

**FAMILY VIOLENCE:
THE IMPORTANCE IN
PRACTICE OF MEN'S
BEHAVIOUR CHANGE
PROGRAMS FOR
WOMEN –
COLLABORATIVE
PRACTICE WITH
PARTNERS OF MEN WHO
ATTEND THESE
PROGRAMS**

Tracy Castelino and Andrew Compton



18 – 22 February 2002, University of Sydney, Australia

FAMILY VIOLENCE:
THE IMPORTANCE IN PRACTICE OF MEN'S
BEHAVIOUR CHANGE PROGRAMS FOR WOMEN
– COLLABORATIVE PRACTICE WITH PARTNERS
OF MEN WHO ATTEND THESE PROGRAMS

Tracy Castelino

Preston Creative Living Centre

& Andrew Compton

Preston Creative Living Centre

Introducing Ourselves

AC: I'm Andrew Compton and we are from Preston Creative Living Centre in Melbourne. We are part of a Family Violence Intervention Program which works with men to take responsibility for their violence and abuse and consider alternative ways of living and being in relationships. What we do is referred to as a men's behaviour change program in Victoria, and in these programs men initiate their own attendance, so they are called voluntary, as against being sent by courts, for which the term used is mandatory.

TC: I'm Tracy Castelino and my role is to contact and manage the work with women partners of men who enter our program.

Our Proposition

TC: Our experience in men's behaviour change programs is that when one looks more closely at the voluntary attendance by the men, they typically come because their partner has said that they had better do something about their behaviour. The men do not look for help out of the goodness of their heart, they respond when there is a relationship crisis identified by their partner.

This also means that women are acting as major stakeholders in these relationships, and that, paradoxically, men's behaviour change programs serve women who are experiencing DV while assisting men. This effect is enhanced when programs build in a sensitive response to the partners of the men who attend, as some programs in Victoria do. We believe that this gives us an opportunity to think about women's experiences of DV from a somewhat different angle.

Our experience is that women who use the ultimatum of a men's behaviour change program with their partners do this as an act of personal agency rather than being stuck with victim identities. I would like to share today something of our experiences of engaging with women who construct themselves in this way, as well as some thoughts about the meanings this engagement has for us as workers, both individually and as a team.

AC: We need to also say at this juncture that in thinking about and writing this paper we have expanded on the original idea that we submitted to this conference to the point where we would like to add the sub title

**“Collaborative Practices with Partners of Men who Attend
these Programs”**

(Overhead with full title on it)

We find that 90% of the partners of the men in our program are keen to speak to someone about their experience. These women have had the agency to know or recognise (to varying degrees) that their partner has responsibility for the violence and have urged him to do something about it. They are women who want to find ways to stay in their home, and who may be using an intervention order to remove the man from it. They may not want to leave the relationship outright, or they may retain a sense of care or fairness to him while doing so. They want to speak about what has happened, what the man has done, whether things can be different, and what they might now do.

We think that many women who have experienced DV are in this position, and we believe that men's behaviour change programs can respond to this particular subset of women. We find support for this assumption from women we talk to on a daily basis, and in the Future Directions section of the report Against The Odds (PADV, 1998). This report recommends expanding the

domestic violence service options available to women to meet “major unmet needs” that include services and strategies available for:

- “women who choose to remain in, or are not ready to leave, a violent relationship;
- women who do not want to utilise crisis accommodation, particularly high security or communal models”.

We think that in practice it is not useful when working with these women to make assumptions about their relationships. We think that working with them provides an opportunity to move beyond assumptions of personal shortcomings, the temptation for instance for workers to think and act on the basis that if only they knew how awful their relationships were, then they'd leave.

Collaborative Practices With Women

TC: So as we have said, women reach us at a point in their lives and relationships when, although they have been subjected to violence, they have already acted with some agency and been effective in that they have insisted that their abusing partner do something about his behaviour. I hear their stories on a daily basis, the particularities of Hurt and Violence that these women are living with, and in addition stories of their Little Hope for something better. I am privileged to hear these women's moments of strength and resistance. I have noticed that daily, and in many incredible ways, these women ACT. I want to present some of the understandings of the ethics and practices of respect that I have come to as I work with them, and some of the practices that I have developed to assist in the discovery and re-discovery of their hopes, intentions and values for their lives.

For me there are three key bodies of thinking that influence my work in the field of domestic violence: namely feminism, post-structuralism and narrative therapy. They provide a framework to understand the idea of power relations within a political context of gender and culture. I try to use them to alert my attention to the day-to-day micro and macro operations of power in women's lives. Feminist post-structuralism and narrative discourses enable me to engage with women's understandings and experiences of the everyday that is not static, and therefore allows the negotiation of new meanings that expose

taken for granted ideas and practices that oppress and obscure personal agency.

Some of my intentions and ethics for this collaborative work with women who consult with me are:

1. Not to traumatise or re-traumatise women further;
2. We are all multi-storied - we can sit with contradictions;
3. Not to be recruited into “negative identity conclusions”; and,
4. Notice and join with women’s strengths.

(Overhead = Checklisting Intentions)

1. Not to traumatise or re-traumatise women further

I hope to create a safe context where women can share their stories and know them from a distance. By this I mean not asking the woman to relive the trauma without her having found a safe place to stand with history. This can be through conversations about:

- What are her hopes for the sessions?
- What are her hopes and intentions for her relationship?
- How has she come to these ideas?
- Has she considered her Safety and Self-Care, before and after the sessions?
- How can we support her Safety Plans and Self-Care?

Through these conversations I have noticed that women often use the man’s words and dictates. I would ask questions that unpack the understanding of these stories. In this way, worker and woman explore meanings together. For example,

With Jackie I noticed that when speaking about her partner, Peter, her words would be rushed and she would move agitatedly and speak differently to when she was speaking about her children or her joys of study. The mentioning of this noticing to Jackie and asking questions about her understanding of it opened space for a significant shift. These are some of the questions I asked her:

- *Do you think there is ‘rushed talking’ in your voice, Jackie?*

- *Does this 'rushed talking' have any effects on your experience of Peter? Of your relationship?*
- *Considering this 'rushed talking' (her naming) what might it mean about your experience of what you were saying?*
- *When 'rushed talking' is happening whose story are you telling?*
- *Whose words and descriptions and worries were you re-telling to me?*

This meaning exploration allowed for noticing that she was speaking Peter's worries and stories.

Another consideration is finding particular times in the conversation to disregard society's normalising judgements. These judgements can finish up shaping women's lives. For instance, ideas such as women's nagging causes them to be abused, that there is something wrong with women who get into abusive relationships, or that women are responsible for relationships therefore they need to address the problems.

2. We are all multi-storied – we can sit with contradictions

This assumption assists me to be respectful of the many and varied stories I hear from women, for instance, that they can live with hope of change and experiences of despair, or love him and hate him at different moments. Being able to acknowledge these contradictions of experience allows for conversations where meaning to the woman of many experiences can be explored. Conversations that appreciate our contradictory experiences create space for rich descriptions that can connect women to their intentions and purposes for their lives.

I have found that dichotomising relationships obscures the complexities of women's lives. For instance, "women need education and then they will leave violent men." I have found that this type of assumption does not allow for the complexity and uniqueness in relationships. It collapses the problem of violence and abuse to the total identity of the man, and with it a woman's identity becomes one-dimensional and limited to the role of victim. It does not appreciate the possibility of men having other preferences for their lives, including that they might want to take responsibility for their violence and abuse in some ways. It also does not allow for the assumption that women always respond in some way that modifies their situation.

I am not saying that what these men do is not horrendous. Many of the acts are calculated, constant, covert, planned hurt. I believe sanctions should be vigorously and consistently pursued for such violence. However, I am still left with the question of how to respond to women respectfully when, for instance, they speak as one woman did about loving the man who has 'spat in my face' or another who told me she still had hope for the relationship even though he 'dragged me on the floor by the hair and kicked me in the stomach'. In these instances I asked about ideas of love and how they might fit with being subjected to violent acts, and this has made space for rich conversations and descriptions about the uniqueness of each woman's experience.

3. Not to pathologise – not to label women – not to be recruited into negative identity conclusions

It is easy to fall into common ideas like there is a 'type of woman' who gets abused, that women who are abused have a history of being a victim, or women who've never know anything better stay in abusive situations. When this happens, there is a shift in discourse from feminist (post-structuralist) understanding to a patriarchal and psychological imposition on women's lives. Locating the problem of violence in a woman's history, her interpersonal life skills, or in her relationships removes abuse from its political and social construction.

It is surprising how pervasive this idea can be. I think that it is helpful to reflect on our assumptions about domestic violence and how they shape questions and influence meaning in conversations with women. For instance, in the common practice situation of planning a women's group, I have found myself wondering what influence we expect to have with the women when we are constructing a group session for them. I am left with questions such as:

- What is the meaning of information provision in such sessions? Are we presuming to educate women about their experiences?
- If the aims for a group session are focused, for example, on providing information on gender inequality, are we assuming that there is a deficit in the women's knowledge of violence? What then would be the expectations of our focus and the questions we ask?
- Whose meanings of domestic violence are being privileged in our work with women?

- And what do women's stories of violence mean to us? How might our own meanings influence how we work, and our experience of hearing stories of violence?

4. Notice and join with women's strengths

With the beliefs and intentions I mentioned earlier, I hold many conversations with women that inspire me. I allow space for and respond to women's experience of pain, but I want them to be richly described as this makes a difference to the women's lived experience. By this I mean that these experiences of pain are constituting of life and it would be disrespectful and unhelpful to silence or disregard them by seeking the positive. My intention is to create a broader space than a trauma focus for the woman's story, a space that allows for expressions of her hopes and purposes, her beliefs and values for her life. These conversations are constituting of lives rather than merely representative of experiences.

In my time with women I hope to connect these moments through time and history with personal agency. An example:

Carol had spoken about instances of severe physical violence to her by her partner, but then told me she was 'more hurt by his humiliation and his meanness. He blew smoke in my face in the car when I had just struggled to give up smoking.' Our conversations were about

- *The meanings humiliation had for her, currently and historically.*
- *What had she done in the past when acts of humiliation had been perpetrated?*
- *What was it like to respond 'by walking away and being with friends'? Carol said that friends made her feel worthy.*
- *Was this an experience of worth, or of further distress? What made it a worthy experience?*
- *Do you think that walking away might work now? What gives you the idea that it might be worthwhile trying 'walking away and being with friends'?*

In this conversation Carol was discovering how **personal agency** leads to the little acts of resistances in the face of practices of domination and control. I believe that women who are being subjected to violence and abuse are

always responding. In my consultations with them the idea from theorists such as Foucault and White, that people 'always respond' and that 'there is no total control or domination', is confirmed.

The practices that women use alternative to those required by domination and control need not be huge steps or public political acts. They can be quiet, almost invisible responses or little changes that modify what they are being subjected to in their lives. They find the gaps in the domination or they become alert to alternative ways of holding their sense of self. For example

- they choose to be silent.
- they decide to retaliate.
- they make decisions to argue or not argue this time.
- they think that their partner is 'doing wrong'.
- they connect with domestic violence services.
- they tell their partner 'to attend a program or else!' and seek the opportunity to talk to a service such as ours.

Although they find these gaps in the control and domination they are subjected to, I am not saying that they are in control. They are still being subjected to abuse and violence. However, these responses and little actions, when linked to intentional states, offer opportunity for women to be connected to their values and purposes. Conversations about how, why and in what ways women have responded in the face of violence, reveal their stands for their safety and self-care and their agency.

(Overhead = personal agency definition)

My work is to notice these little steps, changes or acts of resistance, and to generate new possibilities for women in the individual consultations or group work that I do. While doing so I try to maintain an awareness of the power differential between myself as worker and each woman as a client, so that this can be enabling and influential in the re-authoring of women's lives. As workers it is our responsibility to consider our responses and the impact of them on women who consult us. We need to consider how we can contribute to the construction of strengthening and enabling identities, rather than negative ideas of the self.

(Overhead - worker responsibilities)

My Experiences of Working with Women whose Lives are Affected by Violence

(Overhead return to beliefs/intentions)

TC: The experience of being a worker in the area of domestic violence inevitably challenges our own beliefs and values, and this is doubly so when we work in an agency that considers the position of the men who have perpetrated violence. At the same time this agency context gives me a particular opportunity to reflect on these matters.

My conversations with the women experiencing domestic violence add meaning to my life. The stories about their lives alter my experience of my relationships and continue to expand my understanding of the complexity of the macro and micro practices of power. I listen for and notice these women's acts of resistance, stands for their survival, and active care for their children's well being. I know the many possibilities for them to stand in other territories of life in order to live their hopes.

The work of consulting with women about their lives has given me the knowledge that there will be ever-changing meanings and understandings of respectful relationships. My understandings of my own relationships have shifted as I reflect and explore the politics of violence in our patriarchal culture that constructs one-dimensional characters of men and women.

Each act of resistance is political and personal, and it affects me politically and personally. Each act challenges one or many practices of domination and control, and this connects to my hopes for all of us to know the strengths and purposes for our lives, and to find ways to move towards alternative and multiple understandings of respectful relationships.

This leads me to the question of how to deal with the in my face presence in my agency of the very men who have hurt the women I speak to. Since the women I speak to have told me their experiences of abuse, it is easy for me to sit with suspiciousness, mistrust and disgust in regard to the men. This can lead to a very totalising and reductionist narrative of men, and I have noticed that this can interfere with my support of women's hopes and choices for their relationships.

So, some questions that I have found useful are:

- How do I respect these women's choices for their relationship if I experience nothing but disgust when I think of her partner?
- What would it be like to reflect on my suspiciousness, mistrust and disgust of the men in the program?
- How would this enhance my practices with men and engage in a respectful conversation with women about their partners?
- What type of relationship/s do I want with 'suspiciousness mistrust and disgust when I hear that men who are stating that they want to take responsibility for their violence?

I think that we as workers need the space to reflect upon and explore our experiences of the work. It is easy for us to become trauma-focussed and drained, to burn out. A trauma-focussed understanding of this work can obscure the inspirational and survival acts of each woman. We require a reflective space to articulate our experiences of hearing women's stories of horrendous pain and sadness and stories of moving beyond survival and what meanings this contributes to their work and life. The relationships and conversations that I have with the other workers in my agency, particularly the men's workers, have to support the maintenance of this reflection space.

AC: I assume, as a male worker working with men about their violence to women, that I have a responsibility to those women, and to their worker, that is beyond that I have to the men. How I speak to the men, the assumptions I make, needs to dovetail with the way Tracy talks to women.

The work with the men has strong assumptions about their responsibility for their violence, and it is much more structured and prescriptive than with their partners. The overall assumption that we are making with the men is that there must be an accountability to the women experience of violence. What I will have in mind to bring this to the fore when working with a man is broadly covered by the questions:

1. Is his presentation a mismatch to her reality?
2. How might his attendance at this men's behaviour change program mesh (or not mesh) with her hopes for their relationship?
3. What are the hazards for her of him attending a men's behaviour change program?

(overhead)

Thus:

- When I first meet a man, I am wondering whether he genuinely considers that he has a problem with being violent and abusive towards his partner, given that her agency in the situation has probably initiated his attendance at his first interview.
- I will be talking to him about the need to stay for the full length of the program and assessing what I think about the likelihood of him doing so. This is because we know that the best chance of change is if he remains for its full duration (at least 3 months, according to Gondolf, 2002 p 139).
- We know that the men minimise the violence and its effects. As I speak to a man I am wondering what his partner's experience might have been. If the communication from the WCW suggests that the partner's experience is very different to his version of events, I will be trying to find ways to hold him accountable to this without breaching her confidentiality.
- I will be wondering what I might say to his partner if she were to ask me if he is going to change.
- I will want to know the specifics of how he wants to change when he starts with us, and I want to see how the goals he sets for himself will change after three months in the program.
- If he goes on in the program, I will want to know how he is representing his participation in it to her. For instance, is he saying "I'm doing my bit so you should do yours"? And how he is using the information he is getting from us when he speaks to her?
- If he is separated from his partner and family I will be wanting to know if he can hold with giving her and them space and respect, and if he can continue to develop alternative ways of living and being in relationships.
- I will be discussing with him how his partner may be affected if he does change for the better.

Conclusion

TC: The hope of this paper is to offer scope for workers to reflect and explore their experiences of working with women who live with violence and abuse, and about the meanings that they make of the relationships that constitute a

large part of their lives. We have shared some of our program's ethics and practices with the intentions of exposing our practices of accountability to women who all respond in unique and incredible ways to modify the control and violence that affect their lives.

We would appreciate your comments and thoughts about the notion of women's agency and alternative ways of working with women who experience domestic violence.

References

Bird, J. (2000). *The heart's narrative*. Auckland: Edge Press.

Chambon, A. S.; Irving, A.; & Epstein, L. (Eds) (1999). *Reading Foucault for social work*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Gondolf, E. (2002). *Batterer intervention systems*. Sage Publications

Keys Young (1998). *Against the odds*. Prepared for The Office of the Status of Women, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Milson's Point, NSW.

Laing, L. (2001). *Working with women: Exploring individual and group work approaches*. Australian Domestic And Family Violence Clearinghouse Issues Paper 4.

Slattery, G. (2000). 'Working with young men: Taking a stand against sexual abuse and sexual harassment'. *Dulwich Centre Journal*, 1 & 2.

White, M. (2001). *In Training Workshop*. June 2001, Adelaide.