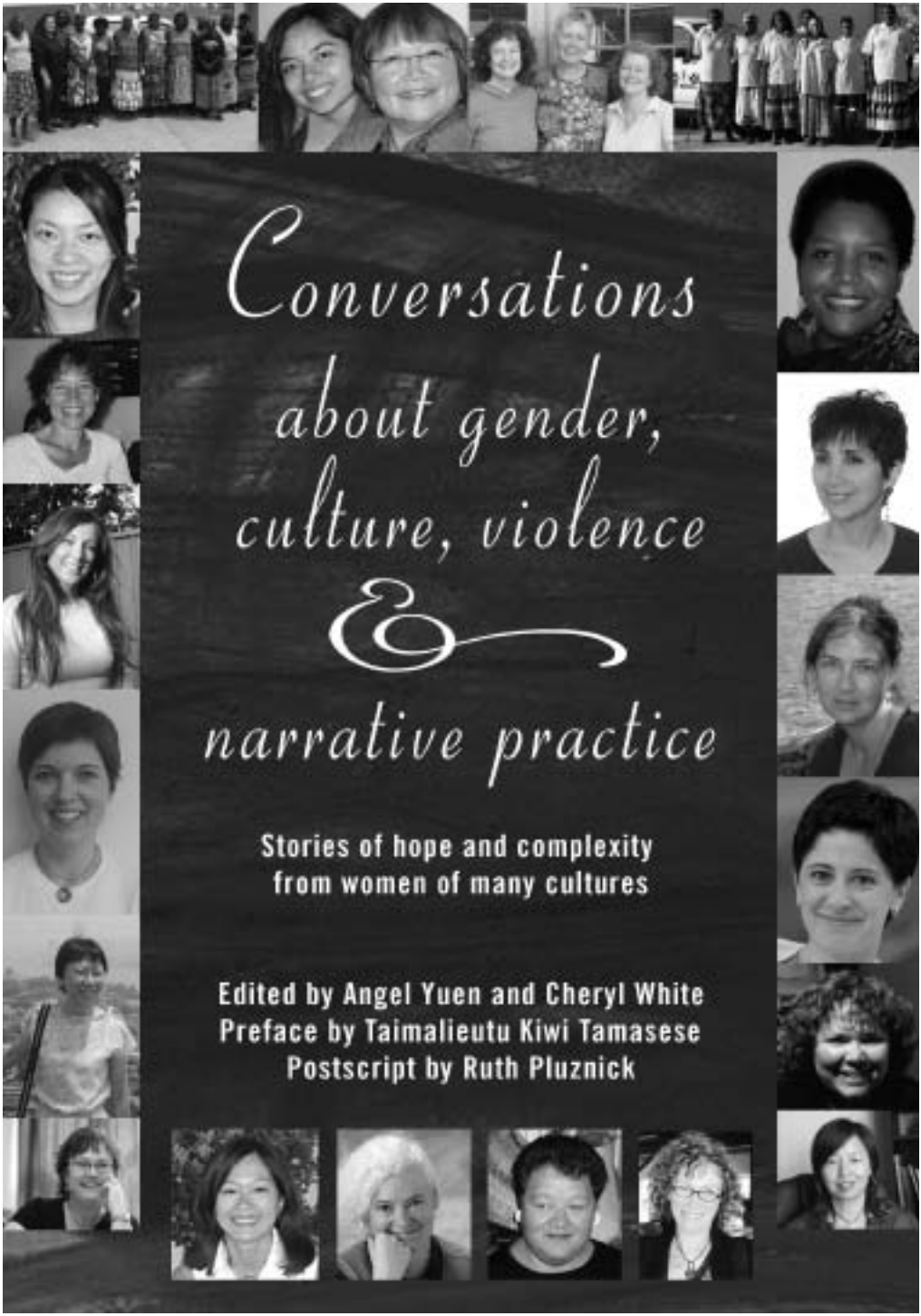
Conversations
about gender,
culture, violence
&
narrative practice
Stories of hope and complexity
from women of many cultures
Edited by Angel Yuen and Cheryl White
Preface by Taimalieutu Kiwi Tamasese
Postscript by Ruth Pluznick

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Dulwich Centre Publications Pty Ltd
Hutt St PO Box 7192
Adelaide SA 5000, Australia
P: (61-8) 8223 3966 • F: (61-8) 8232 4441
E: dcp@senet.com.au
www.dulwichcentre.com.au

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Preface

By Taimalieutu Kiwi Tamasese

I really appreciate that the work of women of many cultures to address issues of violence has been documented in this book. Having access to these stories will encourage those of us who are trying to respond to these issues in our own communities.

This book challenges us when it asks questions such as:

- Has the professionalisation of our work closed off the possibilities for grassroots community action to address violence against women?
- And if so, how can we turn this around? How can our work support local community initiatives?

I particularly appreciate the care with which the writers have included their own questions, hopes and uncertainties. Whether they are describing community development projects or therapeutic practices, the writers have included their dilemmas. This is a generous act and a helpful one. It means that this volume is not a manual on the how-tos of working in this area, but instead an engaging collection of stories of the actions women are taking in their own ways and in their own contexts.

As readers, we are invited to join in considerations of dilemmas and possibilities. We are also invited to witness good work that is taking place to respond to and prevent violence. This is significant in itself. The devastation caused by violence can be overwhelming, but this collection not only draws attention to violence and its effects, it also draws attention to hope and change.

This is a wide-ranging book. It considers ways of responding to those who have suffered as a result of abuse, and also ways of responding to those who have enacted violence. And throughout, there is a dedication to care and thoughtfulness in relation to matters of culture.

White women workers describe their determination to question their own privilege. They describe evocatively the blind spots that people in any position of domination have about their own powers and privilege. This is refreshing to read. And women of diverse cultures speak loudly about ways of working that respect their traditions. Throughout this book, it is clear that practitioners are looking to the liberative elements of cultures from which to draw solutions to end violence. Women describe how within any culture there are liberative traditions of gender relations that can be drawn upon. The solutions to violence can be found from *within* our respective cultures.

Discussions about rape and other forms of violence to women can be very complex, especially within multicultural forums. The question is, how can these discussions occur in ways that do not further diminish marginalised cultures? Continuing reflective questioning from women of dominant cultures about their own practices of privilege is necessary. And at the same time, how can the leadership within marginalised cultures be supported, be resourced, so that they are able to facilitate discussions within their cultures about stopping violence within and between communities? How can the initiatives that women of marginalised cultures are already taking be noticed, acknowledged and supported? Spaces for women of different cultures to come together to discuss these issues need to be opened. I think this book will help to open them.

Finally, as well as offering ideas to put to use in our work lives, this book invites us to take a much closer look at what we can do in our own neighbourhoods, in our local villages, and in our extended families, to help bring an end to violence. If we turn our attention to local community initiatives at non-violence and peace-making, and if we begin to document these, perhaps this book

will be the start of a flood of inspiring stories of action. Perhaps in years to come, there will be the opportunity for a follow-up collection, which contains the stories of actions that readers have taken in their own communities. For that is what this collection inspires and challenges. It encourages us, the reader, to notice and support those who are already taking action to address violence. And it encourages us to take action ourselves.


Setting the context:

The personal is political and professional
Talking about feminism, culture and violence

A conversation between Angel Yuen and Cheryl White

While working on this book, Angel and Cheryl have had many conversations about the interface of gender and culture and responding to violence. We thought readers might be interested to know a bit about why two women from such different cultures, countries and generational backgrounds shared an interest in making this book come to life. The following conversation between Angel and Cheryl took place on a hot summer's day in Adelaide in March 2007.

Cheryl: As this is a book about violence and considerations of culture and gender, I'd like to ask you about the history of your awareness about each of these issues. Where do you think would be an appropriate place to start?

Angel: *I think I'd like to begin by re-telling a conversation I recently shared with my mother. The process of putting together the writings for this book prompted me to ask her about the lives of Chinese women when she was growing up in mainland China and also about her experiences of gender relations when she travelled as a young person as a refugee from China to Hong Kong and later to*

Canada. In reply to my questions, my mother thoughtfully described, 'In Toy San China, I grew up learning that men are everything and women are not'. She continued by explaining that these attitudes often accompanied Chinese families when they migrated. Many Chinese men new to Canada, she explained, worked very hard to support their families and it was not uncommon to hear of some who would gamble after work into the long hours of night while leaving their wives on their own. 'Women just stayed at home and didn't (couldn't) say anything.'

As my mom spoke about this, she remembered her friend Mrs L:

'When Mrs L immigrated to Canada she didn't speak English and I think this made her life much harder. Mr. L controlled all of the money, was never home at night, and he sometimes treated her harshly. I helped her to make a plan to keep saving some of her own pocket money – so she didn't always have to depend on him. I also stayed at their home many times to support her when she was most scared or worried. Although Mrs L couldn't change Mr L, she did have a supportive mother-in-law who cared about her. Her mother-in-law also couldn't change or control Mr L … but she could at least help her daughter-in-law. Together, Mrs L's mother-in-law and I helped Mrs. L over many years.'

The reason I thought I'd start with this story is that I think it evokes the experience of many women in different parts of the world. I also think it conveys the ways in which women offer support and friendship to each other. Often, I think, it is women's friendships that have provided sustenance down the generations. And I think my mother and her life has been a starting point for me to understand women's experiences.

Cheryl: Were these the sorts of stories that brought you to consider issues of gender and feminist thought?

Angel: *While perhaps they provided a foundation, it actually wasn't until I got my first job as a Social Worker that I seriously considered feminism. I would have been twenty-one at the time and the job was in the second freestanding abortion clinic in Toronto called the Scott Clinic. I got an interview right after leaving university and was immediately offered the job as their first counsellor. I remember that my mother drove me downtown for my first day at work. At that time, abortion clinics were considered illegal because of Canada's Abortion Laws, and there were*

always picketers and protestors outside the building. Sometimes there would be as few as two protestors, but on other days it would climb to as many as 100. The first day, my mother drove me towards the building and I was looking over at her to see what she thought about all of this. My mother has always given me the space to do what feels right for me, but when she gives her opinion I always take it seriously. This time, she literally stopped the car before we were at the destination, turned to me and said, 'Are you sure that you want this job, that you're okay about this?' She was clearly just a little worried and understandably so. She wasn't aware that I had given considerable thought to the many women who were travelling to abortion clinics in the United States at that time and how important I thought it was for women to have the right to safe and accessible abortions in their own city. And so I replied, 'I'm fine mum, wish me luck!' And then she had to drop me off down the street because picketers were in front of the clinic.

Cheryl: Did you have to walk through the picket lines or was there a back entrance?

Angel: *We walked through the front and that was a bit nerve-wracking at first but then you just got used to it. The protestors would always think I was a patient so they'd be calling out, 'How are you? We can help you' and would try to get me to leave with them. Then they'd follow me to the door, which was always locked for safety reasons. We always had to coach women who were coming to the clinic how to make it through the door.*

At that time there was no government funding for abortion clinics so the women had to pay for the service. I met with women of a diversity of ages, cultures and economic situations. When I learned of the steps that several women were taking to try to find ways to raise the money to pay for the abortion, this really made me think further about the rights of women. My supervisor was a lovely woman who had feminist principles. She had studied gender, feminism and women studies, and would share different books with me. Looking back, I suppose she was a mentor to me and I really respected her. Through this connection, I realised that the majority of books I had read in undergraduate study were by white men, so to be handed books by women authors was a breath of fresh air.

My following job was with Big Brothers, a non-profit organisation which matches boys from 'father-absent homes' with men who serve as friends by meeting up with these boys once a week. It had a mission that in some ways gave the message that it's fraught for boys to grow up without a 'father-figure'. But we were conscious to not promote this idea and instead simply spoke about how everybody needs a friend. One part of my job was to interview the potential big brothers, to screen them for suitability. The other part of my job was to interview the little brothers and their mothers within their homes. I met so many different women who were on their own, and learning of the many efforts they were making for their children opened my eyes. The ways in which they were providing love for their children in difficult circumstances was very significant to me. I witnessed so many counter-stories to the dominant and often diminishing accounts of 'single-motherhood'. I'd say 40% of these women had experienced violence in their previous relationships where the fathers that some of these young boys had once had access to, had been violent and abusive. I quickly realised that I had so much to learn from these mothers about living in the aftermath of conflict, about caring for children when resources are so stretched. I also learnt to question dominant ideas of family life. These women were 'living family' in unconventional but powerfully loving and thoughtful ways that I could only appreciate and respect.

Cheryl: Have there been particular aspects of the feminist movement that have been significant to you?

Angel: *When I then went back to university, I immersed myself in writings by feminist women. I think it was the phrase 'the personal is political' (Hanisch 1970) that meant the most to me. To think of how personal stories could be understood politically in terms of gender fascinated me. Everything I was reading about the invisibility of women's work and caring, the significance of making the private public, and spousal relationships, I could relate to my own life, and particularly to the life of my mother. My parents had separated five years earlier and there was a statistic in one of the books that I remember to this day. At the end of the first year following separation, women on average will experience a 72% decline in the standard of living, while men's standard of living will improve*

by over 40%. In essence, post-separation, many women end up living in poverty. The reason this was particularly poignant to me was because this was true for my mother.

When my parents separated, I witnessed the financial effects on my mum. My father owned a business, a Chinese restaurant in Toronto, and my mother had supported this business her entire adult life, as well as raising four children. Post-separation she had to start a whole new life and figure out how to support herself. Coming from Chinese culture, we had the benefit of collective ways of thinking about family, and me and my siblings all knew that we would do whatever we could to support our mother. I ended up living with my mother and am happy to say this is still the case, many years later. The link to feminist thought, however, was that everything I was reading seemed to resonate with what I was witnessing in my mother's life and in the lives of many other women I knew. Having a feminist framework through which to understand all of this was a source of liberation.

Cheryl: Having spoken about issues of gender and feminism, can we now hear about the development of your thinking about culture and different cultures … when did you start knowing that culture was a topic really worth investigation and thoughtfulness?

Angel: *Growing up Chinese within a white dominant society meant growing up with oppression and racism in different ways, but I don't think there was a language to understand this at the time. In fact, I don't remember anyone ever referring to racism, and the first time I heard the term 'prejudice' was when I was in high school. Without a name, many of us didn't have ways of conceptualising these oppressive moments or experiences. We couldn't make the connections between what we were experiencing and the broader power relations of culture, race or gender.*

In terms of actively thinking and talking with others about culture, I think developing a language around feminism and sexism was a key step. Beginning to question life and society about issues of gender assisted me to also develop a critical understanding and analysis of culture, race and racism. It's impossible to question notions of gender, family, sexual orientation, without taking into account considerations of culture. Nothing is separate from culture.

And, of course, people like me live in more than one culture. I define myself as a Chinese Canadian woman. In my life these categories cannot be separated but, at different times and in different places, I identify more strongly as Chinese, as Canadian and/or as woman.

Cheryl: Can you say more about this? It sounds like there was a process by which issues and concepts of culture and race became more visible to you …

Angel: *There have been various turning-points in relating to my Chinese culture that I think are relevant to mention. When my grandmother was in her eighties and was not well, I realised that she would not be with us for much longer. Within Chinese culture, our extended families are very significant. As my grandmother grew older and more frail, it spurred me on to want to know more about my culture, my history, and also to look at issues of culture more broadly in my work. When my mother was diagnosed with ovarian cancer, I felt a similar sense of urgency of wanting to understand more about her life, where she had come from, and what cultural and historical factors had influenced our family in ways I may not have been aware of.*

Interestingly, what enabled more conversations with my mother about this, and what opened possibilities to a richer connection to my Chinese cultural identity, was when I came across the writings from Hong Kong narrative practitioners in the International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work (2004 No.1). I remember vividly the day I read it. The journal had arrived in the post about a week earlier, but I hadn't yet opened the envelope. My kids had just got to the ages (five and seven) where it was possible to start reading again without being interrupted any moment. So, on this rainy day when everyone was just doing their own thing, I decided to stay in bed and read. When I opened the envelope, I saw that the journal issue contained stories from Hong Kong. This was intriguing to me. I started reading it and couldn't put it down, and I read the entire publication straight through. As I mentioned earlier, my mother had fled China as a young child to Hong Kong, but she had never spoken freely with us about her experiences. In reading the stories in this journal, I felt like I was being offered keys to the history of my mother and our family. Some of the writings explicitly described the journeys from China to Hong Kong and what these

histories have meant to the future generations. These stories were told in honouring ways. They not only conveyed the real pain, hardship and difficulty within these historic stories, but they did so in ways that were congruent with Chinese values of pride, and honouring the older generations. The efforts, hard work, skills and dreams of those who undertook these migrations were there on these pages for me to read.

For the first time, I thought that I would write to the authors and publishers of the international journal, and did so. Within hours I had received five responses back from Hong Kong writers and I was so touched by this. It was a very special moment of connection not only with the Hong Kong practitioners but also for me to my own culture. I then literally carried this journal in my workbag for many months and loved having it with me. Travelling to Hong Kong and for the first time visiting a Chinese context is a whole other story that I will save for another time! What is relevant for me to mention is that, as someone who grew up Chinese in a white dominant culture, there has been a journey for me of engaging and re-engaging with Chinese culture, heritage and the stories of my mother and father.

I have since become very interested in how as therapists/community workers we can ensure that our practice enables others from non-dominant cultural groups to have the chance to become more connected to their cultures, their family stories, and their preferred cultural ways of being. This is particularly relevant living in Toronto. One of the neighbourhoods I have worked within is considered one of the most culturally diverse places in the world. There has been a huge wave of people from Somalia, many families from Muslim and Arab countries, a significant Czech population, not to mention Chinese and so many other cultural groups. The number of languages spoken in some Toronto neighbourhoods is extraordinary. I have at times felt in awe of the diversity of stories that are all around us here. I live in what is a heartland of stories of migration. Differences in culture and in ways of understanding life are everywhere around us here.

So where once as a child I had no language to describe how my life was being affected by considerations of race, culture and racism, now I am very interested in finding ways of working that create space for young people and adults to talk about racism and about matters of culture, cultural history and legacy in ways that bring pride, strength and connection across generations.

Cheryl: Can I ask you now about the history of your thinking around issues of violence?

Angel: *When I was thirteen I had a friend who was an only child and she was living with her mum and her mum's boyfriend. I remember I was aware through my friend's stories, that this boyfriend was physically violent to her mother. There would be days when we would be walking to school and my friend would be very upset about this. Whenever I was at their house, I had the sense that I was walking on eggshells, and once I noticed my friend's mother had a black eye. I was thirteen and had no idea what to do. I didn't think to tell anybody, my parents or even my sisters or brother. Eventually the boyfriend left and as a result things were really tight financially for my friend and her mother. I'm not sure if it was openly acknowledged, but I knew that the mother had turned to sex-work to support them. There were times when my friend's mum wouldn't come home at night and these were huge things for me at the time. I remember feeling so sad that there were such limited options for this mother – to either continue to live with violence or otherwise needing to prostitute to support her daughter (my friend). I remember thinking to myself, 'This is how difficult life can be'.*

I had another friend when I was about fifteen, and witnessed domestic violence in her home. This friend's mother would often have really evident bruises and a black eye, and sometimes she would be limping. My friend would always just say to me, 'Don't do anything to upset him'. This was my first exposure to the terror of violence, and to the silence that so often accompanies it. I can remember so clearly the feelings of fear in their home. This friend ended up leaving home the next year to live with her boyfriend and, although I never saw her again, I learned later that he was physically abusive to her. It brought home to me at a young age what so many women live with.

I don't know if these experiences contributed to why I choose to study social work, but by the time I was working at the abortion clinic and at Big Brothers, I think I had an awareness of how pervasive men's violence is in so many women's lives. In talking with the women in Big Brothers who had experienced violence, I learnt so much about the effects of abuse in their relationships and I was particularly curious about how they had managed, and what had sustained them when they were living with an abusive partner.

I became particularly interested in how we can best support and respond to women who are living with men who are violent. Having spoken to the women involved in Big Brothers, I had learned how unhelpful it can be to assume that women can simply leave the relationships if they choose to, or that their lives would necessarily be better off if they did leave an abusive relationship. Some of the mothers I saw who were now on their own raising children while living in housing projects in marginalised communities described that the life after separation was harder than living with the violence. Therefore I decided early on that I didn't want to get caught up in the line of questioning that starts with, 'Why don't you leave?' I didn't even want to get caught up in the explorations into what makes it difficult for women to leave because even this implies what the women should do - that they should leave and they should find the ways to do so. Such thinking can contribute to further blame and guilt for women who are usually doing all they can to get by.

Cheryl: Are considerations of culture also relevant here?

Angel: *Yes. There are different considerations to take into account depending upon the cultural context. Someone from the dominant culture suggesting to an individual Chinese woman that she could be supported to take steps to eventually leave her husband because of the abuse she was experiencing, isn't a way of responding that has a high likelihood of success. There are cultural values which pose great challenges for Chinese women to even consider leaving their husbands. It's also important to note though, that these issues of violence are not only individual issues. They are also community concerns. So addressing them will require more than just encouraging or supporting individual women to leave their homes.*

As I mentioned earlier, the community in which I was working was profoundly culturally diverse. It's a fascinating area as it has the highest density of population in Toronto, with only high-rise apartments and tenant housing. There's a mixture of a transient population, people moving on and out, with those who have been there for twenty years or more. Many of the newcomers to this area have fled their home countries seeking refugee status due to war and political violence. I was a social worker in a community health centre mainly seeing women

who were referred to me from doctors and nurses. They were all coming to see me individually and many of them were talking about experiencing violence in their homes. I remember sometimes questioning the effectiveness of these individual conversations, so a women's community worker and I joined together and began running groups for women who were experiencing abuse or had lived with abuse in the past. It felt so much better to be meeting with women collectively as they supported each other and I could be in a more de-centred role as a facilitator.

One of the other issues that arises in these contexts is child abuse and parenting practices. What is known in Canada as physical abuse of children may not be understood in the same way in the places some of these families had recently migrated from. This is a complex topic. Distinctions between 'physical discipline' and 'abuse' can change across generations within *a culture, let alone the changes that can occur when people move or live* between *cultures. Of course, the standard response from the dominant culture is to say, 'We need to teach these parents from different countries parenting skills'.*

We tried to develop something quite different and three women from different communities of colour planned this together with us. They said, 'Oh, you can't have a parenting group because parents might be hesitant to come. Instead, what about having a community event one night? Make it free and we'll cook up a delicious meal.' They knew which women in the community would be delighted to volunteer to cook, and about a dozen women put on a phenomenal spread of food. To begin with, we simply held a social gathering for anyone parenting children and encouraged them to bring their children to this event as a way of making connections. At the end of the evening an announcement was made asking if people would like to meet regularly to address issues facing the community. From this, about fifteen parents and their children met with us over the next year. They developed their own community agenda from day one. Every time they came we talked together about what they were feeling really good about, how they were making it in the country, and also about their struggles. These meetings included discussions about corporal punishment, the effects on their children, and alternatives they were exploring.

At the same time, I was also involved in a violence prevention network with a group of workers who were interested in addressing the high rates of domestic violence within many of the cultural groups in the diverse community in which I

was working. From this came a number of initiatives including the printing of a hand-held card which had information about domestic violence and places to seek assistance which was translated into fifteen different languages and the development of a series of presentations about domestic violence and Canadian law which we gave in different forums. Perhaps most significantly, we held a series of community events, fairs, which brought people together and also provided a forum for discussion and raising awareness about issues of violence. Throughout this time I continued to see some women individually because they specifically requested this, and the effects of the community action were obvious in these individual conversations! As a momentum developed in the community that domestic violence was not acceptable and that it was not the women's fault, then individual women started feeling more able to make decisions to protect themselves and their children.

Cheryl: That is a significant story about what community engagement can make possible. I really appreciate how you mentioned that developing a momentum in the community around these issues made it possible for individual women to think differently about their lives and to take different action. I imagine the fact that women were getting together and talking about these issues began to make many things possible …

Angel: *Yes, but I must say that, as I reflect on this community work, there is also some regret. Many things were made possible for women and children and their lives as a result of the initiatives, but looking back I think that many of us as professionals were privileging our particular versions of feminist principles while inadvertently lacking thoughtfulness to many cultural considerations and complexities. Some questions that I've pondered over the years have been: What difference would have it made if we had women who had experienced violence themselves from various cultures as partners or consultants to our violence prevention network? What meaning did women give to some of the messages we were promoting? For example, by informing the women that 'police could lay charges' there is an assumption that this would be helpful to women being abused. How could we assist women of colour to access help and accountability within their own communities particularly if they did not want their husbands*

charged or removed? So, while in many respects our work was significant in the realm of community engagement, there was much more we could have been doing.

Cheryl: Do you have ideas about what forms of help and accountability could have been accessed within these communities?

Angel: *One possibility is that we could have been exploring how to engage extended families in conversations about preventing and responding to violence. My grandmother lived with us during many of my childhood years and was a very strong presence in family life. In many cultural communities the extended family is still a significant influence in family life, and this has led me to wonder how therapy or community work can engage extended families in ways that could help support women experiencing difficult times including violence*[1].

When I have spoken with my mother on her ideas about this, she has mentioned that while she may not have chosen her own mother (my grandmother) as someone to be included in these sorts of conversations, she could envision how engaging with extended family members could be significant (as Mrs L's mother-in-law was a very significant helper for Mrs L). While I realise that there are many considerations of when it may or may not be helpful to have extended family involved in dealing with difficult times, who better to decide than women themselves? I think it's worthwhile to extend invitations to women to bring elders and relatives into conversations and community action and see if they take up the offer.

Where extended family members are not available or supportive, perhaps the involvement of women's friends would become all the more important. I began by sharing the story of my mother's about 'women helping women'. The way in which she described being Mrs L's friend and confidant over many years was clearly significant to both of them, as the story has been for me. Simply put, my mother states, 'That's why all women should have good female friends'. If I was to return to the community work now, I would be very interested in doing what I could to honour, acknowledge, foster and strengthen women's friendship as a response to violence and see where this could lead in terms of safety, accountability and community action. Of course, there may also be options of supporting initiatives by men of the community who are committed to the safety of women and children. But that's a whole other story.

I think it must be my turn to ask the questions! Cheryl, where would be the best place to start in relation to your history of connection to issues of gender, culture and responding to violence?

Cheryl: In my early years, I was not aware of the significance of issues of culture. In the 1970s and 1980s, I rather sweepingly saw all women as connected in sisterhood and simplistically believed that gender and culture were separate issues[2]. I regret this and can talk more about this later. The lens through which I first came to question the world was the women's liberation movement. So it probably makes sense to start by talking about this and return specifically to issues of culture later. How does that sound?

Angel: *Sounds good to me! I'm interested to hear about how your understandings developed. Can you tell me about your relationship to the feminist movement?*

Cheryl: It is a significant one for me. As someone who was involved in what was called women's liberation, I appreciate so much about the feminist movement, what it was responding to, and what it's done for women. In my lifetime, the changes have been enormous. When some people say that feminism has failed, all I can think of is that they obviously are not as old as me! They can't have seen the changes in women's lives in this country that I have seen.

Angel: *To explain this, can you say a bit about where you grew up and your younger years?*

Cheryl: Well, I was born in 1948 and grew up in an isolated, rural area here in South Australia, miles and miles from the nearest shop. Due to the isolation, the social attitudes of the area were probably a generation behind the city. Then again, the sense of community and skills in collective ways of being were probably many generations ahead of the city! It was a place of very good-hearted people who were there for you and were there for each other. These are people I admire and respect to this day in so many ways: their hard work, their honesty, their sense of commitment to one another.

I don't think violence was endemic in our community back then, and it certainly was not supported or agreed to. But people knew it existed and knew which families it happened in. If a man hit his wife he was thought less of. You'd hear women say about their husbands, 'He's a good man. He's brought the money home and he's never hit me.' This was the definition of a good man: that he stayed in regular work, he didn't drink or gamble the money away but brought it home, and that he didn't use violence to his wife or the children.

Just like any community, however, some men were violent to women. Not far from our farm, for instance, lived a man who was beating his partner, and probably the children, and nobody intervened. At that time there was a genuine social philosophy that the home was private, that you didn't interfere in another 'man's home'. The entire setup was gendered. So, despite everyone knowing about this violence, nobody was intervening: except my mother.

On some nights, we could hear this woman's screams. I always remember my mother saying, 'I cannot do nothing'. We had a siren that was to be used only to call the men in during an emergency like a bush fire. Well, whenever my mother would hear this woman's screams, she would turn on this siren and it would sound out all over the land. She would turn on the siren so that this other woman would not feel alone in those awful moments. It still upsets me to think about this … a big man beating a little woman while the siren is sounding. First thing the next morning my mother would always visit her when the man would have left. It's not that the woman probably needed a cake that next morning, but that's the country way.

My mother was also speaking to her friends and saying that this was not okay. She went to the local doctor and the local school to tell them what was happening and I believe the doctor took some action. In those days, the teacher, the doctor, the priest were like 'gods' in the community. They were people 'with education'. They were people you rarely dared to bother. As my mother was a music teacher herself, I guess she was more able to approach them to take action.

Angel: *So she was making what had been considered 'private' into a public matter, she was refusing to do nothing …*

Cheryl: My mother had a lot of progressive views about women. Women in the country worked incredibly long hours. In the area we lived there had been no

electricity in my early years and the physical work was very demanding. My mother felt so strongly that all this work should be paid. She would tell everyone in the area that women's work should be a paid occupation. It wasn't right, she said, that women worked so hard and yet never had any money in their own right. She thought that no woman should end up financially dependent on a man, that women should always be in a position to be able to walk out on any marriage. As you can imagine, these were not common views in that day!

Angel: *What about attitudes to sex and women's bodies?*

Cheryl: Well, those were the days when husbands had conjugal rights (see box) over their wives' bodies. There was a woman who lived with us and worked for us as a housekeeper. She had left her husband because he was violent towards her and we all became very fond of each other. Every so many weeks her husband would drive all the way from Adelaide and she had to go with him and make her body available to him. He had legal rights over her body. The court used to award men the right to regular conjugal visits. I remember this vividly from when I was still quite young, perhaps two or three years old. I remember my mother sobbing and sobbing whenever this man would arrive. This also upsets me to think about. There were so many things back then that could not be changed. All that could be done was for women to show solidarity and kindness to each other as they faced whatever had to be endured. Attitudes to women's bodies in the city weren't much different.

A note from Mary Heath, senior lecturer in law at Flinders University, Adelaide on 'conjugal rights':

'Conjugal rights' technically refers to the right of a spouse to cohabit with their marriage partner. It used to be possible for a spouse to sue for restitution of conjugal rights, which meant that (most often) a husband could sue to compel a wife to return to their marital home when she had left him. In practice, this must often have meant being compelled to return to domestic violence and rape. We know family violence and

sexual coercion often travelled together then, as now, and then as now were very common reasons for wives to leave in the face of so many practical hurdles. The right to sue for restitution of conjugal rights was abolished by the Family Law Act 1975. No fault divorce may have its flaws, but as this example shows, it is so much better than what came before it!

'Conjugal rights' is a civil law expression (so any court case involved is between two citizens) ... but really to my mind the criminal law is at the heart of this story described by Cheryl. South Australian criminal law did not recognise rape by a husband of a wife in South Australia until 1976. This meant that the law saw a woman as giving up her right to refuse sex to her husband upon marriage – he could not be successfully prosecuted for raping her. The 1976 amendments which recognised rape within marriage were highly controversial and generated public outrage. Before allowing them to pass through parliament, the opposition forced amendments requiring serious aggravating circumstances before a husband could be convicted of raping a wife. Married people were only placed on the same footing as complete strangers in relation to rape law in this state in 1992.

I think the gist of the story that Cheryl tells here is that as a child she understood this woman was compelled to do something she did not want to do and that she had no practical way out of the situation. Certainly Cheryl was right to conclude the law probably would not have helped this woman. People have always lived their lives around and beside the law, often with little recourse to what protections it might, in theory, offer. But in the 1950s there were serious limits to even the theoretical hope of legal help in a situation like this one.

Angel: *This was the culture which women's liberation was responding to and trying to change?*

Cheryl: Yes, and it has changed. I don't believe these cultural norms that I have just mentioned are the same today in Australia. But I am getting ahead of myself!

I left the farm at age thirteen to live in an all-girls boarding school in Adelaide, and soon after this then lived in an all-women's university college. I loved the sense of community with other women. The years I was at university coincided with when women's liberation was first talked about in Adelaide. We would question and critique everything we had ever learned, everything we had ever assumed about our lives, bodies, families, hopes and dreams.

We were building a political loyalty between women and we knew we were a part of something powerful. Previously, there'd been very few spaces where women could talk about our experiences of our own bodies, or of abuse, or of violence. In our early discussions, one woman would name her experience and then others would make links to things that had also happened in their lives. This wasn't about women suddenly identifying as victims, as less than. It was the opposite. These were women who were coming together to define themselves as more than, as worth more than what we had always been told we were worth, or being entitled to more than we had ever been told we were entitled to. It was like, 'Watch out, here we come, you've pushed us around for long enough and now we are speaking back!'

Suddenly, we had each other. We weren't all cosy with each other, it wasn't a love-in and all supportive. People sometimes think that we were only questioning what men were doing, but it wasn't only about that. We were questioning ourselves, everything we had been taught to believe and feel and participate in. For instance, there was a genuine debate about whether women could be feminists and heterosexual. This was challenging to me as someone who identified as heterosexual and was an ongoing discussion. We had a sense that we had to develop a new sort of honesty between ourselves and about our lives. And we weren't joined 'against men'. We were joined in social action. It was like, 'Look out, it has to change, we're not going to put up with this any longer'.

Angel: *We're not going to do nothing … the siren was ringing …*

Cheryl: It was an extraordinary time. Women who had always sought men's approval and never rocked the boat, were suddenly saying, 'Don't mess with us any more. We will do whatever it takes to change this world.' We literally burned our bras, we stopped wearing high heeled shoes, we cut our hair short, and people

thought we were oddities. It's hard to convey now what these actions meant. Up until women's liberation, I'd spent my entire life doing as I had been trained – acting less intelligent than any man I knew. To do otherwise wasn't worth the trouble. Until women's liberation that is, that's when we decided together that it was worth making trouble.

It was also when we decided that as women we would stick together. Although throughout history there had always been caring relationships between women, in some ways the solidarity we were building was new. For generations, all that stood between any woman and poverty was one man. When women didn't have their own income, or access to the workforce, they didn't have independence. As with any marginalised group, this situation was a setup for women to compete with each other over the scarce resources, and in this case the resources happened to be men. The divisiveness and competitiveness between women that was a hallmark of pre-feminist heterosexual women's interactions within white culture was historically and materially constructed. Women's liberation involved a radical idea of connectedness and solidarity between women. And it enabled women to swing into action, together. In a very short period of time, a movement arose to reclaim safety for women. Women set up shelters or women's health centres in people's homes or volunteered to establish rape crisis phone lines. It was a time of social action.

We were all a part of raising questions everywhere we went. We rehearsed together how we could interrupt the gendered assumptions that were everywhere within the culture. We rehearsed how we could stand up and say, 'I don't relate to that', or 'When you say "mankind" does that include women? If so, could we say something else?'

Angel: *Were there other issues that were also being addressed by women's liberation?*

Cheryl: Equal pay was a big issue. When I graduated, the men in social work automatically received higher pay and were instantly offered senior positions, to supervise the newly graduated women, and other women who had been in the workforce for many years.

Many of the other issues we were discussing had to do with women's bodies. Men took it as their right, even in university, to look us up and down, to

assess every woman over her sexual suitability. We began to challenge this and at the same time women liberationists were campaigning for rape to be outlawed in marriage. Abortion rights were a key issue as was access to contraception. In those days, the university doctor would only give a student a prescription for the pill if she came to the appointment with a boyfriend that she had had for two years or more. I can recall debating this with one of my social work lecturers. He believed that if a woman went for an appointment to get contraception and she wasn't in a regular relationship with a boyfriend, then she should be obliged to see a social worker for counselling because she obviously had emotional health issues if she wanted to be sexually active outside of a serious relationship. Those were the times. And that's what women's liberation was questioning. Even if everyone would disagree with you, you had to speak up. There was no turning back. We would gather frequently over coffee and talk into the night.

Angel: *Did this reclamation of women's bodies also include addressing men's violence?*

Cheryl: Women's liberation sought to completely question men's taken-for-granted right to be violent, to rape and to control women's bodies. It was a revolutionary thought at that time that our bodies as women were our own, that they didn't belong to the men who we were dating, or to the doctor who examined us. It was a revolutionary thought that perhaps it wasn't the doctor who 'delivers' the baby – that actually it's the woman. It was like our world turned upside down – you mean this body is mine? I can stop holding it up for male approval? It was a completely new thought that if you said 'no' it had to be respected. We were saying: these are our bodies, we can share them with who we choose, when we choose, on the terms we choose. We can choose whether or not we have a child, whether or not to use contraception. These were all challenging ideas and it was very unsettling to the broader society at the time. The 'stopping rape' campaigns, 'Reclaim the Night' marches, the shelters and the women's centres, all came from this.

As our generation of women liberationists joined the workforce, we took our concerns about women's lives with us. For me this meant working as a social worker in a range of areas with women around abuse, reproductive rights and birthing.

Angel: *Were issues of race considered back then as women's liberationist concerns?*

Cheryl: Looking back, it's clear that the 'women's liberation' groups that I was a part of in Australia consisted of white women who had a certain way of being and who were concerned with particular issues. These groups did not take into account considerations of racism or the differences of experiences of women depending upon race and culture. There was not an awareness of the most pressing issues for Aboriginal women for instance.

What I have been talking about are events and a social movement that began close to forty years ago. While I think the early women liberationists were doing a lot to raise questions and challenge aspects of white culture, it's a different question altogether about whether white feminists from the 1970s onwards did enough to address issues of culture and race. White feminists could and should have been doing much more to look at who was being excluded from the definition of what was coming to be known as 'feminism', to acknowledge the work and contributions of black feminists and the particular feminisms that emerged from marginalised cultures, and to address the ways in which we were participating in cultural dominance.

Angel: *You have traced a powerful history in relation to women's liberation and issues of gender, can you now say more about some of your key learnings in relation to issues of culture?*

Cheryl: It has taken me quite some time to learn about white cultural dominance. As I said earlier, initially I saw all women as connected in sisterhood and believed that gender and culture were separate issues. At the time, I didn't have a glimmer that these views represented my own cultural lens. It's only been due to the ongoing challenges and friendship from many women of other cultures that I began to see the real effects of cultural dominance on women of colour and how, as white feminists, we were sometimes a part of this.

It seems appropriate to acknowledge here all of the women of colour who have put so much time and energy into encouraging me and other white feminists to explore these issues. It was not always an easy transition for us as white

feminists to see ourselves as part of an oppressing group rather than as the oppressed. So I can only imagine how demanding we must be at times.

Personally, what has helped in trying to learn about cultural dominance has been my feminist background. When suddenly I found myself needing to understand my privilege rather than marginalisation, remembering how I had demanded that men of my own culture try to grapple with understanding my gendered life, enabled me to better hear what the women of colour were saying and to try to understand their experience.

Having the possibility to develop partnerships and to work with women of other cultures has been a valued part of my work and life over the past decade. In fact, learning to always work in partnerships across culture has been one of the most important developments[3].

Angel: *Can you speak about some of the key turning points or learnings about these issues of culture and race that have occurred for you along the way?*

Cheryl: There have been many turning points. One of these relates to an international feminist event which I went to with a couple of friends many years ago. This event took place in Australia and women attended from all over the world. I sat fairly near the back, didn't speak much and just listened. There was so much to learn. The organising collective had brought an internationally recognised Indigenous woman from another country to speak at the conference. But rather than speaking on the topic she had been invited to, she instead stood with dignity and said, 'I don't know why anyone would have asked me to speak in Australia on this topic when my Indigenous Australian sisters here have been working on these issues for so many years'. And then she simply introduced the audience to Indigenous Australian women who walked up onto the stage carrying the Aboriginal flag, and proceeded to speak to whatever the issue was for that forum. Apparently, as soon as this speaker had been invited, she started doing research and found the local networks, she found the women from Australia who could speak about these issues on their own land. They then had travelled from across Australia to be there and to march in carrying the Aboriginal flag. The significance of this event has never left me. It was such a powerful invitation to us as white feminists to build local partnerships with the traditional custodians of the lands on which we live.

Something that helped me a lot in this situation was having the privilege of sitting in the back of the hall, listening and learning. I also had good women friends with whom I could have clarifying discussions about all the issues. There have been other occasions, other conferences, when I have witnessed white women being challenged by Indigenous women or women of colour, sometimes with considerable force. The things that these white women had said or done were things that I or many other white women could have said or done. They were giving voice to dominant cultural assumptions and ways of being, and it was right that they were challenged. It helped to be able to witness these challenges in the company of others and try to think through that they belonged to us collectively as people of the dominant culture. Of course, it was easier to hear when the challenge was not directed personally at me. Perhaps as white feminists it is significant to work collectively so that we can hear and respond to challenges to our cultural dominance.

Angel: *Yes, that makes sense to me. These are collective issues.*

Cheryl: Yes, and I think it is enormously helpful for white women not to separate from each other on these issues. I think it's much easier to be able to acknowledge our mistakes, our dominance, our ignorance, if this can be done collectively. These are issues of culture and gender we are grappling with, far larger than any of us as individuals.

Angel: *Have their been other turning points in learning about how considerations of culture are relevant to feminism?*

Cheryl: Some years ago, I went to a workshop with The Just Therapy Team, from The Family Centre in New Zealand. A number of the other participants worked in a white feminist organisation responding to women who have been raped. During the workshop, one of the Just Therapy Team presented on working with Maori or Pacific Island men who'd been very violent and abusive to their female partners. The session that was shared with us involved the Maori or Pacific Island therapist and the family trying to find a culturally appropriate way to respond to this violence. This led to a heated discussion as some participants felt that what was required was a strong, clear State response to the violence, that the police and

refuge systems should be involved, and that to try to explore what was 'culturally appropriate' was actually just a way of excusing the man's violence and would place the woman at further risk. Taimalieutu Kiwi Tamasese, however, kept saying that she has great respect for the work of white feminists in white communities, but actually white feminists don't have the solutions to violence in communities of colour, the answers to violence in these communities have to come from these communities themselves. In fact, white feminists introducing their approaches into communities of colour could be one more form of colonisation, cultural dominance and oppression. It was a very tense discussion but also rigorous, thoughtful and impassioned. The white feminist women would describe how they pick up the broken bodies of women from every single culture. They would describe how a raped and battered woman looks no different because she's from this culture or that culture. They would say that rape is an issue for every woman of every culture. And Kiwi would agree with this, but then point out that it's how this is responded to that makes the difference, that issues of gender cannot be separated from issues of culture and colonisation, and that the solutions to violence in communities of colour must come from those communities themselves.

At another time, Kiwi said something to me that made a huge difference to my approach to these issues. She said that she knew I was genuinely concerned about women from other cultures, but that to her, I was more like a white man than I was like a woman of colour. This wasn't personal. She said that she believed that, in terms of lived experience and privilege, white feminists are more like white men than we are like women of colour. And therefore, she said it was our responsibility to work with white men. 'Go and work with the people you can influence', she said! And so I did. I went and worked with white men on issues of gender in all kinds of ways.

Angel: *Can you say more about this?*

Cheryl: For some years, Dulwich Centre Publications focused its energy on issues of men and masculinity. With other women, we held workshops, took up petitions, tried to encourage the development of ways of working with men around issues of violence, and published a number of journal issues which ended up as

a book[4]. I have often joked that a lot of men in Australia wished I hadn't listened to Kiwi! As I saw it, an apprenticeship was required in which I and other white feminist women needed to work within our own culture on issues of gender before seeking to work in partnership across cultures. We also needed to develop a network of people connected with Dulwich Centre Publications who were willing and wanting to address issues of gender and culture, and this gradually developed.

Angel: *So what sort of partnerships were then formed for work across cultures?*

Cheryl: There are many stories I could tell here as different partnerships have been required for diverse contexts. For instance, the partnerships formed with African American colleagues, or Mexican colleagues or Chinese Hong Kong colleagues in relation to international conferences held on their lands have each been very different from those formed with Indigenous Australian colleagues over work within communities here in Australia[5].

Perhaps it would make most sense to describe what occurred when thirteen years ago Dulwich Centre was approached by the South Australian Aboriginal Health Council to respond to Aboriginal families who had lost a loved one due to a death in custody. There had recently been a Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody and one of the recommendations involved trying to develop culturally appropriate responses to Aboriginal grief which had been born out of gross injustice.

The head of the Aboriginal Health organisation who had approached us to work together was quite clear that the only reason non-Indigenous people had been considered was because they had to use the funds quickly and the effects of colonisation, the dislocation of Aboriginal people and the discrimination against Aboriginal workers, meant that there were not Indigenous counsellors/community workers to play the role we were to play. As non-Indigenous team members, we had not previously been involved in work of this sort within Indigenous communities and many of the challenges issued to us have remained with me ever since.

We soon came to realise that we were entrenched in white ways of thinking. This project was about responding to families who had had a family member die

in police custody or in prison. To these Indigenous Australian families, the Police represent a force that led to the death of their family members. Historically in this country the Police have been agents of violence and dispossession of Aboriginal people. But to many of those on the non-Indigenous team, the Police represented protection. As white women (of a particular class), as white feminists, if there is an incident of violence, we might reach for the police to protect us, we might expect the Police to protect us. The families with whom we were to be responding had a very different experience of the police and state authorities (see Chapter One of this book).

Throughout this time, and ever since, Barbara Wingard, our Indigenous Australian colleague, has been very influential in talking about partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous workers. She has written about this in the beautiful book that she co-authored with Jane Lester, 'Telling our stories in ways that make us stronger'.

Angel: *Finally, can I ask you about your hopes for this book?*

Cheryl: Violence against women, in all our differing cultures, and the violence of racism and cultural dominance, continue to devastate so many lives. It's my hope that women from many different cultures and perspectives, who care deeply about addressing and preventing violence, can find ways to contribute to each other's work and actions. Perhaps as practitioners read the writings included in this book, it will spark conversations in people's own contexts. I hope these conversations might have a similar energy, passion and commitment to action, as the discussions around gender that so inspired me years ago.

What about you Angel, what are your hopes for this book?

Angel: *For me, whenever dealing with complex issues, I'm drawn to and inspired by collective conversations and action. The following pages include rich complexities and many interwoven themes. It's my hope that by bringing people together in this way, in the written word, to discuss the interface of gender and culture and work around violence, that this will generate new and diverse ways of responding to and preventing violence in different cultural communities. I also want to say that I've appreciated hearing your questioning of white western*

practices and their effectiveness in various cultural contexts. It's good to hear this spoken about because, as a Chinese woman, I have been careful about how to question white feminism. I too have witnessed ways in which some white feminist practices have inadvertently disregarded cultural protocols or made assumptions. When white people challenge this and name it, it makes it much more possible to work together. And to me this is uplifting. Having said this, there is never going to be one way to approach these issues. There is never going to be one way of addressing and preventing violence. The knowledge from all our different cultures is going to be required.

I hope the conversations from this book continue. Talking about our histories today as two women from such differing backgrounds has been heartening for me, and for some reason has me thinking of possibilities for the next generation ...

Notes

1 Practitioners in Hong Kong have been exploring just this sort of process. For more information contact Angela Tsun On-kee (oktsun@hkbu.edu.hk) or Andy Sham (sssham@gmail.com).

2 See discussion on this topic in Chapter 8.

3 A lot of thought has gone into ways of developing effective partnerships across relations of power. For more information, contact The Just Therapy Team, The Family Centre, Anglican Social Services, PO Box 31-050 Lower Hutt, Aotearoa/New Zealand, Tel: 64 4 569 7112, Fax: 64 4 569 7323.

4 The book is titled Men's Ways of Being and was published by Westview Press. The editors were Chris McLean, Maggie Carey and Cheryl White.

5 Partnerships with Jewish colleagues have also been very significant over these years. In relation to issues of gender and culture I'd particularly like to acknowledge the contributions of Saviona Cramer and Yael Gershoni.

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The invitation to contributors

This is the invitation that shaped many of the papers now included in this book.

We have been talking and thinking a lot about some of the complex issues in relation to the culture/gender interface, specifically around the issue of violence, and are now keen to work together to create a broader discussion around this topic.

We hope you are as interested in explorations about these matters as we are, and we'd really appreciate it if you could send us your responses to the following questions:

1. Please describe an example of your work (past or present) re violence in which you have been grappling with the interface of gender and culture.
2. What are some of the dilemmas you faced in this situation?
3. Did any particular principles assist you to respond?
4. Were there any learnings from this situation you will take into future work?
5. Are there any things that you would do differently if you had the chance to revisit this situation?
6. If you are working as a counsellor or community worker, did any particular narrative ideas/practices assist you in responding to this situation or others like it?

Angel Yuen & Cheryl White

PART ONE

Working within our own cultures

1

Alternative interventions to violence:
Creative interventions

By Mimi Kim

Anti-Violence Movement in the U.S.

My involvement in exploring creative interventions in relation to violence against women and children has a particular history. It is linked to two pathways: the work of social justice movements in the U.S. that have been led by people of colour[1] to address the concerns of our communities, and years of anti-violence work primarily within Asian American immigrant communities.

These pathways of social justice movements and the anti-violence movement have not always run a parallel course. The anti-violence movement in the U.S. has strayed from the grassroots and radical origins of its nascent years in the 1970s. Indeed, many would say that this can no longer be called a movement, but rather a human service sector which has professionalised and legitimised itself into a provider of social service instead of an agent of social change.

Throughout the 1980s, and particularly the 1990s, government funding of anti-violence organisations in the U.S. increased significantly. This funding was often tied to collaboration with the police, prosecutors or promotion of pro-arrest policies. This funding trend both reflects and promotes the increasing reliance upon criminal legal interventions for domestic and sexual violence. As a long-time worker in anti-violence organisations, I witnessed this increase in federal and state funding, celebrated the availability of much-needed resources, and also came to recognise the short-term and long-term consequences these developments would have upon the very movement which fostered these gains.

During the ten years I worked within the Asian Women's Shelter with women who had been subjected to interpersonal violence, I embraced three key beliefs/principles of the mainstream anti-violence movement in the U.S.:

- that victims are a class of people distinct from perpetrators;
- that change for perpetrators is unlikely and, more often than not, not worth the effort; and
- that engagement with perpetrators is dangerous and therefore best left to the state.

While I understand the evolution of these beliefs/principles and am all too familiar with the victim-blaming, anti-woman myths from which these were a welcome departure, I also saw us walk into another sort of trap.

While the anti-violence movement originally challenged patriarchy within the family and the patriarchal state which protected it, successful attempts to lobby changes to state policies and practices led to a shift towards a collaborative relationship. Furthermore, the anti-violence movement was primarily led by white women (who were becoming increasingly professionalised) who experienced this shift in relationship with the state as beneficial to abused women and children as well as to their organisations which gained legitimacy and, in some cases, increased funding due to this improved relationship. While the positions of women of colour with regard to this shift can in no way be described as homogeneous, women of colour have been much more likely to challenge this relationship between the anti-violence movement and the state.

In recent years, this challenge has escalated with the alarming rise in rates of incarceration particularly among people of colour. Likewise, increasing anti-

immigrant sentiment and policies in the U.S. have contributed to concern over the pro-criminalisation approach supported by anti-violence advocates and the state. Many of us, already wary of the pro-arrest recommendations often offered to women seeking assistance from our own organisations, were particularly struck by earlier compromises represented in the passage of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) in 1994. This important act was the first piece of federal legislation regarding violence against women in the U.S. and the result of years of struggle from anti-violence and immigrant rights advocates. Among other measures, its passage led to significant increases in federal funding available to anti-violence organisations and allowed for critical gains for immigrant women facing domestic violence from their U.S. citizen or legal resident spouses. These were outcomes we all celebrated.

At the same time, however, VAWA was passed as a section of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 (1994 Crime Bill), the bill backed by President Clinton which significantly increased prison construction and legislated 'three strikes you're out': a mandate for automatic long-term sentencing for anyone convicted of three felony offences. For many of us, this compromise symbolised the untenable position the mainstream anti-violence movement had reached with regard to the state and its embrace of criminalisation as a primary intervention response.

On the ground, women experiencing domestic violence had been encouraged to seek safety through our services. Our help lines often advised women to call the police. When women reached our phone lines after hours, they were told to call 911 (the dial code for the police) in case of emergency. While we were often skeptical of the response they might actually receive and spent time instructing women on how best to manage a police response, we failed to think of an alternative way to protect women and children and engage perpetrators of abuse.

Safety, we believed, was paramount. And safety was defined as devising a plan to leave the abuser and engage the police if necessary. Of course, we knew that women more often than not did not leave the relationships or, when they left, they often returned at a later date. This is common for anyone involved in an abusive relationship. But for women in immigrant communities and communities of colour, there are additional concerns. For instance, the fear of an abusive

partner may be matched by fear of the police. Immigrant women want violence to end, but they do not necessarily want their partner arrested, nor to go to a shelter, nor to leave their homes. Those concerned about their immigration status also risk exposure to deportation for themselves, their children and for their abusive partners.

For those involved in abusive same-gender relationships or for the lesbian/gay/bi-sexual/transgender or queer community, fears in relation to the police or state involvement are heightened by knowledge that most conventional anti-violence programs will fail to understand them and their situations. Few anti-violence advocacy services actively target the queer community or have effective anti-homophobia policies and practices. And police response towards the queer community is known to range from insensitivity to brutal violence.

While advocate-led trainings about domestic violence, and the experience of immigrant communities and queer communities may have mitigated some of the most egregious aspects of police response and positively changed policies and practices within some parts of the criminal legal system, the system remains one based on separation, punishment, state definitions of crimes, and state control. Embedded in a criminal legal system which purports 'blind' justice remain deep biases based upon class, race, gender, sexual orientation, immigration status, nationality, religion, and physical and mental ability which permeate the system on all levels. Since 9/11, changes in laws, policies and practices have had devastating effects on already oppressed groups.

Even the most ardent supporters of the current anti-violence intervention approach in the U.S. will admit these limitations. However, many fail to see an alternative. The basic assumptions that the best way to achieve safety is through the survivor leaving an abusive relationship, and the best way to engage a perpetrator is through the criminal legal system, remain. Other options are deemed too dangerous, too subject to the manipulation of the perpetrator, or simply unimaginable.

In recent years, those raising a critique of state interventions and demanding new alternative responses to challenge intimate violence and state violence have coalesced into a vocal and powerful force. In 2000, an organisation called Incite! Women of Color Against Violence was formed during the Color of Violence conference in Santa Cruz to name and respond to the complex

intersection of forms of oppression facing women of colour and communities of colour. This organisation has continued to articulate a new analysis of violence while creating spaces for alternative responses.

Incite! and Critical Resistance, a multi-racial national organisation challenging the prison-industrial-complex, created a joint statement which acknowledged the uncharted territory between those trying to address state violence associated with prisons, and those in the anti-violence movement trying to address interpersonal violence against women and children. The preamble to the 'Critical Resistance – Incite statement on gender violence and the prison industrial complex' articulates a joint commitment to work together:

> *We call social justice movements to develop strategies and analysis that address both state AND interpersonal violence, particularly violence against women. Currently, activists/movements that address state violence (such as anti-prison, anti-police brutality groups) often work in isolation from activists/movements that address domestic and sexual violence. The result is that women of color, who suffer disproportionately from both state and interpersonal violence, have become marginalised within these movements. It is critical that we develop responses to gender violence that do not depend on a sexist, racist, classist, and homophobic criminal justice system. It is also important that we develop strategies that challenge the criminal justice system and that also provide safety for survivors of sexual and domestic violence. To live violence free-lives, we must develop holistic strategies for addressing violence that speak to the intersection of all forms of oppression.* (*Incite! Women of Color Against Violence*, 2006, p.223)

Communities as Spaces of Possibility

Many of us within oppressed communities seek safety within the same collective spaces which hold those who perpetrate violence against us. Leaving violent situations may not seem possible because of potential persecution from those

around us, not only abusive partners but family, faith communities, friends, community members, and leaders. These are attitudes which many of us in the anti-violence community are challenging in order to make it possible for those who have been subjected to violence to speak out about this, and to be embraced and supported rather than shunned or blamed. Leaving violent contexts may also expose us to new vulnerabilities, some of which may in the long run be less safe than the homes and communities from which we escape, i.e., poverty, racism, exposure to deportation, religious persecution, language barriers, cultural barriers, homophobia, transphobia, and so on. As anti-violence advocates and those committed to wider social justice, we are doing all we can to change these conditions.

However, despite conditions of violence, communities also offer multiple forms of safety: emotional safety; material resources; security of home and family; shared language, culture, history and religion; sense of belonging; and so on. These are important to most human beings. For members of oppressed communities, however, these are particularly scarce resources which may only be accessible within the sacred pockets of our intimate spaces. How can these treasures be salvaged? How can the positive benefits of community be nurtured? And, in situations of intimate violence, how can we rely upon these very community resources to lead the way towards safety and accountability – and not simply rely upon outside systems to 'pull us out of danger' by removing us or those from within our communities who violate us?

The shortcomings of currently available intervention options and the need to develop new models for community-based responses to violence became painfully clear to me as I faced the violence in the relationship of my own long-time friends. When I learned what was happening, my instinct was to gather a collective group of our community together to form a system of response not only to support the survivor but also to engage her abusive partner. My professional training told me that this would be too dangerous. Going to a shelter, seeking refuge at a friend's home, calling the police – these were all familiar suggestions which were rejected outright by my friend. I had worked all these years in the anti-violence movement, and yet the options we had to offer were so ineffective. This was not because a woman was not ready to make these difficult choices. This was because, for her, these choices were the wrong ones.

Creating Alternative Community-Based Interventions to Violence

Despite a growing critique of the limited intervention approaches available, and despite the development of some proposed alternative frameworks (Generation Five, forthcoming; Incite! Women of Color against Violence 2005; Kim 2002; Mills 2003), on-the-ground implementation of alternative responses to violence in the U.S. has been surprisingly lacking. Restorative justice applications to intimate forms of violence have been attempted in only a few places (Bazemore & Earle 2002; Blagg 2002; Coker 1999, 2002; Kelly 2002; Pennell & Anderson 2005; Pranis 2002; Stubbs 1997, 2002), and most have been closely tied to the criminal legal system. Some anti-violence organisations have prioritised community organising over a social service model (Asian and Pacific Islander Women & Family Safety Center 2001; Bhattacharjee 1997; Close to Home 2003; Das Dasgupta 2002; Fullwood 2002; Kim 2005; Mitchell-Clark & Autry 2004), but few have engaged the community to take a more active role in actually intervening in violence.

After researching existing programs and participating in local and national discussions confirming the need for alternative options, I decided to form an independent organisation from which to nurture these alternative community-based interventions to violence. In 2004, with the support and inspiration of long-time visionaries in the anti-violence movement, I established Creative Interventions in Oakland, California. I also knew of a handful of local and national anti-violence organisations which would be willing to work together collaboratively to explore these alternative options, but which individually lacked the institutional resources to develop them[2].

Creative Interventions begins with the assumption that those closest to and most impacted by violence have the greatest motivation to end that violence, i.e., survivors, friends, family and community members. And as these are often the people to whom survivors first turn, they are in a position to offer the most accessible and culturally- appropriate assistance at the earliest stages of violence. It also assumes that the intimate network is often already engaged with the perpetrator and may be in the best position to leverage their authority and connection to demand and support change. Thus the key to community-based interventions is not outside systems, but rather the intimate network. The missing

pieces are the framework, knowledge, and resources to equip these intimate networks to offer effective, ethical, and sustainable intervention options.

Creating New Knowledge to Support Alternative Community-Based Interventions

The first project of Creative Interventions is a documentation project called the 'National Story Collecting Project' which gathers stories from everyday people on successful and not-so-successful community-based interventions to violence. We have become so conditioned to think of our current system of shelters, police, and professional intervention programs for those who are violent, that many of us cannot even imagine what a community-based intervention would look like. Yet, I have found that when any group has discussed the topic, people invariably think of efforts that they or others have carried out. 'Oh yes, I remember that my cousin and his friends helped this girl who was being beaten up by her dad. They went to his house and told him that they knew what was happening and he'd better not do it again.' Stories like these contain rich information regarding community-based interventions. What we need to do is to recognise the value of these stories, seek them out, and then rigorously explore these often hidden stories for more information:

- Who decided to start the intervention?
- Why did you do this?
- Why then? What made you know that this was the time to do this?
- How did you decide to move forward?
- What skills were involved in taking this action?
- How did you learn how to do this?
- Who else did you involve?
- What effects did this have?
- Did it reduce or end the violence?
- How?
- What did you learn from this process?
- What advice would you give to others who are in a similar situation?

If these stories of courageous acts of everyday people can be collected in one place, documented, analysed and then turned back to our communities, what further community interventions will be inspired?

Creative Interventions will also add to community knowledge through a second project, the 'Community-Based Intervention Project', which seeks to demonstrate ways of creating alternative community-based models of intervention. An alternative model which organises collective responses to violence including support for survivors, engagement of perpetrators, and education for the community, is currently being developed among partner organisations primarily working within communities of colour, immigrant, and queer communities in the San Francisco Bay Area. Upon completion of this pilot project and its evaluation, the model will be documented and disseminated widely.

These are our efforts to create new paradigms and tools to address and prevent violence. This organisation and its collaborative projects represent just one of many efforts among women of colour in the U.S. to create alternative responses to intimate forms of violence, while at the same time addressing the very real effects of state violence on our communities.

I will end this piece with Barbara's[3] story collected through the National Story Collecting Project in order to provide an example of how these stories can inspire and inform.

An invitation to contribute your own stories

If you know of stories of grassroots community initiatives to address violence, Creative Interventions would be delighted to hear from you! Please contact us c/o stories@creative-interventions.org.

Notes

1 'People of colour' is a term popularised among progressive sectors in the U.S. in the 1990s to refer to non-white populations. The term denotes some level of collective unity or solidarity among non-white people.

2 These organisations include Generation Five, a San Francisco-based national organisation committed to ending child sexual abuse through community organising and leadership development, and local immigrant-specific domestic violence programs including Shimtuh in the Korean community, Narika, which works in the South Asian community, and Asian Women's Shelter, a pan-Asian battered women's shelter which has been particularly interested in looking at alternatives for the Asian and Pacific Islander queer community. Other affiliated organisations include prison abolitionist organisations in the Bay Area including Critical Resistance and Justice Now, the latter organisation advocating for women in prison, and DataCenter, a social justice research centre.

3 Barbara gave permission for her first name to be shared publicly.

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2

Nurturing resistance and refusing to separate gender, culture and religion:

Responding to gendered violence in Muslim Australian communities

By Sekneh Beckett

There is a complexity involved in writing about gendered violence in the Australian Muslim community because my words may be read by others in ways that support stereotypes and downplay the socio-political issue of racism. I cannot avoid the fact that whatever I write about the Australian Muslim community at this time will be read in the context of racist discourses about Muslims and Arabs that are all-pervasive in Australia at this time. However, as a woman of Islamic Lebanese ancestry, I am also not prepared to accept male domination within Muslim communities, a domination that is supported by certain discourses of religion and culture which contribute to violence against our women. The combination of patriarchal religious and cultural discourses on the one hand, and racist stereotypes about Muslims on the other, makes it extremely

difficult for Muslim women to speak about their experiences of gendered violence.

With this in mind, I cannot ignore the journeys of many Muslim women who have experienced gendered violence and who have undertaken journeys to reclaim their lives from its effects. I have included here a letter written to the editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald* by Hayat, a woman with whom I have shared therapeutic conversations.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR
Sydney Morning Herald, 17th July 1996

My family's veil of tears

My father walks through the door. My mother, sister and I run, hide, pretend we're cleaning or sleeping. His grizzly beard, the spot on his baldness on his head, a perfect fit for his self-acquired crown. His huge, fierce brown eyes always bloodshot, a temper equivalent to a wild dog.

He hides his identity as a businessman in the community. Under the social mask lies an authoritative, strict and narrow-minded man. It's his way or no way, and everything according to him is for the sake of Islam.

His violence and barbaric control of his daughters and wife are justified in the name of Allah by the Arabs in the community who admire him.

They have turned a blind eye to our black eyes.

My mother is in the kitchen, preparing the meals, ironing the clothes, doing the dishes for my father and brothers. Under the traditional Islamic veil, which covers her from head to toe, her skin is as white as ice, her body craves to see the sun. Her legs webbed with varicose veins marks the scars from the tiredness of her life. Her heart aches from depression, her eyes are swollen from sadness. She runs the household and is always there for her family. She is a woman with a voice that is never heard and has learnt to deal with her life.

Who am I? A woman with a voice who is never heard, but who will not accept this sort of life. Being the eldest of eight children, a great deal of responsibility was placed upon me. Being a girl, I also had to maintain my family's reputation. I had to listen, obey and never question. I had to wear the veil, not for the sake of Islam, but because of what people would say.

My father's greatest fear was that his daughters might elope with a non-Muslim man. How could he explain his kingdom to people he had no control over? I allowed my father's religion and culture to control me because I knew the consequence of disgracing the family honour: death. And if murder is committed, a cultural plan goes into action, so the perpetrator is helped to escape to his country of origin.

I could not fight the king but silence became my power. Unfortunately, still he does not know who I am, but what he thinks I am.

All bow, The king has a successor: my chosen husband. At sixteen, I agreed with my father that marriage was the answer. I thought it was a perfect escape from my prison home.

My husband has the smile of a prince, but his big white teeth conceal the blackness (sic) within. He was the man who would give unconditional love and care, the things I craved. His hands were the first to caress me sexually, the first to caress me violently. His temper was volcanic, erupting at any time, and his words lashed at my soul. He became the man who wounded my body, my heart, my brain.

He used my weakness against my father as his power to manipulate me into submission. I further tolerated the abuse because of the genuine fear of being murdered and having my children kidnapped and taken to a county where women have no rights. Violence and control are such a viscous cycle and I was trapped once again.

Today, in my country Australia I stand before my Judge, to judge.

Hayat Tahhirah

Before I go further, I would like to acknowledge that men from Arabic Muslim backgrounds who engage in violence, constitute only a small percentage of the Arabic Muslim male population, the vast majority of whom advocate for peace and non-violent practices. I would also like to acknowledge that Arabic Muslim communities here in Australia struggle with disproportionately low levels of employment, lower rates of education, and reside in neighbourhoods of lower socioeconomic status in which crime rates are high. The effects of racism and structural disadvantage play their part in generating a context in which gendered violence can thrive.

So too can particular interpretations of religious texts. Hayat's story illustrates the ways in which certain forms of gender relations are derived from particular interpretations of the Quran and the scriptures, and how these in turn can be used to justify violent and abusive practices. In my experience, Muslim men who engage in violence often perceive these sorts of interpretations of the Quran as a resource, a social construction that promotes particular ideas about Islamic masculinity and control over women.

On the other hand, many would argue that these interpretations of dominance are the antithesis of Islamic scriptures. My father, who teaches in an Islamic college, and my mother, who has recently graduated with a Masters of Eduation, argue that the Quran provides many rights for women, however, due to women's exclusion from participating in the positions of power in the religion, patriarchal interpretations have come to dominate. They go so far as to say that Islam has a relationship with feminist ideology and that the discrepancy lies between what is written and what is practiced. Many Muslim women are marginalised socially, politically and economically, and these barriers make it far more difficult for them to contest patriarchal interpretations of Islam.

Redefining Islam is an academic, intellectual, and political process. It is powerfully relevant to many women's lives. It is also relevant to the conversations I share with women in my practice as a therapist. I am consistently challenged by these conversations. For instance, in meeting with women who are considering whether to start or stop wearing the hijab, many questions come to my mind:

- Is the hijab proof of oppression in practice?
- If I take that position, might I deny the diversity of meaning and practices associated with this tradition?

- Can Muslim women subscribe to western ideas of feminism?
- Must they surrender their religious identity to resist the inequalities and struggles they face?
- How can religion be a source of liberation and sustenance?
- What happens when a Muslim woman reclaims the hijab and finds rich meaning in wearing the Islamic headdress?
- Might she be considered a feminist?
- Who authorises the definition of feminism?
- Who qualifies to be referred to as a feminist?

In the course of one day, I might share a conversation with one Muslim woman who is deciding to wear the hijab and draws meaning, strength, and connection to culture in this act. Then I may meet with another woman who is resisting pressure from her male relations to wear the hijab, and it is her resistance to the hijab in which she is finding the most meaning. Both women may be drawing upon their religion to guide their path. To illustrate this, I will share an excerpt of a transcript from a conversation with one woman who is resisting wearing the hijab. She is undertaking what she is describing as 'Operation Liberation'. This operation is grounded in her understanding of Islamic scripture:

Sekneh: *Can you tell me more about this 'Operation Liberation'? I must admit that I really love the name; it's beautiful. You said that you took some steps some time back that began this operation … Can you tell me more about that? What were some of these earlier steps?*

A: *The start was really based on literature. I went back to look at every relevant quote from the Quran and I looked at books about Islamic history to learn what had happened to the role of women after the death of Prophet Muhammad. I went through the literature and Islamic history, and after this I could say: 'Right. I'm telling you now, it's [Islamic headdress] not going on no more, because I don't believe in it'. I said to him at that point: 'The book tells me that I don't have to put it on, the history of Islam tells me that I don't have to put it on. It's only you who tells me I have to put it on. Islamic practices say it's a woman's choice and everything is a woman's choice …*

In all my conversations with Muslim women, I'm reminded of Foucault's idea where he states that, wherever there is repression, there is usually also resistance. I really enjoy researching with women the acts of resistance that exist within stories of oppression. This resistance always has a history, and we can trace this history. Invariably, it leads back to significant figures in the person's life and to aspects of culture (and sometimes religion) which they value and treasure.

In working with individual women, there are always openings to these alternative story-lines. In thinking more generally about the interface of gender and culture in the Australian Arab Muslim communities, there are many dilemmas. For instance, my conversations with Hayat have highlighted the hazards of certain government policies that grant power and visibility to certain (male) representatives of various cultural communities, and these representatives in turn 'speak for' the community. What happens then to alternate voices within the community? How do they get heard? Might this be hindering women's rights?

Then there are the policies and practices of services for women who have experienced violence. Hayat spoke of her experience after a violent incident when service providers and police advocated placing her in what was described as a 'culturally/religious-sensitive refuge'. After accessing this Islamic refuge, however, Hayat met the religious leader of the community and was given the clear instruction 'not to shame the family and to do the most respectful thing' which was to return home, which she did – and where she experienced further violence. There are now efforts in some Muslim communities to develop a religious-based approach to diminishing violence against women, which involve using scriptures to support a re-defining of the relationship between husband and wife (rather than encouraging separation). In developing these culturally-appropriate forms of intervention for gender violence, how can we ensure that issues of gender and class do not take a lower priority than considerations of culture and religion?

Further complexities become apparent when reflecting on women's organisations shaped by western values and ideas. If most services for women who have experienced violence are based on Anglo-Australian experiences, what does this mean for women from Arab Muslim backgrounds who are seeking support to deal with domestic violence? Hayat talked about her contact with a woman's counselling service and how she found that she needed to defend her religious identity. Not finding a space where her reality was acknowledged, she once again returned to the domestic violence situation.

In reflecting on this, how can services that are set up for women, not only focus on issues of gender but also take into account the significance of culture and religion in the lives of the women who may seek assistance? In my experience, attempts to talk about issues of gender with Muslim women that exclude considerations of religion are likely to go nowhere. In fact, separating issues of gender, culture and religion usually only contributes to a further sense of isolation for Muslim women. Refusing to separate considerations of gender, culture and religion seems a critical way forward.

A related realisation that I have gained in my work is that, if I target only women's issues and not the stories and concerns of men, then this can result in an increase of suspicion about my role in the community. It becomes much more difficult to collaboratively explore non-violent territories. It seems we must address these issues together.

Some of the suspicion that can accompany efforts to address women's issues is understandable. If feminism is equated with separating concerns of gender from concerns of culture and religion, then no wonder it sometimes receives suspicion in various cultural or religious communities. But this is not the whole picture. I hear that many Islamic countries oppose feminism as it is associated with western, individualistic ideals. In these contexts, if you take up feminist issues, your actions can be quickly associated with western ideology. However, every Islamic community and country has their own brand of female activism and action that to me fits a basic definition of feminism. It seems to me that Islam and the West have been so polarised that the term 'feminism' has been exclusively used in the western context, forgetting that women everywhere are active in trying to obtain their rights, support their sisters, and respond to men's violence. Wherever there is oppression, there is resistance. It just takes different forms. And perhaps our task is to find ways to nurture these different forms wherever we may be.

3

Extending our vision:

Responding to violence in Hong Kong families

By Angela Tsun On-kee

Please describe an example of your work (past or present) involving violence in which you have been grappling with the interface of gender and culture …

I recollect one family in which a young mother, aged twenty-three, was leaving her six-year-old son unattended at home in the evenings when she would go out to meet with her friends. The forty-eight-year-old husband, the natural father of the boy, had reported that his wife would beat the son for not obeying her and for finishing his homework slowly. We soon learned that the boy's teacher had complained about the son not handing in his homework and had requested the mother to discipline him.

In talking with the mother, we heard that she felt stressed taking care of the son who she described as 'naughty' and a 'liar' (in relation to homework

matters). She did not have any support from her husband, who was working as a waiter in a restaurant. He worked from 11am till midnight and very often gambled with his colleagues until 2 – 3am in the morning. Her parents did not support the marriage, nor did they like her husband, and therefore she felt she had no-one to talk to.

In addition to this lack of support, the mother also shared with us that her husband had beaten her when he had discovered that she had left the son at home while she went out with her friends, and also because she did not prepare meals for the son. The mother said that her husband very often brought home food from the restaurant and hence she did not have to cook. As for the son, he regarded himself as naughty and this was his understanding of why his mother would beat him.

On one occasion, the mother called us and expressed homicidal thoughts. She had beat the son for having lied to her, after which her husband had beaten her. She told us that she intended to throw the son out of the window of their nineteenth storey public housing unit. She said she wouldn't mind being charged and locked up for this.

While listening to the mother's description of the incident, hearing what bothered her at the moment and acknowledging her efforts to call and share with me these stories, I was thinking about how safety could be ensured.

What are some of the dilemmas you faced in this situation?

Responding to inequities of power: All along, I was hoping that conversations with the husband and the wife together could take place. In the one or two opportunities I had been able to bring them together, the husband had scolded the wife for her irresponsible actions (such as leaving the son unattended), while the wife had complained that the husband did not care for her. Relations of power were very clear to me. The husband was in a more powerful position than the wife, and the son in an even less powerful position than the mother. I felt very uncomfortable with this situation. On one hand, I had a feeling that the husband was working hard for the welfare of the wife and the son. On the other hand, the attitude and tone of voice of the husband in these conversations, and his violent actions, were signs of power and control.

In relation to the woman, I could feel the loneliness around her. However, I knew I could not agree with the act of leaving the child unattended at home, or her violent actions. In our culture, the power of adults over children and of men over women, stems from ancient history. Historically, children have been seen as the property of their parents or adults, and wives have been seen as the property of their husbands. This extreme power of adults and men has changed over the years but, in our society where gender inequality and male dominance are still prominent, these relations of power still affect families and relationships.

Involving the state: One of the dilemmas I faced was whether to call the police or the government social welfare department. Calling the police would mean criminalising the violent actions, while approaching the social welfare department would mean enacting state protection for the child while providing the possibility for joint work with the whole family.

Did any particular principles assist you to respond?

Prioritising safety: Ensuring the safety of both the child and the mother was my prime concern. I called the government social welfare department to speak with them about the situation in case removal of the child was necessary.

Crisis as opportunity: When I sensed that the man and the woman were ready to have a conversation with me, and confirmed this with them, I hoped that this could be an opportunity for us to explore further what this family wanted, what could be done further for the child, for their relationship, and for the family as a whole.

Negotiating what 'partnership' means: I also questioned what working in partnership with this family meant in these circumstances. I knew I could not decide for the couple what they would like to do for their relationship, if this was their concern. And as parents, they have the right to take care of the welfare of their child. Nonetheless, if the child's safety and welfare were in doubt, I knew I would have to take action to protect him while simultaneously taking care that the parents were informed and involved in the process. Even when the man and woman had engaged in violence, I was careful to act towards them with respect,

to be thoughtful about how to involve them in each step of the process, and to ensure that the procedures and processes were transparent. These were some of the elements of the sort of partnership I wanted to continue with them.

Are there any things that you would do differently if you had the chance to revisit this situation?

If I could work with this family again, there are many different avenues that I would explore. First of all, I would see if we could have more conversations in which each person would be able to speak about how they have been impacted upon by the different problems they were facing. The man might speak about the influence of 'work pressures', the mother may speak of the effects of 'isolation', and the son may speak about the effects of 'the punishments' he was experiencing. I would be interested in how they could speak about how these problems may have impacted on their relationships and lives. In the course of these conversations, I would be listening for each person's particular values, beliefs, and hopes for their lives and relationships. If possible, outsider-witness practices could be used so that each person involved could listen and respond to what it is that each other values and hopes for in their relationships and lives.

In my experience, mothers whose efforts in care-taking have not been acknowledged and who have been subjected to violence, often seem to be accompanied by a great sense of helplessness and a lack of agency. This has been expressed to me by many mothers in similar situations. If I had a chance to re-visit this situation, I would be interested in inviting this mother to a group session with other women who are in similar situations. Together, these women could then narrate their stories, explore the meaning of events, and alternative themes could be developed during the process.

With respect to the man, his subjugation in his work world could be explored in individual and group sessions. Moreover, men's stories regarding parenting and couple relationships could be themes to explore together.

With both the mother and father, I would be hoping that the influence of gender and power relations could become more visible. Certain gender issues, along with societal and cultural influences, were playing such a large role in the lives of these individuals. Finding ways to talk about how these values and beliefs

have been passed on to them from various sources could be explored. And this could then enable a chance to question these beliefs, to understand their effects, and to create alternative ways of relating.

Significantly, I would now like to involve more people in the conversations we shared together. In recent years, here in Hong Kong, we have been exploring how narrative ideas can be relevant in working with extended families. Looking back on my work with this family, I'd now be particularly interested in inviting their relatives and extended family members to play a role in responding to this crisis situation.

I am interested in how our conversations about violence can become broader. If we are broadening conversations to look more closely at issues of gender and culture, then these are issues that affect us all. It seems appropriate therefore that we all consider, explore and contribute to addressing these issues of violence. Here in Hong Kong, we are hoping to find ways that the stories of families who are dealing with issues of violence can provide an impetus for different institutions such as schools, kindergartens, social welfare organisations, churches, and so on, to work together to support different sorts of relationships between men and women, and between adults and children.

4

The work of the community patrol

By Djapirri Mununggirritj & Margaret Yunupingu
On behalf of the Women's Patrols of Yirrkala and Gunyangara

In two remote Indigenous Australian communities in the far north of Australia, a community patrol operates each night. In response to the extent of alcohol use and violence, a number of women from Yirrkala and Gunyangara got together to walk around these communities to care for those who were drunk and to intervene in conflicts. Over time, this 'patrol' has grown in size and now operates each evening with vehicles and in co-operation with the local Police. The principles of the work of the patrol, and some of the skills demonstrated by the women involved, are described here[1].

We have a community patrol now. It started when women walked to bring food to those who were drunk on the outskirts of the community. Now we have a vehicle. We pick up people who are drunk, we treat them kindly, we bring them home, we put them to bed and tell them to stay safe. People listen to us because we have old women with us. Young people do listen. We wait until the next day, when they are sober, to talk with them. If they continue with the stupidity, we send them to a homeland, out bush for a couple of weeks, where there is no grog, no drugs. We always approach people with kindness, even if they are acting badly. We never hit them. We never approach them in ways that could make them fearful. We tell them, 'We care for you, we love you' and they take notice of this. We respect them, and in turn this means that they respect us.

Filling the gap for those who are split from their family

Family is very important to us. When people get disconnected from family, when problems get in the way and when relationships are strained, people become very lonely and this is when they are most at risk. This is because family is so important to us. Even people who think they don't have families who care about them, they do have families. We are all related to each other up here. All Yolngu are related to each other. If we see someone who is in trouble, and if their immediate family is no longer connected to them, then we reach out to them. We talk with them. We try to fill the gap between them and their family. And then we try to link them back with their family. For instance, I saw a young kid, who was very drunk, lying by the side of the road. When I asked him what was wrong he said, 'My family don't love me. They don't care about me'. I took him to my home, put him to bed and gave him a big feed. The next day I took him back to his parents. We sat together and I relayed the boy's concerns. This made a big difference. I have seen him around lately and he is doing really well.

When we notice young people who are losing their way, we cry inside and love to sit down with them. It breaks my heart to see young people lose their talent, their talent is important to us, so I try to reach out to them. We talk together. We talk about getting out of the trap. Alcohol and drugs are like a trap or a pit. We talk together about this, and about ways of getting out. I am always clear that trying to get out is their choice. I share stories with them. Stories about

what it was like here when I grew up. How we saw the first pub being built. How we have seen so many changes. We share history. I also try to reconnect them with the spiritual side of life, to link them back to a sense of spirituality. When I talk to them, they start to picture themselves differently. They can see themselves in a bigger picture. When we speak about the trap, about the pit, they agree with me. They say, 'Someday I might start limiting my drinking. At the moment it is too hard. But sometime …' We try to enable our young people to talk with us. We find ways to fill the gap and then link people back to their immediate family.

How to respond when someone is despairing and may take their own life

When we are on community patrol we are sometimes called out to young people who are threatening to take their own life. There was a time when a young man had climbed up a pole and was saying he was going to hang himself. When I went up to him, I talked to him very gently, very calmly. And he listened to me and climbed down. There was another time when a young man was on the roof of a house and ready to hang himself. When we speak to them, people do listen to us and they do respond. This is because there are particular ways in which we approach people in this situation. If we are tense, or angry, or anxious, then they will notice this and react to it. Our calm voice calms them down. Sometimes family members take off at these times, it is too much to witness, or they are frightened, they don't know what to do. We turn towards young people at these times. We speak to them with kindness and care. We try to fill the gap between them and their families. Often we then take them off to a nearby beach so we can be alone and sit down and talk together. We talk in ways that enable us to find out what the problem is, why they are trying to harm themselves, what is bothering them. We talk with them in ways that will enable them to speak back. It's not only about responding in these moments of crisis. We also keep a very close eye on people who are vulnerable. Other community members will tell us if they are worried about someone and, once we know this, we will keep an eye on them and have a quiet talk whenever it is needed. Some of these skills we have developed through training courses. We have done role-plays to work out how to respond to people when they are aggressive or when they can hardly talk. We bring all our experiences and abilities to this work. Some of these skills have long

histories. Some of us have lost family members to suicide. We are dedicated to do what we can to prevent further losses of life. Our young ones are precious to us.

Responding to violence

We have also had to develop ways of responding to violence in our community. If we see violence taking place, a man hitting a woman, then we will always intervene. We are strong but we also use humour. The way in which you approach these situations is very important. There are skills involved in how to defuse these sorts of situations. Some of us, in the past, have used our own homes as safe houses where women and children could stay the night if the man is being violent. In the past, we also developed a program to deal with domestic violence in the community. We would hold a meeting with the man and woman and their parents and key community members. We would talk about how domestic violence is not part of our culture and how we must symbolically break all the weapons. We would get them thinking about the children's experiences. And we would always help the women who were having a hard time. We are proud of this history of how we have tried to deal with domestic violence in our community. There is still more to do. We hope one day that there will be a safe house in the community. This is something we are still working towards.

Intervening in conflicts

There is sometimes significant conflict between members of our community. There was an occasion recently when two groups were facing each other with spears. As women, we stood in between them. We broke the spears and threw some of them up on the roofs. There was another occasion when young men turned on the Police with machetes. It was the community patrol women who again intervened and ensured that no-one got hurt. We have to stay calm in these situations. We have undergone self-defence training so that we have ways of responding. If we don't intervene there could be terrible consequences.

Lately, community members have started to call us instead of the Police when there is trouble. If we come across an aggressive person, but they are not

harming anyone, we will let them be, we will come back later when they have calmed down. When we see people who are very drunk or affected by drugs, we will pick them up and take them home. We will leave it until the next day to talk with them. The next day we will sit down with their whole family and talk it all through.

If the situation is tense, sometimes humour is very important. We joke together. They make us laugh and we make them laugh. For instance, if we see a man who is drunk and who is the right relation for marriage we might say, 'Come on, I'll take you home'. And there is much laughter! The other women will then say, 'No, come in our car, we'd better take you!' These are very funny moments. They take away any awkwardness, or aggro, or shame. Some of the older people in the community are having better sleeps now, because they know that the community patrol is out there. There has been so much to worry about. There is still a lot we are concerned about, but it is significant that there are women who are always available now to respond to those sorts of crisis, to respond to people with care, and to link them back to their families.

Note

[1] This piece is an extract from a larger document containing the special skills and knowledge of the communities of Yirrkala and Gunyangara (see 'Linking Stories and Initiatives: A narrative approach to working with the skills and knowledge of communities' by David Denborough, Carolyn Koolmatrie, Djapirri Mununggirritj, Djuwalpi Marika, Wayne Dhurrkay & Margaret Yunupingu (International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work, 2006 #2).

Where we need to begin

A reflection from Anita Franklin

These first four chapters have moved me with their beauty, accessibility and innovative thinking. I currently live in the UK where both violence against women and the criminalisation of women and black and minority ethnic groups is on the increase. I welcome these writings as signs of constructive community engagement with the complexities of issues of gender, culture and violence.

The article by Angela Tsun On-kee made me think about how we can prevent violence being passed down in families. Families shape the way we respond to violence and provide forums for violence. As men continue to use violence against women, it is urgent that we understand how to intervene. Here in the UK, according to a 1999 Home Office Survey on Domestic Violence, 26% of women between the ages of sixteen and fifty-nine had experienced violence by a current partner (Mirrlees 1999, p.vii). The highest levels of violence were experienced by women between the ages of twenty – twenty-four where 34% had experienced violence. Much of the violence begins during a woman's first

pregnancy. Moreover, according to the same Home Office survey, sexual violence in Britain is on the increase with one in every four women reporting being raped or having been subjected to attempted rape. Worryingly, actual conviction rates are at a new low of only 6%, half of what they were twenty years ago (see www.RapeCrisis.org.uk). In this context of continuing violence against women in the UK, developing effective methods of response and prevention seems imperative.

Sekneh Beckett's account reminded me of the ways in which gendered violence is also 'raced'. While growing up in an all-black area of Brooklyn, New York, I experienced that the death of a black girl wasn't seen as important to social services, and the assault on elders wasn't viewed as worthy of proper police investigation. The rape of boys by men was also ignored. The police and social services were not seen as responsive to problems. Instead, they were seen as interlopers into the community and instigators who brought new levels of violence – making everyday life worse for the entire community. But unchallenged abuse and violence has a way of escaping the so-called 'worst neighbourhoods' and visiting areas beyond the ghetto. When white people were the victims of violence perpetrated by black people, the crimes were seen as serious and heinous and deserving of no less than the most severe punishment.

While it is widely accepted that institutional racism accounts for the over-representation of black and Asian men within the criminal justice system, it is often forgotten that black and Asian women make up 25% of the UK female prison population. This is in a context where black and minority ethnic groups account for only 8% of the population (Institute for Race Relations 2002). Black women and indeed children are frequently targeted as criminals in the UK and the US in ways that their white counterparts are not. The case of a black fourteen-year-old Texan girl, Shaquanda Cotton, is a prime example. Shaquanda was sentenced to seven years in prison for pushing a hall monitor in school, while another fourteen-year-old Texan girl, this one white, was sentenced at the same time to probation for arson. Shaquanda Cotton was recently released after serving one year in prison (see: www.freesshaquandacotton.bolgspot.com).

These broader relations of power affect how black women understand themselves and their lives. A particularly sinister consequence of violence, racism and the interface of gender and culture has been the development of the idea that

to be a 'true black woman' is to be a woman who can somehow absorb violence from 'her' man (hooks 1989). In some communities, a part of a black woman's femininity requires understanding and indeed accepting black men's violence as symptomatic of the racism they endure. While this way of thinking is deeply flawed as it ignores the racism faced by black women as well as the pain they and their children endure, here in Britain, black and Asian women are often expected to suffer violence in silence for fear of hurting the marginalised communities that they call home (Mirza 1997).

In this context, reading Mimi Kim's account of the work of Creative Interventions filled me with hope, first because she links the initiatives of the anti-violence movement with those of wider social justice movements. Second, because she invites us to consider developing new ideas and practices in this area which are so crucial. The paper demonstrates clearly that state intervention alone does not work, at least not in a way that is positively responsive to the lived experiences of women, children, and marginalised communities. Indeed, state intervention so often contributes to the raft of pathologisng discourses that have developed to describe certain communities of colour and those who live within them.

The notion of 'safety first' has long been interpreted as bringing in the State. But Mimi Kim and Sekneh Beckett, like many women of colour, are deeply aware of the double edged nature of state involvement. The concept of safety needs to be re-defined in a more holistic way than before, and their papers contribute to this project.

The paper describing the work of the Community Patrol of Yirrkala and Gunyangara represents another fresh and radical approach to the problems faced by many communities. This approach is based on the ideas, skills and traditions of a culture that the mainstream has denigrated. The powerful and un-stated outcome of this work is that, in assisting individuals to recover from the effects of alcoholism and despair, this group simultaneously recovers its own community's ability to heal itself. And in the end that is where we need to begin.

I am left with new hope, new ideas on how community initiatives might help with stopping the escalating violence in homes and neighbourhoods. Such interventions may in the end be our best hope for preventing violence and its devastating consequences.

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5

Working within our own culture:

many steps taken, many steps to go

By Mary Pekin, Manja Visschedijk, and Genna Ward

Editors' note:
Mary, Manja and Genna were specifically asked to focus this chapter on their work with white women who have experienced violence. All three authors have also worked with women of many cultures and have at different times developed partnerships across cultures.

This chapter is the outcome of a conversation between three white Australian women who between us have worked for over eighty years, within a feminist framework, in the shared project of ending violence against women. Between us, we have worked from the late 1970s to the present day in women's refuges, rape crisis centres, the family court, couples and relationship counselling services, youth and housing services, student counselling, and child sexual assault centres.

We met together to look back over our shared herstory and found there was so much to talk about in relation to being white Australian women working with white women to address violence. In reflecting on our shared journey, we concluded that while there are many steps we have taken as white feminists, we still have many more to take.

With this article, we want to take a moment to celebrate some significant milestones, to briefly review three themes that emerged from our conversation, and finally to speculate about some of the steps we have yet to take.

Looking back at many steps taken

For the past sixteen years I (Mary) have worked in an agency that provides counselling to couples and families. Over this time, we have learnt a lot about ways of responding to violence.

One in three of the heterosexual couples who come to see us has experienced violence in their relationship. We previously saw these couples together, until we learned from women's organisations that women are often not able to tell the counsellor how fearful they are in the relationship in the presence of the man.

Interested in working within feminist frameworks as much as possible, we then we started to ask questions about violence in our first phone contact with people, and would insist on seeing them separately if they mentioned that violence or abuse was identified. Most people did not like this step. They were living with the violence 24/7, and now that they were reaching for help for their relationships, we were separating them! Still, we insisted. We understood ourselves to be protecting the woman, and even protecting the relationships. We knew that if violence escalated as a result of what was said in counselling sessions, the woman, and the relationship, would be severely at risk. If we did harm – if our conversations escalated the risk and exposed the woman to more abuse – she could end up dead, he could end up in jail, and even if neither of these occurred, the intimate relationship could be irrevocably harmed.

A further key learning came from research that said that the best chance of a man giving up using violence and abuse in intimate relationships was if he attended a group with other men who were also trying to stop using violence (Gondolf, 2001). So, we started to run educational groups for men. To do so, we

developed partnerships with the criminal justice system and women's groups. While we were working with men in the community, a domestic violence service worked with their women partners. We were all primarily interested in the safety of women and children – and that was dependent upon the man's ability to take responsibility for the violence. Developing partnerships of accountability so that counsellors who were working with men got to hear from the women working with their female partners was a significant part of this work (Hall, 1994).

Recent developments

Over time, our frustration with an educational approach, the influence of the ideas of narrative practice, and the work of Alan Jenkins (1990) influenced us to change the format of the men's groups. We now offer six week long 'anger management' groups for men. We don't insist that the man name his behaviour as violence from the outset, and we see the first six weeks as a beginning step toward engaging with change. Men are signing up! And then signing up for further rounds of engagement – maybe another group program, maybe couples counselling, or maybe some other path.

Other new developments include our 'Kids Club' – a group for children who live in families in which domestic violence is occurring. During the Kids Club meetings, the mothers also get together to talk about their lives and to make connections between themselves in the hope that this will lead to new possibilities for action. We also try to engage with the fathers, but if they choose not to be involved we go ahead without them. One of the advantages of this process is that it brings mothers together who may be concerned about the effects that violence in the home is having upon their children. These mothers may not have chosen to attend a group with other women to talk about the effects of violence in their own lives, but they are more than willing to participate in a process that focuses initially on their children.

The most recent development in our work is that we are about to deliver our first anger management group for women. This is due to increasing requests from women for a forum in which to talk about their experiences of anger and the times they have used violence.

These days, if we are approached by a woman or a man who is trying to address and prevent violence in her or his relationship, we are able to offer them a diversity of forums in which to talk about these issues. We may meet with them separately, or together as a couple. We may invite them to groups with other men or women. We may suggest that their children attend the Kids Club, or that we meet together as a family. It seems that these approaches work 'some of the time with some of the people'. No single way works for everyone. With violence in relationships still so common, we will continue to develop a diversity of ways in which people can approach us to talk about these issues.

Theme one: *As women born and raised within a white western culture, we are often blind to our own history and culture. It's easier to see the violence in others than in ourselves.*

Two women in particular taught me (Mary) to look more carefully at violence within my own culture.

Jody and Simone, were two women I worked with (not connected in relationships), who eventually left their respective long-term marriages. When Jody and Simone first met with me, they wanted to see if they could find ways to be happy again in their marriages. They attended counselling alone, they attended with their husbands, and their husbands met with me alone. We all met many times.

Jody had two teenage boys, a full-time professional career that she loved, and many close women friends. Simone wanted to have children, she also had a full-time professional career, and strong friendship and family networks. Neither of them described abuse in their relationships. Even so, I asked what I thought were the 'right' questions to check out whether either woman was being subjected to violence, and decided that they were not.

Jody was worried about her growing confusion about the marriage. She was worried that her husband was increasingly hard on the boys – driving them to achieve highly at school, getting critical, angry, and even physically violent with them on occasions in his efforts to push their achievements. Jody didn't describe her relationship as abusive; she said the problem was that she did not love her husband any more.

Simone desperately wanted to have children and in the face of not becoming pregnant with her husband was now wanting to be more active about seeking medical assistance. Her husband was resisting this – saying that if it was not meant to be, then so be it. He was happy with their life, but he was willing to keep trying to have a child because, he said, he loved her.

Over time, talking with Jody and her husband, we learned that twelve years ago Jody had an abortion of a child that she had desperately wanted. In trying to understand how this had taken place, I learnt that over the previous ten years Jody had gradually silenced herself in the face of her husband's anger and dismissiveness about her feelings, wants, needs, and hopes. His hopes and wishes had come to dominate every aspect of their relationship. When Jody became pregnant with a child she longed for, her husband stated definitely and powerfully that he did not want another child. An abortion was the result. Ten years on, Jody still thought about that child who was never born, she spoke to it, she still yearned for it.

In talking with Simone and her husband, we learned one day that Simone's husband had had a vasectomy a long time ago, but had never told Simone this. He had been leading her to hope, for about the past eight years, that she would eventually become pregnant. When his vasectomy finally was spoken about, he said he loved Simone, and that they did not need children to be happy. He also said that Simone would not be able to cope with being a mother – she had had 'so much trouble' finishing her PhD and she 'never could finish anything' without his help.

In our meetings together, these husbands were unable to understand the grief their wives suffered, their shock, and their loss. Neither Simone nor Jody were able to express their rage. But they knew it was time for them to leave these long-term relationships. Why hadn't I seen the domination, intimidation, and fear that had been rife in both these relationships for so many years? Was it because these were white, middle-class families?

I grew up in just such a family, and in communities of other white middle-class families, at a time when husbands dominated with fear and intimidation, and wives put up with it. There were outbursts of hitting or throwing. There was plenty of crying and yelling, and silences. No one spoke about the violence that took place, or named it directly. There was an unspoken assumption that

somehow violence didn't happen in our neighbourhoods. Violence was what happened in other places, or other families. Besides, nothing that bad happened, I kept saying. Not compared to what happened in other places.

Of course, we know now that physical violence, abuse, and rape occurs in every sort of family imaginable. And I think I am alert to these overt forms of violence. What I learned from working with Simone and Jody, however, is that I also need to be on the alert for the violence that some men perpetrate against women in other forms. This violence may not take the form of beatings, or overt expressions of ownership and 'power over'. It may instead take the form of practices of dismissing, judgment, contempt, eternal disagreement, minimising, deceit, crazy-making actions, or not asking about or not being interested in her cares, wishes, hopes, dreams, fears, and hurts.

As a white, middle-class woman, am I still less likely to see the violence that occurs within my own community? Am I still affected by those myths that I grew up with long ago? I am still learning, with women like Simone and Jody, how not to 'put up with it', how to express my rage at practices of ignoring, dismissing, minimising, and silencing, both in my work and in my personal life. There are many forms of violence. How can we ensure that we are open to noticing those that may be more subtle but just as damaging? How can I respond in ways that honour the rage, and that don't frighten or disconnect me from the men and women I love? Lucinda Williams, the American feminist/songwriter, sings it beautifully bluntly: 'You took my joy, I want it back' (Williams, 1998).

Theme two: *Dividing people into the category of either 'victim' or 'perpetrator' serves to individualise violence against women when it is a social, political, and community problem.*

I (Manja) carry with me many favourite feminist principles from my own history of 1970s feminist activism. These principles are contained for me in phrases such as 'Sisterhood is powerful', 'The personal is political', 'Until all women are safe, no woman is safe', and 'Yes means yes and no means no, however we dress and wherever we go'.

Before the 1970s, the phrase 'violence against women' was not one you would be likely to hear in Australia, either in public or in private domains. The

fact that violence against women is now acknowledged as a problem worldwide, and the fact that many individuals, communities, and governments all devote resources to address this violence, is largely due to the tireless and courageous work of feminists worldwide over the past thirty – forty years.

As feminists, we are proud of the part we played in this. We are proud of our organising, our consciousness-raising groups, our demonstrations, our lobbying and graffiti actions, our struggles to bring an awareness of this violence into the broader public domain, our work to establish services for the victims/survivors of this violence, and our success in establishing academic journals and forums to discuss our theory and practice.

Modern western ways of thinking are powerful and tenacious, and the feminist achievement of challenging dominant western ways of thinking about violence against women is no mean feat. Modern western thinking has been characterised by such things as a tendency to make broad, sweeping truth claims; the use of the 'scientific method' to arrive at those truths; 'black and white' polarised 'either/or' kinds of thinking; and a predilection for individualising and pathologising social issues.

A challenge for us as white western women is that even as we stand up to, question, and transform the dominant (patriarchal/masculinist) culture, we can also unwittingly reproduce it. The ideas and habits of thinking of the dominant culture are integrated into every aspect of our lives. They are as familiar to us as the air we breathe – and therefore often invisible to us. As white western feminists, this means we can find ourselves caught in a double-bind: both questioning and (often unwittingly) reproducing patriarchal or masculinist ways of thinking and working. Early second-wave feminist consciousness-raising groups, and the continuing feminist self-reflective discourse that is their legacy, provides some safeguard against reproducing dominant cultural ways, but this requires constant vigilance and a willingness to continually revise and question any truth claims feminisms develop.

I remember one time in which I was caught in one such double-bind. One day about six years ago, I answered the crisis line at the Rape Crisis centre where I was working and spoke to a woman[1] who was in a state of great distress because her partner, a convicted paedophile, had offended again and had been remanded into custody. She was fearful for his safety there and for their future together. She

told me that she had no-one to turn to for support and could see no way out of this intolerable situation, apart from death. The only thing that was stopping her killing herself was the thought of leaving him alone to deal with this situation. She told me that all her usual family, friends, and church supports had shunned her for standing by him. I could understand why! I also didn't want to listen to this woman. I was angry with her for supporting a paedophile and, as she talked, I found myself thinking that she certainly was not eligible for a counselling appointment, as we didn't provide a service to perpetrators – and wasn't that what she was, by extension?

I had, however, been trained to support women in crisis and to regard all women as sisters, regardless of race, age, colour, or creed – so wasn't this woman also my sister? This long-time habit influenced my decision to offer her a one-off crisis appointment despite my initial misgivings and confusion as to whether she was a 'perpetrator by extension', or a 'sister'. Our initial face-to-face appointment, however, was followed by a series of follow-up appointments during which she eventually came to tell me about her own experiences of sexual abuse as a child. I heard this disclosure with a great secret sigh of relief – I no longer had to hide the fact that I was offering a service to this woman – she was now eligible as a 'victim'.

In time, I developed a genuine affinity with this woman, particularly once I discovered that we shared a rural working-class background and a desire for building warm, loving, and respectful relationships. While we continued to disagree on some issues, together we found a place to stand in which she could continue to love and support her partner, and I could continue to support her, with all of us, including her partner, taking the stand that child sexual abuse is wrong and it is not right to blame the victim. This situation left me with new questions: If this woman is not exactly a perpetrator, nor exactly a victim, then what is she? And what did this mean in terms of feminist responses to victim/survivors of sexual violence?

Thanks to this woman, I was reconnected with three of my early, cherished feminist principles:

1. That violence against women is an act of power.
2. That violence against women is a social, political, and community problem.

3. That the solutions to this violence are best found in social, political, and community arenas.

If this was so, then wasn't working in isolation as an individual counsellor, with individual women victim/survivors, undermining feminist principles? I wondered how my move away from these cherished principles had occurred.

What I had believed in theory, but had lost touch with in my practice, was that this woman's experiences (both as victim of child sexual abuse, and in her support for a loved partner who had committed acts of violence) were not 'individual' – but rather, that they were 'indivisible' from me, and they were 'indivisible' from our shared social, political, and community context.

I choose the word 'indivisible' deliberately because I recently came across an interesting book which described the origin of the word 'individual':

> In the fifteenth century, 'individual' meant 'indivisible'. It could be used to describe the Trinity ('indyvyduall Trynyte') or a married couple, who were 'indyvyduall', not to be parted as man and wife. Since at least the seventeenth century however, the term 'individual' has emphasised the separateness of persons rather than their connection. (Klein, 1995, p.26).

I have realised anew how this modern interpretation of 'individual' has so many tenacious tentacles of influence in the ways I think and work, and how it can undermine the feminist understanding that 'the personal is the political' (Hanisch, 1970, 2006).

If the dominant Western idea of the 'individual' is not an inviolable 'truth', but a social and political construction, then the idea of 'individual' may sometimes help, and sometimes hinder, our feminist project of ending violence against women. This will depend on the context. Where it supports the view that a simple and clear-cut line can be drawn between victim and perpetrator, and where it implies that working only with individuals (without concurrent community actions) is enough to address violence against women, I think that it hinders us. It seems to me that there are many steps yet to be taken in feminist theory and practice to address the influence of individualism.

Reflecting further upon the relationship I built with 'the paedophile',

through my conversations with his partner, strengthens my affinity with the feminists who propose models of restorative justice (Madsen, 2006) or alternatives to criminal justice in the area of interpersonal violence, or those who stand for the abolition of prisons altogether[2]. These are often women from Indigenous communities or Women of Colour. This is another area in which I believe there are many further steps to be taken.

Theme three: *Sitting with complexity – respecting women's desires for their relationships*

In the early 1980s, one idea we white feminists had about domestic violence was that 'violent men' were uniformly unable to change from those ways, and that the best way for women to respond was to leave the relationship and never speak to him again. Our feminist action therefore went into trying to develop services (such as refuges and sole-parent benefits) to make it possible for women to do just this.

Now that there are refuges and sole-parent benefits and other services that make it more possible for some women to leave abusive relationships, we are still confronted with the dilemma of how to understand and respond to women who wish to stay in relationships with the men who have hurt them. This is particularly complex when women speak of their continuing 'love' for the man who has been violent towards her.

Early in my counselling work, I (Genna) had largely responded to a woman's expressions of love and longing for her current or ex-partner who had hurt her terribly, by highlighting his lack of respect for her, and trying to convince her how hurtful he had been and how unlikely he would be to change. At that time, I saw her 'longing for contact' as an expression of brainwashing (him teaching her that she can't live without him), and as a result of the powerlessness and dependency that women have often experienced in abusive relationships. Gendered discourses of romance also play a huge part in shaping women's experience of love and longing in a context of violence.

Over time, I learnt to encourage and listen to the woman's experiences and her sense of injustice/rage/hurt, and to put her story of dissatisfaction and actions towards change at the centre of our conversations. Thickening stories of resistance, where often women had felt intensely powerless, has become a very

exciting and empowering part of the conversations I have with women who have experienced violence or sexual abuse. More recently, I have begun to find that it is possible to engage with women in conversations about their stories of love for the men who hurt them, their attachment to them, care for them, and hopes for current or future interactions with them. While it seems vital to ensure that these conversations do not minimise the effects of abuse, nor that they engender any false hope, or place the women at risk of further violence, in some circumstances these conversations have proved to be significant.

A turning point in my thinking about this issue took place about six years ago, when I was visiting a refuge to provide counselling to a woman. It is not now possible for me to seek her consent to talk about her story, so I want to touch on this only briefly, and to talk more about what happened for me through the course of our meetings.

I found that this woman, and her children, had a long history of being subject to violence and emotional abuse from her husband when he was drinking. She told me she had moved into the refuge to put a pause in that abuse, and she was also engaged in meeting him to keep discussing what terms their relationship might continue on. This history of protesting the abuse directly to him and having, from her account, some success in discussing it and altering it, was something she had great hopes for and was very committed to. Her clarity about this, her insistence on this objective, meant that I approached the conversations differently than I once would have.

In this circumstance, I found that if I could join with her in this project (instead of attempting to convince her that it was futile and dangerous), I could help her articulate her aspirations of how she would like interactions to take place, what criteria she would use to tell if the relationship was proceeding in a good way for her and her children or not, and what she might do if it wasn't going that way. I could also ask questions about who else could be engaged in this project of addressing/changing her husband's violence so that this task wasn't in any way left as her responsibility.

While I was still worried about her making these attempts to continue the relationship, and worried that patterns of power and abuse would continue, I hoped that by respecting her desire for a non-abusive relationship, I could best support her to challenge the practices of abuse her partner used, and to leave if

need be. If I didn't engage in these conversations, it would have felt as if I was ignoring something that was very significant to her.

This particular woman moved away from town, so I didn't get to continue our relationship or to know the outcome of her attempts over a longer period. But her words and determination have influenced my conversations with other women. I remain committed to speaking with women about *their* preferences for their relationships and using this as my starting point. If their preference is to maintain a relationship with the man who has hurt them, then I am interested in talking with them about this. Sometimes, their reasons may relate to the poverty and lifestyle inequality that sole parent women often experience. Sometimes, discourses about separation that confer shame and notions of failure on a person may be influential. Alternatively, it may be that they have strong desires to protect the interests of their children by keeping relations with the abuser as 'sweet' as possible. And sometimes women may still declare their 'love' for the man and wish to remain in a relationship for this reason.

Whatever the explanation, I am now interested in finding ways to speak with women about their experiences, and their hopes and wishes about how best to find safety for themselves and their children. And yet, complexities remain. When engaging with women's stories of love for the men who hurt them, their care for them, and hopes for current or future interactions with them, these stories sit alongside stories of hurt, of resistance to abuse, and passionate desires to be free of the effects of abuse. This combination of stories brings many complexities, tensions, and dilemmas to the conversations. I don't ever join with a woman's desires for the continuation of a relationship that has been abusive without a great sense of caution. In fact, I still have many concerns about this work.

Given that the practices of power and abuse that some men use in relationships are supported by the practices and discourses of patriarchy, women are not 'equal' when they challenge what their partners do. But it is also clear that women are not passive victims in life. So when is it safe to encourage empowered actions by women in relationships that they wish to continue, and when might this encouragement expose them to greater danger? What are the signs I use to determine which women, and in which circumstances, it would be safe to pursue this approach with? What signs tell me it might be helpful, or at least not harmful?

Even then, if I support women's desires to improve the relationship, am I leaving her trapped by the discourse of women's responsibility for everyone else's happiness and mental health? These complexities continue … and I will continue to grapple with them. I hope to find or develop forums in which I can speak about these dilemmas with women who have lived through experiences of intimate violence. There seem to be many conversations we need to pursue.

Where to from here? Towards (back to) community initiatives

Four years ago here in Canberra, devastating bushfires destroyed lives and property and also gave us an intense experience of the power within communities, families, and friendship networks to heal, counsel, and advise. As we reflect on that experience, and as we read Mimi Kim's chapter in this book about grassroots solutions and responses to violence, we find ourselves thinking about how we could once again join with women in developing community initiatives to address and prevent violence.

Much of our work now takes place within professional organisations and we are struck by our lack of engagement with the wider community in relation to issues of violence. Where once we may have joined with other women to publicly campaign against and question 'rape culture', our approaches no longer seem to be engaged in these broader concerns. Nor do we seem to be engaging with the community to develop collaborative forms of collective intervention and change.

In recent years, we have organised gatherings of people who have all had a similar experience in relation to mental health concerns or parenting issues. In these gatherings, we have used narrative practices and definitional ceremony structures through which participants have been able to come together to share stories of their lives, their experience of common problems, and to name and more fully engage with their own skills and wisdom that would otherwise have remained invisible to them[3]. Why couldn't we also use such a collective approach to respond to issues of violence?

Developing community initiatives to respond to violence would link back to an early feminist principle that states 'as long as one woman is subject to violence, no woman is safe'. This principle makes it the responsibility of everyone to speak out and take action against violence against women in every arena of our

lives – at home, and in our workplaces, as well as within our friendship networks and our spiritual, social, sporting, and other contexts …

Many steps have been taken, and there are many steps still to go.

Notes

[1] I (Manja) am unable to contact this woman to ask her permission to share this story so I have altered the details and only included as much information as required to enable me to describe my own learnings from our conversations.

[2] See Communities Against Rape and Abuse (www.cara-seattle.org/index.html) and Incite: Women of Color Against Violence (www.incite-national.org) for examples of these women's groups. See particularly the 'Critical Resistance – Incite Statement: Gender Violence and the Prison Industrial Complex' (www.incite-national.org/involve/statement.html)

[3] For descriptions of these sorts of gatherings, see Aboriginal Health Council of South Australia & Dulwich Centre (1995), Dulwich Centre Publications (2000), ACT Mental Health Consumers Network & Dulwich Centre (2003).

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PART TWO

Working across culture

6

Casting light

By Mercedes Martinez

I am a newcomer to Australia, having recently migrated from Mexico, and am now working in a community health centre as a family violence counsellor. I work with women who are, or have been, subject to violence in their relationships. As a newcomer, I have been trying very hard to make my practice fit with the 'standards' I expect of myself and also the 'standards' of my new country and new workplace. And yet I am facing dilemmas in the process.

Not long ago, I was meeting with a woman originally from China. I will call her M. After ten years of marriage and the same number of years of different forms of abuse and exploitation, M decided to separate from her husband. She took out an intervention order against him and managed to arrange for herself and her two children to stay at the family home. M's elderly mother-in-law was also living in the house because her son (M's husband) argued that he could not take her with him when he left the family home. M thought this was only an excuse. When M met with me for our fourth session, she was facing the dilemma of whether to allow her mother-in-law to stay in the house and provide sustenance for her, or to do what her friends were advising: 'Don't be stupid', they were saying, 'Just lock her out of the house; let your husband deal with her'.

This was a complex situation for M because, in the years that her mother-in-law had lived with them, she had witnessed the violence that had been directed towards M and had still sided with her son. However, M also recognised that her mother-in-law had helped her out with house chores and in taking care of the children. Another aspect adding to the complexity was that M's husband was coming to visit his mother and the children and M wasn't sure that she wanted this to stop; even though she knew from her solicitor that by allowing him into the house she was breaking the conditions of the intervention order. M told me that 'family' was important to her and that she could not see herself denying her children the opportunities to see their father, nor the chance for her mother-in-law to see her son.

As I was listening to M's story and her dilemma, I was also hearing in my mind, the voice of colleagues or other professionals in the field telling me: 'You need to open her eyes'. I had received this advice previously when I was working with a woman who did not want to call the police, even though to others this seemed like the 'right' thing to do to protect her safety. The dilemma for me in these two instances, and many others is that, in the conversations I've had with these women, I haven't found that their 'eyes are shut'. Even when the decisions of the women may not seem to me to be the most 'appropriate' ones, particularly with regards to ensuring their safety, I've found that most women have considered and thought through their options and are constantly making evaluations of their situation. For instance, the woman who didn't want to call the police had thought of, and put in place, many alternative ways of ensuring her safety, alternative ways which were more compatible with her own beliefs.

In the case of M, she was making a series of evaluations of the situation in terms of herself, her children, the risk, the advantages, the disadvantages, etc. However, the answer to her dilemma seemed to be escaping her grip. Although she was clearly more inclined to let her mother-in-law stay in the house, the 'justification' of this decision seemed elusive. This left M with an uncomfortable sense that she was 'a fool' or just 'too weak' to evict her mother-in-law. I suspected that a further exploration could be helpful to bring forward what M was giving importance to in choosing to let her mother-in-law stay at the house.

A few steps into the inquiry, M spoke of having been told she had a 'kind heart'. This led to a series of questions referring to the re-membering

conversations map, which in turn directed us to M's relationship with her grandmother. M had treasured this relationship and her grandmother had treasured having M in her life. M had received from her grandmother a legacy of stories about cultural traditions including those that referred to consideration and respect for elders. M thought that her grandmother wouldn't be surprised and would approve of her decision to house her elderly mother-in-law, who otherwise would have been forsaken. Having found this link between her decision and her connection to her grandmother, M felt she could regard her decision with respect and not as a result of some weakness or deficiency of hers. At the end of this conversation, M announced she didn't think she would need more counselling for now.

While this approach was judged favourably by M, the dilemmas remain. Perhaps it could be argued that by going into a conversation about the foundation and history of M's decision, and by touching on aspects of culture and relationships, an unacceptable situation of exploitation was condoned 'in the name of culture'. I'm aware there could be considerable discussion about the gender politics involved in M's decision and consequently a lot of questions could be raised about my role in the process. I understand that practices of gendered violence, abuse, exploitation and entitlement are often disguised, minimised or rendered invisible when they are named as 'traditions' or upheld as 'cultural practices'. I am, therefore, aware of the importance of finding ways that practices of gendered violence, abuse, exploitation and entitlement can be named and made visible. But my hope is to be able to cast light over problems, rather than attempt to 'restore' people's vision.

Whenever I've felt worried about a woman's physical safety in a relationship, I know I can become more captivated by the call to 'open her eyes'. But if ever I take up this call, there is a price to be paid. There have been numerous times I have heard women talk about the attempts by others (professionals and non-professionals) to support them to break away from the violence and how they have ended up feeling worse about themselves as a person on account of the help they have received. Some women have described situations where the negative descriptions and conclusions about themselves that were pervasive in the relationship with the violent partner were reinforced, unintentionally of course, by other people trying to help. Often women who have

been subject to abuse have experienced unrelenting efforts by their abusive partner to crush their sense of agency. From the stories I have heard, inadvertently, some attempts to help have also undermined women's sense of agency and knowledge about their own life. By choosing the approach of trying to 'open these women's eyes', there is a risk of contributing in a negative way to the sense of self that the women are developing or wanting to reclaim. If the woman's life is at stake, perhaps there are times when I may think it's a price worth paying, but I really don't want to add myself to a list of well- or ill-intentioned people who dictate to these women what they should think or do, or what they should be privileging in their lives.

As I said before, I don't think I've met a woman who has had her eyes shut. Rather, I've seen women who are facing complex, sometimes dangerous situations, and are having to make important decisions that will most likely have great implications for their lives and the lives of others. I feel a lot of respect for these women and their decisions, whether these are founded on considerations of culture, gender, connections to loved ones, or whatever else it is that they value in life.

In time, I hope to find ways of bringing women together for these conversations, to support one another, and to come to their own decisions and actions about ways of addressing violence in their lives and communities. I also hope to be able to gather a group of women from diverse cultures who can act as my consultants on dilemmas like these. Perhaps some time down the track, if I am meeting with a woman facing a similar dilemma, there will be a group of women from different cultures we can go to together to talk it all through.

Unpacking value dilemmas & enabling discernment

Editors' Note

The example offered here by Mercedes Martinez has sparked our thinking. When women who are seeking counselling are facing these types of value dilemmas, when they are trying to discern what decision to make, what ethic to abide by, one option for conversation is to find ways that the woman can name these conflicting values and then unpack the history of both (or all) of these. If women have a chance to then trace the history of these differing values in their lives, map out who in their lives stand with each of these different values, and speculate as to the effects of different courses of action in their lives, then the counsellor can avoid stepping into giving advice or 'opening the woman's eyes' and instead become a conversational partner in exploring the ethical bases by which women are seeking to live their lives.

If counsellors only attend to and explore one of the conflicting values that a woman is engaging with, or if counsellors deliberately encourage a certain path of action, then the hazards that Mercedes clearly outlines here become very real.

The other matter that seems relevant to mention is that broader community conversational options may be necessary to assist women to discern the sorts of courses of action that they wish to take. Discernment is not only an individual process. At the start of the women's liberation movement, consciousness-raising groups were key sites in which women collectively 'opened their eyes' to the power relations of gender and the influence these were having on their lives. These groups also played a key part in 'opening the eyes' of the broader culture to the status of women. Women coming together (within cultural groupings or across cultural groupings) in contexts for discussion as equals, is a very different context than a professional 'opening the eyes' of someone who is consulting them. These sorts of contexts might look quite different from 'support' or 'therapeutic' groups. They might deliberately focus on women being able to speak about their values, their ethics, the histories of these, how they might be in conflict, and then together discuss ways forward.

7

On meeting Dawn

By Lisa Berndt

It seems to me that every aspect of our work at the Center for the Vulnerable Child has to do with the interface of gender and culture and violence! So much of the so-called 'vulnerability' of the children we are concerned about has to do with historic and current cultures of racism, legally sanctioned discrimination, state-sanctioned violence in terms of discrepancies in law enforcement, and the allocation of resources and respect. And the vulnerability is not confined to people served by agencies. In my solo practice outside the agency, conversations about relationships often occur in contexts where violence has been perpetrated or is threatened.

One young woman, Dawn, is currently very much on my mind. She is fifteen, in the eighth grade, identifies as African American, and as a young woman proud of having 'a mind of my own'. She was referred for therapy by her godmother who, after a long and difficult fight, was granted custody of Dawn, who had been in several foster homes over the course of the past ten years. Dawn had been subjected to ongoing sexual and physical abuse in at least two of these homes.

I am a forty-nine-year old white woman, working in partnership with African American clinicians. Dawn's assigned therapist, an African American woman in

her twenties who was called away on a project of several months, asked me to meet with Dawn. I discussed this change with Dawn and her godmother, who agreed to meet with me. We talked at length about generational, cultural, regional, and religious differences and overlaps. Both wanted Dawn to have time to meet with me on her own.

In our first such meeting, Dawn introduced me to some of her favourite music and her ideas about pressures to dress up and be feminine in narrowly prescribed ways. She described how this pressure comes more from other young black women than from young men, and she was happy to be resisting. While watching music videos, we noticed and talked together about the sexualised images depicted of the young black women and the 'pimping' roles played by the black men in the videos. In the USA, an imagery of urban pimp lifestyle has been taken up in rap and hip hop culture, and popularised by record companies in a way that perpetuates a long hisitory of commercial and cultural appropriation and misuse of African American symbols and art forms.

Before our next scheduled meeting, there was a conflict between Dawn and her godmother, who felt she had to send Dawn back into foster care. Dawn ran away and hooked up with a young man who offered her shelter, companionship, food and sex, and she allowed him to be her pimp. When she came in to see me a week later, she was very excited about the opportunities this life was offering her, and was not ready to leave it. She still felt it was a choice she was making, and returned to the street a few days later. She said she had never felt such a sense of belonging as with this young man and the other girls he was recruiting (she was also helping to recruit). She hoped to have his baby.

Throughout the time of these conversations, I was in touch with a group of counsellors who offer assistance to sexually exploited minors. The counsellors themselves are young women who had in the past been recruited to have sex for money and under threat. They say that Dawn's experience matches their early days on the streets, when they were being groomed for the life. The violence came later and, for them, the first step was sexual violation. They described to me how violence is what keeps the man's power over the women in place. When I asked Dawn about violence, she said, 'No, he's one of the good ones … If anybody messes with me he'll mess him up'. So the violence 'out there' was a factor in the choices she was making.

Dilemmas

As I had profound concerns for Dawn's safety, my first dilemma involved how to show up and invite Dawn to reflect on her situation and context and choices without imposing my own worries, values and proposed solutions. The multiple layers of privilege that have protected me are not available to Dawn, so the decisions I have made and solutions I may have come up with for my life have not brought me into the same sorts of danger as those Dawn is facing. Similarly, chances are that any 'solutions' that have worked in my life may not work for Dawn. But I saw the situation she was in as involving kidnapping and rape, and I was alarmed.

So much so, that I wondered (and talked with colleagues and the women who were consulting with us) if we should go to the avenue and scoop her up, or have her taken in when she showed up at the office. This is a dilemma that I face a lot when there's violence in the picture: What is my role in stopping it? What is the worker's role? At what point do we do things 'for someone's own good'? And then another voice says that to call in Police on an African American youth has a lot of historical echoes and numerous repercussions. Is there someone else we could call in? Are other collective responses possible? If they are not now, then what ground work could we be involved with that might generate options in the future?

A big consideration, which Dawn and I talked about, is the overlap of popular culture with the exploitation of young women. When images of violence and 'pimping and ho'ing (whoring)' are popularised by those who profit from the image, and when this imagery fits snugly into wider discourses of discrimination, what options are rendered less visible, how does this affect the personal agency of young women, and how can we as workers respond? If popular culture is so much a part of the problem, can our work play a part in generating alternative popular culture? Could our work involve joining with young women who have insider knowledge of reclaiming their lives from the effects of 'pimping and ho'ing' to turn this knowledge into the lyrics of new hip-hop songs?

The shadow of Dawn's previous experiences of foster care was cast over all our conversations. If it wasn't a coincidence that Dawn had hooked up immediately after she learned there was a chance that the welfare system could again become involved in her life and she could be sent back to foster care, then how could the legacies of these histories be addressed?

In working with Dawn, and with many of the women I see who have come into this country with partners who abuse them, the danger they know is less dangerous to them than risking the involvement of 'the system'. While Dawn was not facing deportation across national borders, she feared deportation to a county where the authorities had let her be abused for years. How can we contribute to creating systems (welfare, policing, immigration) which young women who have been through foster care, and women who have migrated, are going to fear less than the violence and control of the men they know?

Principles

I value collaboration, and I value seeing people as part of communities. I believe that these communities can be based on culture, common experiences, shared values and/or shared concerns. I believe that people should have a chance to make informed choices in their lives, and I believe that histories in which some have been systematically oppressed while others systematically privileged, shape the choices and decisions we make. If people are grappling with difficult and significant decisions in their lives, then I will seek to provide a context in which they can speak about their values in ways that (re-)connect them to significant others who have similar commitments. I also hope to find ways that the broader relations of power that are influencing a situation can be named and discussed. These are principles and beliefs which I hold as foundations for my work.

The conversations we shared

I saw Dawn three times, and our last visit was on the eve of her moving to Southern California. Attempts to reach her again have not yet born fruit. In the three conversations we shared, we were finding various ways of talking about her experiences which Dawn was expressing enthusiasm about. These included:

Trying to locate people's experiences in the context of power relations (of race, gender, class)

In greeting Dawn, her family, and her peers, I tried to locate people's experience in the context of broader power relations. This included recognising and

acknowledging my position as an older white professional. It also meant asking about Dawn's understanding of the experience of girls being turned against one another and inviting her to consider how this happens, its effects on the girls' lives and on men's lives, and whether these practices tend to support or to undermine white supremacy. An additional avenue of enquiry would have been to look at the commercialisation of rap and the pimp lifestyle, who benefits from this, and its effects on community – this could have involved experts from the local community including young hip hop artists who are standing against violence and misogyny.

Always holding an awareness of multiple-stories and perspectives

In our conversations, I asked Dawn and her godmother to speak about what was important to them and to locate these values in their own life histories. Some of the questions I asked included, 'Could you tell me how that became important to you? What else does that connect with? What skills have you developed along the way that support you in living according to this value? This attention to Dawn's values was especially important in listening and responding to the stories of past experiences of abuse. I was particularly interested in the history of Dawn's resistance and responses to previous situations of exploitation and the skills she had honed in surviving. The stories I got to hear included several instances of Dawn standing up for younger children. When talking with Dawn's godmother, I took a similar approach, asking her to speak about what values were important to her and enquiring into the history of these in her life. This made it possible for Dawn's godmother's perspectives to be spoken about and acknowledged without these being placed in direct opposition to Dawn's ideas for her own life.

Inviting Dawn to name and take a position on the difficulties or dilemmas with which she was grappling

Early on in our conversations, the main difficulty or dilemma that we discussed was named as 'Trouble', although this externalised definition was more from the viewpoint of Dawn's godmother than Dawn herself. Over time, Dawn named 'trash talking' and then 'living the life' as aspects of her experience that were having mixed effects in her life. Naming these externalised difficulties and then exploring their multiple effects, made room for Dawn to give words to some of the

complex dilemmas with which she was struggling. She described some of the complexities involved in exposing herself to danger while cautioning younger siblings to be careful. She also described the way that prostituting helped her feel closer to some of the women who'd cared for her in the past, while at the same time acknowledging that risking arrest might jeopardise her chances at education and employment in the future. As I asked about the effects of taking this road on her family, friends, and her ideas about herself, she was most saddened about the strain that was being placed on her relationship with her godmother. Dawn expressed concern that her godmother might not realise how much Dawn loved and appreciated her. Throughout these discussions, it seemed very important to keep acknowledging the context of white supremacy, and various twisted ideas of male power, that were robbing Dawn of choices for her life. As we evaluated the effects of various difficulties or dilemmas, I would consistently ask whether these were things that fit with what racism might want for her life.

Curiosity about Dawn's hopes and their social history

Having heard about some of Dawn's hopes for her life, which included making a better life for children (especially her siblings who had been scattered in the foster care system), I was curious about the histories of these hopes. I was also curious about how the choices she was now making were fitting with these hopes. If we had had time for future conversations, perhaps there would have been opportunities to learn more about the social history of Dawn's plans for her life, for instance, who had kept these hopes alive, who had supported them, who would recognise them. Perhaps there would also have been opportunities for more exploration about how Dawn discerns whether the actions/choices she is making in the present are in accordance with the longer term hopes she holds for her life, and about what hinders and what assists these discernments.

Linking Dawn's insider knowledge with the insider knowledge of others

I was curious about Dawn's knowledge about ways of keeping herself safe on the streets, and the histories of this knowledge. Asking about this led Dawn to speak about a number of stands she had taken in the past to stop the exploitation of others. It also led to conversations about who else would know about the sorts of skills and knowledges Dawn has in these areas. I was interested to know what

Dawn's friends and her aunt (who has had experiences on the street) would say about some of the things that Dawn was going through and the ways in which she was trying to deal with the complexities she was facing. So I asked Dawn some questions about this. I also tried to get Dawn in touch with the young women who I had been consulting, who knew the experience of 'being turned out' and who use their stories to advocate and to help other young women navigate life on and off the streets. I would have loved to have access to some archived accounts of the skills and knowledge of survival and overcoming of these young women. Perhaps one day I may be able to be involved in collaboratively generating such archives. I'd also love to find ways for family members who feel they have 'lost' young people to the streets to have access to each others' knowledges.

If I had the chance to rewind time, I would have liked to have found a way to show up for Dawn's godmother in ways that offered more choices than either 'accepting' or 'rejecting' Dawn's decisions. She faced such painful decisions about staying true to her values and protecting other children in her home from the dangers of the exploiters. In both Dawn's life and her godmother's life, there are rich legacies of resistance to dehumanisation, of survival in tough times, and of seeking out and loving others. I wish our conversations could have explored these in more detail. Perhaps if these other terrains and stories could have been shared with each other, new possibilities for both Dawn and her godmother, and their relationship, may have become available. Perhaps there'll still be a chance for this in the future.

Reflections

I guess I see my place as working within my communities (social workers, therapists, white folks, adults, women) to continue to expose layers of violence and intimidation as they are practised at every level, and to work in partnership with people who are addressing violence in their own communities. I am very grateful to the young women counsellors who were available to be consulted, and I hope to have continuing consultation from young women and men who can understand the context and experience of young women such as Dawn.


8

Working for gender justice across cultures

An interview with Taimalieutu Kiwi Tamasese

By Cheryl White

For many years, Taimalieutu Kiwi Tamasese has been speaking about and encouraging workers to think differently about issues of gender, culture and violence. In this interview, she identifies four key principles that can assist in working with women across culture on issues of violence. These include: not separating issues of culture and gender; making it possible for women to trace the liberative gender elements within their own culture; workers attending to their own privilege and cultural assumptions; and the development of meaningful cross-cultural partnerships.

Please note that some extracts from Taimalieutu's earlier writings have also been included in this text as the editors believe these will be of significant value to readers.

Cheryl: *The ways in which you have described how issues of gender and culture cannot be separated have been very helpful to many of us. Let me quote from one of your earlier writings:*

> As women from subjugated cultures we have tried to point out that gender and culture cannot be separated. Our ways of living as women and as men are always influenced by the symbols, rituals, language and relationship structures of culture. Recognising that gender cannot be separated from culture does not mean that we are privileging culture over gender. It means that whenever we are talking about gender, cultural considerations are relevant, as are other considerations of class and sexuality, etc. Similarly, wherever we are talking about culture, relations of gender are relevant (Tamasese 2003, p.204).

Can you say more about why this is important?

Taimalieutu: The ways in which 'gender' and 'culture' are sometimes talked about seems to lift both these concepts out of relationship. In some conversations it seems as if gender is in some way separate from the general ways in which people live their lives, as if gender resides within individuals. Similarly, the ways in which 'culture' is sometimes spoken about makes it sound as if it is a fixed entity. To some degree this is to do with the English language. Gender and culture can be constructed in the English language as if they exist separately and independently of one another, which they cannot.

These separated constructions of gender and of culture are problematic, particularly for women from subjugated cultures who wish to address issues of gender. If our gender and our culture are constructed as somehow separate from each other, as soon as we attempt to take any action in relation to either issues of gender or culture, we find our identities called into question. For instance, when I return to Samoa with other Samoan women we must take great care to ensure that we are not perceived as white feminists. However, back in New Zealand, in trying to ensure that issues of culture are considered in all projects, white feminist women may believe that we are 'privileging culture over gender'.

When working with women from subjugated cultures, refraining from talking about issues of culture and issues of gender in ways that seem to place them in opposition to one another is a key consideration.

Cheryl: *I find it very helpful to consider the importance of not placing women in this bind where they have to choose between their culture or their gender. I know that you have also described the significance of taking a 'non-oppositional' view to culture. Can you say more about this?*

Taimalieutu: If we understand that gender and culture are not separate from one another then, in order to address issues of gender justice, we do not need to take an oppositional view of culture. Instead we are interested in tracing the liberative gender arrangements within a particular culture and finding ways that these traditional arrangements can inform our work.

Within all our people's histories there are non-liberative as well as liberative stories, traditions and practices. As we have written about elsewhere, the principles of belonging, liberation and sacredness, and their inter-relationship, inform every aspect of our work. We're interested in playing our part to contribute to the traditions of belonging that are liberative, and that we could call sacred. Many sacred traditions are not liberative – so we do not make these our focus. And some liberative traditions don't emphasise belonging, so similarly we do not concentrate on these. We believe in creating contexts to further those traditions and practices in which belonging, liberation and sacredness meet. And we believe that this is a challenge for all people's within our own cultures.

Cheryl: *Am I right in thinking that when working with a woman or women from a particular culture, it therefore becomes possible to trace the history of liberative gender stories in their own lives (for instance, times in their history when they have been supported to take actions that may be contrary to dominant patriarchal gender relations) and then also to link these individual stories to broader liberative gender traditions within their culture?*

Taimalieutu: Yes. Of course, the women may not initially be aware of the broader gender liberative traditions of their own culture and so some research may need to be carried out. The women themselves might be able to be involved in this, or the workers might need to approach cultural consultants to assist in this process. The research may turn up examples of women from the particular culture who are currently taking action on behalf of women's lives; it may also turn up examples

of women of that culture from the past who have been influential in relation to these issues; and it may also turn up cultural traditions that are supportive of equitable gender relations that have been obscured over time.

Let me describe this process in relation to Samoan culture. In order to find ways of grounding our current work on issues of gender in history, we thoroughly researched the traditions of gender arrangement within Samoan culture, and by doing so unearthed various liberative traditions. Specifically, our analysis of pre-colonised Samoa revealed a covenant relationships (*feagaiga*) between brother and sister that had the capacity to equalise the relationships between women and men. We learnt of traditional gender arrangements of partnership, and of the positions of respect that women had been held within Samoan culture. This research was an involved process that we took very seriously. The fact that we can identify traditions within the culture that promote the sorts of gender relations to which we aspire has made our work in the present considerably easier. And it has meant that as Samoan women we have been able to work on issues of gender without having our cultural identity questioned.

Cheryl: *I can see how significant this process can be. Rather than women struggling against their own culture in order to achieve a sense of equity, they can call upon the liberative aspects of their own culture and traditions to assist them in this work. I know how being connected to a sense of women's history within my own culture is significant to me. My guess is that these explorations can also lead to ways of working that are based on specific cultural ways. Are there ways of working with issues of violence that you have developed that have evolved from Samoan cultural understandings?*

Taimalieutu: The most relevant project to mention is probably the 'Stop Abuse Project' that we developed some years ago. For us, as Samoan people, where there is a matter of importance, an issue that touches the whole life of our people, it is important that we discuss it not only as a collective – at the village level – but also that we discuss it in gendered collectives – as a group of women and a group of men. There is a feeling that there are boundaries of discussion between the genders particularly around matters of sexuality. The only way that matters related to sexuality can be talked about in depth is to have separate gender

groups. Within the separate groups there is some degree of common experience, there will be differences too, but there will be common ground. The group of women need to come to a consensus on their views of the issue, as do the men. The only way this can be done equitably is through single gender groups. Having separate age groups means that the voices of young women and young men can also be heard and honoured.

Within the 'Stop Abuse' Project, all of the groups began by building a sense of belonging and strength to deal with the issue of violence. We then looked at the definition of violence and how it is lived out. We set about establishing a community consensus on what is violent and what is not. By doing this it meant that we had to rely very little on workers' judgements. The community came up with their own definitions of what is violent and what is not. Great care was taken in the ways in which we did this. We called the exercise 'Drawing the Line'.

We asked the members of the community to identify behaviours that they considered to be examples of physical, economic, spiritual, psychological and sexual violence. We asked for five examples of each type of violence. The examples ranged from overt assault to less dramatic examples of harassment.

We then asked the participants to 'draw the line' as to what violence they wanted stopped in the community. A lot of negotiations would then take place as we tried to facilitate a consensus. Importantly within these discussions the final judgement of what behaviour is okay and what is not okay is always decided by those who have suffered from it. We ask people throughout the discussions to put themselves in the places of those who have experienced the particular example of violence. We ask questions like, 'Would the people who experience this think it is okay? If not, why not? Do you still think it is okay?'

This principle of the right for those people who have been subject to violence to determine where the line should be drawn is also structured into the program. At the end of the separate training day sessions, the different groups (older men, older women, younger women, younger men) all come together. As a community, we then come up with a consensus of where we wish to 'draw the line'. As facilitators, we are clear that at the end of the day the 'drawing of the line' needs to satisfy the group that are most hurt by the violence, that are most affected. As sexual abuse is mostly experienced by women and young women, we are clear that where the line is drawn must satisfy the women. What is also

important is that, by the end of the exercise, the men must be able to see the importance of this and the reasons behind it.

Having established a community consensus on what is violent behaviour and what is not, we then explore different ways of stopping violence. As most violence is perpetrated by men, we look at ways of ensuring a restitution of the place of respect for women within the family, within organisations, within the churches, and within the culture itself.

One of the direct outcomes of this work was that the community named a Sunday of each year as 'Stop Abuse Sunday'. The community wanted to see a particular Sunday to focus on these issues, and to remember those who have suffered. It is also a day of recommitment to non-violent behaviour. Many of the men who attended the training days continue to work to live lives free of violence, and also to run groups to help other men do likewise.

Another direct result of the Project is that participants have identified that they have come to know more about the gender arrangements that were a part of Samoan culture before the Christian missionaries arrived. This knowledge had dispersed. Participants said they came to learn of the gender arrangements of partnerships, and the positions of respect that women had within Samoan culture. And they reconnected with the culture's deep commitment to its own futures – the children.

Cheryl: *That seems a significant example and I can imagine how people working with different cultural groups could start to imagine developing programs and approaches that fit with the traditions of these cultures. Can I now ask you about the particular responsibilities of women from dominant cultures when working with women from subjugated cultures?*

Taimalieutu: This is a big topic and I have really appreciated the other chapters in this collection by white feminists. It seems that these white feminist women no longer see issues of culture as separate or peripheral to the feminist struggle. But instead they see issues of culture are critical to the work which they are doing. They have described clearly that their own cultural views and assumptions limit what they see and what they do, and how they are taking care not to impose their values and beliefs upon women of other cultures. It seems to me that they

have articulated clearly that they do not wish for their work to in any way contribute to the violence of cultural domination. They do not wish to assert their cultural values or cultural ways of being over those of women of subjugated cultures. They do not wish to put women of subjugated cultures through therapeutic processes that would be counter-productive to the women's own cultural values.

While I think people of dominant groups can reach a level of sensitivity in relation to these issues, we cannot afford not to be vigilant. We can never know when our blind spots that relate to our positions of privilege will come up. And so, we all need a group of people around us who can help us be vigilant. We need a group of people, cultural consultants, feminist friends, women friends, men friends who are very sensitive to issues of feminism and gender justice, to sit by us, to look at our work, advise us, support us, challenge us in areas in which we need extending.

To white feminists who are engaged in this work, I would congratulate them on their hard work and soul-searching to be sensitive to issues of cultural domination. I would also say that no-one can be self-vigilant all the time, that we all need to ensure that there are other people (from subjugated cultures and subjugated positions within the culture) to monitor our work, to point out the blind spots we have not noticed and to work together to address these.

Cheryl: *Are these the sorts of partnerships that you and the Just Therapy Team have written and spoken about?*

Taimalieutu: Yes. I don't think it is possible to work across cultures or to work on issues of gender and cultural justice without meaningful partnerships of accountability. We all require 'monitoring' and feedback – in a way that supports us to take the next steps. We have written elsewhere about the ways in which we have developed partnerships across issues of culture and gender within The Family Centre (see Tamasese & Waldegrave 1996; Tamasese, Waldegrave, Tuhaka & Campbell 1998) and so I won't go into this in any detail here. And people will form these partnerships in different ways in their own contexts.

For me to be able to spend my life working on issues of gender and culture requires long-term relationships. I need the ongoing relationships with men and

with people of other cultures in order to be able to move into the outside world and address issues of culture and of gender. These relationships sustain me. Sometimes there are difficulties, but we all know that these are long-term committed relationships to one another. We know that in time the difficulties will be sorted out.

We've had thirty years in the field now. In the beginning we had no vocabulary to use to speak about power differentials, practices of power and privilege and their effects on our work and our relationships. In the absence of language and vocabulary, sometimes the discussions were fierce and cutting words were the only ones that we could find to articulate the damage done by domination. Now we've developed vocabularies and languages through which we can talk across differences. It's now possible to speak with each other across differences in much kinder ways.

What remains critical if we are trying to work for gender justice across cultures, is that we build strong partnerships in which the perspectives and knowledge of all involved are respected and honoured.

Cheryl: *Thank you Taimalieutu. As always, it's been great to speak with you about these issues.*

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9

What do we mean by victim? And what do we mean by culture?

By Aya Okumura

Several years ago, I was working at a community mental health agency in San Francisco when we decided to incorporate a California State Victim Witness Program into our work. This Victim Witness Program offers financial support to victims of crimes by providing funds for medical and psychological treatment. At the time, I was working with Japanese women who were born in Japan and had grown up in Japan. They had been subjected to crimes of violence in San Francisco and, because they could not otherwise have afforded to attend therapy, I encouraged them to apply for support from the Victim Witness Program. About a year after they applied, the agency was notified that two of these applications were going to be reviewed by a committee. I attended two court hearings as part of this process.

The first case was about a date rape. Ikumi was subject to a date rape at the house of her friend. A male panel member of the committee mentioned

that Ikumi did not press the charges against the perpetrator, therefore this man was still at large in the community. It was the opinion of this panel member that Ikumi's choice not to press charges meant that Ikumi had not 'contributed to the community'. Her application for financial support was denied.

The second case was about a domestic violence situation. Yoko was from Japan and when she moved to the USA, she fell in love with an African American male, John. They started living together, but one day John's violence started. I explained to the committee that, as a Japanese female living in the USA without family support, and not knowing the legal system in the USA, calling the police or pressing charges would not be an easy thing for Yoko to do. Yoko did her best to call the police to inform them of the violence from John, but she did not press charges against him. At the committee hearing, the same male panel member commented, 'You said that Yoko was a traditional Japanese female from Japan. But does a traditional Japanese female go out with an African American male or live with a man without being married?' Yoko's application was also denied by the committee.

Dilemma one: Being a 'good victim'

It seemed to me that the panel member was asking these women to take some responsibility about the incidents that they had been subjected to. From this panel member's perspective, these women did not follow the 'appropriate' course of action in response to these incidents so they did not 'deserve' what the program had to offer. Apparently, they did not do 'their part' so they do not have the right to get what 'they need'. The message I received during both committee hearings was that there are different sorts of victims: the deserving and the non-deserving. Should we separate victims into 'good' and 'bad'? What makes a victim 'good'? Who decides who is a 'good' victim and who is not? Is it my job, as a therapist, to make these women 'good' ones? Whose responsibility is it to take action concerning men's violence? What about the men concerned? What about men more generally? What about the community more generally? And how am I supposed to respond as a therapist to these women whose applications for support were denied?

Principles of fairness and transparency

It seemed to me that Ikumi, Yoko, and I were punished by this older white man because we did not, according to his definition, take responsibility to prevent others from getting hurt. In this way, he was attempting to shift the responsibility for protecting others away from those who have perpetrated violence, away from the community more generally – and men in particular – onto the victims of this violence. I do not believe in laying the responsibility for addressing men's violence at the feet of women who have just had to endure it. What's more, I don't see it as my responsibility as a therapist to be encouraging women to follow a particular 'correct' path in dealing with their experiences of being subject to violence.

This experience of attending the committee hearings made me look at my own practice more seriously. As a health professional, my actions and my words have a great effect on people's lives. In noticing the power of the committee's assumptions, categorisations, and judgements, I have had to ask questions of myself:

- Am I in any way categorising people into groups such as 'good' vs. 'bad', 'deserving of my attention' vs. 'undeserving', 'productive' vs. 'unproductive', and so on?
- Am I making judgements about people's pasts or futures based on my own biases?
- Am I in a position to make decisions such as 'who gets what'?
- If so, whose responsibility should this be? Should it be me making these judgements/decisions or someone else?

I have also had to think more about whether the process of coming to see me is 'transparent' and clear. I want to have no hidden process or condition for the people who come to see me. Am I making it clear enough to people who may choose to see me exactly what they can expect from me and the process? I do not want to disappoint those who consult me, just as I would not like to be disappointed by any hidden/unspoken conditions if I was consulting a therapist.

Dilemma two: Being a 'traditional Japanese female'

The male committee member mentioned how Yoko was 'a traditional Japanese female'. I found this comment disturbing and confusing. When I meet these

women who are subjected to partner violence, they often speak about how they see their 'acculturation into the culture of USA' as in some ways linked to the violence they have been subjected to.

These Japanese women were considered 'smart', 'independent', and 'outgoing' when they lived in Japan. However, when they came to the USA without much support or a familiarity with the US system, they were perceived as being very naïve. Moreover, communication in English, their second language, became an obstacle in this new world. For these reasons, these Japanese women who had just arrived in the USA sometimes appeared to others to be 'traditional Japanese females' – a phrase that can generally be understood to mean 'quiet, submissive, and hard-working'.

Many times, Japanese women who have just migrated to the USA look for support to survive in their new world. For these particular women, among this support appeared men who use violence. These men seemed at first to be very kind. In the early days of the relationships, they gave a lot of direction and advice to these women to help them navigate through this new world. However, it was precisely when the women became more accustomed to life in the USA – when they became more independent – that these men became increasingly controlling and became violent.

This made me think a lot about the image or construct of the 'traditional Japanese female' figure. Was it this image of the 'traditional Japanese woman' that attracted these men to these women? And once Japanese women stop wearing this 'ideal traditional Japanese female' costume, do people act and treat them differently? And is it possible to be a 'traditional Japanese female' when living in the USA? Is it desirable? And if so, by whom?

A belief in transformation

When people migrate to a different country, it is not possible to live life in the same way we once did. Fortunately and unfortunately, we have to adapt to a new world and, in the process, leave some very familiar things and ways of living behind. Our ways of making and keeping relationships, communicating, and how we engage with health, social and legal systems may all change. We undergo a rite of passage, a transformation from one way of being to another.

However, we do not wish to leave everything behind and we do not want to accept everything from the new world. I like to call myself a 'hybrid', an integration of ways of being. I wish to try to utilise my favourite parts of two different worlds. There are nuances in meaning. For example, if I wish to show my appreciation to a person, I will make a cup of tea for them. This is in line with traditional Japanese ways of being. However, if I was forced or expected to do so just because I am a woman, and making tea is women's role, then I might refuse to do so. When living in a western country, western feminism may influence us, but this does not mean that we have to separate ourselves from aspects of traditional culture that are meaningful and precious to us.

I don't believe that Japanese women who migrate to the USA should be forced to become 'Americans' and leave their cultural practices and values behind. But I also don't think they should be punished for changing, integrating, and creating hybrid identities.

Future conversations

In meeting with other Japanese women in the future, I look forward to deconstructing the influence that the image of 'ideal Japanese female' has on our lives. Does it prevent us from taking on new ways of being in the new world? Who is benefiting from the idea of 'we should behave like a traditional Japanese female'? Which aspects of 'traditional Japanese female' would we like to hold onto, and why are these aspects significant to us? Perhaps we can also discuss the different Japanese-American women we know and the diversity of ways they have found to live their lives.

I am also interested in talking with women about the processes of transformation that they are undertaking. We could speak about the rites of passage they are in the midst of as they find their way between and amidst two cultures. I would like to find ways of witnessing their transformation as it takes place in their own ways and at their own pace.

Perhaps it will be possible to involve their partners in these conversations. Deconstructing the ideal of the 'traditional Japanese female', and exploring how this notion may limit the partners' view of these women, could open up conversations about 'stereotypes' and expectations of these women. I would also

like to know what these women's transformations make possible in the relationships with these partners.

What would I do differently?

During the committee hearings, I did not speak up about what I saw as the unfairness of dividing victims into categories of worthy and unworthy, or about the depictions and assumptions about 'traditional Japanese females'. I was concerned that, if I offended the committee by my actions and comments, this would have negative consequences for Ikumi and Yoko. However, if I had the chance to revisit this situation, I would speak calmly about my dilemmas and the sorts of ideas I have written about here. I now realise that, by not challenging or questioning the assumptions that were being made, in some way it seemed as if I was admitting that they were not 'good victims'.

If I had the time over again, I would also seek to find different ways to represent the stories of these women at the court hearings. Rather than only present the stories of these women's victimhood, we could present the alternative stories of these women. These women all responded to the assaults they had been subjected to. They all sought to cope and deal with the effects of these attacks in their lives. The ways in which they did this were linked to their values and hopes for their lives. And, in turn, these hopes and values are linked to social, cultural and historical stories. If I had found ways to represent to the court these rich accounts of these women's lives, then it's possible that the actions and decisions which they took would have been given more validation, rather than undermined and belittled. If the court hearing could have been a context for the thickening of alternative stories, then, far from this re-victimising and re-traumatising these women, it would have strengthened their resolve.

Next time, when I do speak up about the right of these women to develop 'hybrid' cultural identities, when I defend and celebrate their transformations, and when I challenge the construction of 'worthy' and 'unworthy' victims, I will be taking a significant step in my own life. I will be demonstrating that I myself am no longer afraid of not fitting into other people's image of a 'traditional Japanese female' figure. And I will be proudly claiming that I am a part of a long line of non-traditional Japanese women.

10

Violence upon violence:

Reflections on institutional practices towards families affected by sexual abuse

By Maisa Said-Albis

Between 1992 and 2002 I worked at an agency that provided therapy for children, young persons and their families affected by sexual abuse. Our mandate was to work with both those who were abused as well as those who had committed the sexual offenses. The majority of the families that we served included either children who had been abused by a sibling or parent figure, or adolescents who had committed sexual offences within or outside of their families[1]. In this paper, I will present some reflections on my experience there, and in particular on the aspect of the effects of institutional practices on the work with families.

Our approach came under some scrutiny and debate. Some people took issue with the idea of providing therapy to those who have committed sexual

offences in principle, raising concern about siphoning scarce government funded resources away from services for survivors. Others were open to the idea of providing services to those who had committed offences, but had concerns about how they could be delivered in a way that was helpful and not re-traumatising of the family member who was abused.

Coming from a feminist-informed theoretical orientation, I needed to consider these ethical dilemmas. The first concern of using scarce resources to work with those who have perpetrated sexual offenses did not fit for me; I saw it as a reflection of the paradigm that supports a polarisation of people into groups of good and evil, or deserving and non-deserving. Moreover, it did not take me long working at that agency to see the profound ties of attachment and loyalty in the families who consulted me. Although some families permanently separated as a result of a sexual abuse disclosure, many didn't. In such situations, to deny service to a father or brother who committed sexual abuse would have done a grave disservice to the family members, including the one victimised. In my conversations with children who were abused, I often encountered a frequently (and poignantly) stated wish: 'I never wanted my Dad to leave/go to jail; I just wanted the abuse to stop'. Mothers whose husbands or sons had abused their children tearfully described the relief they felt when they saw our acceptance and understanding of their wish to eventually reunite their families under safer conditions. They described harsh and abusive treatment by courts and other service providers who could not understand their loyalty to their sons or husbands.

Turning to the second concern about how to consult families in a way that was sensitive to those who have been abused, that was a more difficult and complex one to navigate. The pace of therapy was often an important factor. Work was usually done with those who had committed the offences individually and in groups before they were given the opportunity to meet with the children they had abused. The purpose of this was to support them in taking responsibility for their offences and attending to the consequences of their actions. Upon referral to our agency, the offending family member was usually out of the home, either serving a sentence or living away from home following the terms of a probation order or child welfare requirement. We supported this and in fact required it in order to begin work with a family. We saw it as necessary in order to ensure the child's physical safety and to provide her with an environment in which she could be

'freed up' to attend to the effects of the abuse and support her recovery. The rationale was that living with the person who abused her would keep her emotionally and cognitively constrained from attending to her experience of the abuse, given the powerful patterns and interactions that would likely continue in that family, even if her physical safety could be ensured with constant supervision.

However, following this approach provided us with a number of challenges. Tensions often developed that were constraining to the families and their ability to consult with us on attending to the effects of the abuse. Most commonly, these families had been separated for a period of one to two years following disclosure and before reaching our agency. This was a result of delays in court proceedings and referral processes. To adhere to the investigative and trial regulations, they were also instructed to refrain from discussing the sexual abuse with one another during that period. So by the time they arrived at our door, they presented 'reunification' as a significantly more meaningful and relevant issue, with the abuse being a more distant though disturbing concern. However, the decision regarding access and reunification was under the jurisdiction of the legal and child welfare bodies. It was usually contingent on progress in 'sex-offence specific treatment'. This in turn would lead to a perception on the part of the family that we held the power to reunite them by advocating on behalf of the offending member.

Upon meeting with these families, our conversations with them brought to light how disempowered and overwhelmed they were feeling by the effects of the separation. They would express tremendous frustration, acknowledging the abuse and its effects, but appearing unable to attend to it due to the levels of distress they were under. This would include guilt and worry about the welfare of the family member who abused and how he was faring away from home, stress over the tremendous financial strain on the family in situations when the father had had to find a second residence, and oppressive guilt on the part of the abused child at witnessing what she has begun to perceive as the repercussions of her disclosure. In effect, although wanting to support families affected by sexual abuse, we often found ourselves inadvertently participating in something that was causing another layer of distress and trauma, namely our inability to alleviate their despair at being separated.

This brings to mind a couple of families with whom we consulted. In both situations, it had been the elder brother who had sexually abused his sister. In the first family, the brother's sentence did not include any custody. However, the child welfare authority required that he be placed outside of the home contingent on progress in 'sex-offence specific treatment'. His parents declined the alternative of placing him in a group home facility, worried about the effects such a placement could have on him. They opted to have his father move to an apartment with him. This resulted in an enormous financial strain on them, and serious hardship on the part of the sister who was young and highly stressed by the separation from her father. Co-ordinating day-to-day life events became a logistical nightmare for both parents. Consequently, the family's practical and emotional resources were depleted before they had even begun a therapeutic process.

Another family I worked with whose son was in a group home facility, arrived at our door with a sense of panic about their separation. They had apparently been advocating relentlessly for the return of their son. Their child welfare worker informed me that the judge had aggressively chided them, expressing disgust with them at their commitment to their son. When I began working with them, they were unavailable to engage in any kind of dialogue about the sexual abuse. They expressed enormous alienation, as well as frustration and incredulity at their sense that no-one seemed to be acknowledging the harm done in having their son removed from home. Being immigrants to Canada, they described this experience as a form of 'cultural violence' perpetrated against them and suggested that such practices would never occur in their country of origin. This statement underscores the need to recognise these practices as reflections of prevailing cultural attitudes and ideas about responding to violence that may in and of themselves come into conflict with the views of other cultures on the subject. It is also worth considering how they support dominant social structures of class and race, in that marginalised families are further undermined, while destructive effects on wealthier families are mitigated with their access to more financial and legal resources. In working with that family, it was not until I took steps to initiate a dialogue with other professional bodies about this issue and consulted the family about this, that they began to feel less alienated and more available to support their son in the work he had to do.

In my work, I have always tried to remain firmly grounded in an awareness of the socio-political contexts of people's problems. However, working in this area has helped me to cultivate a kind of 'sensibility' related to the power of institutional practices to affect the lives of people in ways that obscure the positive intent upon which they were based. This sensibility has allowed me to integrate an awareness of how these institutional practices can undermine the families who consult us, and how their effects can be interpreted in terms of pathologising constructs such as 'collusion', 'denial' and 'dysfunction'. This awareness has made it possible for me to participate in conversations that acknowledge the effects of these practices with families. When that occurs, there is often a palpable sense of relief on their part, as the pressure of what they think they 'should' be appearing to feel and say dissolves, and space is made for more meaningful conversations that support richer stories.

Conversations with other professionals on this subject were often difficult as it seemed like a dilemma for which no-one had the ideal solution. In the context of prevailing legal and social service frameworks, separating a family in the interest of protecting some of its members inadvertently seems to create its own set of chronic problems. This occurs at a time in which families are most vulnerable and in need of immediate and effective intervention and support. Worth noting is the fact that, upon completion of their therapy, some families consulted have actually expressed an appreciation of the need to have the offending member moved at the stressful and emotionally charged time of disclosure. They suggest that it can be critical in helping to create space for affected family members to develop another perspective that supports preferred ways of being. The challenge seems to be how we can develop institutional practices that protect children while at the same time support family environments that promote healing and recovery.

In this paper, I have documented some of the hardships faced by families who have been subject to violent institutional practices following disclosure of sexual abuse. As I write, I think about the family mentioned above who maintained their passionate critique of the justice and child welfare system in the face of substantial hostility and criticism directed towards them by professionals. I wonder how different their experience might have been had the disclosure been attended to in a more timely manner and without the influence of pathologising

and marginalising discourses. It is my hope that this paper will invite readers to consider this complex question, and explore possibilities for change in the timing and delivery of legal, child welfare and counselling services to families affected by sexual abuse.

Note

[1] To enhance the flow of this paper, because the majority of the family members who had committed the offenses were male, I will refer to them in the third person male. Since a larger proportion of those abused were female, I will refer to them in the third person female).

A reflection from Norma Akamatsu:

A question about how violence becomes normalised

Most of the people I work with who have experienced violence, did so at a much earlier time in their lives, as children. In thinking about the influence of gender and culture, I am struck how the negative effects of these earlier experiences are often disavowed or minimised, and how this seems to transcend ethnicity. A Thai woman with whom I meet defines the rather brutal discipline of her youth as 'normal' in that context, discounting its significance. A woman of mixed European descent minimises the fright she experienced at her alcoholic father's unpredictable rages. At midlife, a Latina is just now fully grasping her step-father's beatings, which were always remembered but held beyond awareness – 'parked' in some sequestered zone of memory, a collection of short paragraphs not yet incorporated into a coherent narrative. While I do not wish to pathologise people's childhood experiences, or the behaviour of family members, these situations are complex. When the contexts in which people have grown up have normalised violence, the grave difficulties that they have endured can be frankly dissociated, set aside, and their resourcefulness, the stamina and skills of survival they developed are unacknowledged.

As an American writing in April 2007, it is difficult for me to consider the problem of violence and its normalisation without taking broader perspectives into account. This month the most lethal mass killing on a school campus took place here, sparking some debate about 'gun control', concerning the ease of access to firearms in this country.

I cannot help but think that weapons are a mere cipher of my society's deep embrace of violence and violent responses to interpersonal and international issues. While more restrictions on firearms may be useful, I doubt that alone can reverse a 'violence as appropriate response' premise so pervasive and thoroughly embedded in this culture. It is virtually impossible to gather enough congressional support for legislation to strengthen gun control. This tells us a great deal, as does the joking response of a Presidential candidate, John McCain, to a question on the possible threat posed by Iran. He sang, using a Beach Boys tune, 'Bomb, bomb, bomb–bomb, bomb Iran'.

Five years after our government invaded Iraq (after some ten prior years of sanctions which grievously harmed substantial numbers of innocent civilians, and children in particular), this war – though increasingly and broadly unpopular, seems to be the business, and perhaps in the consciousness, of very small numbers of our citizens, mostly military volunteers (many who are 'economic draftees') and their families. The rest of us seem to cast aside our glance from the terrible killing, injury and destruction done in our names.

The increasing spread of Government-sanctioned torture at Abu Ghraib, Guantanomo, and other foreign prisons, and the rendition of detainees to countries known to practice such techniques, is a recent and catastrophic development in the evolution of this country's acceptance of violent solutions.

The psychologist, Ervin Staub[1], has described a pattern in the unfolding evolution of genocidal societies – a sequence of predictable steps ignited by some economic or political crisis. The moment of state-sanctioned torture, accepted and prescribed aggression against some 'tortureable class', is a critical threshold. Our genocides are often airborne, bombs, with the menacing possibility that nuclear attacks will soon be framed as the next 'obvious' necessity. Staub demonstrates with four case histories, how a society can move through stages of stereotyping, discrimination and sanctioned violence against a targeted group, to the endpoint of mass killing. As a Japanese American, the history of World War II, internment

of people like me within the United States, and the inauguration of the nuclear age with Hiroshima and Nagasaki, keeps these possibilities alive in my mind.

Staub writes that the pathway toward genocide is by no means inevitable and points to us 'bystanders' who can choose to look away or to face the consequences of our government's and our society's embrace of violence. We can choose to take action to oppose and prevent American massacres wherever they exist. How can we, as individuals, as families, as communities, and as a society, refuse to be lulled into acceptance of acts of violence within our intimate personal domains or as acts of war against whole classes of people? How can we bring into collective focus the real effects of our actions and inaction?

As President Bush unleashed his 'shock and awe' invasion of Iraq, a group of young mothers joined a Peace March in my home town. They pushed their toddlers in strollers with handwritten signs taped on – 'President Bush, Use your words!'

In this book, women from many different cultures have done just that, 'used their words' to convey very thoughtful approaches to the task of stepping away from a violent way of living, involving both those who enact the violence and those who take new steps to stand up for themselves and keep themselves safe. The care with which different cultural nuances are recognised and respected, and the dilemmas that may sometimes ensue, are recounted. The severe limitations of institutional policies and procedures which tend to flatten persons into simple categories are documented, while the potential of living communities to provide support and protection is raised up. Practitioners repeatedly take into account both their own cultural assumptions and their privileged positions as professionals in sensitive ways that are still quite unusual in mainstream therapy and community services. The therapy work is often precisely described in clear steps that are very accessible for others to use. There are also many detailed examples of types of authentication – documents, outsider witnesses and even international correspondence. The charting of the journey out of a violent way of living – separation, the liminal phase and reincorporation of the new – is specifically outlined, with many examples provided by the work described throughout the book. Finally, the impact of broader discourses regarding gender roles, femininity and masculinity, as well as the role of racism, are all acknowledged.

In doing so, these women refuse to accept that violence and abuse remain normalised in any sphere of life. I am currently engaged in education and citizen mobilisation dialogue work around the specific issue of U.S. government-sanctioned torture. The chapters of this book will strengthen my resolve.

Note

[1] Staub, E. (1989). The Roots of Evil: The origins of genocide and other group violence. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

PART THREE

Queer matters

11

Honouring Complexity:

Gender, culture and violence in the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer individuals

By Pat Durish

The Same-sex Partner Abuse Project for the LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Transgender, Bi-sexual and Queer) community in Toronto provides direct service to individuals, educates service providers, conducts research to identify occurrence rates and gaps in service, and advocates for more funding and more appropriate services. This is the only project of its kind in Toronto, and I am one of only a handful of counsellors who are dedicated solely to serving this community in this capacity. In general, there are very few culturally appropriate services for this community in Toronto, and even fewer in smaller cities and rural communities in Canada.

Research suggests that the rates of violence and abuse in same-sex relationships are similar to those in heterosexual relationships. However, this is difficult to confirm as there is so little research conducted to investigate this issue, and reporting rates are very low. The latter problem can be attributed to a number of factors including a lack of culturally appropriate services available to individuals who do report, a history of poor relations between the LGBTQ

community and service providers, particularly shelters, the police and child welfare services, and a reluctance on the part of community members to recognise that abuse is a problem.

The Challenges

The question of the role that culture plays in shaping the experience of violence in same-sex relationships is an interesting one. 'Culture' can be understood in a number of ways. In the conventional sense, it can refer to my clients' specific cultural identities. However, I also wish to acknowledge the important role that sexuality and the politics of the LGBTQ community play in the way that abuse in same-sex relationships plays out, is understood and responded to – both by the community and by service providers. The broader cultural context of heterosexism frames the experiences of LGBTQ individuals, as does the cultural politics of the community itself. My recent research has confirmed that LGBTQ identities and relationships are marked by a high degree of complexity which means that our lives do not fit easily within some of the frameworks that have been developed to guide policy-making and service provision in the area of domestic violence.

The diversity of the LGBTQ community is a major challenge in doing this work. This diversity is multi-layered. Although the community shares a common identity due to our marginalised status based on differences in how we define our gender and sexuality, our differences from each other are also significant – particularly in the area of intimate violence. Relationship violence for lesbians looks different from that of violence in gay male relationships. Trans folks often don't identify as gay or lesbian and therefore do not define themselves as being in same-sex relationships. They are included, however, in our definition of same-sex partner abuse because they are members of our community and share with other members a marginalised status due to issues of gender and sexuality, and because they are extremely under-served by mainstream social service agencies.

Just as the frameworks developed to understand violence in straight relationship are inadequate for understanding same-sex partner abuse, the same is true for our attempts to understand violence in trans relationships through a lens that has been developed based on the experiences of individuals in same-sex relationships. The experiences of bisexual identified individuals are similarly

unique, often overlooked and not easily equated to those of lesbians and gays. In addition, bisexual and trans folks often report feeling marginalised within the LGBTQ community itself. Add to this picture the complexities of race, class, religious orientation and ability, which cut across these neat identity categories, and you get an idea of the difficulties that are involved in trying to understand and respond to the needs of this community!

Aside from the issue of how diverse the community is, and therefore the challenge inherent in trying to find a framework for understanding same-sex partner abuse that facilitates advocacy and service provision without over generalising, we also need to actively resist the seductive pull of the conventional heterosexual gender-based framework for understanding and responding to this issue. It is not only that the heterosexual gender-based framework is insufficient or inappropriate, it is also that it has colonised our knowledge systems to the extent that an astounding amount of energy has to go into resisting it. I have been involved in a project to create resources (a series of brochures) for the LGBTQ community regarding same-sex partner abuse. I am constantly frustrated by the fact that my experiential knowledge informs me that same-sex partner abuse is not the same as domestic violence in heterosexual relationships, but the basis of this difference has, at times, eluded me when trying to develop a brochure that is to provide practical information to survivors in plain language. The challenge is how to represent our communities' lived realities when the language and concepts available to us are drawn from realties that are different and sometimes hostile to our own. Try as we may, each subsequent draft appeared to reproduce conventional understandings. To make things more complicated, it's also not just a case of resisting external influences. For example, the differences inherent to the trans identity has been the focus of interesting and sometimes heated debates within our editorial committee. Trans women are the most vulnerable members of trans community when it comes to all forms of violence, including intimate partner violence. Yet, framing intimate partner violence (which we can no longer call same-sex partner violence because a sizable percentage of the trans community identifies as straight) as 'woman abuse', is antithetical to our goal of upsetting the gender-based understanding of domestic violence that equates women as victim and man as perpetrator which has become so entrenched. There is no easy resolution to this and other debates.

As feminists, we want to honour the work that has been done to recognise domestic violence as a form of gender violence that women are subjected to, and thus connect it to other forms of violence against women both public and private. However, as lesbians, we understand that this comes at the cost of acknowledging other forms of violence such as homophobic or transphobic violence, as well as violence that uses race as its organising principle. Similar to violence against women, intimate violence between members of the LGBTQ community occurs within a broader context of socially sanctioned public violence against LGBTQ people. The more work we do in this area, the more I have come to believe that what makes same-sex partner abuse unique is the way that the forces of homophobia and the inter-sectionality of class, race, gender, ability, etc., shape our experiences.

Complexity

If we could only use one word to characterise LGBTQ relationships it would have to be the term 'complex'. For instance, in the case of same-sex partner abuse, it is not always so easy to determine the direction of abuse. These relationships go a long way in sending up the neat binary categories – man/woman, perpetrator/victim – that society relies on to maintain order. It's not that gender is not a factor; it is that nothing about it can be taken-for-granted. Gendered roles and behaviours can influence same-sex relationships but these do not always have the same meanings as they do in straight relationships and therefore power does not accrue to them in the same way. Add to this mix the power differences of race, class and ability, as well as the effects of what some researchers refer to as 'marginalised stress' (the stress related to occupying a marginalised place in society) and you get a very heady mix of factors that play themselves out to create and sustain violence/abuse within some same-sex relationships.

Because of the perspective that same-sex partner abuse offers to upset gendered understandings of violence, activists and service providers in this area are not always welcomed guests at the table when issues of domestic violence are being discussed. It's difficult to know where we fit in. Gay men are not often seen as victims, at least not in the classic sense, and as males are not often welcomed at meetings about domestic violence. Our aversion to seeing men as victims of

domestic violence means that same-sex partner abuse in gay relationships is often dismissed and/or devalued as 'boys will be boys' and therefore there are very few services available to gay men who experience this type of violence. The services that do exist are under-funded, under-staffed and often run on a volunteer or ad hoc basis. In Toronto, there are spaces available for gay men fleeing violence in a few of the homeless shelters across the city, and gay men's groups have tried to maintain a network of safe houses where individuals are willing to take victims into their homes for short periods in emergency situations.

Lesbian 'batterers', on the other hand, challenge the myth of women's inherent non-violence. The idea that a woman would abuse another woman, or that if she did her partner would have anything to fear, is difficult for many people to understand – including lesbians. Identifying your partner as abusive can feel like a betrayal of the sisterhood. This feeling and fear of being seen as betraying the community is a major barrier to individuals acknowledging the fact that they are being abused. Like many other marginalised communities, our lives and relationships have been and continue to be pathologised. As a result, many of us feel protective towards our communities and are therefore willing to withhold information about abuse – consciously or unconsciously – so as not to provide fodder to our critics. It is my experience that the sexualised nature of LGBTQ identities also means that individuals leaving intimate relationships where violence and abuse is a factor confront difficult identity issues that have no corollary in the world of straight partnerships.

What's more, in many cities and neighbourhoods, the lesbian community is small and tightly knit. Many of the services available to battered women or LGBTQ specific services are staffed by women who are drawn from this community. It is not uncommon to run a group for lesbian or bi women who have experienced abuse where there is no more than one degree of separation between many members. Although theoretically lesbian and bi women can access services that have been developed for women fleeing heterosexual relationships, many of these services have not done enough or have not been successful at addressing homophobia amongst their staff and/or clientele.

Myths concerning the appropriate behaviour of men and women in relationships accompany us at every step on our journey to address the issue of same-sex partner abuse. It is when confronting the myths concerning LGBTQ

relationships, and the messages these myths contain about gender identities, that I am most clearly able to see the inextricable link between sexism and homophobia. The strictures concerning appropriate gender behaviour are integral to a system that enforces heterosexuality as the only acceptable mode for being in relationships. To these issues, same-sex marriage is not the answer, rather dismantling, or at least easing, our rigid gender system is the only way that LGBTQ identified individuals will be able to live free of the violence that accompanies marginalisation; violence that plays itself out within both the public and the private sphere. Having said this, as a therapist I am also aware of the danger of over-emphasising the social factors that impact on private acts of violence at the expense of individual responsibility.

Myths regarding the nature of lesbian identities also prove to be barriers to identifying abuse. Few lesbian couples conform to a clearly demarcated butch/femme dyad. And, if and when they do, power doesn't necessarily accrue along traditional gendered lines. Similarly, although factors of race, age, ability, class, etc., can play a part in determining who has power and who does not, they don't always play out as expected. There has been much debate amongst community members as to whether conventional understandings of power and control are applicable to situations of same-sex partner abuse. Histories of childhood abuse, homophobic violence or internalised homophobia do not excuse abuse, but they do make it harder to identify, respond to and determine the degree of intentionality. The prevalence of consensual SM (sado-masochism) in a community that had been highly sexualised, adds to this complexity and multiplies the possibilities for misunderstanding or stigmatising.

Many of the women I see who are dealing with relationship abuse also struggle with a sense of their own culpability because they fought back. For them, this muddies the water regarding who is the abuser and who is the victim, and makes screening for abuse in the context of service provision very difficult. This has led to the development of a number of very innovative screening tools for applying to same-sex relationships that are able to look at and identify the subtleties and nuances of relationship dynamics and the effects of abuse (for example see Anti-Violence Project New York, www.avp.org).

In general, the fact that society does not support the rights of LGBTQ individuals means that our relationships are not accorded status equal to

heterosexual relationships. As a result, service providers – police, social workers, health care professionals – fail to screen for violence when dealing with members of the LGBTQ community or, when confronted with it, fail to treat it as seriously as they would evidence of domestic violence in straight relationships. I recently was asked to evaluate a training program being developed for health professionals in the area of domestic violence and there was no mention made of the fact that LGBTQ patients could be at risk of violence in their relationships. This is not an isolated occurrence.

LGBTQ individuals frequently report having their complaints dismissed by police as situations of 'mutual aggression' or 'cat fights'. Many LGBTQ individuals are reluctant to admit the nature of their relationship to police because they do not trust the police to treat them respectfully and fairly when they become aware of their sexual orientation. The police services have come a long way in this regard, but homophobia is still an issue particularly when homophobia is supported by attitudes of racism and transphobia. Individuals that have been identified as being particularly vulnerable include those individuals diagnosed with HIV/AIDS, living with disabilities, living in rural communities, from ethnic or religious communities where homosexuality is particularly stigmatised, and two spirited people of the First Nations. Heightened vulnerability is due to the extreme lack of appropriate services, disconnection or marginalisation from/within the LGBTQ community, a marked history of neglect or persecution by institutions associated with the dominant society, or forced dependency issues.

The fact many LGBTQ individuals have formed families and are raising children is also relatively invisible to mainstream society. The result is a lack of services for children who have witnessed violence in same-sex families. A history of poor treatment at the hands of child protection workers has made many LGBTQ individuals reluctant to report abuse because they fear the involvement of these services. Consequently, under-use of the system allows homophobic attitudes and practices to go unchallenged.

Furthermore, homophobia and sexism are not only social attitudes but can be internalised, thus making it more difficult for individuals to identify the fact that they are being abused and therefore hold their abusers accountable. Gay men live in a gendered society that makes it difficult for them to reconcile their masculinity with victimisation. In addition, many LGBTQ individuals have

experienced abuse throughout their lives, making it difficult for them to draw distinctions about what is acceptable and what is unacceptable behaviour.

Although there is still much that we don't know and understand about same-sex partner abuse, research into this phenomena has grown steadily over the past decade. As a clinician working with this client population, I am particularly frustrated by the lack of clinical materials available to guide my practice. Despite the reluctance of survivors to come forward, we need to pay more attention to this issue – and not only for the benefit of members of the LGBTQ community. I believe that the issue of same-sex partner abuse provides us with a unique perspective to re-examine the framework within which we have come to understand violence and abuse in all intimate relationships. Just as the AIDS crisis has afforded us an opportunity to revisit and reinvent rituals of death and mourning, I believe that same-sex partner abuse affords us an equally poignant opportunity to rethink the assumptions that we have internalised about domestic violence and hence our response to it.

Principles for responding

Given the challenges I face in my practice, I have had to adopt a set of principles for working with my clients. I work in the heart of the gay village in Toronto and, as I've mentioned, my client group is extremely diverse. Living on the margins affords us the opportunity to reinvent many taken-for-granted social institutions, including gender identity and roles (many of my clients identify as gender queer or trans), families (many of my clients are raising children in multi-parent families, which include donors or co-parents, straight or queer, or families of choice rather than biology), and relationships (many of my clients have, as they see it, freed themselves from the constraints of monogamy and are struggling to find ways of maintaining various forms of polyamorous or open relationships). Working in this context has challenged me to rethink and often relinquish many of my own assumptions about gender, sexuality, sexual identity, families, and relationships. Thus, I strive for a quality of mindfulness that allows for vigilance regarding the tendency to universalise one's own experience or unintentionally accord stereotypes the status of truth. As well, as a white, well-educated, feminist lesbian, the concept of race and class privilege is one that I constantly struggle to foreground and remain accountable for.

There are several key principles that guide my practice and can be traced back to various aspects of my identity as a lesbian, feminist clinician and academic. I take seriously the poststructural principle of the non-essential nature of identity. I cannot afford to make assumptions about my clients, their lives or their experiences. The number of variables that are at play in any one life are too many, and their interaction too complex, to rely on a uni-dimensional and uni-linear approach to practice. Like many other clinicians, I value my ability to be compassionate, to be empathic, and to be curious. In the context of my work with individuals who have experienced same-sex partner abuse, I strive to listen closely to client's stories, pay careful attention to the effects of their experiences on their cognitive and emotional processes, and always question my own assumptions about what it means to be a LGBTQ individual in relationship. As a result of the central position that I accord to the principle of non-essentialism, I also strive to adhere to a client-focused therapy. My clients, rather than myself, are the experts when it comes to their lives. My role is to support them to gain understanding and find solutions that are in keeping with their unique knowledges and capacities. However, as a feminist, I know that social context is key to understanding individual experience: the personal is political. Thus, my role is also to support my clients in understanding the social, cultural and political context within which they live, and how these forces influence their experiences. I believe the meanings that are created and circulated in community and society have an impact on identity formation and thus help to shape our real lived experiences.

The feminist principle of the interlocking nature of oppressions is also central to my clinical practice. This refers to the dynamic, rather than additive, nature of the relationship between categories of social identity or location such as gender, race, class, and sexuality. Thus leading to the requirement that our practice is able to account for the complex and contradictory nature of our client's lived experiences and identities, which can only be understood by undertaking a detailed and respectful investigation of the specificities of their actual lived experiences. This emphasis on complexity and uniqueness requires a corresponding principle of flexibility. Thus, the permutations of possible outcomes of therapy are endless and, as much as possible, will reflect the real lived needs and desires of clients. This is opposed to the assumption that there are a limited number of possible outcomes that can be applied to any given case, all of which reflect a dominant vision for relationships and families.

I also adhere to the poststructural principle of the linguistic or narrative basis of our system of meaning. In other words, I believe that our experiences are meaningful to the extent that we are able to fit them within a narrative framework that is derived within a particular social context. In my practice, I focus on my clients' stories of self and explore what these stories accomplish and make possible in their lives. In addition, narrative practices provide an opportunity for resistance by allowing for the development of counter-narratives with which to combat the myths that contribute to the continued marginalisaton of LGBTQ individuals. In this regard, I have found the concept of externalising to be particularly helpful when attempting to support survivors of intimate partner violence, especially because many of these individuals have also experienced early childhood trauma. As many of us are aware, one of the most devastating effects of trauma is its ability to colonise our internal meaning system. Externalising conversations provide an opportunity for creating a story of trauma that locates it outside of the person so that 'it' rather than 'me' can be seen as the problem. A focus on strengths and creating alternative stories of hope and promise is exciting and can be experienced as a real gift for clients who have been victimised in so many different ways. This focus on strengths and alternative stories has particular significance when one works with, and belongs to, a community that has shown such courage, resilience and compassion in the face of ongoing oppression.

In this short piece, I have tried to describe some of the challenges, complexities and possibilities of responding to same-sex violence. I would welcome feedback, reflections and continuing conversations with other practitioners who are trying to respond to these issues in their own communities.

PART FOUR

Working with those who have enacted violence

12

Responding to men's violence

By Nancy Gray

PART ONE: Identifying migrations of identity

Nancy, to begin with could you just say a little bit about the work of New Start and your team?

The work we are involved with focuses on responding to men's violence against their women partners. Many of the men who come for counselling have been mandated through the court system, and a disproportionate number are from marginalised communities. I work with the men, while colleagues respond to the women who have been subjected to violence. The partnership we have developed between those of us who work with the men and those who work with the women is critical to our work. It's a team approach, and these days we have a team of women workers from a range of different cultural backgrounds.

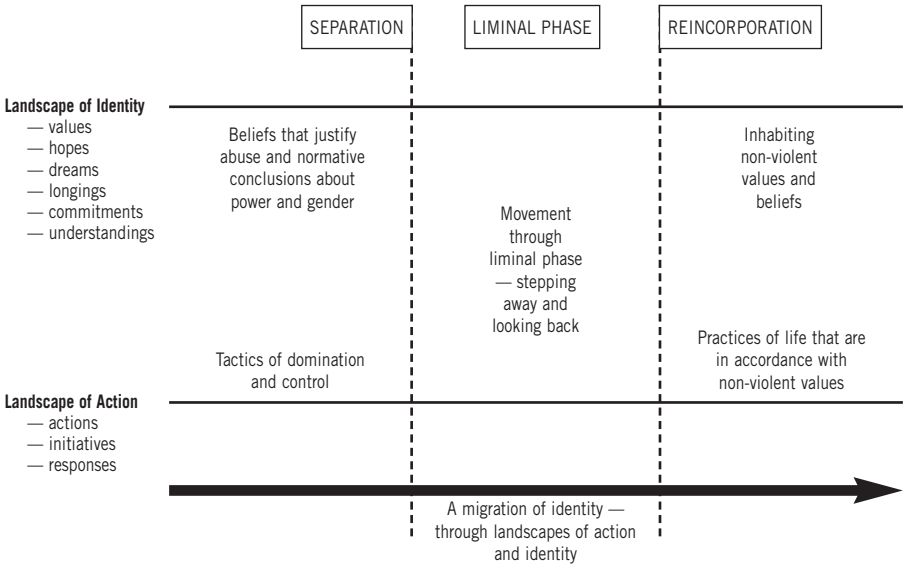
Can I ask you about some of the ideas that assist you in thinking about your work with men who have been violent?

In working with men to address the violence they have perpetrated to others, I have found the migration of identity map, and the re-authoring map, described by Michael White (1995) extremely helpful. These maps are enabling men to chart a movement away from violence and dominating practices, and towards different forms of masculinity.

In the diagram below, I have melded these two maps. This diagram evokes the concept of 'migration of identity' which involves three stages (separation, liminality and reincorporation) and describes how this occurs across two landscapes – the landscape of action and the landscape of identity.

Can you describe why the metaphor of a migration of identity is proving helpful in your work with men about issues of violence?

The migration of identity map provides a framework for me to conceptualise what men are moving away from (tactics of domination and control and beliefs that



justify abuse), and also what they are moving towards (non-violent actions and ways of inhabiting non-violent values, beliefs, hopes and dreams).

Significantly, this map also highlights the transitions and confusions that may occur as they separate from the practices and beliefs they were recruited into and which they have used for years to justify abuse. Stepping away from violence and abuse, and from relational practices based on dominance, involves stepping into uncertainty that characterises the liminal phase in any rite of passage (Turner 1969). The liminal phase in this process involves stepping away from past practices and looking back at them, while at the same time looking forwards to what might be possible.

Why is it that you have then superimposed the re-authoring conversations map?

By superimposing the re-authoring conversations map onto the migration of identity map, it draws my attention to how my conversations with men explore both the landscape of action (in relation to their actions, initiatives, responses) and the landscape of identity (in relation to their beliefs, realisations, hopes, dreams, longings, commitments, etc). The re-authoring map also draws my attention to considerations of story and history. It reminds me that one of my tasks is to assist men in re-authoring story-lines of identity that will support non-violent ways of living.

Okay, can we look first at the separation phase? What are some of the tasks involved for you in this part of the work?

There are many different types of listening and enquiry involved in this work. For instance, early conversations require listening for the beliefs that support abuse in order for these to be externalised. They also involve enquiring as to the real effects of the violence. If there are moments in which the man alludes to or speaks about the consequences of violence for his partner, for him or for his children, I seek to explore this in more detail. And, at the same time, I am listening for openings to other stories about values and hopes the man may hold that are in contrast to abusive ways of being. Throughout these conversations, I am seeking to attend to the seriousness of the violence, consistently exploring its

real effects on the lives of all concerned, and I'm also asking about alternative preferences the man has for his life and relationships.

But perhaps most significantly, for these men, identifying movement away from lifestyles of violence requires naming and then separating from the hegemony of what has become to them a 'routine masculinity'. The problem is, this 'routine masculinity' is bound up with notions of control, domination and violence. In my experience, in order to separate from this hegemony, there must be an enquiry into how they were recruited into these forms of masculinity in the first place.

These men's practices of domination, callousness, and brutality came from somewhere. They learnt these ways of being somewhere, somehow. Asking them to describe how they were recruited into these, and how these practices became routine in their life, creates space for them to then take a position on the effects of this training and to separate from its lessons. It also opens space for them to speak about their past experience of the effects of abuse and domination tactics. This process of deconstructing dominant beliefs that support male violence against women can involve an exposé of the social history of relations of power in the man's life.

Exploring together this context of these men's lives, how they have become recruited into violent ways of being, enables me to stay de-centred in these conversations. This de-centred practice was elusive to me until I started to ask men about the stories of masculinity they were groomed in. Now, together, we try to identify and give names to ways of being men that are 'known and familiar' to them, and this acts as the first step in separation.

Do these conversations also touch on experiences of violence that the man may have been subject to?

Without it becoming a central theme of our conversations, it seems important to acknowledge the experiences of violence that many men have lived through, and the dominant expectations that have accompanied these experiences. As one man described recently, 'You act like nothing bothers you, and after a while you start to believe it'. To enable men to name this recruitment into callousness can create the first steps in being able to separate from it and to develop an increasing

awareness of the effects of violence in their own lives and the lives of others.

Sometimes men draw parallels between their recruitment into certain forms of masculinity and various survival practices they learned to protect themselves at a young age from other men's violence. Many young men seem to have learned violent ways of being from older male kin who claimed they were wanting to 'toughen them up'. This 'toughening up' process is often akin to abuse.

Gradually, we find a language to describe the ways in which these men were recruited into dominating ways of being. Some common characterisations include: 'acting tough', 'acting like a blow fish', or developing an 'alpha male mentality'.

What are some of the sorts of questions that are helpful in characterising these dominating ways of being?

There are lots of different sorts of questions. They might include:

- What are the dominant and familiar stories about the way men are supposed to be?
- How did you learn about this?
- What do you notice about the effects of these expectations?
- What's your position on the effects of these expectations?

Although many men claim that they grew up being told never to hit a woman, and may have told themselves that if they saw any man being violent to a woman that they would intervene, dominating and controlling tactics tend to have a long history. A man's practices of domination can invariably be connected to a broader social context of domination and the ongoing normalising of rigid gender expectations. Asking questions that deconstruct settled certainties about gender expectations, and that enquire as to the effects of certain gender expectations which give rise to abuse, can create a shift in position from justifying abuse to protesting abuse. Invariably, this protest can then be linked to hopes and dreams of a different sort of life, and these alternative hopes and dreams also have history.

To give a better description of how this process works, I'll include an extract from a conversation with a man called Bert. The discourse that Bert wishes to separate from has been named by him as 'alpha male mentality'. An alternative story-line of 'being a good person' emerges as the conversation continues.

An example of a migration of identity –
moving away from an 'alpha male mentality'

Nancy: So, you're on a path of separating from an 'alpha male mentality'. Can I ask you more about that? We've talked before about this 'alpha male mentality', that it's a way of imagining life, and a way of actually living life. Many of the men I meet with, especially recently, have been talking about certain ideas about ways of being a man gets them to escalate in ways they're ashamed of – pushing, shoving, hitting. This 'alpha male thing' seems to be about dominating …

Bert: Yeah, in my mind that's the alpha male mentality, for sure.

Nancy: Where do you think this comes from? I imagine wolves when you speak about it … Is it like that, is it about domination?

Bert: It is like someone seeking to dominate the rest of the pack. Yeah. I find that the need to be more dominant than somebody else is something I see ingrained in most men. Even men who are good to their significant other – other aspects of their life are very much influenced by the alpha male mentality.

Exploring the social context of dominating practices

Nancy: How do you think this happens? Do you think men learn to be this way because of this dominant culture, so many messages from a young age …

Bert: I think it's learned … If you look at native culture, my culture, women are the ones who used to run things, and they didn't have that alpha male mentality. It's hard to explain.

With Mi'kmaq culture, pre-colonialism, I don't believe the men were 'alpha male'; everything was much more equal. But since colonialism, because of the influences on so many different levels, in my community now, many men are very 'alpha male' oriented.

Inviting reflexivity

Bert: A part of the whole alpha male mentality is to divide things up, to think of things as being either 'weak' or 'not weak'. I used to think crying was 'weak' – that men aren't supposed to cry because to cry means you are weak. I really did believe this. My previous partner used to say 'That's not true', but I would find every excuse to keep my belief alive.

Nancy: So studying the idea of the 'alpha male mentality', looking at it, noticing it, thinking about it, has helped you to separate from it?

Bert: Yeah, for sure. Before, I thought it was just part of what men do, you know? This is a man, so this is what he is like. I thought things had to be that way. But if I realise that this is just an idea, a powerful idea, ingrained on me by somebody else … well that's different …

Moving away from dominant beliefs

Bert: My dad was a very alpha male person. And the way I look at it now, I can see now how he put that on me … how I learnt this from him … and he probably learnt it from somebody else … But before, when my partner used to challenge me, I'd say: 'That's just the way men are'. And if she'd question that, then I'd be like, 'Well, that's the way I was raised'. I would always fight to keep this alpha male belief alive. It was such a strong belief for me. But the truth is … it's bullshit. To be a different sort of man is not weakness.

Referencing values as guides

Nancy: What values are you finding are good guides along this path …?

Bert: In order to be a good person, you have to, like, throw away that whole alpha male thing. That's my biggest thing. It's very hurtful to the spirit. It inhibits life. Some of my friends get upset when I bring a certain friend around, their whole attitude changes … because he's homosexual. They don't take the time to see what I see. All I see is this great person. I don't care what he does in his spare time; it's none of my business. He's always treated me respectfully. They're intimidated by the fact that he doesn't have that alpha male mentality. I don't think it's the homosexuality that's intimidating, it's more the fact that he's more effeminate, he doesn't have that mentality …

Nancy: It sounds like it's important to you to 'be a good person' … can you say more about what you mean by this? And what's the history of this in your life?

Can I ask you about the liminal phase now? What are some of the tasks involved in this part of the work?

The liminal phase involves 'stepping away and looking back'. Once the man has taken a position in relation to 'alpha male mentality', it's possible to look back at the real effects of the domination, control and violence on the lives of others and on his own life.

Within the liminal phase, it's also critical to explore the moments of separation from violence, and from beliefs that justify violence. These small acts of movement need to be researched. We explore the chinks in these stories, the moments they have sought out other ways of being men, ways that are not in accord with violence.

And we also 'step away and look forwards' by asking questions that speculate about future action:

- How important is it to you to find alternative possibilities? Why?

- Can you remember moments or particular times when you were acting in other ways?
- What values and commitments will support you to move away from those dominant stories?
- How will you practise / demonstrate other ways of being a man?

It's important to note that during this entire process of research, the conversations also consistently reference and reflect back on the effects of abuse on others, particularly those who may still be living in fear. I keep in close contact with my colleague, Catherine Hennigar-Shuh, who works with the women partners, so that women's experiences continue to inform all aspects of this work.

I know that you have a particular interest in language, and in counselling conversations being orientated towards local knowledge and the words and phrases used by those who are consulting you. Can you say more about why you see this as important in your work with men?

In conversations about abuse and violence, one of the things that often takes place is a gradual realisation by the men of the diversity of practices that can be abusive. Often men, and women for that matter, begin to develop an increasing discernment about practices of abuse. This is an important aspect of the migration of identity. Where once something was taken for granted, over time as the migration occurs, various practices are discerned to be abusive, as harmful, and as contrary to their hopes for their lives and relationships.

But different people and communities have different language about these practices and different forms of discernment. For instance, in some of the communities we are working with, a common realisation is, 'I didn't realise that hollering could be abusive', or 'I didn't know put-downs could be a part of violence'. I have become very interested in these different expressions. They catch my attention. Paying attention to local language and particular phrases seems to lead to some very interesting conversations.

Some of these conversations assist in the process of discernment. For instance, there may not be a local vocabulary for talking about 'abuse' but there may be a local way of discussing 'troubles'. I can start conversations by asking

questions like: 'If people don't talk about abuse, how do they talk about the troubles that create hurt in relationships?' In doing so, I am trying to find ways of discussing these issues in the language of the people who consult me, rather than relying on a professional vocabulary. I am also trying to create a scaffold in which people can more easily and readily speak about what has probably gone unspoken.

Other sorts of questions can also assist men to discern what is harmful in relationships. If a man has mentioned that he knows sometimes that something has been wrong because of the look he sees in his partner's eyes, I might ask: 'What would you call those moments when you look in your partner's eyes after you've done something that you're ashamed of? And what would she call those moments?' These sorts of explorations involve finding a language to discuss these issues, rather than importing a language and imposing it upon them. This is also about generating a language and the skills with which to discern harm, to respond to it, and to prevent it.

I know that you have an interest in poetry … it seems a bit of a leap between poetry and conversations about violence, but do you see any connection?

Perhaps in some ways I bring a poetic determination to pay attention to the metaphors people use, to the attributions of meaning embedded in their phrases, to the cadences of people's expressions, and even to those moments of wordlessness that can be imbued with meaning. There is a poetic aspect to this work, and I sometimes draw upon the words of poets whom I admire as guidance. Adrienne Rich (1974), for example, in her poem 'Diving into the wreck', reminds us that 'the words are maps, the words are purposes'. This helps me to ask more questions about the meaning of particular words that people are using and to be curious about the development of actions and initiatives that connect with certain phrases.

This attention to 'experience-near' language seems very relevant in listening for the ways in which men have been recruited into, experienced, and enacted practices of violence, and also in listening for the dreams, hopes and values that are often implicit in these conversations. At times, other hopes are 'absent but implicit' (White 2000) and that requires different listening.

You mentioned earlier how these conversations take place in both the landscape of action and the landscape of identity. Why is it important for you to be listening for these men's dreams, hopes and values?

Once I may have asked the same question. I would have wondered how this was relevant to them addressing their violence and keeping their partner and/or children safe. But my views on this have changed. Finding ways to thicken the stories of men's commitment to addressing their violence is a key part of this work. It's not all that is involved, but it is significant as it provides a foundation for them on which to build new ways of being men, new ways of living, forms of life that are free of violence. Seeking to identify the values and principles that the man wants to inform his actions, his relationships and his life, is directly related to making it possible for a migration of identity to take place.

There is an interesting story as to how I became more interested in asking men about their dreams, hopes and longings. I recall one young man who used to come and visit. He used to drop in rather than making an appointment. And, if I was free, we would sit and talk. He would talk about having seen friends die on the street. He would sit and look out the window rather than at me while we spoke, and we would hear the sounds of the street while he would say, 'It's like a war out there'. As a young black man, the metaphor of war seemed quite realistic as the prevalence of violent deaths of young black men in North America at present is quite staggering. At the same time as describing the 'war' he experienced all around him, he would speak of the times of his childhood when he had spent days in the woods at his grandmother's place. These quiet times, alone in the woods, were described with such longing. Because he had just dropped in to talk, and I wasn't in 'therapist role', I realised I was listening differently. I was more open to listening for the longings, the hopes and dreams that were a part of his stories. It was in these 'non-therapeutic' (or non-mandated) conversations that I came to realise that I needed to spend more time listening for and then exploring some of those other longings, laments and hopes for life. The men I am working with who are engaged in naming and addressing abuse and its effects, do not express longings, laments or dreams that relate to wanting to have been involved in more violence, more death, more destruction. Instead, these men or young men often express certain longings which represent their

hopes for change. In talking with them, I am reminded of the words of Langston Hughes (2004): *What happens to a dream deferred?*. There are many traces that can often be retrieved.

Of course, it is then vitally important to link these longings, dreams and hopes back to actions in the real world. Re-authoring conversations involve linking these hopes, dreams and longings to actions that the men have taken, are taking or could take, to redress harm that has been done, to prevent further harm, and to create the sort of relationships and experiences that are based more on safety and respect.

Has this approach led to changes in the sorts of conversations you are now having with men?

If our conversations have unearthed and described the values, dreams, longings that the man wants to have inform his actions, then when I am seeking out responsible stories (Jenkins 1990), stories about times when the man may have taken steps to minimise or address the effects of his actions, I can do this in a way that is free from dogmatism, that is free from any sense of extending punishment in my questions, or any sense of moral superiority. The search for responsible stories becomes collaborative; it is in accord with the man's expressions of hopes, dreams and longings, and this leads me to a different experience of the work.

I have also begun to notice an increasing poignancy in many of the moments of conversations with these men and this has been very surprising to me. When men start to speak about their longings, hopes or laments, they often begin to speak about their mothers, or about their brothers who they may have lost to violence. In the midst of conversations about violence, I am now finding myself listening and responding to very tender stories.

I think that I see openings to these sorts of stories now where once I would have missed them. For instance, when working with big guys who come in with their arms bare and lots of tattoos, once I may have been quite intimidated by this appearance. But I have become increasingly curious about the markings they have chosen, about their piercings or tattoos, because I have discovered that often these are highly symbolic and full of meaning. I recall a time I was asking

questions about what was significant to one man, why it was that he wanted to address issues of violence in his life, and he opened his shirt to show me a tattoo he had over his heart. It was a portrait of his brother's face, his twin brother. He and his brother had lived through incredible violence when they were young and his brother had died as a result of violence. This man was wearing his brother on his heart. Enlisting his brother's memory in his efforts to free his life of violence was extremely powerful and effective. It was his brother who had known about the history of violence in his life. It was his brother who knew what they had both witnessed. And it was his brother who would have known what sort of man he wanted to become.

Finding ways for men to speak about the sort of people they wish to become, and then tracing the history of this commitment, can lead to significant stories. If it isn't brothers who are implicated in these stories, it is often mothers or grandmothers. I recall one man, a huge man, whose life had been saturated in violence that he had both lived through and perpetrated. When he first walked into my room, I was conscious that I felt afraid of him. But over time, I came to hear about his commitments to living a non-violent life and where they had come from. He spoke of his grandmother and the stories she would tell, including particular cultural stories. He also spoke of his brother. These were evocative, loving conversations. Gradually, I witnessed this man begin to enact in his daily life his commitment to turning his life around. Doing so was in many ways a tribute to his grandmother and all that she had meant to him. The explanations for why men wish to turn their lives around often involve stories of loss, or stories of tribute. I have found exploring these sorts of stories to be invaluable in this work.

I know that outsider-witness practices are also an important part of your work. Can you say more about this?

When I first started using outsider witnesses in this work, I was quite nervous and unsure about the process. So I began by asking the men I was seeing if they would be happy for a student to simply sit in on our sessions as a listener. I was surprised how the men were usually comfortable with this. They seemed to really enjoy hearing the students reflect back on what they had heard. Of course, there

are plenty of hazards and accompanying responsibilities involved in inviting outsider-witness responses. It has been really helpful to think through what sorts of responses will contribute to the development of responsible story-lines and will assist men to undertake a migration away from practices of domination and control.

When I started using outsider-witness practices in groups, I discovered this was very effective. It seems that the men particularly appreciate being in the listener role. As much as anything else, they seem to notice practicing *how* to listen. In the groups they learn to listen to the stories of other men's lives, to the stories from female students and workers who act as outsider witnesses, and also to the stories of their own lives. Significantly, they report that this sort of experience of listening helps them to go back and listen differently to their partners. Very often, one of the first key steps they describe in separating from violence and violent ways of being, is learning how to listen and not jump in and interrupt. In terms of living non-violent lives, listening is often a very underrated skill.

We have spoken about the separation phase, and the liminal phase of this work. Can you say a little about the reincorporation stage? What is required for men to get to the point of reincorporation?

In order for men to make a full migration to be living a non-violent life, they must, in collaboration with others, find ways to fully inhabit a range of new values, beliefs and ways of being. This is a significant migration and it doesn't happen over night! The dreams or hopes that they have identified for their lives must be linked to actions, they must be enacted as practices in all areas of life. Certain hopes and dreams require certain skills and knowledges of living, and these need to be developed: practices of respect, of care, of discernment. They must also be practised in a range of different circumstances, under different pressures. The preferred story-line cannot just exist in words; it must be played out in day-to-day action.

At the same time, the man must come to an ever-richer understanding of what it is that he has separated from. A rich knowledge of the practices of abuse and violence, the ways in which these came to inform his life, and a full

appreciation of the effects of violence, are other entire realms that need to develop. With these understandings come skills to detect and then prevent practices of domination and control. Creating contexts by which others can offer continuing feedback is also often a critical aspect of this work.

None of this takes place in isolation. This is not solely an individualistic project or process. A whole range of relational skills and negotiations may also be required. And ideally, significant others can be found who can assist a man in this process of migration. Of course, his woman partner would not be expected in any way to play this role. She herself is undergoing a different migration of identity, one which involves reclaiming her life from the effects of abuse, and which also requires significant support from others.

We seem to have travelled quite a distance in this conversation. Nancy, do you have any reflections on what we have talked about so far?

It's interesting that I used the word 'tender' earlier to describe some of the poignant conversations involved in this work. I wouldn't have used that word once. I might have thought it, but I wouldn't have said it aloud. When I started doing this work, some of those who had been working in this area for some time said to me, 'You're gonna have to act a little tougher. Otherwise they're not going to take you seriously.' I found this disturbing. It was implying that it's not okay to speak with a soft voice, that no-one would take me seriously as a woman unless I acted more like a certain sort of man. These ideas are pervasive in the field. When I see myself on videotapes I sometimes worry, 'Am I speaking too softly? Is that my gender socialisation creeping in?'

But I do not believe that my tasks in this work are confrontational in a conventional sense. I also don't think being a woman makes this work more difficult. Whoever the therapist or group facilitator, there are plenty of dilemmas involved in talking about violence and attempting to deconstruct routine assumptions about gender and power.

That seems an appropriate place to take a short break! Then I'd like to ask you about the community work you and your team are engaged with.

PART TWO: From the office to the community

Addressing men's violence to women will require more than individual or group responses. Developing ways to assist communities to address violence is an additional theme of the work of New Start. In this second part of the interview, Nancy Gray tells the story of how partnerships with communities have been built and the developments that are flowing from this.

In recent years, I know that your work has not only involved individual counselling and group work, but also broader community engagement. Can you tell me the story of how this has occurred?

When I first started here, all of our work occurred in groups rather than through individual conversations. I recall one large group in particular that had about twenty-two men in it. There were five Black men in this group who were very quiet and they all sat together – very intense and very quiet. Both facilitators of the group were white. As one of these facilitators, it seemed important to find ways for us to be able to discuss issues of racism alongside considerations of sexism, and yet I felt really awkward about this. The men were mandated to be there, and I felt unsure how to discuss issues of racism in this context.

These African Canadian men had often been sent to the group by a parole officer and were expected to speak to me about their lives, their relationships and their violence. But why should they trust me, as a white person, as a white woman? I started to pay attention to these issues in the room, and how they were influencing the conversations in the group. At that time, the group was being run according to a certain curriculum which was presented as a series of truths about how to think about equality between men and women without any consideration of the complexities of race, socio-economic privilege, etc. In paying attention to the experience of the African Canadian men in the group, I became more curious about my own discomfort. Some of this discomfort related to how to ask questions about the effects of racism, and an uncertainty about the real effects of our power and privilege as facilitators in that context (see Cain 2006). But there were other concerns too which related to the ways in which Black men have been objectified as part of the history of racism, and also to white women's complicity in this both

historically and in the present. Acknowledging this started to make me question some aspects of our role as facilitators. I was aware that parole officers often want 'progress reports' and that, if certain men were not speaking at all in the group, then as facilitators we had a responsibility to document this. But if the African Canadian men were not speaking in the group because both facilitators were white, and the African Canadian men then got reported to parole officers for not participating, were we potentially replicating racism in our work? At the same time, we are employed to address issues of men's violence to women, so we were challenged to come up with alternative ways of working[1].

Hiring women of African heritage and Native American heritage to our staff has been one response to this situation, but there have been others too. We have sought to take the conversations about men's violence back into the communities where violence had been taking place.

Can you describe how this move towards community engagement has taken place?

It really began with the five men I mentioned earlier. As I felt uncomfortable with how things were progressing in the group, I started to have more conversations one-on-one with these men, particularly when they came to our centre voluntarily. I would explore with the men what some of the restraints were in being able to talk about abuse, including the fact that they had to come downtown into a building in which all the staff were white, and in a context similar to those in which they have routinely experienced racism in the past. I would ask questions like, 'How hard is it to talk about abuse (men's violence to women) when you yourself may have been subjected to injustices?' And, 'Who else would notice what it takes to be able to do this?' These kinds of questions would open up richer conversations, conversations that we hadn't up until then been able to have in the mixed group.

Through these conversations, I also came to learn about the communities these men live in, communities that I had never been to and didn't know much about. Over time, in these one-on-one conversations I began to learn more about talking about racism and gained more of a sense of how to proceed with those conversations. That's not to say I felt comfortable, but I started to notice that

some men didn't want to talk about issues of race and racism with me, and that was okay with me, while others did.

One man in particular, and then others, began to say, 'You should come out to my community. We should have groups out there. We should have discussions out there.' The idea of having conversations out in the communities had actually been a long-held hope of one of my colleagues, Catherine Hennigar-Shuh, who works with the women partners. For some time, Catherine had spoken of our responsibilities to develop partnerships with these communities, but I had always resisted this. I didn't feel I could take this on as I wanted to prioritise not having a huge waiting list for the service. I felt our energies had to go into providing our key service of counselling and groups. But when I had become uncomfortable about what was occurring in the groups, when I started to hear more about what it took for the men to come downtown to talk, and when the men started asking us to come out to their communities, I was convinced that we had to develop another approach to this work.

There was a particular conversation that brought this home to me. I was speaking with a man who was just starting to realise the effects of the emotional abuse and controlling behaviour that his partner had experienced in his actions for many years. When I asked him, 'Who else could you have these conversations with? Who else could you talk to in your community about these matters?', he said that he didn't know. But he very much wanted to speak with others and asked if together we could generate some ideas. So this was one of the things we did together. I would ask questions like:

- Who else could you talk to about this?
- Who would want to listen?
- How could you bring the topic up?

When he then asked me to come out to speak with members of his community, I said, 'Well, would you do that with me? Would you speak with me about these issues of abuse to a group of men at the church? Could I support you to do that? What could this look like?'

We then created a list of people who might be interested to come to such a public meeting and, in making that list, I thought for the first time that this community approach could actually work. The people on this list became a sort

of 'steering committee'. Included were women from the communities who some years earlier had made a video/documentary about domestic violence called 'No more secrets' (Hamilton 1999).

Am I right in thinking that some of the men you were meeting with wanted to try to deal with the issue of violence in their community as well as dealing with it in their own lives and relationships?

Yes. And there was a tragic story that provided impetus to this. The same man who asked us to visit his community told us a story of what had occurred there recently. A woman who had been subjected to terrible violence by her husband had tried to seek help. She spoke to different people in the community, including the pastor, but no-one knew how to help her. Her husband had apparently threatened to come after her and kill her if she left him, so, after much anguish, she took her own life. She set her own car on fire in the community and burnt to death.

The shock and sorrow of this woman's life and death provided the impetus for community action on this issue. Her death had profoundly shocked the man who I was speaking with. He told me this story as his way of explaining how important it was that conversations happen back in his community. He described how he had never thought that he was abusive, because he had only thought of physical beatings as abuse. He said that he was now starting to notice more the abusive practices within his community and in his life, and that he wanted to have more conversations with people about this. Previously, he hadn't seen himself as someone who would talk with other men about abuse but, after the death of the woman in his community, he wanted to take some action.

Once he told me this, I started asking other men if they thought it was important for them to talk to others in their community about these issues. And this generated a second list of people to involve in community conversations. This was a list of men who had come for counselling and who would like to be contacted again in order to be a part of community discussions.

So then we started to hold discussions and public meetings in the communities. This process is still going. In fact, we're really still just beginning. We have created documents from these community discussions from the words of the women and men in the African Nova Scotian communities[2].

As community conversations continue, and as these documents are more widely circulated, community members are hoping that collaborative community action can develop to address violence and promote safety in their homes, families and neighbourhoods. As I said, it's still early days, but we have come quite a long way from the group conversations in which the African Canadian men sat silently throughout.

Can I just ask you one further question, Nancy? As you have been engaging with these conversations with men from African Canadian communities, has this influenced the conversations you have with men of European heritage or other cultures?

Yes, I think it has. Certainly, when I am working with men who have migrated from other countries, who don't have English as a first language, or who have come to Canada from very different cultural backgrounds, I am now more curious about their experiences of life. This doesn't just relate to an increased interest in issues of racism, but also their experiences of migration and how this has influenced their sense of identity and belonging. I am also interested in any confusion they may have had about Canadian laws and the police and criminal justice system. I am interested in exploring all of this as these conversations often lead me to hear about some of the values, hopes and preferences of these men. And having heard this, there is the opportunity to explore how they might live their lives more in accordance with some of these values and hopes.

In terms of my conversations with white men, what stands out for me is how poverty and deprivation has played a significant part in so many of their lives. I don't mean to suggest that only men from poor backgrounds are violent, far from it, but these are the men whose lives are least resourced and more problematised under the influence of the criminal justice system, and who are most often referred to our program. Since the conversations about racism with Afro-Canadian men have led in productive directions in relation to addressing their individual violence and the violence in their communities, I am now more interested in speaking with those white men whose lives have been affected by poverty and deprivation about their experiences. I no longer see the issues in the broader context of men's lives as something to avoid. Quite the opposite; I am increasingly

interested in how exploring this broader context of men's lives can enable men to address issues of violence.

For instance, when talking with men who've been imprisoned, I now routinely ask them about their time in prison and experiences of racism, homophobia, aggression, and violence. Of course, in these conversations I am always conscious of the fact that the aim is to assist this man to address the violence he has enacted against others, and against his partner in particular. But enquiring into the broader context of men's lives makes this more possible, not less. It establishes trust and understanding and enables us to have much more detailed conversations about abuse that has been perpetrated. It also provides many more entry points into conversations about the effects of abuse and violence, as well as many more entry points into the hopes and commitments the man may have that are not in accordance with violence and domination.

I am also increasingly interested in broadening conversations about violence, enabling communities to discuss and take collective action in addressing these issues. These are important developments for our team and, the more we learn to work together, it seems that there is much more that can be done. Taking the time to slow down, to collaborate and consult, seems crucial and challenging. It also seems to be opening many new possible ways of identifying abuse and supporting women and men to live without violence.

Thanks, Nancy, for sharing these stories with us. And please pass on our appreciation to all those who have been involved in the conversations you have been describing. I am sure practitioners in other places will draw ideas and hope from the work that is taking place here in Nova Scotia.

Notes

[1] I have found Tionda Cain's writings (2006) very helpful in this area. Tionda has written: *More and more I am seeing the necessity of white people taking up the challenge of educating other white people about racism. I am more interested in talking about the strategies people of color are employing to resist the negative impacts of racism in their lives, about how they are getting by without white privilege. I want to talk about how things like gender, class, age and sexual orientation impact a person's experience of racism. I want to talk about what it means to heal from racism's devastating effects while still constantly being bombarded with racism on a daily basis … But these are difficult conversations to have in a room full of white people.* (p.141)

[2] See: 'Documents of knowledge about violence from African Nova Scotian communities' and 'Caring about violence and our communities' by Amanda Reddick, both of which appear in the International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work, 2006 #4.

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13

Conversations in groups with women about their experiences of using anger, abuse & violence

By Julie Sach

Setting the Context

There are two reasons why I have chosen to examine group work with women who experience difficulties with their own anger, abuse and violence. Firstly, I have had my own experiences of anger, which left me ashamed and silent. And secondly, I work at a Family Violence service. This service was originally set up to respond to men who use abuse and violence towards their female partners, but recently the agency has been faced with a dilemma as increasing numbers of women have begun to request an 'anger management' group for themselves.

Literature on appropriate interventions for working with women who use anger, abuse and violence is difficult to find (Dennehy & Severs 2003), and there

are few community programs which offer assistance to women to make sense of this issue for themselves. Our service sought to respond to the increasing requests by piloting an 'anger management' program for women. An eight-week group program was developed and, as part of my training to become a facilitator for this group, I first attended it as a participant.

During this initial program, despite the best efforts of facilitators, I noticed group participants expressing dissatisfaction with some of the content that was presented to them. During a particular session which involved teaching women how to use 'time-out' as a strategy with their children, one participant said that as a single mother with the child welfare services involved in her life, it was not realistic for her to use such a strategy as leaving young children alone could be construed as 'bad mothering'. As someone preparing to facilitate subsequent groups, I began to consider how the program could take the context of these women's lives more into account, and how any strategies we offered could be workable for the participants. Was there a way to approach this issue that would take as a starting point the experience, skills and knowledge of the participants in the group? In considering this, it seemed important to think more about women's anger.

Thinking about 'anger' in women's lives

'Anger management' is a popular term used when people are wanting assistance for abusive behaviours, be they male or female. As Trudinger (2000) notes, this term has a ring of certainty to it, it is as if 'anger' can be looked at as a discreet entity, and then managed. Yet as I explored the issue of anger with the women who came into our service for assistance, it no longer seemed so simple. I began to wonder about the gender-neutral language of 'anger management' that may have obscured the context in which anger and violence occurred. I noticed that many women told stories of being able to manage anger in some parts of their lives but not in others. They also almost invariably brought with them stories of victimisation and trauma that they had been subjected to in the course of their lives. These stories of abuse were both historical and current. Sometimes they were so disturbing I wondered how they had endured such difficulties. I remember thinking as I listened to these painful accounts that if I had had to

experience these things I would be angry too! Many women were still living with partners who used violence and abuse against them, and one told me that if only she could get her anger under control her husband would not have to beat her. A study from the USA reported similar findings – almost all of a group of 108 women who had used violence against a partner in the previous six months had themselves experienced violence from their partner. The greater the frequency of victimisation from partners and experiences of childhood abuse, the more likely it was that the women would use aggression against their partners. Increased exposure to violence also increased the likelihood that the women would experience symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and depression, and, in turn, women with more symptoms of post-traumatic stress were found to be more likely to express anger outwardly towards others (Swan et al. 2005, p.267).

I became very concerned about how best to respond to these women. If their anger was an expression of protest or anguish about the abuse and trauma that they had been subject to, and if the group program only skimmed over the surface of their lives, it could potentially do more harm than good. It did not seem acceptable to me to run a group that did not address some of these wider issues and experiences of the women. I was concerned that any approach to managing anger that made women calm down and accept their lot in life would implicate us as workers in shutting down a form of anger that may be legitimate in the context of their lives – that anger could even be a force that might be useful to them in making themselves safe. In order to fit with the values of feminism that I cherish, it seemed critical that the group somehow acknowledged the effects of men's abuse in women's lives.

At the same time, however, we faced another dilemma: how to balance this awareness of the broader context of these women's lives while also acknowledging the hurt and pain that their anger, abuse and violence may have caused others. We were aware that many women were referred to the group by the child protection services because there were safety concerns for their children. We wanted any group we ran to contribute to making these children's lives safer, and we were wary that focusing on the effects of the women's victimisation might minimise the harm done to children and diminish the women's sense of responsibility for preventing further harm.

In this chapter, I wish to describe how we have developed a group program based on poststructuralist understandings and narrative therapy practices. We hope that this program honours the life experiences and knowledges of women who attend the group in order to address anger, abuse and violence in their lives.

The influence of a poststructuralist approach to talking with women about anger, abuse and violence

A poststructuralist perspective does not assume an individual 'self' comprising various properties and essences of people's nature. Instead it assumes an interconnected web of relationships that provide us with our sense of identity. As Gergen (1994) has described, our relationships create ourselves, rather than our selves create relationship. Poststructuralist approaches also emphasise the significance of meaning-making. That is to say, the meanings that we give to our experiences of life constitute and are shaping of our lives (Burr 1995; White 1997).

Narrative therapy is an approach that draws on poststructuralist theory, amongst other influences, to find ways of working with people that do not pathologise. This seems particularly relevant in considering responses to women's anger, as female rage has often become pathologised and medicated through the mental health system (Russell & Carey 2004). In developing our group program, we decided to have conversations with women that would explore how this anger came to be in their lives, what its effects were on their relationships and their sense of identity, and how it might be harnessed in ways that would move women closer to their preferred identities. The idea of identity as a social construction has strongly influenced our work.

We also want to acknowledge the contribution of feminism to work with women who have experienced oppressive cultural practices, particularly the influence of poststructuralist/postmodernist feminism (Weedon 1987; Speedy 2001; Hare-Mustin 2001; Russell & Carey 2004). Poststructuralist feminism's emphasis on the plurality of women's experience, as opposed to the idea that 'women' are a single group with an inherent sameness, has proved helpful in our work. It has also assisted us to deconstruct the gendered discourses that make

men's anger appear 'natural', while casting women who experience anger as some sort of aberration of femininity.

Michael White's (2003) ideas on exploring the multiple meanings of expressions of pain and distress have opened possibilities for us to enquire as to the multiple meanings of women's expressions of anger. We have become aware that expressions of anger may not only be evidence of entitlement or how much a women is not coping. A woman's anger may be a form of response to what is being disrespected or disallowed in her current life. Her anger may represent what she is not prepared to give up and consequently what it is that she cherishes, believes in and hopes for. In our work, we hope to explore the multiple meanings of anger in these women's lives in order to bring forward accounts of life that will enable them to change their relationships with anger.

I will now convey the ways in which narrative ideas have been used in our group work with women who wish to curb their own anger, abuse and violence. The group runs for eight to ten weeks and is closed, i.e., no new members join after week two (this is to try to establish a consistent environment so women are not left wondering who may attend). This group is a work in progress, so I offer these descriptions tentatively, knowing that we are learning more and more as we proceed, based on the feedback the women give us.

Background to group

Before I outline what we do in each group session, I want to consider some of the key principles that have informed our work.

The following principles are those that we aspire to in our work with women in groups:

1. To make visible the politics and power relations involved in instances of abuse.
2. To 'doubly listen' – not only to stories of trauma but also to the ways in which women have responded to trauma.
3. To listen for multiple stories about the women's lives.
4. To practice in a de-centred way that focuses on the knowledge and skills of the women in the group.
5. To link women with others in their history, their families, their neighbourhoods and their communities.

6. To listen in ways that acknowledge diverse ways of living.
7. To acknowledge the contributions that the work makes to our own lives as facilitators.
8. To understand that the women in the group will be undertaking a journey of sorts that involves exploring new territories of their lives.
9. To create a space where there is no room for pathology.

Consulting the participants

The development of our program has occurred through consultation and feedback. In deciding what would be useful for the women we are working with, we often ask their advice on topics we should cover and we solicit their feedback on each exercise we use. One of the most useful pieces of advice they gave us alerted us to the effects of abuse and trauma on their lives. The women asked if they could talk about 'past hurts' and how to 'get over them'. In response, we developed a session on this topic that is described later in this paper.

From expertise to personal agency

We are conscious that discourses of educator/learner and professional superiority will sometimes invite women in the group to position us as the experts on their lives. For instance, they may request that we give them 'strategies' to deal with their anger. This challenges us to find ways of respectfully declining the invitation of expertise. Whenever this occurs, we ask the group members to brainstorm the things that they have found helpful on whatever the question relates to. We create a list from this discussion that is typed up and brought back to the group the following week. In this way, we create written records of the group's knowledges and skills that women can return to whenever they may experience doubt. We believe that creating these sorts of documents contributes to the participants beginning to value their own insider/local knowledge (Geertz 1983). In turn, this contributes to the women having a greater sense of personal agency in their lives, and more opportunities to renegotiate their relationship with anger.

Flexibility

We have found it important to be able to shape the group week by week, in response to women's requests for certain topics. We believe that the 'one-size-fits-

all' approach to group work delivery does not serve the interests of our clients because it assumes a homogenous group. It may be far more challenging for us as facilitators, but we have found that it's vital to have a flexible curriculum.

Cultural considerations

A further principle involves being conscious of our cultural backgrounds as facilitators. I am a fifth generation New Zealand Pakeha (New Zealander of European descent), and Katharina Boehm with whom I facilitate the groups is originally from Germany and has been a resident in New Zealand for fifteen years. Usually at least half of the group identify as Maori and bring to the group their cultural knowledges which we want to respect and make visible. Within the groups, we try to use the women's language as much as possible and this includes Maori language. We also always try to use the metaphors offered to us by group members. In future, we hope to consult and work more in partnership with Maori and Pacific Island colleagues in order to continue to develop the best program we can for Maori, Pakeha and Pacific Islander women.

SESSION 1: Coming together

Prior to the group beginning, we meet individually with each woman and routinely hear descriptions of embarrassment, shame and personal failure. In previous groups we had run we also noticed that there seemed to be considerable shame and distress for women in talking about their own use of anger, abuse and violence. We have therefore taken a lot of care in how we initiate group discussions on these topics.

Group kawa / treaty

After a gentle introductory round, we proceed to negotiate group *kawa* – a Maori word meaning shared understandings of 'how things are done around here'. This provides space for women to speak about what will contribute to a good experience for them in the group. This includes considerations of privacy and avoiding practices of judgement. During this process, we like to add that anyone can pass on any group activity, and for whatever reason. We make it clear that there is no pressure to participate. We have found that the process of negotiating a group *kawa* (sometimes called a treaty) fosters respect, tolerance and safety.

Setting a foundation

We are acutely aware that we need to begin a process of re-storying the women's problem-saturated identity claims before participants will be able to openly share stories of their lives. To facilitate this, we ask the women to interview each other in pairs using the following questions:

- How did you come to be in this group?
- Was it a response to something that happened?
- Can you tell a story about your decision to be here?
- What kind of a step was this, to come to this group?

The following questions then enquire about the women's intentions, hopes, dreams, values and qualities:

- What was your intention in coming to the group?
- What were the hopes and dreams that led you here?
- What does this step say about what is important in your life?
- What qualities might it suggest about you?
- What does it say about what is important in your life?

Negotiating a name for the group

After joining together again in one group, we then place the last two questions up on a whiteboard and brainstorm the women's collective responses. Having done so, we ask the women to think about the name for this group. We ask: 'Does "Women and Anger" adequately represent who you are, or could we come up with a better name?' Through this process, one group chose to call themselves '*Mana Wahine Toa*' – a Maori name meaning 'strong women with courage and respect'. Another group chose to name themselves 'Bridge-Builders', a reference to a currently popular catch-cry, 'build a bridge and get over it'. By choosing this name the women were describing their desire to not let the effects of their pasts continue to shape their present. Our current group has chosen the name 'S.A.S. (Strong Awesome Sisters)'. We have found this process of re-naming the group leaves women feeling more hopeful about their ability to move towards preferred futures.

From this first session's discussion, we also create a handout to be distributed the following week that lists the values/hopes/dreams/aspirations that

the group members have identified are important to them. I have listed some examples of these here:

- To attain my right to a violence-free lifestyle.
- To respect and accept the rights of others.
- To have good relationships with the people who are important to us.
- To care for and protect our children.
- To be a leader of myself, to live my life according to my own values and beliefs.

In this way, from the very beginning of the group, we are focusing our attention on intentional state understandings[1] (values, hopes, principles, dreams, etc.) rather than internal state understandings (such as concepts of self-esteem, strengths or deficits). Doing so sets a context for women's lives to be joined around shared hopes and aspirations. Further sessions can then build on these foundations.

SESSIONS 2 AND 3: Getting to know anger

Within women's lives, anger can occur in many different contexts. We believe it is important for women to examine the locations of anger in their lives, so they can identify the times and places when it is present, and also the times and places when it is not. The times and places when anger is not present may represent instances in which the women are demonstrating a sense of agency in relation to anger. The meaning they make of their discoveries can then act as a springboard for further discussion. If a woman is only experiencing anger in one area of her life, for example, in contexts involving her partner, it becomes possible to enquire about what the anger relates to. In turn, this can lead to conversations about women's preferred ways of being in their lives.

Many types of anger

We start with a brainstorm of all the different types of anger women have experienced, such as hurt anger, jealous anger, stressed anger, confused anger, grieving anger, overwhelmed anger … and this usually generates quite a big list! From this, they work in pairs to interview each other about the different contexts

of anger in their lives. This is a structured interview as we provide the following list of questions for them to use:

- What kinds of angers are around for you at different times?
- Which anger has created the most problems in your life?
- What supports this kind of anger in your life?
- Did it come into your life as a response to anything that happened to you?
- Where did you learn to 'do' anger?
- Has anger ever been a signal to you that something wasn't right in a situation?
- At what times in your life is this anger around more?
- At what times in your life is this anger around less?
- How do you make sense of the difference?

Distinguishing between anger and violence

We then introduce an exercise to assist women to differentiate between anger and violence. We ask the women to describe the things that anger tells them which convince them that violence is called for. This brings forward a list of excuses, justifications and blame of others that contribute to violence. We then ask the women to name this list and we create a handout using their name as a title, for instance: 'The Lies of Anger'.

The gender of violence

We also introduce an exercise that we believe exposes the gendered meanings attributed to anger. We brainstorm the characteristics that are valued in men in our cultures and then those valued in women. We ask the group to consider how the meaning of anger is gendered: What does our society/culture say about men who are angry? What about women who are angry? Is it different? What names does society have for an angry man? An angry woman? What is the effect of those words on women who may experience anger? Whose interests are served by this effect? The purpose of this exercise is to expose the gendered nature of the discourses about anger and to deconstruct these taken-for-granted 'truths'.

Scaling anger

We then introduce a scale of anger and ask women to name differing intensities of anger from 1 to 10. We also ask them to describe the physical changes they

feel in their bodies at these different intensities. This usually provokes a lot of discussion, and many times women have told us this has been very useful to them because they have begun to pay more attention to their physical experience of anger.

Doing so enables them to develop an 'early warning system'. When they notice certain physical changes they can take action to de-escalate emotion, or to keep other people safe.

To finish these sessions we might ask the following questions:

- Can anger be both helpful and unhelpful?
- How?
- Can anger be a tool for social change?
- Do you know of times when this might have happened? (e.g., the feminist movement, civil rights movement)
- If the anger you have experienced were to start a movement for social change, what would it stand for?

To close, we ask the women to choose one of the qualities they identified in the first session and to tell us a story about that quality in their life. We then try to 'thicken' the stories about this quality. One of the ways we do this is to have the women act as an audience to each other's stories about the qualities in their lives. A second way we do this is to ask the women to introduce to us someone in their life who taught them about the particular quality they have chosen to speak about. This process contributes to a re-storying of the women's identity away from pathologised understandings and towards more preferred themes.

SESSION 4: Effects of anger in our lives

This session focuses on the effects of anger and has proved to be very powerful to the women in the groups. We start by asking the women to consider the effects that their anger, abuse and violence has had in the many domains of their life. We document the women's responses on large sheets of paper on which we have pre-written headings (see box on p.171).

When this documentation is complete, we place the lists on the wall and

step back and ask the women to evaluate the effects/influence of the problem in these domains of living:

- Is this okay with you that anger should take so much from your life?
- How do you feel about this?
- How is this by you?
- Where do you stand on this?
- What is your position on this?

and so on.

We then ask them to justify these evaluations:

- Why is/isn't this okay for you?
- Why do you feel this way about this?
- How come you're taking this stand/position on this?
- Would you tell me a story about your life that would help me to understand why you would take this position on this development?

and so on.

The use of externalising language (White & Epston 1990) is very important throughout the ten sessions, but it is especially critical in this session. This exercise seems to assist the women to begin speaking about anger and its effects as separate from themselves. This also seems to enable them to stand back from anger and fully comprehend its effects in their lives.

Women seem to leave this session with a sense of outrage at how much the anger affects their lives and how much this is not okay by them! They seem particularly affected by realising the impact of anger on the lives of their children.

SESSIONS 5 & 6: Past hurts

As mentioned earlier, participants had requested the opportunity to speak about how they could 'get over the past hurts' that had happened in their lives which still had the ability to create rage for them. It was clear that the women were referring to past experiences of abuse, violence and trauma. We had some trepidation in addressing this issue, but knew that to ignore it would

Physical health	Relationship with community members, e.g., neighbours
My sense of myself – what I think about who I am	My view of myself as a mother, sister, aunt, worker, etc.
Social life	Thoughts
Everyday life	Moods/feelings
Relationship with children	Hopes, dreams, sense of the future
Relationship with partner	Work
My *wairua* (spirit)	Children's lives

not be honouring the request from the women, who were clearly struggling with aspects of their histories. In order to respond to the women's experiences of trauma, we drew on the writings of White (2004), Mann & Russell (2003), Jenkins, Joy & Hall (2003), Silent Too Long (2003), Trowbridge (2003) and Verco (2003).

In planning this session, we were very clear that we did not believe that each woman had to tell us the intimate details of trauma they may have experienced. We start the session by being transparent about this belief and women have responded positively. They have told us of other experiences they have had, often with other professionals, in which they have been pressured to tell in intimate detail what had happened to them. Many have experienced this as re-traumatising.

In order to prevent re-traumatising occurring in this session, we are conscious of wanting to provide a context in which the women can experience a different 'territory of identity', one that is not defined by the trauma, but instead by the women's values, hopes and dreams. To do so, we 'doubly listen'; listening not only to the events of trauma but also to what the women have continued to give value to in their lives, and how they responded to the trauma[2]. Many stories

of resistance to trauma get obscured over time, and we wish to bring forward these responses to stand alongside the dominant account which usually casts people as passive recipients. In practice, this process usually takes two group sessions.

Past hurts and the women's responses

We begin by creating a list of the 'past hurts' which the women have endured. These have often included rape, sexual abuse, physical abuse, bullying at school, death of a loved one, witnessing violence between parents, and so on. Alongside this list, we then note down the responses the women made at the time of the events, and also the responses they have made more recently to cope with these events. We then ask the women to characterise what these steps were about; what they were trying to preserve that was precious to them. We also ask about the effects, past and present, of these acts in their lives. This process makes visible not only the 'past hurts' the women have experienced, but also how they have responded to these and what it is that the women value. They soon see that, far from being passive recipients of trauma, they have throughout their lives taken actions in accordance with their values.

Other people's responses

Often, those who have experienced significant trauma have not only had to deal with the effects of the trauma, but also a range of responses from others that have exacerbated these effects. These may include responses of disbelief, or blame or indifference. To make visible the effects of these responses and the societal discourses that influence them, we ask the women to list the responses from others, past and present, that have not been helpful to them, and we then ask the following questions:

- Whose interests are served by these sorts of responses?
- Who is supported?

These two questions help the women to see that often the interests of the person who has used abuse are well-served by these responses and the discourses which inform them. We discuss this fully before moving to questions that are designed to evoke stories of personal agency.

Personal agency

The following questions create a context for women to experience a sense of personal agency in relation to 'past hurts' they have experienced:

- How come you have survived your life so far, in spite of these messages/responses?
- What strategies have worked for you?
- What has kept you going?
- What has become important to you as a result of what happened to you?
- What do you value?
- What stands have you taken that reflect these values?
- What commitments have you made?
- What qualities have you drawn on to cope?

Linking lives

To close these sessions, we want to draw attention to people in the women's lives who have been supportive and have played parts in assisting the women on their journeys. To do so, we use remembering practices (Hedtke & Winslade 2004). These assist us to richly describe the contributions of key figures in these women's lives. We also ask the women to reflect on what these key figures saw in them that would have told them that the women would come through their experiences of hard times. In this way, we are inviting the women to see themselves 'through the eyes' of those they have identified as key supporters. Through these conversations, the mutuality of these relationships are emphasised and this enables the women to draw new conclusions about their own worth and value.

SESSION 7: What's happening to anger?

The purpose of this session is to explore fully the times that the women are not being troubled by anger, violence or abuse. These represent unique outcomes or exceptions to the problem story (White & Epston 1990). By exploring these we seek to build upon preferred stories of the women's lives.

Excavating unique outcomes

We begin by asking each woman to tell us about a time when anger could have got the better of them, but they did not allow it to. We then question them fully about the circumstances of that exception to the dominant story before exploring what these developments reflect about the women's values, hopes and dreams. We believe that this session helps the women to appreciate times when they have the upper hand in relation to anger. Our belief is that there are always such exceptions, but sometimes excavation is required to find them, and that is our work.

Noticing changes

We then set up pairs to talk about all the areas of the women's lives in which anger is affecting them. We ask them to notice if any changes have been occurring over recent weeks and then to report these changes back to the group. In this way, the group begins to act as an audience to these changes, to this 'news of difference'. Our purpose is to 'thicken' (Geertz 1978) stories that do not support or sustain the problem of anger. Our experience of this process mirrors that described by Freedman & Combs (1996, p.16.): … *as people began to inhabit and live out these alternative stories, the results went beyond solving problems. Within the new stories, people could live out new self images, new possibilities for relationship, and new futures.*

Some of the changes that women have noticed included:

- I am noticing anger earlier.
- I am mentally removing myself from certain situations.
- I am telling my partner what is happening for me emotionally now.
- I've learnt to look at myself differently – I do matter!
- I'm holding *whanau* (family) meetings with my children to talk about things that are important.

Reflections on identity

We then enquire about what these discoveries of change may mean for the women: how they may view themselves differently in the light of these changes; what is becoming possible in their relationships with their children and other important people; and what may be possible in the future.

We also enquire about what might support further changes in their lives. Here is a small sample of their responses:

- Being open to help from friends.
- Connectedness with others.
- Free education at *Te Wananga o Aotearoa* (A national Maori tertiary institution).

SESSION 8: Stepping into responsibility

The work of Alan Jenkins (1990) has been very helpful in thinking about how to invite women to take responsibility for the effects of their anger, abuse and violence. We have, however, found that women participants seem more inclined to take responsibility for violence they have enacted in comparison to the men with whom we have worked. We wonder whether this is due to women having a lesser sense of entitlement to act in violent ways (although we have worked with women who have had a significant sense of entitlement). Or perhaps accepting responsibility for harm done in some way leads to a more positive identity claim for women – as dominant constructions of masculinity can construe men's acts of acknowledging doing harm as 'weakness'. At the same time, however, society expects women to be the victims of violent crimes, not the perpetrators. If a man commits such acts, he is seen as dangerous but acting within an expected gender role. If women commit violent crimes, they are often considered worse than a violent man – as monstrous, crazy or especially evil. These sorts of ideas can complicate the process of coming to terms with what has been done, taking responsibility for it, and preventing further harm.

We are still in the process of developing this topic, and at first it was a part of another session. It is only due to feedback from the most recent group of participants that we now feel that the topic of 'Stepping into responsibility' is important enough to devote a whole session to it. The following list is what the women have told us helped them take responsibility for their part in anger, abuse and violence:

- Admit it when I am wrong.
- Saying sorry and acknowledging the hurt/harm done.
- Asking 'How can I put this right?'.

- Following through with actions to put things right.
- Offer an explanation without justifying or blaming.
- Take consequences – face up to things.

We look forward to developing exercises to further thicken the particular skills and knowledge associated with 'taking responsibility'.

SESSION 9: Saying goodbye and continuing the journey

So far we have found the women quite reluctant for the group to end, as it has offered a sense of support in their lives. Of course, groups end but relationships do not. The women often continue to keep us up-to-date with what is happening in their lives, and also keep in touch with other group members if connections have been made. Despite this, the ending of the group is significant, and the purpose of this final session is to prepare the participants for this. We have drawn on the work of McPhie & Chaffey (1998) to create a session that acknowledges what has been shared, but also looks ahead to life without the group. The women meet in pairs to ask each other:

- Do you have any fears about being without the group?
- What are they?
- What are you taking away from the group that will help you to stand up to those fears?

Documents to take away

In narrative therapy, therapeutic documents are very significant and we have experimented with these. We have asked each woman to write a letter to herself that she would find helpful at some point in her future and would remind her about the purposes/hopes/dreams she has for her life that anger is intent on undermining. We then post this letter in the weeks following the group. This serves as a reminder to the woman of her thoughts and values and also provides a way for the group to have a continuing presence in her life.

We have also invited the group to write a collective letter to the next group we run – one that might be useful to participants who may be affected by shame and despair.

Taking it back practices

During this final session, we also believe it is important for us as facilitators to take time to acknowledge the contribution the group has made to our lives. For this we use the outsider-witness framework[3]. We describe:

- what struck chords for us in what we heard throughout the group,
- the images this evoked of the women's lives that were linked to their hopes and aspirations,
- what it is in our own lives that accounts for why these things caught our attention,
- where this has taken us to in our own lives; how our work or lives have been changed by witnessing the women's stories.

A final round

To close the group, we invite a final round asking the women to articulate what have been the most helpful aspects of the group for them. Some of the responses have included:

- 'Hearing others' stories, knowing I am not alone'
- 'Noticing the effects of past hurts'
- 'I like myself better now'
- 'Handouts that are our work'
- 'Permission to just be me'
- 'Respect for everything'
- 'Laid back but serious'
- 'Knowing there are different kinds of anger'
- 'Understanding the hurt beneath the anger'
- 'We have created our own answers'
- 'Not telling us what the experts do'
- 'Seeing what the anger was doing to my life'
- 'Life changing'

Some further thoughts …

Facilitating this group has involved a 'steep learning curve' for us as facilitators as we have tried to take the principles of narrative practice and apply these in a group setting. The groups have also been an inspiring experience as we have

walked with these women for a part of their journey. We have shared many laughs as we have heard of the courage and resilience of these women, but also many tears as we heard of the pain and trauma they have been subjected to in their lives. Even though we have been witness to this suffering, the group has offered us hope as we have endeavoured to centre the women's skills and knowledge and to doubly listen. These practices have been an antidote to the 'overwhelmedness' that I experienced when facilitating a previous group informed by different ideas.

There have been many challenges along the way and there is still much to do to shape the group in ways that may be even more sustaining of these women's lives and even more protective of their children. I am very conscious that we have not yet found ways to include wider audiences to witness the developments in the women's lives. There is also the potential to use outsider-witness practices more within the group itself. As the work continues, we are learning more and more about the women who seek out these groups and how we might proceed in ways that are useful to them. As I write these words, the faces of the women participants appear before me. It is due to their lives and courage that we are inspired and supported in this work.

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Notes

[1] For discussion of the differences between internal and intentional understandings see White (2001).

[2] For more detailed descriptions of how narrative practices can be used to respond to those who have experienced trauma, see Denborough (2006).

[3] For more information about outsider-witness structures, see White (2004).

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14

Young men and violence:

for the love of mothers

By Angel Yuen (with a story from Heather Johnson)

In this paper, I describe a way of working with young men who are grappling with the effects of racism and also the effects of dominant forms of masculinity which encourage the use of violence as a response to racism. In my experience, young men's relationships with their mothers offer alternative possibilities for their lives and identities. Here I will share stories of how two young men of different cultures and countries came to correspond about their efforts to move their lives away from violence and towards ways of living which more suit them and that are also in accordance with the hopes and dreams of their mothers.

To begin though, I wish to share a story from a colleague, Heather Johnson, as it was this story that inspired the work that I will then describe.

Talking with young men about their mothers – Heather Johnson

As a social worker at a Toronto inner-city alternative high school, I had the privilege of meeting with and linking the lives and stories of young men from different cultural backgrounds about the effects of violence on their lives. In this group there were young men of colour from the Caribbean and South American countries as well as young white men born in Canada. Many had been involved in different situations with the law where they may have enacted violence to others in the community or been engaged in gang-related activities. When I first sat down with this group of young men in an open space considered the hub of the school, I couldn't have anticipated how talking in this open forum about serious issues of violence was going to lead to conversations about connections, value and love for mothers.

In this group, one young man spoke of inappropriate or disrespectful comments made toward his mother. He explained that he could not turn away from a remark such as 'your mother is a whore' and considered such a statement to be an immediate invitation to assault the person who said it. As it turned out, this story was also poignant to other males in the group who agreed that insults about their mothers were unacceptable to them and could often lead to escalating anger, rage and violence.

In hearing more about the young men's responses to disrespectful statements made about their mothers, a theme emerged which was named 'mothers' sacrifices for sons'. Most of these young men were raised by their mothers living in one-parent homes amidst conditions of severe poverty in marginalised communities. Stories were shared about mothers ensuring that there was food and clothing for their children even when they themselves did not have much. The young men also appreciated that they could count on support from mothers such as being accompanied to court or how their mothers would always be there for them during any encounters with the police.

Stories of mother's caring had the group members engaged in richly describing the importance and value of mothers and their profound influence on them as boys and now as young men. As a result they said they were more than willing to 'fight for and protect' their mothers for all they had sacrificed. These stories invited different conversations about the meanings that this diverse group of young men attributed to the effects of violence and the importance for them to cherish their relationships with not only their mothers, but also their partners and children.

Enabling movement away from violence

I am also a school social worker in the multicultural landscape of Toronto and I was drawn to Heather's description of the gathering of young men from diverse communities who are faced with ongoing violence in their lives. I joined with Heather's excitement about finding gems of hope within the young men's stories of honouring their mothers' sacrifices in the broader context of poverty and gender and cultural oppression. At the same time, this story had me grappling with the interface of gender and culture, where a protection of, and love for, mothers had these young men from different cultures so easily considering violence as an immediate and justifiable response. With this dilemma in mind, I was left to question the concept of 'protection' and the socially constructed masculine discourse in varied contexts in which men are expected to 'protect women', and how this discourse can be associated with and perpetuate various forms of violence.

In reflecting on Heather's story, I found myself keen to create contexts which would enable the lives of young men from different cultures to be linked, while also finding ways that their respect and honouring of their mothers could contribute to non-violent ways of being. I assumed that it would be important to enquire about the real effects of violence in these young men's lives, and also to seek out openings to alternative non-violent stories of identity which contrast with the 'tough guy' masculinities that often shape young men's sub-cultures.

The story of Ali

The following story of Ali has been significant to me. It illustrates some of the ways that it can be possible to assist young men to move away from using violence to protect their mothers, and towards non-violent lifestyles that fulfill their mothers' hopes for them as young men in their communities.

Ali who is a twelve-year-old Afghan Muslim born in Canada, showed up one day in my school office quite upset. He began by saying that he was 'so mad'. He was breathing heavily and had difficulty sitting still: he proceeded to get up and down from his chair numerous times before being able to settle. He explained that his last two days had been very difficult because he had been bullied by a number of male students while on his own in the school. He overheard one boy being

dared by the others to slap him. Ali said, 'The boy came up to me and made fun of my name. Then he slapped me and everyone in the group started laughing. It got me *very* mad. I got so mad that I felt like putting an end to them all by beating them up so badly.'

When I asked Ali what occurred next, he replied, 'Instead, I just kept my calm and hoped that things would get better for the future'. However, the next day Ali found that these oppressive incidents kept coming into his mind. They were reminding him of some other very difficult times with the same kids who had previously teased and made fun of his mother. As Ali recalled the past incidents, he remembered the boys putting down his mother with name-calling and racism. I could see Anger growing to Rage as Ali recalled, 'When this happened before, Anger got me to swear at them and even punch them. I just couldn't take it anymore!' At this point, Ali was bent down holding his head in his hands saying, 'Thinking about them making fun of my mother makes me so mad and upset!'

I already was aware from the initial referral for school social work services, that Anger and Frustration had the ability to sometimes get the best of Ali, and so I became concerned about the potential for violence to erupt and for Trouble to get in his way at school. In addressing this, I wanted to doubly listen to Ali's narrative of not only distress and anger but also what this distress might speak to, what values might be implicit in his anguish.

The unstated in distress

A number of years ago when distress like that being displayed by Ali entered the counselling room, it would likely have had the effect of making me feel helpless about how to proceed in my therapeutic conversations. However, when I started to enquire about what is unstated but implicit[1] in people's expressions of distress, what values they hold precious that have been violated to cause the experience of distress, this has enabled me to join with the person in rich explorations of personal history.

With this in mind, I was curious about what values might be unstated but implicit in Ali's upset and distress. I asked him the following questions:

- What happens to you when kids make fun of your mother?
- Can you tell me more about how disrespect about your mother makes Anger grow?

- Do you have some thoughts about why Anger grows more in situations where people are saying unfair things in relation to your mother than in other situations you deal with?
- Can you tell me about your mother? I don't know a lot about her …

In response to my questions, Ali provided a picture of his mother, 'She has not been well and has been sick with diabetes. This makes me sad. My mom is also innocent and I just don't understand why those boys would make fun of someone that they don't know. It's not right and is not fair. My mom is so nice and she is a really good person.'

In responding to Ali's expressions of distress, upset and unfairness, I was interested in engaging in a therapeutic conversation that would bring forth his hopes, values and understandings that I (and he) might not have been initially aware. When Ali began to talk further about his mother being 'nice' and 'good' and 'very important' in his life, I asked the following questions:

- What do you appreciate about your mom's niceness?
- Are being nice and good important to you as well?
- Do you think you learned about goodness and niceness from your mother?
- How did your mother teach you these values and, if she were here, would she have a story to tell me about you being good and nice?

By drawing on what was absent but implicit in Ali's distress, a rich description was brought forth about certain things that Ali values in life. These values were 'relational', they were significant values shared by Ali and his mother. At this point of the conversation, Anger was no longer overtaking Ali and, when I asked him how the conversation was going, he stated, 'It feels good to tell you about my mother'.

I was touched by Ali's story. His responses to my questions suggested to me that the reason he was so distressed by the insults of the other boys was because what he holds precious in his life are values of fairness and being 'good and nice'. These values were openings to an alternative story-line of identity for Ali. Moreover, as this subordinated story-line was rendered more visible, it made it possible for Ali to turn away from responding violently to bullying, and ultimately to move towards non-violent preferences for his life.

Thickening non-violent preferences in Ali's life

I was interested in linking these emerging values and principles that Ali was identifying to some of his actions, and so I reminded Ali of an earlier statement he had made in our conversation when he said, 'I just kept my calm and hoped that things would get better for the future'. I asked him,'If your mom knew that you have been keeping-your-calm, instead of using violence and swear words as you have in the past, what would she think?' Ali was thoughtful and responded with, 'I think that my mom would be proud that I kept my calm because I know it's important to her for me to be a good person and to not hurt others'. In further speculating how proud Ali's mother might be about his decision to act in non-violent ways, Ali immediately guessed that she would be proud in a 'huge' way.

As I always think of identity as something that is created in relationship with others, I was busily thinking about significant people who would be good to include as witnesses to these recent developments in Ali's life. When I asked Ali who else might be proud of his non-violent and keeping-calm responses, he thought that his father, brother and the school vice-principal would all join with his mother in encouraging how he had been responding to the bullying.

In my work, I have learned how bullying, harassment and racism can severely isolate students while in school, so I wanted to further collaborate with Ali to build a wide 'community of support' which could support his efforts of not engaging with violent responses. Believe it or not, we were able to recruit two additional members to this community from the other side of the world. They live in Sydney, Australia.

Prior to our conversations about Ali's non-violent responses to bullying, a letter-writing exchange had begun between Ali and a Lebanese Muslim young man from Sydney named Adam. Adam's mother (Sekneh Hammoud-Beckett) had sent me via email a letter from Adam about his experiences of dealing with racism and taunts at school. I had passed this on to Ali and the two young men had then corresponded with each other (see p.189).

Ali decided to draft a letter to Adam to catch him up on how he had managed to respond to bullying without himself being violent or aggressive. In his letter, he recounted the bullying incident and his escalating anger which resulted from thinking about the put-downs the young men had once directed to his

mother. The letter also poignantly described his mother who lives with illness and captured Ali's reverence for her as someone who is good, nice and caring. Ali ended his letter by letting Adam know that throughout this difficult situation with the other kids he had managed to stay calm.

Writing this letter to Adam was significant in many ways. It conveyed a double-storied account of Ali's experiences – not only pain and hardship, but also what he treasures in his life. It also provided a context for a significant re-telling, as we read the letter out loud together before sending to Adam and his mother. The initial dominant story Ali was once ascribed, of being a violent, angry boy who swears, no longer holds sway over his identity. By drafting and re-reading the letter, Ali's preferred thoughts, words, beliefs and values were elevated.

In response to Ali's letter, Adam wrote back to him the very next day. Here is the letter he sent:

Dear Ali,

Thank you for writing me the letter.

It's funny how you live in Canada and I live in Australia and we experience the same things.

I remember when I was at school and people teased my mum and like you I also had felt really angry. I remember I felt really hurt because my mum is loving and very kind to everyone and they were saying things without knowing her. Instead of talking about it, I would just take the anger out on my mum. Now that I look back on it, it wasn't really good at all. I am also very sorry hearing that about your mum. I really hope that she will recover and she would get better soon. It is sad when mums get sick because they are the ones that have cared for you all your life.

Being calm is a good solution but how do you do it?

The way I stop and be calm is I think of my mum, and how she believes in me to do my best, and anger is not my best. I also don't want to disappoint anyone in my family because they love me so much.

Hope to hear from you soon,
Thanks,
Adam

Upon receiving Adam's letter, Ali was grateful for and touched by the shared understandings. He indicated that these provided an instant antidote to 'feeling alone'. Their lives were now also linked through sharing ways of staying calm, and also sharing loving sentiments of care for mothers and honouring the contributions they make to their lives. Ali, a boy who had felt isolation, distress, and anger, felt powerfully connected to Adam across the globe when he read the words 'it is sad when mums get sick because they are the ones that have cared for you all your life'. What was also significant about Adam's response was that it clearly acknowledged that staying calm in these sorts of situations is difficult. This added more meaning to the achievement of staying calm. Ali also appreciated how Adam described that staying calm can also be connected to one's love for your family and their love for you.

Reflections

Ali's story and Adam's response provide hope to me in how to work alongside young men to enable movement from violence to non-violence. They describe how it was possible to move from a position of using violence to 'stand up for' or 'protect' their mothers, to instead act in non-violent ways to fulfill their mothers' hopes and wishes in relation to ways of being good sons and men in the world. In richly describing young men's preferences and values, and by linking and connecting these values to important figures in their families, history and culture, we can support them to step away from enacting violence. In particular, by richly exploring the significance and meanings associated with young men's love for mothers, space can be opened to deconstruct dominant forms of masculinity, including discourses of men's 'protection' of women through the use of violence.

In this process, the individual stories and concerns of particular young men can become located in a broader context of power relations of culture and gender. As a consequence, the stories of young men (and their mothers) can become linked. In my work it has become meaningful to see how young people's responses to oppressive experiences can be shared with one another.

My preference would be to not hear so many painful stories from young people I am working with. And yet, I know that the distressing experiences of Ali and Adam, who have been subjected to injustice, have not been for nothing.

Instead, rich descriptions of their stories of caring, compassion and a sense of justice have been shared with each other, and they know that they have contributed to each other's lives. Linking lives in this way is one of the things that sustains me in this work. Where once there was isolation, now lives are becoming linked and this can make all the difference.

Note

[1] See White (2000).

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LINKING LIVES OF YOUNG MEN OF DIFFERENT CULTURES THROUGH LETTERS

When I received an email with New Year wishes from my friend and colleague, Sekneh Beckett from Sydney, Australia, I never would have predicted how our lives would become so joined, both personally as mothers and professionally through our work with young people.

Sekneh wrote to me about strife her son Adam was having at school where he was experiencing racism and taunts with regard to being from a Muslim (a.k.a. terrorist) family. In my reply to Sekneh, I expressed my sadness in hearing about his situation and posed an idea to her. I wondered if Adam might be interested in writing a letter to share his story with a tweleve-year-old Afghan Muslim boy named Ali who I was seeing and who was also dealing with taunts at school. Maybe the two young men might find it interesting to exchange ideas between Australia and Canada about ways of dealing with tough times at school. To my delight, the very next morning I received the following letter from Adam via Sekneh which was the beginning of a rich letter exchange:

Hello Ali… my name is Adam.

I am an Australian born, Lebanese Muslim and I live in Sydney, Australia. My hobbies are playing all sports, especially football, and computer games.

My experiences of being teased at school are because of my cultural background. The reason why I think other kids tease me is because of the media and that they don't understand what type of people we are, and they feel bad about themselves. When they teased me I felt really angry. Sometimes I got so angry that I didn't want to go to school any more. But I had to go to school so I dealt with it in a bad way.

Some ways I received help with this is by talking with my family; telling the teacher, deputy principal and talking to a counsellor. I have learned it is better to tell the teacher and be responsible for my actions so I don't get into trouble and then suffer the consequences.

People should not tease us for our religion or background, they should look at our positives and the good stuff we do in our community.

Thank you
Yours sincerely,
Adam

In sharing Adam's letter with Ali, he was enthusiastic to send him a response:

Dear Adam,

Thank you for your letter from Australia! My name is Ali and I live in Toronto. I was born in Canada and am Afghan, Muslim. I am 12 years old in Grade 7 and I like sports such as basketball and also playing all kinds of video games.

When Angel read me your letter I felt bad for you. I told her 'It's not fair!' But I hope that the hurtful things that other kids say to you won't get you to do things that get you into trouble.

I have been teased before about my skin colour, religion, and racist stuff. Other kids have sometimes made fun of my country saying things like 'Ha, ha for your country … your people are suffering'. Sometimes they make fun of my name because it's different. I have got in trouble before for fighting back and using swear words to deal with the situation. I have learned that it's better not to fight. It's easy to get out of a fight by walking away. I spoke to a counsellor too and it's helpful.

I agree with you that people should not tease us for our religion or background and that they should look at our positives and the good stuff we do in our community. The Quran talks about a lot of good things like 'treat people in a good way'. At the mosque I've learned a lot about our ancestors and we are told 'remember them'. My parents also tell me to always keep strong for years to come and to stay connected to our ancestors.

I was wondering, do you have anybody to protect you and who will always be there and stand up for you? My brother does this for me. My parents help me a lot too! This helps me at the times I'm made fun of – to remember and think of my family and my ancestors.

Thanks again for your letter Adam.
Sincerely,
Ali

A second letter from Adam:

Dear Ali,

Thanks for your letter. It's so cool that we are the same age and the same religion. I like being Muslim because it's a respectable religion.

My granddad teaches me about Islam and he says that as Muslims we must respect all people and all religions, even if others are sometimes

not so nice to us. He says the way you fight back is by acting good and showing them what they say is wrong. Everyone thinks we are terrorists and some are, but most of us are good. It's really hard not to fight. I have to remember to be good and calm too.

I think you're lucky to have your brother to protect you. My sister and brother are really little. But, I can talk to my dad and he is funny. And I can talk to my mum, she is very accepting.

I didn't think I'd like writing letters but I like them now because I can connect with you from a different country and learn heaps.

Good luck and thanks,
Adam

This letter exchange de-centred my professional knowledge as a school social worker and centred the insider knowledge of both Adam and Ali. They learned from and shared 'heaps' with each other not only about the effects of taunts and racism, but more significantly about their own skills and knowledges which included a shared cultural understanding of loving connections to family, history and ancestors.

Thinking about Adam and Ali's words and also about Sekneh as a mother, had me remembering a conversation with my own son, Cameron, when he was nine years old. I had been preparing for a narrative therapy workshop and since I had previously shared little stories about him he asked, 'Are you going to talk about me?' I said, 'Well, I thought I might mention that you are both Chinese and German'. He looked at me perplexed and said, 'What does that have to do with narrative therapy? That's about culture!' 'Well', I responded, 'narrative therapy has a lot to do with culture'. He said, 'Why? Because people make fun of culture?' This unexpectedly opened up a chance for us to talk about how other children sometimes make fun of his Chinese culture. As a mother, I felt sadness, protectiveness and hope, all in the same moment.

My continued hope comes from knowing that, when my own children, or young people such as Ali or Adam have a space to talk about

oppressive experiences, they so quickly step into these conversations. And it does not take too long before they begin sharing how they have not only dealt with these terrible times, but also what they value. I look forward to many more sparkling letter exchanges and conversations with young people from diverse backgrounds.

Postscript

By Ruth Pluznick

Ruth Pluznick works at a children's mental health center in Toronto, part of a rich network of services for children, youth and families facing all the problems in living that might be expected in a city of three million people in diverse arrangements of race, culture, class, and gender relations.

I was raised in an extended Jewish family with the strong influence of grandmothers who came to the United States from Eastern Europe. In the *shtetls* of Poland and Russia, the women in Jewish families (including the women in my family) were central to the survival of the community, often serving as 'go-betweens' who negotiated relations between their own communities and the broader society. Many skills were required to do this in places where anti-Jewish sentiment was pervasive.

Life in America was presumably easier (or at least more safe) for Jewish women, but something somewhat sinister happened. What had once been revered – the Jewish mother's fierce determination to look after her own – became an object of derision. Surely we have all heard jokes about 'Jewish mothers' which are diminishing of them and what they stand for. The economic realities in America, which had men (but not women) working, also rendered unnecessary the skills of women that had been developed over centuries of survival and it took away their public presence and voice. A different story emerged for Jewish women which separated them from the traditions and history of their own mothers and grandmothers, particularly with respect to how their lives could make a difference for others.

As I read the writings in this collection, I was wondering what it would mean to my grandmothers and mother to know that women around the world were given a platform to speak about their families and communities in ways that honoured their skills and wisdom to look after their own. Reading this book, I also started thinking about what it is I learned from the women in my family, and the ways in which these learnings can contribute to actions to address violence against women. In this sense, my contributions to end violence may reflect (and engage) my life as a Jewish woman as part of, and apart from, my professional commitments.

My own experiences of collectivity, the penchant for thinking about 'we', not 'I', is a gift from my grandmothers. They were the 'women's patrol' in my life and community. Actions on my part to re-value communal responsibility for the care and safety of women and children (and, yes, men) is a way for me to honour and stay connected to them. This will be the legacy for me of this very special collection of writings.

About the authors

Norma Akamatsu is a social worker in Northampton, MA., USA. She is involved with therapy and community dialogue work. She can be contacted by email: nakamatsu@verizon.net, or 151 Main Street, Northampton, MA 01060, USA.

Sekneh Beckett is coloured by her Lebanese Muslim ancestry. She is a Psychologist and Narrative therapist. Sekneh lives in Sydney and works at the Corner Youth Health Service and is part of the teaching team at Macquarie University's Social Health course. She can be contacted by email: sekbeckett@hotmail.com

Lisa Berndt lives in Oakland, California, where she works as a clinical social worker at the Center for the Vulnerable Child at Children's Hospital & Research Center Oakland. She is also a member of Bay Area Partnership for Social Justice. She can be reached by phone at +(1-510) 428-3885 ext.5071, or by email at: lberndt@mail.cho.org

Pat Durish I am an LGBTQ identified practitioner. I hold a PhD in Women's Studies and Education and an MSW. I am currently working as a therapist and researcher, servicing the LGBTQ community of Metro Toronto. My research and clinical focus is intimate partner violence in same sex relationships. I also work as a researcher at the University of Toronto where I am involved in a project entitled Disciplining Women: Gender and State Violence in Iran. In my spare time, I teach under graduate and graduate level courses in gender equity and sexuality. I can be contacted c/o David Kelley LGBTQ & HIV/AIDS Services, Family Service Association of Toronto, 355 Church Street, Toronto, ON M5B 1Z8, ph. +(1-416) 595 0307 ext. 388, fax. +(1-416) 595 0242

Anita Franklin is co-director of the Centre for Narrative Practice in Manchester, UK. She also teaches at Sheffield University in the areas of Gender Studies and Community Development.

Nancy Gray lives and works in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, where she has been engaged in responding to violence and abuse using narrative practices. She can be contacted via email: nancylouisegray@yahoo.ca

Heather Johnson lives in Toronto and has worked in schools as a social worker for the past 15 years. Heather enjoys working with the diverse population of Toronto. She is particularly interested in helping to create possibilities within the school setting to help the system to notice alternative and hopeful stories about students, families and communities.

Mimi Kim is a second-generation Korean American working on issues of violence against women for the past twenty years. She is a national steering committee member of the Asian & Pacific Islander Domestic Violence Institute and a founding member of Incite! Women of Color against Violence where she has been working collectively with women of color nationally and internationally to create community-based solutions to violence. Mimi is the Founder and Executive Director of Creative Interventions, a resource center supporting community-based interventions to domestic violence and other forms of intimate violence based in Oakland, California. She is also a program consultant for Shimtuh: Korean Domestic Violence Program, an Oakland-based program which she co-founded in 2000. When she really needs to make some noise, she drums with Jamaesori, a Korean women's drumming (pung'mul) group. Mimi can be contacted c/o Creative Interventions, 1904 Franklin Street, #200, Oakland, CA 94612 USA. phone: +(1-510) 452 8595, website: www.creative-interventions.org email: mimi@creative-interventions.org

Mercedes Martinez is a Mexican psychologist and family therapist interested in narrative ideas and practices. She is currently living in Melbourne working with men and women from diverse cultural backgrounds around issues of family violence. Mercedes can be contacted via Dulwich Centre Publications.

Djapirri Mununggirritj lives in Yirrkala in Arnhem Land, Australia, and is a member of the Community Patrol that operates each night in Yirrkala and Gunyangara. For more information about the work of this community patrol, contact Djapirri at The Yirrkala Women's Centre, email: yirrkalawrc@bigpond.com

Aya Okumura is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker in California. She works as a private practice therapist and also works as a medical social worker at a clinic in San Francisco. You can contact Aya via email: aya_narrative@hotmail.com

Mary Pekin lives in Canberra, Australia, and works at Relationships Australia helping people to enjoy their relationships. She is a 52 year old woman, who lives with her partner Drew, and their cat Lil. She can be contacted c/o mpekin@gmail.com

Ruth Pluznick lives and works in Canada. She is Director of Clinical Services at Oolagen Community Services, a community-based children's mental health centre in Toronto where narrative ideas and practices inform the directions of programs and services for youth and families of diverse cultures, race and gender relations. Ruth is also a founding member and faculty for The Narrative Therapy Centre of Toronto. Ruth is deeply committed to principles of social justice in her work and life. Ruth can be contacted c/o ruthpluznick@rogers.com

Julie Sach is a counsellor working in private practice in Tauranga, New Zealand. She also works part-time for a family violence service facilitating groups for women who are/have been in abusive relationships. She is very interested in using narrative ideas in group work contexts. Julie can be contacted at Adelaide House, 79 Welcome Bay Rd, Tauranga, New Zealand, website: www.adelaidehousecounselling.co.nz, phone +(64-7) 5441754, email: sach@xtra.co.nz

Maisa Said-Albis is a narrative therapist living in Toronto, providing therapy, consultation and training through her private practice. Prior to that, she worked with children, young persons and their families in the areas of sexual abuse, community support and day and residential programs. Maisa's work has been informed by her interest in uncovering and deconstructing the various manifestations of power relations, and the privileging of kindness and respect. You can contact Maisa via email: m.said.albis@sympatico.ca

Taimalieutu Kiwi Tamasese is Co-ordinator of the Pacific Section of The Family Centre. She specialises in family research as this applies to the Pacific nations and to Pacific people – for example in relation to mental health, poverty, housing, unemployment, cultural and gender deprivation. In relation to social policy analysis, Kiwi is engaged in the development of new social policy perspectives emanating from various Pacific cultural rationalities. She is also concerned with the impact of government policy decisions on the Pacific Sector of New Zealand society. Further areas of her work include: documenting and analysing the effects of cultural dislocation upon the Pacific community in New Zealand; a focus upon Pacific youth; and patterns of migration to New Zealand from the Pacific. Kiwi is regularly contracted to speak and advise in areas of applied social policy at national and international levels. You can contact Taimalieutu Kiwi by email: tamasese.k@fc.org.nz

Angela Tsun On-kee is a narrative practitioner from Hong Kong. Together with other narrative practitioners, they are exploring the ideas and concepts in Chinese contexts. Angela can be contacted c/o oktsun@hkbu.edu.hk

Manja Visschedijk can be contacted at the YWCA of Canberra Community Services, Ph: +(61-2) 6239 6878 or by email: manja.visschedijk@ywca-canberra.org.au

Genna Ward can be contacted at the University of Canberra Health and Counselling Centre, phone: +(61-2) 6201 2351or by email: genna.ward@canberra.edu.au

Angel Yuen lives and works in Canada where she is a founding member and faculty member of the Narrative Therapy Centre of Toronto (NTC). She is also currently working in schools and in an independent practice. Angel has a particular interest in working with children, young people and women from diverse communities who are responding to trauma. Angel's contact information is available at the NTC website at: www.narrativetherapycentre.com

Cheryl White is the founder of Dulwich Centre Publications where she works as publisher, editor, training co-ordinator, conference host and initiator of projects. She is also a Co-Director of Dulwich Centre. Cheryl is particularly interested in finding ways to support practitioners who are working in difficult and challenging contexts such as within war zones and in developing countries. She has recently launched the Dulwich Centre Institute of Community Practice which is dedicated to the development of community approaches and narrative forms of psychosocial support.

Margaret Yunupingu lives in Gunyangara in Arnhem Land and is a member of the Community Patrol that operates each night in Yirrkala and Gunyangara. For more information about the work of this community patrol, contact Djapirri Mununggirritj at The Yirrkala Women's Centre, email: yirrkalawrc@bigpond.com

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