

The Point of DARVO

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DARVO (Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender) is a common tactic deployed by abusers to co-opt one of the few (potential) sources of power available to the survivor — disclosure — and turn it towards their own project of coercive control. The abuser denies allegations of abuse (if any have yet been made, sometimes abusers preempt their victim), attacks the credibility of the survivor, and creates a narrative in which the abuser is cast as the true victim of the survivor. When some people first hear of DARVO they express concern that the reality of the tactic makes it functionally impossible to distinguish between abuser and victim, implies the presence of “mutual abuse,” or demotes the situation from abusive to simply “toxic.” With these conclusions in hand many feel as though they can safely recuse themselves from engaging with the situation entirely, thus fulfilling the abuser’s central aim in deploying DARVO as a tactic in the first place.

The point of DARVO, contrary to popular belief, is not to convince but to seed *doubt*. The abuser does not require the surrounding community to fully and completely validate them as the true victim of the abuse, though they certainly see it as a bonus. Abuse is not an individual pathology, but an ideology of domination that must utilize or at least refer to various technologies of control that are active in the social context of abuser and victim, it is not an aberration from the status quo, but an expression of it. In the contexts in which it is enacted abuse *is* the status quo. Therefore, as within all hegemony, the only thing that needs to happen for an empowered authoritarian to keep their power is for enough people to ignore it. The abuser does not need to convince everyone fully to their side: all they need are some close accomplices and for most everyone else to simply withhold action.

Because inaction from the community is often sufficient in maintaining the abusive situation (or at the very least in maintaining the empowered position of the abuser, even if an individual relationship has ended) action is the *only* thing that can actually help the survivor. The survivor needs to be seen and understood as a survivor, as a victim the abuser’s coercive control, in order to receive adequate support. The abusive situation is characterized by the disempowerment of the victim and the disproportional empowerment of the abuser, and this power imbalance cannot be rectified if the survivor nor abuser are not accurately identified as such. When the surrounding community withholds actions of support to the survivor and challenge to the abuser because the abuser’s mobilization of DARVO makes doing so fraught and confusing, only the survivor suffers, and the conditions of the abuse maintain.

While DARVO may make it less simple to discern victim and abuser at a glance, it does not make it even close to impossible. Abuse is about power and a context of control, not individual actions. When people mistakenly determine abuse by one's behavior in a singular event, or even multiple disconnected events, rather than by the entire context of the relationship, they may easily accept an abuser's attempt at DARVO. Here is an example illustrated in The Network/La Red's Intimate Partner Abuse Screening Tool:

Context, Intent, Effect Example:

Survivor	Abuser
Incident: Two women who are dating are in a car. The woman in the passenger seat punches the woman who is driving.	
Context: "My partner was driving the car and screaming at me and driving dangerously. At a red light, I punched her and ran out of the car."	Context: "My partner was driving. We were fighting and she pulled the car over and tried to get out to leave. I punched her and told her to keep driving."
Intent: To get free of a dangerous situation, self defense	Intent: Control partner, keep her in the car
Effect: Survivor gets away and flees to a friend's house, fearing the repercussions of her action.	Effect: Abuser gains power and control through fear and violence.

[Image description: Pictured is a table titled Context, Intent, Effect Example. On one side of the table is the survivor reaction to an incident and on the other the abuser's reaction.

Incident: Two women who are dating are in a car. The woman in the passenger seat punches the woman who is driving.

Survivor context: "My partner was driving the car and screaming at me and driving dangerously. At a red light, I punched her and ran out of the car."

Survivor Intent: To get free of a dangerous situation, self defense.

Survivor effect: Survivor gets away and flees to a friend's house, fearing the repercussions of her action.

Abuser Context: "My partner was driving. We were fighting and she pulled the car over and tried to get out to leave. I punched her and told her to keep driving."

Abuser Intent: Control partner, keep her in the car.

Abuser Effect: Abuser gains power and control through fear and violence.]

Notice how if one relies on a conceptualization of abuse that focuses on individual actions like “punching is inherently abusive” to guide them, they can easily end up affirming an abuser in their control. Like on the broader political scale, the ethicality of violence is dependent on context. There are victims who use physical violence, lie, cheat, yell at/insult their abusers, break things, steal, and pretty much anything that many people seem to think disqualify someone from being a “true” victim. Often victims will do these things *because* of the abusive context in an attempt to regain their sense of dignity and agency in a situation that places heavy restraints on their ability to exercise them. It is very easy for most abusers to pick out stories of their victims pushing back, melting down, being dysregulated, lying, etc. to damage their credibility as victims. The conditions of abuse call for a myriad of resistance strategies that, divorced from that context, can appear illegible at the least and morally condemnable at the worst. The questions to ask are not as simple as who did what in individual, decontextualized events but contextual questions such as: what is the *intent* of that behavior (gain control over someone or take back control over oneself)? What is its effect (are they afraid or have they established control)? Who is making the decisions? Were these decisions coerced? What are the consequences for making decisions that the partner doesn’t like? Whose boundaries are respected? Who feels entitled to consistently have their way? Whose life is getting smaller?

This is why understanding abuse as a context of continuous disempowerment and control of the victim is a vital skill that can also serve to defang an abuser’s attempt at DARVO, because in practice most such attempts do not manage to stand under even the slightest scrutiny. I have seen a successful attempt at DARVO in which the survivor detailed extensive emotional, financial, and sexual abuse and the abuser responded by arguing that the survivor was the real abuser because they “didn’t allow [the abuser] to feel their emotions” whenever the survivor asked them to stop verbally abusing them. The abuser in this situation was believed, the survivor ostracized from their community. As discussed above, the goal isn’t to convince, but to seed doubt, and because abuse is an expression of the status quo many who have been thus far complicit (knowingly or not) are usually quite eager to grasp at any excuse to remain in comfortable complicity rather than engage in action against social hegemony.

Using the existence of DARVO as a common tactic among abusers as grounds to treat all abuse allegations with immediate skepticism ultimately fulfills the goals abusers aim towards when they deploy it. The utility of DARVO to abusers is not that it convinces everyone that they are a victim, but that it muddies the waters enough to give the surrounding community an excuse to disengage, to throw up their hands and say “we can’t know who the abuser is, so it would be better if we didn’t even try!” This position renders DARVO into such a successful tool for abusers that abuse becomes a defacto protected act as long as they utilize it. Discerning between victim and abuser in an interpersonal relationship is as possible as discerning between victim and abuser in larger oppressive systems, even when the oppressor (as they often do) cries victim. Terrains of power are analyzable even when propaganda works to obfuscate them, and from that analysis must come action. All else remains complicity with the authoritarian status quo.

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