, 58 women attended at least one of the sessions I observed. Twenty-nine of these women were present at three or more sessions, and eight were present at between six to nine observed sessions. These figures do not represent the total number of women who came and went during this ten-month period, as some may have come and gone before the group I observed met, or stayed for an otherwise short period during which they did not attend the group I observed.

Data also come from written program materials and 15 semistructured, in-depth interviews (4 with staff, 11 with residents) recorded and transcribed in full over the course of the study. I began writing memos early in the process, and interview questions were derived from ongoing analysis. I wrote analytic memos throughout the process as the complexities of the setting became apparent, and field notes and interview transcripts were frequently reviewed and coded and re-coded throughout the project (Charmaz 2006). Before turning to my analysis, I will introduce the empowerment program, its rationale, and the "point system" in greater detail, as it profoundly shaped the staff and resident interactions I will explore below.

Rules, Points, and "Empowerment"

Upon her arrival each woman received an orientation packet informing her that she had "made a decision to join a *counseling program* based on the empowerment philosophy."⁶ Empowerment was defined as "regaining strength, courage, confidence, and personal power. In other words, empowerment is taking back your life." The packet went on to list house rules, which included curfew (7 p.m. on Group nights, 8 p.m. all others), child supervision (children must remain on the same floor as their mother at all times), no television between 10 a.m. and 4:30 p.m., and no food or drinks outside the kitchen and dining room.

Shelter rules were enforced by a point system, which staff viewed as the mechanism through which they empowered the residents while enforcing shelter policies. The point system was described as follows:

Use of a point is a result of a personal responsibility not being met. We understand that emergencies may arise or that an important event may occur that may take priority over the program's requirements; it is in these circumstances that many clients *choose* to use their points. Some examples of ways you can *choose* to *use* your points: missing Monday or Thursday night support group meetings; missing curfew; not meeting program requirements; leaving your children unsupervised; [or] not complying with any individual contract issues. *Using* all five of your points indicates that our program is not the best fit for you at this time. Arrangements will need to be made for you to move on within 24 hours (emphasis mine).

Staff framed the point system as one that empowered women to make their own choices. Residents experienced the point system differently. To residents, points were something they *lost* rather than used.⁷ Residents often lost points for things they had no intention of "using" them for. For instance, when Melinda's four-year-old ran downstairs while she was upstairs, she lost a point for child supervision. When Lilly's son threw his cup across the kitchen, she also lost a point. Women occasionally lost points unfairly when staff failed to note that chores had been completed. Staff recognized this problem and encouraged the women to "remind" staff to check them off. In interviews, women told me about inconsistencies in enforcement across occasions and across individual staff. Staying out overnight might result, for example, in the loss of one point on one occasion and two points on another (for missing curfew and for not staying in the shelter overnight).

Although appearing rational and universalistic, the point system and its inconsistent application created an environment of uncertainty. The women were often unsure of how or when

6. To imply that women have chosen to join this program over others is misleading. Most women will be sheltered in their county of origin, and shelters in general tend to operate at or near full capacity, which means that the shelter at which one ends up is almost entirely based on practical issues and availability of space, not "fit" with program philosophy. Furthermore, many women come to the shelter as a result of referrals from police, schools, or child protective services. For some women, leaving an abusive relationship and moving to the shelter was either a felt or actual requirement to retain custody of their children (see Gengler 2011).

7. I use the term "lost" throughout this article to reflect the residents' reality.

they would lose points, or how many. When I asked Melinda if she worried about points she told me:

Melinda: I did at first when I first came here. 'Cause I thought that my kids were just gonna like 5, 4, 3, 2—

Me: (Laughing) Knock them all out!

Melinda: I'm like, I said, the first week we're there we'll have to move because, you three kids are gonna be so wild. They're gonna take points away from us every 5 minutes.

Melinda understood, as did others, that losing points could mean being kicked out of the shelter. Melinda told me that she frequently worried about points because then she would be “in trouble again—right back in the trouble I was in, with abuse and—I don't wanna go back to that.” One night in Group, following a discussion of chores not being checked off, Lori said that they had all been on a “cleaning frenzy” because “I'm scared that I'll get written up. My husband will kill me. I'm trying to *stay*” (emphasis hers). The anxiety induced by the inconsistently enforced point system was, for some women, reminiscent of what they experienced living with their abusers: never knowing what they might do that would get them in trouble.

Beth and other staff frequently emphasized that they never put anyone out without somewhere to go. However, people *were* asked to leave at times due to point loss or other infractions (e.g., failing a drug test), and other residents were aware of this when it occurred. When Latisha was seen on a nearby corner with a man her child clearly knew and recognized (I was unable to determine whether this was in fact her partner), she was given 24 hours to leave for breach of confidentiality. Margaret found this upsetting and told me that Latisha and her six-year old were now staying at a motel, wondering what they would do when her money ran out. Thus, residents perceived the point system as a tool staff could use to punish or get rid of them. Group sessions often became a forum for the women to voice their opposition—if fruitlessly—to these policies.

Resisting Control

Residents and facilitators came together for Group with conflicting goals. Facilitators told me that Group was valuable time that should be spent “empowering [women] with the skills and tools” they needed to lead “independent, violence-free lives” upon leaving the shelter. A fine goal, but one colored by paternalistic, middle-class narratives about how women (particularly formerly battered women) should mother their children and conduct their lives. Staff used guided discussions, instructional games, and educational handouts to meet this goal. To ensure it was met, facilitators needed to keep the group process—and the residents—under tight control.

Residents, meanwhile, often found Group activities to be silly or contrived, as I show below. Needing to find jobs, child care, and housing to reconstruct their lives, they often came to Group tired and overwhelmed, preferring to do laundry, get their kids to bed, or just relax for an hour. Because attendance was required, the women participated, but were often skeptical of facilitators' activities and agendas, and chafed at the implication that they lacked basic parenting, communication, or daily life skills. This set the stage for a struggle for control over Group in which the empowerment rhetoric became a key resource for both sides. Residents resisted facilitator control by exploiting the openings the empowerment rhetoric offered them, and drawing on raced, classed, and gendered life experiences to signify equal (or greater) status with staff—pushing back against the staff's condescension and privileged position in the shelter's hierarchy. Staff, while constrained by the need to act in accord with the empowerment rhetoric, could use it to justify their ongoing interventions. Actors' social positions along lines of race, class, gender, age, and family status constrained some avenues of control or resistance while opening others.

Storytelling: Using the Empowerment Rhetoric to Open Group Space

One of the simplest ways women could interrupt the facilitator's agenda was by ignoring it and telling their own stories instead. Storytelling was effective precisely *because* of the empowerment rhetoric. As storytelling is seen as an empowering act, especially for women (see Higgins and Brush 2006; Winkelmann 2004), facilitators were reluctant to interrupt residents, even if their stories veered off-track or interfered with their agenda. It also meshed with the assumption that women benefit therapeutically from sharing their feelings and experiences. Most importantly, storytelling allowed residents to highlight their greater years of life experience, their experiences as mothers, and the hardships they had faced—all of which stood in contrast to most staff.⁸

For instance, during a parenting group co-led by Beth and Heather (a children's counselor), residents used facilitators' questions as springboards to share their own experiences. Heather had drawn a large chart on a dry erase board with slots for different types of abuse, and asked the residents how each type of abuse affected their children. From my field notes:

Heather asked the women what "social isolation" means. Saida (an Egyptian woman in her early thirties) quickly answered, "My husband doesn't want me to associate with anyone. He doesn't want me to go out with my friends. He wants always to know where I am, where I am going—"

Heather interrupted, "OK, good—so how does that affect the kids?"

Saida thought for a moment and said, "Ameerah doesn't want to be with other kids," then bridged back to storytelling about her husband's violent behavior towards her.

Heather wanted to help the women increase their sensitivity as mothers by talking about how seeing abuse affected their children. The residents, however, preferred to discuss their *own* experiences of abuse. Bouncing their relationship stories off one another ("mine did that too"—or—"mine wasn't like that; he did such and such") brought a level of energy to Group it generally lacked when residents were simply following instructions. To keep this going, the women gave token answers to facilitator questions, then launched into stories of their own, spurring others to do the same.

Since storytelling meshed with the empowerment rhetoric and general ideas about what women in crisis need, facilitators could not forcefully cut residents off, and instead had to work to more subtly shift residents' stories into line. One night Kristen, a children's counselor co-facilitating another parenting group, gave the residents child safety scissors and Elmer's Glue. She asked them to cut out words from a worksheet containing a list of developmental skills and paste them to the appropriate age range (e.g., six to ten) and type of skill (motor, cognitive, social, or language) on a corresponding chart. Throughout the activity, residents told stories about their children doing the things listed (e.g., bike riding, putting together three- to four-word sentences). Kristen repeatedly interrupted the women to try to shift their focus back to the assigned task. The following exchange occurred after Melinda had spent several minutes recounting instances in which her son had injured himself and been taken to the hospital:

Kristen tried to break in by clearing her throat and saying: "OK—." Melinda continued her story, describing the extent of the injury and the hospital experience. Kristen broke in again a moment later with, "OK, let's move on to six to ten year olds, starting with motor skills." Letitia said: "The bicycle" referencing the cutout she had chosen, but went on to elaborate. "Or anything with wheels. [My son] would just jump on anything and ride. Ride till the training wheels come off." Melinda said, "Yep, that's what we did when we were kids." Lisa said, "I just went to look at apartments today? And there were these kids on just the frames of the bikes—no wheels—is that the new style now?" The women laughed and remarked about this. Kristen cut in a third time saying, "That's creative," then quickly turned their attention back to the chart asking, "How about language skills?"

8. See Polletta and Lee (2006) for a sociological analysis of the possibilities and limits of storytelling.

Despite Kristen's redirection attempts, the women paid cursory attention to the chart and spent most of the time chatting about their trials and tribulations as mothers. Though she tried to push the women back towards her activity, the empowerment rhetoric prevented Kristen from more forcefully compelling the women to stick to her task.

At times, though, this back and forth was more direct and dramatic. During one of Gloria's groups, residents lamented the unhelpfulness of some staff. Gloria, while agreeing with them, did not see this as an effective use of Group time. She admonished the women:

"This is NOT gonna be a bitch session. We can bitch all day. I'm not here for that." She repeated these phrases several times, then said, "I'm not here to talk about other staff, or down anybody, ok? I'm here to help you get what you need." The residents suddenly became very quiet, and without entirely shifting out of this tone, she said, "OK, anyone got anything you need right off the top? Lilly—what happened with [a housing option in another city]?"

For a while, the residents let Gloria ask them questions, which they answered. But after about 15 minutes one resident spoke up again:

Chontrice said, "I know this is not a bitch session, but . . ." and went on to explain that she was worried she had lost a point because she had not returned from social services in time to meet her oldest daughter at the bus despite beginning her visit to DSS at 8 a.m. She had called another resident while stuck there to ask her to watch her child until she returned, but neither had signed a required baby-sitting form. Gloria, accepting Chontrice's caveat and conversational turn back toward grievance airing, told her "not to worry herself silly about these points" as others again chimed in about the unfairness of what had occurred.

While Gloria temporarily broke out of the empowerment mold by more directly quashing the residents' complaints—drawing on stereotypes of women's complaints as frivolous "bitching" (Kleinman, Ezzell, and Frost 2009) to do so—her focus on the women's practical needs (jobs and housing) was still in line with other aspects of this philosophy. This gave the residents an opportunity, after a sufficient period of compliance with Gloria's agenda, to successfully steer Group *back* to their original concerns about staff and shelter policies. In doing so, they highlighted the challenges they faced as poor and working-class mothers, and the impracticalities of the shelter's policies given these realities.

On another night Beth intended to lead the women in an activity that explored things in life over which one may or may not have control. She taped up a large sheet of paper with the silhouette of a stylish looking woman drawn on it. The residents were given a list of life happenings and were to record inside of the silhouette those things that were within her control, and put outside of the silhouette those things beyond her control. The activity never got off the ground. Someone grabbed the opening phrase of Beth's discussion—a version of the serenity prayer—and began telling a story about her life experiences. Another woman told a similar story. Then another. Beth later tried to reassert control over Group by linking the women's stories to the need for "self-care." During the last five minutes, she asked the women to list things they could do for themselves (which included suggestions such as, "going to the beauty salon", or "buying flowers"). At the end, she assigned them "homework"—to do something for themselves in the following week.

In instances like these, everyone managed to feel efficacious to some extent. Residents resisted facilitators' agendas and got to do some of what they wanted: to share stories, strategies, or grievances with one another. By doing so in ways that resonated with the shelter's empowerment rhetoric, they did not have to directly challenge the facilitator or withdraw from Group, risking the loss of a point. As storytelling and talk about one's feelings and personal struggles meshed with the empowerment rhetoric, it was difficult for staff to cut residents off and exert more direct control over the group at these times. Meanwhile, when facilitators used women's stories to make a point or reconnect to the night's activity, they felt that they had "helped" the residents. Interestingly, in many cases, staff redirected the residents toward conveniently gendered coping strategies, as with Beth's "self-care" assignment, or away from inappropriate ones,

as in Gloria's admonition against "bitching." Here again, femininity functioned to help cloak resistance and control, making it less observable to both parties, and allowing staff to feel they were not controlling the residents at all.

Defying (Dis)empowerment: Turning Empowerment Back on the Staff

Even when residents more directly challenged house rules and policies, they did so in ways that could be interpreted as "affirming woman's proper role . . . or sphere" (Janeway 1980:294), or drew on classed and gendered life experiences to signify equal status to staff. The empowerment rhetoric sometimes explicitly, but other times implicitly, undergirded these efforts. For example, one night Beth decided to lead the residents in a series of guided activities, ostensibly to improve their communication skills. The first activity was to line up in the order of our birthday months without speaking to one another. The second was a game of "telephone" (unsuccessfully passing a complex sentence down the line). The third activity involved finger-tracing a shape on the back of one person, who was to trace the same shape on the back of the person in front of her, and so on down the line. Beth promised to keep the first shape simple.

Holly, a black woman in her late thirties, stood with her arms crossed and an impatient expression on her face as we were given our instructions. She seemed skeptical. When we began the third exercise, I was at the back of the line and Holly was in front of me. Beth traced the outline of a circle on my back. I, in turn, drew a circle on Holly's back. Holly drew a circle on the back of the woman in front of her—then proceeded, coolly, to draw a face inside the circle, complete with eyes, nose, mouth, and hair. The bewildered woman in front of her had no clue what Holly had drawn. Others laughed and protested that the drawing was too complex to replicate on the back of the next person, while Holly, unfazed, maintained her nonchalant demeanor. Beth encouraged them to keep going and do their best. Ultimately, some sort of shape made it up the line. Following the activity, Beth asked the women what had happened. After an awkward silence, Holly stated flatly that she had decided to fill in the circle because she was "feeling creative."

Holly's claim to creativity meshed well with the empowerment rhetoric, and softened what might otherwise have been seen as deliberate disobedience by framing it in more passive and feminine terms, while still effectively subverting an activity she seemed to find silly and condescending. In doing so, Holly salvaged a bit of pride, while technically meeting the requirement to participate in Group. Beth could not have challenged Holly's "creativity" directly without discrediting the empowerment rhetoric.

Later, Beth made several unsuccessful attempts to get the women to reflect on the importance of strong communication skills. Adrienne, a black woman in her mid-forties, was sitting back in her chair with her chin in her hand, looking particularly disinterested. When Beth prodded for participation, Adrienne said:

"I don't like to be talked to like a child." She leaned forward as she said this and began speaking more forcefully. She glanced briefly at Beth, then around the room. She continued, "I don't appreciate being talked down to," and suggested that this comes from a history of abuse. The other women nodded vigorously and vocally concurred.⁹

Holly took up Adrienne's thread, and explained that she had lost a point (apparently her fifth) and had been asked to move out by Monday. From my field notes:

Holly said that you have to work in order to make money to get out of the shelter, but the shelter requires you to attend meetings, do chores, etc., or you lose points. "So now I'm at work and my boss is telling me

9. Residents often backed each other up during Group (see also Haney 1996, 2010; McKim 2008; Schrock and Padavic 2007; Stombler and Padavic 1997), echoing and reinforcing points about condescension, child discipline, and menu issues. This collaborative resistance constituted a makeshift culture of opposition that was transmitted between old and new residents. Residents often protected one another from sanctions by keeping an eye on one another's children, offering guidance to newcomers about rules and particularly strict staff members, and keeping other residents' rule-breaking secret.

I gotta stay, but when I get back here I'm told I used up all my points and I have to leave. What kind of place just throws you out in the street?" The other women were again nodding and mmm-hmming. After Holly finished, Adrienne reiterated this sentiment.

By collectively voicing their discontent, the women refused to allow the language of empowerment, or shelter staff's policy justifications, to mask the reality of their experiences. Instead, they *used* this rhetoric as an opening for their argument, putting the facts of their lives as poor and working-class women on the table and openly discussing their feelings to protest demeaning facilitator control and unrealistic shelter policies.

Despite the resistance she was getting from Holly and Adrienne, Beth again tried to get the women to address the assigned topic by asking them how to deal with problems in interpersonal communication. Holly took this opportunity to directly spell out what Adrienne had insinuated earlier, drawing explicitly on her social location to do so, telling Beth:

You might have degrees or whatever, but I'm 38 years old, so you can imagine how hard it is to have someone younger, who probably has never been through domestic violence herself—you may be educated but *we are educated by the street*. You're just a child.

Here, Holly interrupted Beth's agenda and staked out her own ground, asserting her worth and dignity in an interaction in which she felt demeaned (see Goffman 1967) by invoking life experiences associated with age, race, and class to trump Beth's authority. Both Holly and Adrienne refused to allow Beth to erase the differences between them, and successfully derailed her agenda. By holding up the discrepancies in life experiences between themselves and staff, particularly around age, race, and class, the residents seized control of the conversation and delegitimized Beth's attempts to assert authority over them.

Residents also used Group to point to inconsistencies between house rules and the empowerment rhetoric, and explicitly cited their skills as poor and working-class women and mothers to argue for more control and autonomy. For instance, on another night, residents seized control of Group by discussing problems that had occurred with the menu (each night a resident was assigned to prepare dinner with food purchased by shelter staff). The residents had been requesting input on the weekly menu after listing all that had gone wrong with meal preparation over the past week. Many felt that they could do better if they were allowed to do the shopping and make meals from scratch, and suggested that money was being wasted on expensive prepackaged food like frozen pizza. They drew on their gendered class position vis-à-vis shelter staff, arguing that they "knew how to make food [like spaghetti and potatoes] *stretch*" and often ran out of food because "frozen pizzas do not stretch." Lori, a white woman in her early thirties, led the opposition:

"It just feels childish that everything is planned out for us." She argued that the residents could be helpful, and that having it all laid out made her feel she "didn't have control" over her daily life. Beth said, "Well, now, take a minute to think about this. Time gets tight and people get busy and it sounds good now to do the menu yourself, but . . ." Lori jumped in and said, "No matter how busy you are you have time to figure out what you want to eat—you have time to plan what *you* eat."

Lori successfully challenged Beth's justification of house policies by pointing out that she was denying them a privilege she herself took for granted. Drawing on gender- and class-specific cultural resources (savvy family cooking skills, the ability to make food "stretch"), and highlighting the class and status differences between themselves and staff, residents cast staff as a privileged group and drew attention to inequalities that made the staff—who saw themselves as compassionate, egalitarian "helpers"—uncomfortable.

Lori also invoked the empowerment rhetoric directly to strengthen her case, arguing that because "this program is supposed to be about empowerment" residents should have more control over meals. Another resident invoked the shelter's principle of "respect for diversity," particularly religious diversity, to complain about pork being on the menu. To challenge infantilizing house

policies, residents often said, "We are all adults here." Insinuating that they were being treated like children (as both Lori and Adrienne did earlier) was a particularly powerful critique of this rhetoric, as it directly contradicted the empowerment frame.

Residents used their experiences as poor and working-class women and mothers to resist in more subtle ways as well. One night Group was run by Vivian, a black woman in her fifties, who came in from another social service agency to do a budgeting workshop. Vivian kept tight control of Group, allowing little room for questions or discussion. After constructing a solidly middle-class budget that demonstrated that the women would be unable to make ends meet even on a salary that was unattainable for most of them, she listed "savings tips" they could use to "cut back." As an exception, though, she told them that they needed both a landline and a cell phone, because "if you lose your cell phone, how are you going to communicate?" Sandy, a black woman in her late thirties joked, "I send smoke signals," drawing snickers from the other women.

Later, when Vivian told them that they should ask their physician for generic drugs to cut back on medical expenses, Sandy offered, "Another choice would be to roll to Mexico—you could clean up. You could get a whole five years' worth." Vivian, visibly irritated, said, "Well, we're in the USA." At the end of Group, after she emphatically told the women never to give out their social security numbers (despite the women informing her that they had to provide them to Recourse upon admission to the shelter), Kendria joked that they should all put their social security number on their "post-test" before handing it in. This joking allowed the women not only to safely express their dissatisfaction with the condescension that had permeated the group session, but to simultaneously suggest that they possessed a skill set and knowledge base for navigating poverty and social service organizations that exceeded the facilitator's low estimation of them. While middle-class women in this situation may have invoked educational or professional credentials to put themselves on the same plane as Vivian, get a greater voice in the session, and rebuke her condescension, poor and working-class residents *distanced* themselves from Vivian and highlighted the classed realities they face.

Parenting groups were also fertile ground for a class clash between staff and residents (Gengler 2011). The young, white, middle-class mostly childless children's counselors adhered to a philosophy of childrearing deeply rooted in intensive mothering (Hays 1996) and the "concerted cultivation" of children (Lareau 2003). Residents were much more likely to adhere to a philosophy of "natural growth"—allowing children greater latitude and self-directed play time (Laureau 2003)—and were skeptical of many of the negotiation-based parenting strategies staff encouraged.¹⁰ Residents pushed back against this during some parenting groups:

Carly (a children's counselor) asked the women, "why is spanking an ineffective tool?" The women were silent and glanced around, dubious, leading Carly to prompt, "why or why not?" The women immediately began to argue that spanking *is* effective. Ophelia, an older black woman, said, "You have to spank 'em. And don't pat 'em up, don't hug 'em up after, that's confusing."

Margaret, an older black woman caring for her four-year-old grandson, related a time when her 11-year-old son had hit her and "knocked me out cold." She told him she would call the police and "send him to juvie." She told us that she did ultimately send him [to juvenile detention], but that she is "afraid of [her] child to this day." Sabrina, a black woman in her early thirties, asked her if she thinks this is because she didn't "instill the fear of God in him." Margaret quickly agreed that this was the problem.

Here again residents called on their classed experiences as mothers to resist the young, professional staff's notions of how they should raise their children. Carly did not directly contradict the women's assertions, but glossed over their implications. Returning their attention to the handout she had provided, she discussed the importance of giving children choices, suggesting that, "little decisions, like whether to eat broccoli or carrots for dinner, empower them." The parallel to the shelter staff's own point system as an attempt to direct and control the residents through often relatively meaningless or insensitive "choices" did not seem apparent to her.

10. Failing to use these strategies could also result in the loss of a point, or other staff attempts to intervene.

Amber, a white woman in her early twenties who was pregnant and the mother of a four-year-old, chafed at being encouraged to improve her mothering by someone with no children of her own:

Carly, she's probably 22 or 23? You're 2 years older than I am . . . I've been through a hell of a lot more, I have a four-year-old, I'm eight-and-a-half months pregnant, how are YOU gonna sit [and tell me how to parent]? It's very hard for me to sit and listen and be able to take them seriously.

Gloria, though she also did not have children of her own, was much more successful than Beth, Vivian, or Carly in this regard, and was able to employ a different set of strategies for managing the residents. A middle-aged black woman with working-class roots, Gloria could joke with the residents from a more equal footing than other staff. When Scarlet, a white woman in her late twenties said, "I'm a sweet little innocent angel," Gloria responded, "Uh-uh, we know better!" Gloria made rule announcements more forcefully than other staff, as when she told them, in a firm and incredulous tone, "don't eat food marked 'menu items'—apparently someone's been eating the *menu items*" (emphasis hers)—or, "Please, please, PLEASE clean up the kitchen after yourself, clean behind yourself, just keep the house *clean*." As the women began to grumble and name names of those they suspected to be the culprits, Gloria's strong voice quickly moved on, asking for a volunteer to "finally get this darn [Christmas] tree out of here . . . my grandmother would turn over in her grave, a tree being up this long after God's week." Residents were more receptive to Gloria's direct and more forceful announcements than Beth and other staff's softer but more formal ones, and Gloria got more in-the-moment compliance (e.g., more focused attention, a volunteer to take down the tree).

While Gloria echoed the rest of the staff in encouraging residents to become better mothers and told residents, for instance, that "yelling is bad for kids," she herself often told children "no" or to "knock it off," which was common among the mothers, but something none of the white staff members ever did. Gloria's embracement of her childless status also earned her respect. Gloria began one session in which she wanted to encourage mothers to focus on their children's self-esteem by telling the residents in her deep, booming voice, "I don't have kids, and I'm not gonna sit here and tell you 'I know.' I'm not gonna do that. But I will say I've worked with kids for years and bottom line, I have *been* a kid."

Though Gloria and Vivian—the outside speaker whose budget workshop residents barely tolerated—share social positions along lines of age and race, Gloria was able to invoke her shared class position, religious orientation, and informal interactional style to gain greater authority with the residents. Gloria's control strategies were less noticeable and more effective as a result. This does not mean that Gloria never faced resistance—she did, as we saw above when residents effectively overturned her admonition against "bitching" about staff and shelter policies. Importantly though, Gloria's position afforded her leverage other staff couldn't achieve, and that position forced residents to shift the resistance strategies they could employ when necessary. They could not make Gloria feel uncomfortable about her privilege, as Lori did with Beth, or dismiss her authority based on her age and inexperience, as Holly and Adrienne did with Beth, and as Amber and other mothers did in Carly's parenting group. They could not use jokes to undermine her as out of touch with their lived class experience, as they did with Vivian. They could, and did, draw on their shared class position and the currency of the empowerment rhetoric (as in the storytelling example earlier) to garner her sympathies, interrupt her group agenda, and get her to hear their concerns.

Withdrawal: Asserting the Power to Opt-Out

The empowerment rhetoric also laid the groundwork for residents to get out of Group altogether. Women avoided Group by making a variety of excuses. Children offered women particularly powerful and appropriate excuses to leave that helped them appear more, rather than less, responsible. Women left to attend, for instance, to crying children who were unhappy in the child

care provided in the next room, or brought children (who offered many distractions from Group) into Group with them. Babies became centerpieces of attention that could be passed around and cooed over, while the clock ticked away. One night, when Group had already run 30 minutes over, Lori insisted "I want a cigarette so bad I could kill myself." On another occasion, Carly admonished Ophelia, a black woman in her sixties, to "please be quiet while Amber is talking." Ophelia then told Carly that she really needed to go eat because of her blood sugar. Carly said, "Ok, but don't talk over Amber." Ophelia stood and left the room abruptly. This was the first of several occasions when Ophelia would leave group. To avoid losing points, however, she did so only after obtaining permission leveraged by showing signs of withdrawal and offering an acceptable, often health-related, excuse.

The most dramatic instance of withdrawal occurred one night when Beth had the women playing a therapeutic "get-to-know-you" board game. LeAnn, a white woman in her early twenties with a punk hairdo and multiple piercings, had begrudgingly participated through several rounds. At 8:15 she exclaimed "Fifteen minutes!"—expressing pleasure in the imminent end of the session. Soon the house phone rang, and when she was told she couldn't answer it, LeAnn became angry, making several comments about how the call might be an emergency, or related to the children (who had been taken offsite to see a play). After some eye rolling and sighing, she escalated her resistance:

Hillary was next, saying, "I'm helping y'all win." LeAnn was now leaning so far back in her chair that her head was lying on the table behind her. Her arms were crossed over her stomach and her eyes were closed. Hillary's card said "don't be modest, list 4 of your best qualities" and everyone started writing. LeAnn did not move a muscle. Hillary said, "I know, you're mad about the phone" in LeAnn's direction. After going around the table for responses, LeAnn still had not moved. Hillary said, "this one is tired" and reached over LeAnn to pass the dice to Whitney, skipping her.

The play continued until 8:30, with LeAnn continuing to be skipped. At this point, LeAnn was not willing even to remain in the room.

At 8:30 Hillary asked what time it was. When Beth responded, LeAnn said, "I was told we could leave at 8:30." Beth told her we would finish the next round. As others began to resume play, LeAnn asked, "Can I go to the bathroom?" Beth asked her to wait a few minutes, and told her we would be done shortly. LeAnn said, "It's starting to come out." Hillary giggled and told her she was gross. Beth said, "If you have to go, then go." LeAnn stood dramatically, put her sunglasses on, grabbed a pack of cigarettes from behind her, and walked out.

Beth often spoke with me in recorded informal interviews following Group, and on this evening she shared her interpretation of LeAnn's withdrawal: "It almost seemed like, a lot of the responses to the questions prior to her pulling out seemed to try to elicit attention." She went on to explain that facilitators understand that, "Sometimes you're just not in the [right] place, and we do encourage people to use their points if they're just not in that place." However, in regard to LeAnn she said, "I don't think that was the case. I think that was just a 'what's gonna happen if I do this' [situation]." Beth acknowledged that this would have been even more problematic if "others had gotten pulled in," but framed LeAnn's disruptive behavior and eventual withdrawal as an individual attention-seeking strategy, or a testing of boundaries—casting LeAnn as an intractable child. She did not view this behavior or its potential to draw others in as resistance to the shelter's programming, or the control she asserted during Group.

Resistance that escalated to the point of withdrawal was rare. Most residents wanted to be respectful to staff and meet the obligations they had agreed to because they *were* grateful to have a safe place to stay. For some, Recourse was the first relatively peaceful place they had found for themselves and their children. Even if Group was a pain, for many it was better than having no place to live and potentially being driven back to their abusers. Thus, Group was usually at least tolerated. The coercive power of the point system provided additional incentive to stick it out.

Importantly, though, the women's ability to withdraw when they did choose to do so was also facilitated by the empowerment rhetoric. Staff could attempt to coerce residents into Group through the point system, but could not, if the women rebelled nonetheless, force the women to participate without contradicting their language of individual "choice." Beth and Carly could not have comfortably demanded that Lori, Ophelia, or LeAnn remain in Group despite their claims to pressing needs to leave. To do so would have been too deep a challenge to their philosophies of empowerment and their own professional identities. By selecting resistance strategies that exploited the openings provided by the empowerment rhetoric, and that were specifically designed to emotionally resonate with their audience, residents were able to resist in "least observable" ways that were consequently most effective in this context. It was also interactionally challenging for younger white women to assert more overt authority over older women of color. While the empowerment rhetoric facilitated withdrawal for both Ophelia and LeAnn, Carly backed down immediately when Ophelia asserted a need to leave, while Beth made several attempts to exert authority over LeAnn before ultimately acquiescing to her escalating demand to leave Group.

The Staff Response

Staff also had an investment in ignoring the resistant intentions behind residents' actions. To affirm their professional identities and uphold the image of Recourse (and themselves) as therapeutic and empowering, facilitators had to overcome residents' resistance, either by denying or suppressing it. In an interview, Gloria echoed Beth's earlier interpretation of LeAnn's behavior, framing residents' resistance as attention seeking by those who saw Group as a "stage" to "perform" on (rather than a genuine challenge), saying:

You know, it's not about what the topic is, it's not about, you know, getting help. It's about "this is my audience, and I'm gonna perform." And that's very annoying, because there's women in there—it's important information being put out, you know? They're not there to be entertained. They're there to get information that's gonna help them when they leave here.

To Gloria, women's "performances," including such behaviors as flipping through a magazine or loudly whispering to one another in Group, were distractions for women who wanted to learn something. Neither Beth nor Gloria openly recognized the women's actions as resistance to staff control, or understood the meaning resistance held for residents.

This interpretation protected staff members' view of themselves as therapeutic professionals. They struggled, as did the volunteers at a homeless shelter studied by Daphne Holden (1997), to enforce rules that prevented them from feeling good about themselves as compassionate "helpers." At Recourse, the empowerment rhetoric aided this effort. Ken Kolb (2011), in a study of advocates for battered women, found that a rhetoric of empowerment allowed advocates to feel less responsible for bad outcomes, since those outcomes could be attributed to victim's choices. Beth's frequent use of the story about a woman "using" all her points and then "realizing" that it had been in her own best interest to leave served a similar purpose. She neither had to see herself as a rule enforcer, or feel responsible for a "failed" case.

Cynthia, the director, while a bit more cognizant of residents' perceptions of the point system, framed it as important for accountability nonetheless. As an example, she told me that while they did not want someone who missed the bus to have to "use" a point, if people were not held accountable, suddenly "everyone would be missing the bus." She used the same frame to appease any guilt she might feel over those who did use points "accidentally," explaining:

Based on an empowerment philosophy, part of that is being accountable for your choices and your responsibilities and your behaviors, and knowing that everything has consequences—sometimes good, sometimes not, and that's ok. You're free to make those choices, and if it has a consequence that you decide is not a good one, then maybe that's a learning opportunity to make different choices [than] in the past.

By framing rule enforcement as good for women's long-term development, the empowerment rhetoric justified the staff's exertion of control over residents and masked the paternalistic assumptions lurking just beneath the surface.

Resistance unchecked could also become an obstacle to maintaining order within the house. If procedures regarding meals, for instance, were constantly changing with the turnover of the house, chaos might well have ensued. As facilitators often said, the rules were "in place for a reason." They were the best policies staff had devised to manage the difficulties they faced in running the house on a day-to-day basis. Staff thus fended off residents' resistance with a variety of renewed control techniques. First, they tried to forestall resistance. On nights when she expected contention, Beth read a list of "group rules" before the session began. Gloria often reminded residents that Group was "not going to be a bitch session." This was important, she told me, because "we have a short amount of time to get a lot of stuff done, and we're not gonna waste this valuable time complaining." As shown earlier, these preemptive attempts often failed.

When this happened, facilitators would first (in keeping with the program philosophy) sympathize with residents, validating their concerns and acknowledging the difficulties of shelter living, and then proceed to justify house rules and policies, explaining why alternatives offered by residents were not viable. If validation followed by justification and reassertion of the rules didn't work, facilitators tried deferral strategies. Beth assured residents that she would "take their concerns back to staff." Gloria encouraged the residents to make a suggestion box as another outlet for their complaints. Staff also reminded residents that Group was not the proper outlet for their concerns, but that they should discuss these during "contracting" (their weekly meeting with the director). Diverting resistance *out* of Group and into a one-on-one setting where residents could be more easily managed still allowed staff to feel they were responding in an "empowering" and sympathetic manner. Ultimately then, the empowerment rhetoric became a resource staff could use to *deflect* resistance as well.

Conclusion

Shelter workers are charged with the daunting task of managing a potentially volatile group-living arrangement while meeting the needs of as many residents as possible. In *Rape Work* (2005), Patricia Yancey Martin argues that the revictimization of women who are sexually assaulted occurs in part because of the organizational demands placed on those who work with victims. So, too, behaviors that mirror those of abusers (i.e., restricting independence, surveillance) are built into the jobs of shelter workers. It is an immensely stressful, exhausting, and unpredictable job.¹¹ Creating an adequate framework for community living, while avoiding unnecessary control, is no small challenge.

At Recourse, staff drew on a gendered rhetoric of empowerment to construct a seemingly benign system of control to manage shelter residents. Yet the very notion of empowerment assumes that women have failed to take control of their lives and must be taught how to do so. This is particularly true for women who are seen as "victims," and implies that an inability to make "good life choices"—rather than structural gender arrangements, economic exploitation, or both—led to their victimization. The solution, then, was to teach them to make better choices and to learn "accountability." This approach would have made less sense in a differently classed or gendered setting: it's hard to imagine a group of women executives or the unionized men in Burawoy's machine shop tolerating a managerial control regime that painted them as vulnerable or passive individuals in need of empowerment.

11. Having previously worked in a shelter myself (not the organization studied), I am particularly sympathetic to these difficulties.

Despite its progressive ring and the good intentions of its users, the empowerment rhetoric at Recourse obscured a paternalism that reflected the staff's middle-class outlook. Presuming that women who came to the shelter needed empowering and other therapeutic interventions rather than simply a place to stay (see also Liebow 1993), the staff created infantilizing control policies that required residents to receive these interventions whether they wanted them or not (see also McKim 2008). The point system and mandatory group sessions, while ostensibly empowering residents, were, as in other similarly classed and gendered settings (Goodkind 2009; Haney 2010; Hannah-Moffat 2000), used to manage, control, and "reform" them.

Residents resisted these interventions by bending the moral rhetoric of empowerment to their own ends and drawing on the cultural resources available to them by virtue of their position in structures of race, class, and gender inequality, and that would be most effective given a particular staff member's own social position.¹² By openly discussing their feelings and emotional experiences, asserting strong mothering and home-making skills, "creatively" interrupting group activities, *highlighting* the race, class, age, and experiential differences between themselves and staff, using concerns about health and children as justifications for withdrawal, and invoking the empowerment rhetoric to legitimate their actions, women at Recourse could effectively push back against staff control. These tactics stand in important contrast to those used by men in the batterer intervention program Doug Schrock and Irene Padavic (2007) studied, in which men resisted facilitator control by *refusing* to talk about their feelings or be emotionally vulnerable, asserting themselves as hardworking "breadwinners," and telling long stories about successes at their jobs.

This process highlights how strategies of control and resistance are selected from "a web of possibilities [by] agents, whose nature is both active and structured [and who] make choices and pursue strategies within given limits" (Lukes 2005:69; see also Giddens 1984). Structures of inequality equip actors with resources to legitimate their control and resistance strategies, rendering them more or less emotionally powerful given one's own (and one's audiences') position in matrices of difference and inequality. Moreover, resources deployed by one side can be co-opted, adapted, and effectively redeployed by the other. Struggle itself can develop new capacities for control and resistance.

At the same time, however, resources provided by systems of inequality can trap actors into reproducing inequality. When staff and residents at Recourse cast women as victims (see Dunn 2010; Hollander 2001; Leisenring 2006), inherently emotional, or naturally maternal caretakers, they inadvertently bolstered the essentialist ideologies at the root of women's subordination. By leaning on the empowerment rhetoric to legitimate their control or resistance, the women at Recourse simultaneously reinforced its assumptions. Similarly, "empowering" residents on an individual level to make "better choices" in their lives, even if successful, does little to challenge the root causes of violence against women in a patriarchal context. While it makes good feminist sense to empower women as a group, the rhetoric of empowerment at Recourse reduced women's problems to matters of individual choices, thus shoring up the status quo. While residents did manage to defend their dignity and derive feelings of efficacy from their resistance—which could, ironically, be considered "empowering"—these individually satisfying acts posed no real threat to the underlying regime of control operating in the house.

The explosion of new, progressive-sounding moral rhetorics in any number of arenas, from the empowerment rhetoric invoked in women's shelters and women's prisons, to the rhetoric of "shared governance" or critical pedagogy in higher education (Ellsworth 1989), can mask the power of those who make the rules of the game, set agendas, and "decide what is decided" (Lukes 2005:111). As such, they obscure mechanisms of control, and "secure the *willing* compliance" (Lukes 2005:12, emphasis in original) of those subject to them. At the same time, however, the logic of such moral rhetorics place real constraints on those who

12. They did so covertly, in gender appropriate and "least-observable" ways that generally would not rock the boat enough to risk the loss of a point or otherwise reduce their time in the shelter. While those in subordinate groups are willing to resist and spark conflict, they are often still invested in maintaining what little they do have (Jackman 1994).

invoke them, and provide a legitimating foundation for resistance. At Recourse, in the absence of organized and sustained collective challenge (see Fantasia 1988), this resistance remained largely at the level of *self*-defense, offering fleeting psychological rewards in place of concrete, structural change. While both structures of control and strategies of resistance, then, may be most effective when they employ moral rhetorics that are highly valued in a given local context, their success may also confront significant limits.

As a relatively fruitless struggle for power and control played out between staff and residents at Recourse, little progress was made toward the larger goal of ending violence against women, or the battered women's movement's historical goal of remaking a world in which women are not dependent on relationships with potentially violent men in order to support themselves and their children. Without deeper, targeted, and sustained challenges to larger structures of inequality and exploitation beyond the shelter's walls, the dilemmas facing both staff and residents at Recourse are likely to be endlessly replayed. While the women's resourceful resistance garnered them small, meaningful personal victories, their precarious social positions at Recourse, and in the broader context of their homes, workplaces, and communities, remain unchanged.

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