

Discursive Differences: Examining Battered Woman Syndrome as Applied to Chicago's Black Women

SURG | Social Sciences and Journalism, SSJ | Tags: Archival, Literary/Compositional Analysis

*This cover page is meant to focus your reading of the sample proposal, summarizing important aspects of proposal writing that the author did well or could have improved. **Review the following sections before reading the sample.** The proposal is also annotated throughout to highlight key elements of the proposal's structure and content.*



Proposal Strengths	Areas for Improvement
The gap in knowledge and justification for the research aims are clearly stated.	Proposals should be written for an educated, but non-specialist audience. For this reason, you must define your terms.
The scope of the project, especially considering its eventual incorporation into a larger senior thesis, is appropriate for an 8 week project.	The first paragraph should be a big picture overview of the rest of the proposal. While this proposal does summarize the project/approach within the first paragraph, it feels more like part of the background.
Archival methodology is explained with illustrative examples for what the student intends to find at the archives they will visit.	
The proposal includes a specific research question. It comes at the end of the background section. As such, it is fittingly more concrete, answerable, and well justified by the preceding literature review.	



Other Key Features to Take Note Of
The location of the study is specifically justified. In particular, the researcher lists the specific archive they will travel to, and what specifically they will find there.

Battered woman syndrome (BWS) emerged as a concept in the 1970s, growing in prominence over the remainder of the century, and served as the crucial foundation upon which society developed its current understanding of intimate partner violence (IPV). In addition to raising discourse and awareness of such abuse, however, BWS has faced critique in the decades following its inception (Sweet 2015; Rothenberg 2003). Much of the critique of BWS focused on the medicalization of women's various post-abuse symptomatic experiences as a syndrome. This medicalization converted the social concerns of abuse into individual concerns of disordered behavior (Summerfield 2001). Critics further argued this medicalized construction of BWS created a narrow and stereotyped identity for IPV survivors—by ascribing them negative traits like weakness and helplessness, but also by focusing on white women—and that many of these concerns linger in modern conceptions of IPV (Dunn 2004). Given the important ramifications of early conceptions of BWS on IPV, and the relative exclusion of non-white groups in BWS research, I will focus on where non-white groups fit into, or did not fit into, this dominant and stereotyped understanding of BWS. Using Chicago as a case study, I will use archival research to examine how public discourse differed in its pathologization between Black and white “battered women.”

It was through these early conceptualizations of battered women, which resulted from the process of medicalization, that women who experienced IPV came to embody a collective identity (Pagelow 1992). Early studies, conducted in the late 1970s and early 1980s, attempted to provide a clinical framework for BWS, paying close attention to the syndrome's causes, effects, and risk factors (Appleton 1980; Walker 1979). Society came to understand these women and determine the conditions of their victimhood through this medical framework. Sweet explains that this “converting [of] a socially produced problem into a biomedical places the cause of the now-disease on the patient herself,” becoming a means of managing survivors (2015). This exertion of control and influence over survivors' narratives through the medicalized framework of BWS has undeniable implications by creating norms or expectations for battered women, which is particularly problematic for women who do not fit into the typical BWS narrative or identity (Pagelow 1992).

Though many scholars have looked at the role of the medical and legal fields in constructing and medicalizing BWS, study of this subject has largely ignored discourse among the mass public and different demographic groups. Sweet argues that there should be more research on how medicalization came to “co-constitute” discourses among the public and survivors, and further, how the discourse had an effect and played out in Black communities (2015). Even research focusing on discourse among activists and grassroots movements affords most attention to rhetoric from white scholar-activists and does not look at variations across demographic groups (Dunn 2004). Allard echoes this need for an examination of public discourse that takes into account demographic differences, arguing that “gender-based theories that do not incorporate race and class will be as problematic as battered woman syndrome” (1991). Allard's Black feminist angle does not, however, discuss pathologization, instead taking a legal focus (1991). Lastly, it must be noted that there is little research on the dynamics and nature of public discourse in specific populations or places. Therefore, my question is: how did public discourse in Chicago view and account for—or perhaps fail to account for—the experiences of Black women within the medicalized construction of “battered women”? As part of my larger question, I will be particularly alert to how certain groups of women were included, and other women excluded, in the rhetoric of who suffered from BWS; I will pay attention to the possibility that some women received more sympathetic rhetoric compared to other women.

In order to answer my research question, I will examine primary news sources from historical archives to see how these larger trends of social construction and medicalization applied to Black women compared to white women within the public discourse of Chicago. I will only use the racial identification of women when indicators within my research make obvious the woman's race. These indicators include explicit statements of race or a combination of pictures,

The focus of the project is clear within the first paragraph.

Researcher should mention this will be a senior thesis.

Justifies why this project is important and situates this importance in relevant literature.

Background leads to specific and answerable research questions.

Justifies timeframe and location of the case study.

Proposals should be written for an educated, but non-specialist audience. For this reason, you must define your terms.

Despite the focus of the project being clear in the first paragraph, the citations present make it appear to be more of a literature review.

Identifies gap in knowledge.

Identifies gap in knowledge.

Includes explicit research question.

names, and neighborhoods or locations (given the extreme segregation of Chicago's neighborhoods during this time). This research will specifically examine discourse during the period of the mid-1970s, when "battered women" emerged in mainstream media discourse, through the mid-1980s, when medical journals increasingly invoked BWS within a medicalized framework. With these archival documents, I will look for how a given news item portrays battered women symptomatically: what attributes they assign the women and what, if any, kinds of interventions they mention. I will compare any differences between how they symptomatically portray white versus non-white women. I will also take note of which women are discussed, as well as the manner in which they are discussed: if there are changes in rhetoric among different demographic groups, and, similarly, if certain public discourse regards certain women with greater sympathy.

I have already done database searches for this time period using terms like "battered woman syndrome" and "battered women" and yielded roughly 225 results (see Appendix I). To identify the extent to which public discourse of Black women reflected social and medical trends, my database searches will center on the coverage of BWS specifically in Chicago publications, making use of archival collections through the Chicago Public Library (CPL) and Northwestern's library (see Appendix I). CPL's newspaper collections feature archives of two major Chicago publications: the Tribune, historically representing Chicago's white population, and the Defender, historically representing Chicago's Black population. Looking at these two newspapers in-depth during this time frame will be important to understand public discourse as they have both historically held particular prominence in Chicago while also traditionally representing two different populations of readers. That they represent different groups, and perhaps different perspectives, can speak to any inclusion or exclusion of women from BWS rhetoric between white and Black news media. To get a more varied and nuanced understanding of public rhetoric towards BWS, I will also use Northwestern's digital newspaper archives to look for sources from more local community newspapers from this period—these archives include additional newspapers and newspaper databases from Chicago's Black communities (see Appendix I). News that represents these other community perspectives will engage well with discourse found in the more popular Defender and Tribune, speaking to how BWS discourse of Black women could have varied or portrayed women differently. Given the COVID-19 pandemic, I will access the vast majority of information through digital archives, with the exception of selective use of CPL's newspaper microfilm by appointment (see Appendix I). Upon examining these primary sources, it is possible that I will need to consult additional scholarly sources for contextual purposes (e.g. if there is a particular law or act that numerous articles reference, I will conduct additional research on this law). I will determine any additional readings based on the archival information I gather (see Appendix II for more examples of possible readings). My analysis of these primary, and of any secondary, documents will be an important component in my research process for a senior honors thesis in the fall with my faculty member.

As a history major, I have significant experience working with primary source documents as well as tying primary sources into broader scholarly arguments. I have taken History 393 and will take History 395 this spring, both of which prepare students with how to interact intensively with historical texts and media and write for the history field. I will also have had experience learning about IPV as I have worked with a domestic violence organization in Chicago, and I will be conducting an independent study about Chicago efforts to address IPV during spring quarter. As much of my preliminary research has indicated, archival research can present challenges; to address any difficulties I encounter during this process, I will continue to seek guidance from my faculty advisor, Dr. Sarah Rodriguez, and those who work with the archives I will be studying (see Appendix III). Given my passion for the issue of gender-based violence (GBV), I will use the skills I gain or expand upon through this research to pursue a career in public health that will hopefully focus on GBV.

Researcher has a plan of analysis and lays out specific details.



Explains how the content and analysis connects back to their research question.



Clearly mentions output of the researcher—a senior thesis.



Researcher provides proof of being able to access necessary materials.



Researcher lists clear preparation to undertake this project.



Works Cited

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- Sweet, Paige L. "Chronic Victims, Risky Women: Domestic Violence Advocacy and the Medicalization of Abuse." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 41, no. 1 (September 1, 2015): 81–106. <https://doi.org/10.1086/681772>.
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Appendix I: Archival Collection Plan
(Please note COVID-19 considerations included)

A) Chicago Public Library: Chicago Newspaper Collections

1. Chicago Tribune Historical Archive (all through digital collection)
 - a. Publication date: 1975-1985
 - i. Keyword search “battered woman syndrome” (4 results)
 - ii. Keyword search “battered women” OR “battered woman” (around 170 results)
2. Chicago Defender Historical Archive
 - a. Digital collection (digital archives available through 1975)
 - i. Publication date: 1974-1975
 1. Keyword search “battered women” OR “battered woman” (11 results)
 - b. Microfilm collection (located at the Harold Washington Library Center)
 - i. Possible publication dates include:
 1. June 22-26, 1978: several new directives are passed by the state government regarding “wife beating”
 2. October 25-27, 1978: following the release of an important city health-care plan that included important ramifications for abused women
 3. Feb 25 - March 3, 1982: the announcement release of the original Illinois Domestic Violence Act
 4. March 2-3, 1983: following the release of a critical study of the Illinois Domestic Violence Act one year following the Act’s passing
 5. March 16-18, 1983: Mother Theresa’s nuns visit church-led efforts for “battered women” Chicago

Contacts:

Research assistance is available through appointment only (see Appendix III).

Accessibility of in-person collection:

All in-person collections/archives at the Harold Washington Library Center are available through appointment (see Appendix III).

B) Northwestern University Library: Chicago Historical Newspapers

1. African-American Newspapers, 1827-1998 (all through digital collection)
 - a. Publication date: 1975-1985
 - b. Limit search exclusively to Chicago newspapers
 - i. Keyword search “battered women” OR “battered woman” (around 30 results)
2. Hyde Park Herald Archives (all through digital collection)
 - a. Publication date: 1975-1985
 - i. Keyword search “battered women” OR “battered woman” (10 results)

Contacts:

Anne Zald, Northwestern “Chicago Area Guide” Librarian (see Appendix III).

Appendix II: Possible Readings

A) Illinois Domestic Violence Acts

- Boland, Mary Lou. "Domestic Violence: Illinois Responds to the Plight of the Battered Wife - The Illinois Domestic Violence Act, 16 J. Marshall L. Rev. 77 (1982)." *The John Marshall Law Review* 16, no. 1 (1982): 77–99.
- Brady, Terrence J. "The Illinois Domestic Violence Act of 1986: A Selective Critique." *Loyola University Chicago Law Journal* 19, no. 3 (1988): 798–808.
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- Peurye-Hissong, Celene. *Illinois Domestic Violence Act: a Victim Advocate's Manual*. Springfield, IL: Illinois Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 1983.
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B) Different Feminist Perspectives

- Loseke, Donileen R, and Spencer E Cahill. "The Social Construction of Deviance: Experts on Battered Women." *Social Problems* 31, no. 3 (1984): 296–310.
- Richie, Beth. *Compelled to Crime: The Gender Entrapment of Battered, Black Women*. New York, NY: Routledge, 1996.
- Saunders-Robinson, M A. "Battered Women: an African American Perspective." *ABNF Journal* 2, no. 4 (1991): 81–84.
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- West, Carolyn. *Violence in the Lives of Black Women: Battered, Black, and Blue*. 1st ed. New York, NY: Routledge, 2003.
- Yllo, Kersti, and Michelle Bograd, eds. *Feminist Perspectives on Wife Abuse*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1988.

C) Medicalization of Trauma

- Conrad, Peter, and Joseph W Schneider. *Deviance and Medicalization: From Badness to Sickness*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1980.
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- Kleinman, Arthur. *Writing at the Margin: Discourse Between Anthropology and Medicine*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997.

Appendix III: Proof of Support and Access

Chicago Public Library:

Request an Appointment: Special Collections, Archives and Microfilm

Chicago Public Library's special, archival and microfilm collections are available by appointment only at this time. Use the form below to arrange your appointment.

We also offer phone and email reference, and many research inquiries can be handled by speaking with a librarian or archivist.

Appointment availability depends on reading room occupancy limits and the status of requested collections. Please be aware that some collections may be quarantined and temporarily unavailable if they have been recently used by another researcher.

* Indicates a required field

Name *

First

Last

Email *

Enter Email

Confirm Email

Phone *

Where would you like to schedule an appointment? *

- Newspapers and Microfilm, Harold Washington Library Center
- Northside Neighborhood History Collection, Sulzer Regional Library
- Special Collections and Preservation Division, Harold Washington Library Center
- Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature, Woodson Regional Library

This information will be submitted via email. [Learn More](#)

Anne Zald, Northwestern "Chicago Area Guide" Librarian:



[Redacted]

Wed, Mar 3, 11:59 PM (6 days ago) ☆ ↶ ⋮

to Anne ▾

Hello Anne,

Thanks so much for all of this help already! Given that this research would be for the summer, not this spring, your leave should not be an issue to my research. Is it possible that you would still be willing to assist me in the summer?

Best,
Gaby



Anne E Zald

Thu, Mar 4, 7:42 AM (5 days ago) ☆ ↶ ⋮

to Gaby ▾

Absolutely!

Anne

