

The Empowerment of Ostriches: Flying 101.

A participant Action Research project aimed at improving youth worker intervention for young women experiencing family violence.

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On the whole, youth workers are intimately aware of the issue of violence in families and the impact that this has on the young people they work with. Young people who live in an environment in which they are physically, emotionally or sexually abused – or, if not them, their mother is – desperately would like someone to just listen to them.

However, these two groups of people are not necessarily coming together in any meaningful way. That is not to say that many youth workers do not daily support the victims (or survivors) of a violent family background. Neither is it to say that youth workers or others who are accepting of the individual's need to “tell their story” have not supported many young people. However, what is quite clear is that many youth workers feel quite helpless when confronted with someone they “suspect” is being abused.

Even youth workers who consider themselves to be professional and who have undergone several years “professional” training at university may either not recognise the “symptoms” presented by young people as a result of physical, emotional or sexual abuse, or feel inadequate in dealing with them. They may have suspicions, but feel quite constricted in their ability to support someone who will not disclose to them their need for support. Workers with little formal training, who have learned their skills on the job, often have even less idea of what might be happening for these young people. Frequently, they have little understanding of power imbalances within society that frequently result in violence and abuse (Omelczuk, 1992).

The problem, therefore, is two-fold. Young people – especially young women – who have experienced violence in their family of origin, are often extremely reluctant to disclose. There is a whole range of reasons for this. Many youth workers, on the other hand, may mistake the “quiet kid” who docilely goes along with the crowd, for a mild-mannered, good-natured individual with no hang-ups, rather than recognising the sexually and emotionally abused child they might in reality be. Most commonly the child who “acts out” is further condemned for bad or inappropriate behaviour rather than understanding their need for support in dealing with issues of violence and abuse at home.

A study completed last year as part of my Masters Degree (Killing Ostriches: Young women, family violence and youth work) highlighted the difficulty many young women had in opening up about the violence they experienced at home as a matter of course. Disclosure was definitely something these young women felt uncomfortable with. The emotion evoked during their interviews was quite moving. Even though the young women in this study were between the ages of 17 and 26, only two were able to describe attempts at disclosing to others. The remainder claimed that they had never attempted to disclose previously and predominantly, much of the information disclosed to me had never been shared with anyone else. One young woman had never even told her friends of the extent or character of abuse she experienced, and had not shared with her mother an account of being sexually abused by a third individual. One participant told snippets of information to elders at the church she belonged to. She didn't disclose the complete situation but gave them enough information to ensure they were sympathetic towards her. This young woman failed to acknowledge, even to herself, that being sexually abused by her grandfather constituted family violence. It was whilst exploring her life with me that she identified this aspect as part of the bigger picture and as an important experience for her.

WA is probably the only Australian State that still does not have mandatory reporting requirements. For participants in this study, this is just as well. The repercussion of mandatory reporting was something they would have had difficulty coping with. What they wanted was to know that there was someone who did understand. They would have liked to have known that people really did

by people to whom they might disclose. They wanted to know that there was someone who would understand and support them in what they chose to do. For the most part these young women were afraid of the idea that they would be forced to press charges or face the perpetrator with accusations. If they could have spoken to someone that they knew had the power to stop the problem, without being made to face the perpetrator, they would have done so without any question. Although, from the young woman's perspective this is quite reasonable, it is obviously a tall task to fill. However, adoption of an empowerment model as discussed by Moore (1998) and Omelzuc (1992) would enable these women to develop their own models for dealing with the problem.

I set out to discover what youth workers could do to help young women, in particular, who were survivors of family violence. What I discovered is that, although not typical of all young women in this situation, at least this particular group had no knowledge of youth workers or other professionals who might be available to support them. If we look at what is happening generally in the community and accept that many people are unaware of what constitutes family violence or its prevalence, this is, I suppose, not surprising. It is, however, frightening to think that, although not typical, these young women are not isolated incidences of family violence. The violence they described covered a continuum from ineffective communication and discipline to levels of abuse that were physical, sexual, and emotional and to neglect ranging from physical to emotional. The young women themselves came from families that were, with one exception, typically middle class and suburban. They could have been the girls next door.

Further exploration

I had set out to discover what youth workers could do to support young women in this situation. Based on an assumption that it is important to have an understanding of the impact of practices in order to avoid reinforcing social structures that are effectively violent, I attempted to identify youth work practice that made these young women feel better able to cope with their situation.

None of these aims were achieved. The study did, however, provide a better understanding of why it is that young women who have experienced violence in their family of origin do not disclose. The fact of non-disclosure should not be surprising – after all it is commonly accepted that family violence often goes unreported. According to the National Committee on Violence Against Women (NCVAW, 1991, p.14), children and women living in violent relationships frequently remain isolated; and these young women were certainly isolated from their peers and from support mechanisms.

How, then, could I find a way to help concerned youth workers help these particular young people? Completion of a Masters Degree enabled me to enrol as a PhD student, still with Edith Cowan University in Perth, Western Australia. Together with my Supervisor, Dr. Margaret Sims, I developed a research proposal that would enable me to use the information gained from the Masters research and to work with a group of youth work practitioners to explore their practice in light of the information previously gained.

“The Empowerment of Ostriches: Flying 101” was developed as an Action Research project with seven youth workers all of whom are employed in an informal setting – Drop-In Centres – across Perth. The outcome of this research is anticipated to be twofold:

- the development of a policy framework to support agencies in dealing with young people experiencing violence in their family of origin
- together with a training package for Youth Workers to align their practice better to the needs of this group of young people.

The youth workers involved in this Action Research project come from an interesting mix of

These agencies are situated at such diverse locations as Mandurah in the south, Gosnells in the southeast, Joondalup in the north and Midland in the east. Three of these agencies are operated with predominantly external funding by local government authorities and one by a community based management structure.

The process being followed includes an initial individual interview, the collation of concept maps, three focus group interviews and recording of daily practice in workers' own reflective diaries. All workers have provided an initial taped interview in which they were asked questions about the youth agency in which they work, any policies currently in place to deal with young people experiencing violence at home, and the way in which they believe they currently deal with the issue. They have each developed two concept maps (one immediately after the initial interview and a second at the conclusion of the first focus group). They are currently compiling reflective journal notes that will be used as the basis for our second focus group meeting in August. At this point, I anticipate the outcome of this next focus group will be the emergence of a framework on which they can start to build practice to more effectively meet the needs of this under resourced and under supported group of people, that is young women experiencing violence at home.

According to Wadsworth (1988) focus groups are useful as interview tools because they allow participants the opportunity to gain the knowledge as well as the researcher. She claims:

By the end of the meeting, the whole group has been able to take part in a collective information-gathering technique because it's not just *you* who has found out what they had to say – they all have! (p. 32-33).

A significant result of the first focus group was that all workers (who were interviewed by telephone following this first group meeting) claim to have found the process therapeutic. As one said: *it gets to you and kills your soul if you don't talk about it!* Coming together with other workers and just discussing everyday issues was an important tool that could be used for affirmation. They discussed such things as funding, support from management, how the workplace is set up – the physical environment, how many workers are on hand at any one time; as well as other issues to do with running a service. Self-affirming, also, was the discussion they had regarding how they had approached situations with individual young people. They talked about what they had previously considered to be violence; and what they had believed were indicators of violence in young people they worked with. One worker, well versed in issues of family violence in indigenous communities, said she felt as though she had been “*slapped in the face*” by discussion around acting out behaviour and aggression and the probable links to violence at home.

The initial interviews suggested that these workers had an awareness of the social issues surrounding family violence as well as the more intimate issues with which individuals might have to find ways of coping. However, when I did an analysis of the concept maps – using induction rather than scoring – I found that workers did not often raise such issues as power imbalances in relation to violence. Nor did they mention social structures which are inherently disempowering. Poverty was a concept included in almost all the maps as either being a causal factor or being caused by family violence resulting in family breakdown.

What the initial concept maps suggested was, unlike the initial interviews, that workers' conception of family violence was actually quite limited and not dissimilar to views more commonly held in society. They demonstrated little understanding of how a young person, male or female, experiencing violence at home might act. They were aware, however, of the difficulty of raising the issue with someone who lived their life trying to keep their family situation secret. The concept maps drawn following the first focus group demonstrate a shift in understanding particularly in the area of behaviour that might be indicative of violence at home.

Although still in the early stages, the study, so far, suggests that youth workers need to have a broad understanding of power and control and how it is used in Australian society – both formally and informally. They need to have an historical understanding of patriarchy and how it forms many of the beliefs and customs we continue to hold, particularly where family and children are concerned. Youth workers need to have the ability to be available to young people, particularly young women, to just listen and not to offer advice. Young people deserve to be heard, without judgement or direction and then encouraged to make decisions based on information provided to them. They also deserve to know that, whatever decisions they make, they will be supported to carry them through. If that means the young person will return to an abusive environment because they are unable to cope with the alternatives at that moment in their lives, so be it. Hopefully, with the aid of a supportive youth worker they will soon be in a situation where they are able to move forward and to remove themselves from the abusive situation.

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