

Responding to women in prison who have used interpersonal violence:

a narrative approach disrupting binaries

by Jill Faulkner

I locate myself in the world as an intersectional feminist and prison abolitionist. I experience my life as having been shaped by multiple social locations including colonial settlement, both in my country of birth, Aotearoa, and in Australia on the lands of its First Nations peoples. Colonial settlement has produced accounts of women through patriarchal discourses that have shaped my and other women's experiences of interpersonal and systemic discrimination and abuse embodied in gender inequalities. Heteronormative narratives have othered LGBT, queer and nonbinary communities. Capitalism ensures that, like many other women, my future as I age remains less predictable, less sustainable. These social locations are not experienced as discrete accounts of my life, but as cumulative experiences over time that inform my participation in the world.

Many women in prison face multiple oppressions that intersect. They are experienced not singly but as a single synthesised experience (Crenshaw, 1991). Women who have been incarcerated have lived experiences of early abuse and trauma, poverty, violence as an adult and systemic racist discrimination. Prisons are not spaces of healing. Instead, they continue experiences of violence, abuse, subjugation and oppression. The prison–industrial complex appears to be the preferred approach to issues of poverty, homelessness, victimisation and systemic racism, continuing injustice for women, in particular Aboriginal women who are the fastest growing group of incarcerated people.

This chapter explores conversations I have shared with women in prison. These women have both used and been subjected to interpersonal violence. In this context, it has been important to find ways to make the operations of power visible. It is my contention that some of this power is concealed and contained in binary constructions of sex, gender, race and class, and that disrupting binary constructions makes it possible to reclaim the complexity of women's lives. It is my hope that these conversations can invite a shared interest in exploring a practice of examining, disrupting, shifting and dismantling the deep historical and structural systems of interlocking violence and oppression that are connected to interpersonal violence.

The following accounts of one-to-one and group work demonstrate my efforts to track the effects of power in naturalised binaries that are constituting of women's experiences. In these therapeutic conversations, I am alert to the ways social norms of gender produce interpersonal violence in women's lives. I am listening for how the labelling of women as 'perpetrators' is connected to the contexts of women's lives through experiences of sexism, poverty, race and class. For many women in prison, their offending is directly related to resisting the violence of men. Women's use of resistive violence challenges paternalistic notions of women as non-aggressive and shapes the criminal justice system's response to women who 'offend' gender norms (Sudbury, 2016, p. 17). Women with histories of early childhood violence and abuse often find

that alcohol and drugs mediate the overwhelming emotional distress related to early abusive experiences. Naming these behaviours as effects of patriarchal violence and abuse provides possibilities for illuminating previously subordinated storylines. Enactments of violence in women's lives are linked to broader operations of social and state power. In drawing these links and working to disrupt binary ways of thinking, I invite women to see their own experiences as linked to a broader collective project that reveals violence as a social, rather than individual, issue (Denborough, 2013).

Women exiting prison

The work described in this chapter emerged through multiple conversations with women in the prison system. I was meeting with them because they had indicated that they wanted to 'get over' their trauma. This cohort of women has often been invisible to the human services system. Many manage the traumatic effects of their past experiences, and the dislocation involved in experiences of feeling invisible in their communities, by accessing hospital emergency departments or mental health services during crisis episodes. The women inevitably disengaged once the critical moment had passed, slipping into the shadows away from the social gaze. Women who have resisted or responded to violence in ways that do not fit with social notions of the 'good victim' are often redefined as the problem or misidentified as the perpetrator. As such, they are even less likely to receive assistance (Russo, 2019).

An element of my role was to link women, after their release, into a network of feminist services. The services I referred these women to are generally centre based and accessed through structured appointments. This arrangement did not enhance accessibility for this group: women exiting prison often become homeless and must deal with multiple requirements from community corrections to attend services and courses to prepare them to be 'good citizens'. This makes it difficult to

get to appointments. Psychological discourses of ‘client readiness’ and requirements that ‘complicating issues of drug use and mental health instability’ be dealt with before the commencement of any ‘therapeutic’ work further inhibit access. These women and the conditions of their lives challenge notions of emotional and physical safety that trauma professionals often hold to be prerequisites for the work.

More broadly, the programs developed by community corrections and funded services to address the needs of people leaving prison are generally gender-neutral in approach and premised on notions of individual pathology, criminogenic behaviour and responsibility, with an intense focus on monitoring and changing the individual’s behaviour, often under the guise of a trauma-informed approach. Research has consistently noted profound differences in the gendered experiences of female and male people who have offended (Steffensmeier & Allan, 1996, p. 460). Many women with experiences of incarceration live on the social and economic margins, struggling to survive and often engaging in a lifestyle that brings them into contact with the criminal justice system. Many have survived childhood sexual abuse, sexual assault and family violence. These experiences are often precursors to addiction, mental health issues and criminality. Many women report that their pathway into drug use, prostitution and crime began with running away in their early teenage years to escape family violence and sexual abuse. This early and continuing history of abuse often precipitates long-term physical and mental health problems (Covington, 2003). For many women, their criminalised behaviour represents multiple experiences of violation, abuse, subjugation and oppression by family members, partners and institutions including the police and the health care system. In my experience, women consistently speak about the absence of justice and healing for their herstories of harm, and this is reflected in research (Iman, Fullwood, & Paz, 2009).

In order to invite a hearing of the experiences of these women’s lives, I provided a presentation to the Victorian Government at the invitation of the Inclusion and Diversity Unit of Family Safety Victoria. Women

in prison requested that I incorporate the following points in order to illuminate some of their experience.

‘Leaving prison is not easy’

The needs of women exiting prison are multimodal, and often their mental distress becomes more severe and crisis oriented on their release. Women exiting prison are often overwhelmed by the complexity of transitioning into the community.

‘Without accommodation our choices are sex work or returning to violence or the drug dealer’

Most women exiting prison have two to four nights’ accommodation in a motel and then need to present at homelessness services. Effectively, most women become homeless after their release. Many have relationships with drugs. Many have been responding to severe violence prior to incarceration and have comorbid presentations of mental health distress that often become more severe as they transition into unpredictability and poverty. The Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence (2016, p. 239) found that 80% of women incarcerated in Victoria had histories of childhood abuse, sexual abuse, teenage and adult experiences of family violence with direct links to drug and alcohol use and offending behaviour. The royal commission acknowledged the absence of research findings on programs for women in prison who had ‘perpetrated’ violence (Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence, 2016, p. 246). I was employed to implement programs for these women and to use these programs to build the research evidence.

Binary positions

The family violence sector, and related services such as the mental health and drug and alcohol systems, use the terms ‘victim’ and ‘perpetrator’ to position people affected by violence. This positioning is problematic in several ways. Violence is primarily an act – often a pattern of coercive and abusive acts – not a static, permanent identity or way of being

(Hyden, Gadd, & Wade, 2016). It also presents the categories of victim and perpetrator as distinct and mutually exclusive. When people have both used and been subject to interpersonal violence, the system is not structured to address this complexity. This necessitates 'an ongoing reflexive analysis of the multiplicity of individual identities and the interlocking nature of systems of privilege and oppression when disrupting simplistic, normative binary thinking' (Ristock, 2005, p. 68). The essentialist nature of binary descriptions of women's identities provides categories of identity that are totalising and often experienced as fixed, concealing an understanding of identity as multi-storied and a product of the ongoing negotiation of multiple subjectivities (Denborough, 2008). An integral part of social justice work is building the capacity to identify, question, interrupt and resist such binary thinking.

Binaries have a hierarchal structure in which the 'superior' term gets its superiority in direct relationship with the 'inferior' term. Male/female, white/non-white and victim/perpetrator are examples of this. Ravenscroft (2012) discussed how the race binary reinstates the superiority of the settler and coloniser through their naming of 'the Aboriginal' as inferior and giving no space for the naming of the settler self. The privilege contained in the capacity to name the 'other' is the privilege to create reality. This binary logic exponentially magnifies the power of the superior term (Crenshaw, 1991). The social construction of racial binaries establishes people who are classified white as educated, modern and in control of their own bodies, with the freedom to make their own decisions. People classified as non-white are established as inferior and are more likely to be associated with criminality (Russo, 2019). This structure of thinking has concrete effects. Currently, the greatest increasing cohort in prisons is Aboriginal women, who are generally serving remand in prison because they cannot meet the bail conditions for low-level crimes. People seen as deviating from the binary order can be subject to different forms of discrimination. Queerness and gender non-conformity are often conflated in the eyes of society with pathology and criminology (Russo, 2019). Violence against these groups

is often minimised within criminal justice systems and the people themselves blamed (Merry, 2006). This is the violence of binaries.

Crenshaw (1991) noted that in the absence of noticing the way power circulates in these binaries, we fail to see how multiple layers of identity can amplify and complicate the experience of a problem. Patricia Hill Collins (1990) noted that lack of recognition of intersectionality leads to the erasure of people and their identities. Poststructuralist feminism places emphasis on the plurality of women's experiences and destabilises universal norms of womanhood (Russell & Carey, 2004). Many women in prison face multiple intersecting oppressions that are organised around structural, disciplinary, hegemonic and interpersonal domains of power. Binaries operate to keep structural inequities in place, one relying on the other to maintain the superior/inferior positionings. The power of the binary is that it becomes a lens through which we interpret ourselves and the world. Based in essentialist thinking, the dichotomised binary appears as a 'truth'; it is naturalised rather than recognised as having been made through culture.

Many women in the prison system are responding to multiple enactments of violence in their lives: interpersonal violence through families and partners; the violence of the state through the criminal justice system; the operations of systemic power that establishes the conditions for violence between women who are incarcerated; the violence of services in acts of regulation and exclusion; the violence of the medical system's pathologising of women's lives without consideration of the social conditions that shape them; the criminalisation of women who live in poverty; the violence of binaries that are produced through gendered, racialised and class-based ideologies (Allard, 2016). These multiple enactments of violence produced through an adherence to binary thinking are often experienced by women in terms of individual failure and responsibility. The rigid fixities of binaries locate problems within individuals, limiting possibilities for transforming oppressive and violent behaviours through recourse to the wider contexts that produce them.

In the conversations I hold with women in the prison system, I seek to map the effects of violence in their lives using tools from narrative practice to identify and disrupt binary thinking. I hope to open possibilities for women to experience alternative territories in their lives – territories that counter the multiple negative identity conclusions produced by these operations of power. The following is an example of this practice: the story of my meetings with Raelene.

Raelene

Raelene was an older woman who had found herself in prison for the first time. As frequently occurs, her crime had been reported in the media, which meant she had been subjected to a range of comments, questions and insults. Raelene had requested counselling to support her as she waited for the court to determine her sentence.

When Raelene and I met for the first time, we spent the first part of the session talking about ideas of safety and how we might structure safety in our conversations. Raelene said that she would not want to talk about certain times in her life, including what had happened to bring her to prison. She said she was more interested in talking about what was going on now so that she could ‘get through’ day to day. I asked her how she might let me know if any of my questions did not feel helpful. She responded that she would tell me that she didn’t want to talk about those things. I suggested that navigating safety is something that we might see as an ongoing project that might change over time. Raelene agreed and spoke about having to think about safety in the compound, and how this changed depending on who was around. I asked about the effects of this vigilance. She responded that she had been well trained in ‘watching over my shoulder’. I asked her what she would do if she were to support other women to manage their safety in the compound. Raelene responded with a range of skills that included: walking with your head up, finding safe spaces like the library where you could be busy and out of the way of gossip and prison politics, and learning to notice people’s

facial expressions because they could be an indication that care is needed, but also recognising that they might be about the person's inner world.

The collaborative process of structuring safety was a way of addressing relations of power within the therapeutic relationship and the different positions we each held in the prison system. If I stop noticing my power and privilege I may transgress. The idea that safety is not fixed but relational speaks to the dynamic construction of experience through complex interactions (Bird, 2004). It begins a second-story development founded on rich descriptions of skills and knowledges of 'being safe'.

Raelene was named in the prison system as an offender. In our first session together, I wanted to create the possibility of exploring other identity conclusions that would provide an alternative territory from which to explore the effects of the dominant story in future sessions. I was interested in beginning to understand the politics of the dominant story in Raelene's life. Holding a poststructuralist understanding of identity as multi-storied (Thomas, 2002), I was listening for dominant constructions of identity, and for ways this might relate to binaries that are shaped by hegemonic patriarchal understandings. I also wanted to listen for moments that might prove to be exceptions or sparks of resistance to this dominant story.

I asked Raelene what I might learn about her if I had a long time to get to know her. She responded with stories of her career and family, her passion for art and reading. She was delighted to hear that we shared many passions and that we had both worked in settings where people struggle against broader structures of oppression. She spoke about what she had been taught by the many different people she had supported. We shared laughter and a feeling of connection that was co-constructed in shared understandings of women's experiences. Women who have enacted interpersonal violence are often perceived as disrupting cultural representations of femininity (Yuen & White, 2007). In asking Raelene about what I might learn about her if I had months to get to know her, I was also exploring ways to contest binary notions of the feminine and of the perpetrator.

Raelene had been managing being in the prison environment by minding her own business, spending time in the library, taking care to eat as healthily as possible and walking all the time, doing many circuits of the compound during the day and evening. Recently, a person in her unit had threatened her because she often retired to her room after dinner to watch the news and this had been perceived as ‘snooty and stuck up’. Raelene felt that she could hold her ground; however, the campaign against her increased with insinuations and loud threats about would be done to her when no-one was looking.

As I listened to Raelene describing her current problem, I noted that she cast herself in the role of ‘perpetrator’. The assumptions that flow from this totalising categorisation had been active in shaping Raelene’s identity in prison. Raelene said that she understood that she needed to ‘earn’ her right to be returned to the community one day: ‘after all, I am a criminal’.

Raelene also disclosed that she had been having nightmares about times in her childhood. She would wake up in a sweat with her heart racing. She quietly wondered whether parts of her childhood that she had pushed away were making an appearance but said, ‘today is not the day for remembering those things. I can’t think about the distant past until I have been sentenced’. She also told me about a long-remembered dream about her affinity with birds in flight and how, when she felt troubled, she would imagine herself lifting off from the swamplands and gracefully riding the currents of the wind, out of reach. Transforming into a bird of flight in her mind had helped her flee early experiences of violence. I asked what she might call this practice of survivorship. She named it ‘flights of fancy’.

The criminal justice system cannot solve problems of social inequality and oppression. Instead, prisons are sites where intersections of state violence and interpersonal violence, shaped by patriarchal norms, are internalised and played out (Hudson, 2006). I was interested in considering the sociopolitical context of the bullying Raelene had been experiencing. I asked what she had noticed about the ways that

bullying behaviour liked to operate. She responded that she imagined that bullying had ideas about being 'better than others', being 'at the top of the pile' and being able to control others, and said that it was good at manipulating people. I asked Raelene what effect this bullying behaviour had on her. She reflected that it had separated her from others and brought embarrassment and feelings of shame. This had resulted in her feeling small and isolated in ways that she had experienced as a child. 'These feelings of smallness have been around forever', she said. I wondered aloud whether these ideas of domination and making people feel small and not good enough might be connected to ideas about superiority and domination that have been normalised in society. Raelene asked, 'are you talking about patriarchy?' I smiled and agreed, asking her what she knew about the effects of patriarchal ideas. Raelene responded that her father had used these ideas of superiority and men's ownership and control of women and children to hurt both her mother and her. She spoke about her father's idea that women amount to nothing, and how she had managed to finally escape this when she was 16 years old. She added that 'this is why I know so much about how to quietly find my way through'.

Raelene had spent many years 'finding the gaps' when her father was home. She took care that the younger children were 'out of his way'. I asked her whether there was anyone who would have noticed these acts of care for others. Raelene smiled and said a teacher had noticed her drawings of her siblings and invited her to Sunday lunches where she was able to read books and draw. This gave her respite from life at home. Raelene said that the teacher never mentioned knowing what was occurring in Raelene's family, but she would always give Raelene something to take home for her mother. I asked whether her teacher would be surprised to learn that Raelene had continued her commitment to caring for others and that she was still active in caring for women having hard times, even though this was frowned on by the corrections officers. Raelene replied that 'my teacher wouldn't be surprised, and in fact I made this my career'. We went on to talk about the other abilities

and skills that Raelene had brought to her career. In this session Raelene had not wanted to talk about the abuses of her past. However, I was still able to draw out her skills and knowledges for surviving patriarchal violence. These skills had a long history and were embedded in skilful practices like embarking on ‘flights of fancy’, which she valued and practised often. I was drawn to her practices of care in what was at times a hostile environment. This spoke to the values and ethics that provided her with a foundation for living and for her work with others.

Sometime later, as an outcome of Raelene’s initiative, we were able to spend more time together. She explained that she had been subjected to further bullying and harassment, including by the staff, and that she was looking for someone to remind her that she was ‘sane’ and not paranoid. The staff held institutional ideas that criminal behaviour was an individual pathology (Covington, 2003) and Raelene was fearful that the system wanted to make her mad because that would explain her criminal behaviour.

The following is a therapeutic document that I wrote to Raelene following this visit. The document provided an opportunity for additional witnessing of Raelene’s preferred identity conclusions, which were in danger of being problematised and pathologised through the institutional gaze. The letter was designed to provide a portal into alternative storylines that at this point were barely visible to Raelene (see White, 2007).

Dear Raelene,

It was lovely to see you looking so well, albeit within the constraints that surround you, both seen and unseen! I have marvelled at your ingenuity in activating the system to be able to at least facilitate a further conversation between you and me – no mean feat! It had me thinking what an advantage it is to be a ‘thin liner’ for whom the ink and the rules are not so indelible and who can create space for manoeuvring! I am sure there is a long history of thin line activities that you have engaged in. I would love to know more about these and their history.

I have been feeling very honoured that you felt I would be able to stand with you against the multiple transgressions that have continued to occur. These enactments of power can be readily spotted by someone who has had to become well trained in responding to abuse – they require a survivor’s eye. Unfortunately, others may minimise, conceal or down-play these acts and hand them back as if the responsibility belongs to those resisting violence within systems.

The idea that a football kicked at you is ‘better than a smack in the ears’ does not fit with safety and respectful relationships but is part of a patriarchal enactment of violence towards you as a woman. So easily it appears that when those in power are blind to these enactments, a woman’s safety can be eroded. I don’t believe that standing against this type of violence is being ‘too sensitive’. When those in authority move towards protecting those who perpetrate violence against others in this way it leaves you ‘having to be a bit plucky’ for yourself. I am glad that your practices of being plucky for others are now being used to stand up for yourself. When taking a stand against these behaviours is translated as ‘you seem to be holding on’, an unspoken culture of forgetting these transgressions grows. It must have left you feeling quite alone when the corrections officer further excused this person’s behaviour, saying ‘what do you expect when we throw you lot all together?’

One of the knowledges that experiences of oppression and violence creates is a strong perception of threats to our safety. This means we are especially attuned to these violations. For many women for whom stories of pain and suffering shape their experiences in the world, things like strip searches or being forced to urinate in front of others can push us into spaces where feelings can become overwhelming, often carrying the intensity of early experiences. I am sorry that your refusal was not understood in the context of previous traumatic experiences. I am imagining

that to then learn that refusal means you get written up as having produced a positive test must have felt like a further injustice. These ways of controlling others erode safety and trust in much the same way as other abuses in our lives.

I am reminded that you stated clearly to the officer: 'I am going now', and the response was: 'you are shouting at me'. How quickly things get elevated to the level of a transgression and then incur punishment such as taking your walks away. There are many unspoken messages in this treatment of you, which is aimed at controlling your behaviour and makes this 'a very dangerous place', as you described it.

I was deeply touched when you spoke about the medication that you are expected to take as part of your rehabilitation, and how you have continued to manage this on your own. I have a growing awareness of how much you have shouldered over many years as you have tried to protect people in your family, in your work and in the prison. Rather than seeing your refusal of the medication as defiance, it seems that your wisdom is standing alongside you, bringing an awareness of the possibility of becoming dependent on the medication. There are many knowledges and skills about recovery and punishment and what leads to a reparative and healing journey, and I wondered whether we might think together about ways to build on your innovations to bring ideas like trauma recovery to the people holding power in institutions. I wonder what knowing this might make possible for other women.

Travel well through your week.

Standing with you as a witness, respectfully,

Jill

Through this therapeutic letter, my intention was to make visible the enactments of violence that Raelene was responding to. Positioning myself as an ally, I was working to counteract the institution's pathologising of

Raelene's behaviour. In naming patriarchal violence and the tactics of violence against women embedded in behaviours of silencing and 'not noticing', I sought to ensure that Raelene was not positioned as the problem. I was aware that positions of power in the prison context impart not only a sense of the entitlement to objectify someone, but also a lack of consequences for those enacting harm. I wanted to address this as a social issue rather than allowing it to pass as an individualised problem that Raelene might internalise as evidence of not measuring up. My use of the term 'trauma recovery' was used cautiously. I am conscious that trauma is a term that conflates experiences of violation, oppression and subjugation and can invite people into a belief that the problem is in their brain via discourses of neuroscience and psychology. Raelene had shared that in prison it felt safer to speak of 'trauma' rather than of having been sexually abused as a child so I mirrored this language in the letter.

Raelene's efforts to humanise the prison continued as she resisted acts of violence against her. This disrupted identity constructions embedded in descriptions of women as passive and neutral, and assumptions about women as perpetrators. We were able to engage in what Denborough (2008) has described as considering the person as representing a social issue. For Raelene, this enabled her to feel connected to a collective endeavour to address women's experiences of violence in prison.

Reflecting on my conversations with Raelene and other women in prison, a recurrent theme has been the opening of space for women who have used interpersonal violence to be able to acknowledge and heal from violence, abuse and subjugations that they have been subjected to in the past. This is critical in moving towards a collective concern and commitment to refrain from using violence against others. It involves a rich description of the effects of the dominant narratives of women's lives, and deconstructing fixed and dichotomised identity conclusions produced through the violence of binaries. It involves identifying values, beliefs and commitments that support alternative stories that enable the women to acknowledge the harm they have done to others. This is made possible through offering experiences that allow an understanding

of the self as socially constructed through broader social, political and cultural discourses. Women come to see their own and other's suffering as linked to power, control, poverty, racism and sexism, which interact with structures in society.

In my work with Raelene, consideration needed to be given to the violence that she had enacted. I have noticed in conversations with women in prison that because they have been identified as a 'perpetrator', and culturally women are trained to take responsibility, they readily speak about the harm they have caused. This has not been my experience in working with men who have used violence. Over time I have developed an approach in which I ask women if it's okay to hear more about their family, their siblings, the kind of things they did as a family, how school was for them and whether drugs or alcohol or violence had shaped their family life. Inevitably, stories of abuse are told. I then ask how these experiences shaped them as a teenager. I weave connections across time, listening for dominant, problem-saturated stories and for alternative storylines. This allows me to witness the injustice of women's lives as a foundation for later addressing the harm they have enacted. In these ways I seek to open landscapes of identity that are multi-storied and contest totalising constructions of women as 'perpetrators'. I also locate individual actions within broader operations of gendered violence, racism, classism and poverty.

From individual conversations to a group-work program

When I was contracted to respond to incarcerated women's use of interpersonal violence, I wanted to find ways to support women to renegotiate their relationships with anger and violence. A poststructuralist approach enabled me to stand aside from the idea that anger can be treated as a discrete identity that can be managed through taught skills. I was interested, instead, in bringing into view the complexities of women's lives, both historically and currently. In my work with women in prison, I have consistently heard women speak about their use of

interpersonal violence in the context of past and current interpersonal violence. This complex relationship with violence is not acknowledged by services and disappears in the criminal justice system, with the law of provocation as a partial defence to murder having been abolished in Victoria in 2005. In many ways, I hoped that a program that attended to early experiences of violence and abuse might create possibilities for experiences of justice and being heard in ways that had not been present in women's lives. Denborough (2013) wrote of the possibilities for narrative approaches to address diverse concepts of justice. In considering narrative practices to resist binaries, I have been interested in the links between justice, healing and reparation. This, I believe, emerges out of a collective project of women sharing experiences (Hung & Denborough, 2013; Denborough, 2013).

Women's stories confirmed that their anger and use of violence was less likely to be driven by a sense of being entitled to harm and control another, as commonly characterises men's violence, and more likely to be used as a defence or resistance; an act of protection or anguish in the face of the abuse and violence they have been subjected to (Yuen & White, 2007). Experiences of responding to violence and harming others are not mutually exclusive. They are often an expression of what has been cherished and lost, which speaks to values and beliefs that open alternative storylines. The commonality of these experiences raised questions about how to approach work with women who have used interpersonal violence. I did not want to 'shut down' a form of anger that may have held legitimacy in the context of the women's lives – that may have been keeping them safe.

As I moved to extend the one-to-one conversations I had been having with women like Raelene into a new program of group work, I was alert to the possibilities of reproducing relations of power when working with women in prison. The co-facilitator of the group and I held a commitment to practicing in ways that are transformative of the social injustices inherent in the prison-industrial system, which is maintained through the creation of a culture of punishment and control (Fricker,

2007). Hare-Mustin (1994) argued that therapists are often engaged in activities of social control rather than effecting social change: therapy has the capacity to operate as a normalising activity. To avoid this possibility, we wanted to engage in practices of active listening in which the facilitators would not be at the centre. Such decentring practices can produce another kind of belonging: a belonging not conditioned on my own centrality (Russo, 2019).

Accountability

It was important that our commitment to transformative practices was held to account through an ethical framework and practices of collective responsibility (Reynolds, 2010). Hare-Mustin's (1994) work reminds us that both men and women participate in dominant discourses, including those relating to gender. bell hooks (2006) stated that no-one is exempt from the influence of patriarchy, which can be enacted by any of us. All too frequently, as Russo (2019, p. 1) stated, 'our praxis reproduces the power dynamics we are seeking to change'. To support me in bringing accountability to this work, I sought a community of practice that would meet regularly to build a culture of critique and hold extending conversations about the complexity of working with women who have used interpersonal violence and who have also been subjected to the violence, harm and subjugation of others. There were four members of the group, each with a different therapeutic orientation.

We used a series of questions to guide our conversations. These questions were influenced by questions posed by Aimee Carrillo Rowe in her book *Power Lines* (2008):

- When I'm speaking with someone who experiences structural oppression, in what ways might I perpetuate that oppression?
- How do I seek restorative action to redress the oppression I have enacted?

- What are some of the ideas produced by gender and racial binaries that I have grown up with?
- How do I disrupt the structures of binary thinking in which I have been raised?
- How are my own ‘power lines’ connected to structures of privilege and oppression?
- Whose wellbeing is essential to my own?
- Whose survival must be overlooked in order to connect to power in the ways that I do?
- How enmeshed am I in the systems we seek to change? For example, the carceral logic of guilt/innocence?
- As a practitioner speaking with women in prison, in what ways am I at risk of reproducing structural impositions of power?

The hope was that these ethical questions would support movement towards cultural humility in work with women in prison, and that the community of practice would provide an accountability structure that would hold my intentions for the work: to be generative of respect, knowing that power and privilege must be subjected to constant scrutiny in order to notice the struggles of others. These conversations continue as part of an ‘imperfect project’, and serve to hold me to account for my power and privilege in the work I undertake.

Inviting participation

My co-facilitators and I invited women interested in a program addressing women’s use of interpersonal violence to join us in a focus group to be held in the prison. Eighteen women attended. The questions we were to discuss were subjected to the gaze of the Department of Justice, which articulated some key elements that we were to treat as essential to the delivery of programs for ‘perpetrators’: ‘perpetrators’ must be held accountable and kept in view at all times’ and ‘collusion with

perpetrators is not to be tolerated'. Keeping these directives in mind, we planned and guided our exploratory focus group conversation.

Before putting questions to the group, we presented the following explanation of the purpose of our meeting:

We understand that over 80% of women in prison were harmed as children or suffered partner and family violence as adults, and that these experiences often lead to behaviours that harm both ourselves and others.

Groups for women who have used violence have not been run in many places in the world. We want to work together to make sure we shape the group we are planning in ways that are helpful, healing and support you in gaining skills to manage your lives. It is important to us that those who join the group become co-researchers so that we can find out what works and pass this knowledge on to others. In many ways you will be shaping the path not only for new possibilities in your future but for many other women and, importantly, all our children.

Some of the questions we ask may not be relevant to you personally, but we encourage you to think about other people you know and to share your thoughts and ideas.

After this preamble, we posed a series of questions:

- When you were growing up, what were the ideas in your family about gender?
- What do you think these ideas made possible for you and how did these ideas limit you?
- What is the most important role you have in the world? What would help you or support you to fulfil this role in the way you want to?
- When you think about the kind of person you want to be in the world, how is this different to who you are now and what do you feel needs to change?

- If you think about times when you've acted in ways that have harmed others, what would be helpful to understand or know more about so that you can do things differently in the future?
- Is there past hurt that constantly sabotages or gets in the way of who you want to be in the world?
- What might you want to know more about to make your hopes and dreams for a different life on your release come true?

Some of the ensuing discussion was captured in a therapeutic letter to those who participated. It was read to the women three weeks later in the first session of our group-work series. All the women who had attended the focus group chose to participate.

To each of you who attended the focus group, I want to thank you for the care and thought you brought to our meeting. These were hard questions and I was touched by the way you looked out for other women in your responses, checking to make sure that everyone's voice was heard. I wondered about how you had found ways to hold on to these practices of respect in prison, where the value of making space for everyone's voice is not so alive.

Many of you spoke of wanting to learn more about your anger, and there were stories about how anger had taken hold of your lives in ways that both terrorised you and had you terrified of the harm that you could do. I wondered what your concern about this said about each of you and what is important to you in moving forward in your life. It had me thinking about values of wanting to do no harm, a position against violence. I look forward to hearing more of your ideas about this.

Since our conversation, I have been thinking about anger and how it can lead to the use of violence. I wondered what might be made possible if, as a group, we were to explore the times when

anger is most often around, and what anger might tell us if it had a voice. Many women have spoken to me about how their anger has become a flag that something is unfair or unjust. I heard you speak about how anger had led to ways of controlling others. I also heard ethics of care and responsibility. I would like for us to more richly explore these in our time together.

I heard many of you speak about your yearning for belonging and reconnection with families and children, and a desire to learn more about how you might do this in different ways – how you might live lives with ‘more respect’ and ‘make good’ the harm you have caused. These sentiments struck me as standing for responsibility. I have been thinking about what others in your families might say if they could hear about these commitments and the hopes that you are holding as you begin working with this group.

It was an emotional conversation in which many spoke about what they had learnt about being a woman in their family. There were stories of hardship and painful experiences, including abuse by fathers, brothers and uncles. I heard that, for many, these experiences were accompanied by memories of feeling disconnected, alone and angry. I am sorry that, for so many, suffering shaped your lives as children. I am interested in learning more about your skills of survival in hard and abusive times. I have been thinking about what these skills might make possible for your journey in this program, in which we will look at the stories of your past and address both your own healing and the pain and hurt that we have caused others. I am imagining that as your knowledges are shared in the group, they will become a powerful resource for each of us.

A program for women who have used interpersonal violence is a new undertaking for us. I have been holding an idea that you might think about being a co-researcher with us as we run the

program, helping us to ensure that the program is travelling in ways that are helpful to each of you, and that we are speaking in ways that are meaningful and support a journey that fits with your values and hopes for your future.

In these ways we will be creating a path for other women.

Warmly,
Jill

The women were excited about the idea of joining us as co-researchers in developing our understanding of the experiences of women in prison. Bird (2004) described the search for an explanation whenever something in our lives goes wrong. People with histories of traumatic violence and abuse can end this search with an unresolvable conclusion that they are bad. Such life-defining ‘truths’ gather strength whenever they are confirmed in several locations, such as family and significant societal institutions. Responses that echoed this pattern shaped our ideas about the group, prompting a focus on co-creating different landscapes of identity before inviting stories about hurt and pain.

Within the constraints of the prison-industrial complex, opportunities were set up to gather the women’s thoughts on the challenges they encountered in the group learnings and on what could be done differently. This included setting up a postbox in which women could anonymously leave comments during or after sessions, and a canvas that collected pictures and comments about what had caught participants’ attention during the program. At the end of each group meeting, we invited reflection on the ideas and activities that the women had enjoyed, and any they felt needed to be changed. Each woman also attended a one-to-one session, during which her comments on the program were elicited. A focus group with an external evaluator was a further opportunity to capture the women’s thoughts about their experience of the group, and about what worked well and what might be changed.

Conclusion

In working to address women's use of violence, I have been struck by the injustice of the serious harms done to women, and how recognising the absence of this narrative in women's use of interpersonal violence offers a starting point to disrupt binary positions of perpetrator/victim. These conversations support women to notice the effects of sexism and patriarchal ideas that are informed by the gender binary, and enable the naming of ways in which women have responded to or resisted such effects. I name the operations of power in ways that support people like Raelene to feel 'sane'. As women notice the effects of these ideas in their lives, and how they produce and legitimise men's entitlement to use violence and abuse in the subjugation of women and children, further stories of resistance and survival become available. Connecting small acts of resistance to a broader story of injustice becomes possible through exploration of ways people have been harmed and how they have responded to and resisted violence and abuse. Tracking women's resistance enables meaning to be made of their behaviour in ways that contest binary notions of female passivity. We see actions that are consistent with people's values and commitments for their lives. Importantly, we understand that people are always seeking safety (Reynolds, 2010). Documenting women's resistance supports them to move from binary notions of individual deficit to locating their experiences within patriarchal structures as a social issue.

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I want to express my heartfelt respect for the women who continue to find ways to resist the overwhelm of a system that has failed to provide care and justice.

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