

EXPLORATIONS:
Challenges, Speculations, Risks

In Quest of a Heart: A Personal Journey in Working with Violent Men

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The scene was an alfresco restaurant in Surfers Paradise. A colleague and I sipped orange juice as we discussed the possibility of working together in a group for violent men. We reached no decision, and as I returned to work, I rationalised that it 'wasn't the right time for me to do this', and besides, 'the men wouldn't have come anyway'. I immediately set about the formation of a women's support group. This was much easier, and at least I knew that the women would be willing to come. Not long after, my supervisor asked me how I would feel about running a men's group. My unhesitating reply was in the negative. I knew that working solely with violent men scared me. I thought violent men were somehow different from other men, and different from me, and I believed that I did not know how to deal with them. So I avoided the idea, and put it in the 'too hard' basket. Besides, I knew/believed that I had not had much success with the violent men that I did work with, and neither had anyone else with whom I talked. Everyone, it seemed, found them difficult. Still, men with problems of abuse within their relationships came for help in increasing numbers. My question was, 'what am I to do?'

'When in doubt, read!' is part of my story, so I consulted Jenkins' *Invitations to Responsibility* (1990), went to some of his workshops, and was most impressed. I also read Michael White's description of how he worked with abusive males, and proceeded to try and do likewise. However, it did not seem to work for me. I often commented facetiously to my supervisor that the problem was that the male clients had not read these books and did not know how they were required to act! The truth, I believe, was that I was trying to imitate someone else, rather than find my own way of working. In session, I often found myself working harder than the men, being accused by them of being 'pro-women', arguing with them about the centrality of the abuse rather than the problems of the relationship. I also found that I did not like these men very much—

I somehow thought of them as a race apart, requiring some special theory to guide those working with them, but mostly I just wished they would not come at all. Nevertheless, they did! This was not going to be an issue that would simply go away.

Violent men's insistence that we concentrate on the relationship rather than on the violence or abuse that existed within the relationship was always viewed by me as being negative. I usually made sense of their insistence as a form of avoidance, a way of shifting the blame for their violence from themselves to their partners or to the relationship itself. My efforts to focus on the violence usually brought me into conflict with the men. However, Leupnitz (1988: 179–181) noted that 'object relations theorists believe that the basic human drive is the need for relationship'. This appealed to me as a second description of men's insistence on attention being paid to their relationships, and provided meaning for it. It seemed to me that their insistence was a meta-communication of the non-validation of the importance of relationship in men's lives.

This prompted two actions. First, it enabled me to see these men as being like me (or vice versa) since I have always maintained in my personal life the centrality of relationship. Secondly, it encouraged me to start to validate this relationship-centrality in men, and I used statements like, 'I believe that you're here because you really value your relationship and you really want it to work—however, the violence and abuse are getting in the way of you achieving what you want for your relationship, and I see your presence here as indicative of your desire to remove the violence and abuse so that you achieve the sort of relationship you really want'. The men always nodded vigorously while I was saying these words, and started to relax. I noticed that the statement produced an immediate difference in my relationship with the men. It was as if I became a working partner in a quest for the key that would allow their relationship to work. Whenever we might be getting off the track, I was able to remind the men of this centrality of relationship, and bring them back to themselves and their responsibility, rather than focussing on their partner's responsibilities.

Gordon and Meths (1990: 55) point out that 'many men and women feel like intimate strangers to each other', and the popularity of Gray's book *Men are from*

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Mars, Women are from Venus seems evidence that this lack of connection is clearly recognised in society generally. Adams (1988: 38) and Long (1987: 308) both comment that 'differences are not celebrated or treasured'. I have often heard men talk about their difficulty in understanding women, and prompted by this, I reframed the value of 'relationship' as an attempt to add something different to our lives. I continued to try to find approaches that would invite men to appreciate and value difference and thus develop a different narrative about 'women'. Using Cameron-Bandler's (1984: 185–190) idea of 'seeing yourself through the eyes of someone else', I devised questions that invited men to attempt to see themselves through the eyes of their partners. My questions were, at times, fairly convoluted, for instance, 'If you could be inside a woman's head, and hear what she thinks men think about women, what would you hear?' 'What actions of men might invite women to develop this belief?' My aim was to invite men to answer questions about themselves, but from their partner's perspective, or from the perspective of women generally, and I believed that a different description of themselves would allow them a different description of women.

I further invited men to consider the impact of their language on their partners and to contrast this with the impact it would have on other men. Some men, after having done this, asked their partners and were embarrassed to find that their partner's view of them was harsher than their own. It occurred to me that these men had only a very slight idea, or no idea at all, regarding the impact of their behaviour and their words on their partners. For reasons of safety, I did not ever suggest that the men *consult* with their partners, but only *speculate* on how they would answer. But in cases where men did choose to consult their partners, I questioned them closely on their ability to handle their partner's different point of view, and attempted to restrain others by urging them not to consult if they would be unable to consider difference.

Walters et al. (1988: 211) observe that 'the majority of men live in subordination to other men based on race, class, religion, or seniority at work'. This gave me the idea of inviting men to explore the abuse that they had suffered in their lives, the impact of this abuse on all domains of their lives. It seemed to me that the identification of this abuse validates men's experience of abuse, and dispels the notion that 'all men are bastards'. It also allowed men to speculate on the set of ideas, structures and conditions that would allow the survival of these abusive practices, and on what position they personally would take concerning these practices. I invited men to articulate a set of beliefs and contexts that would allow such abuses to take place. This was a process that the men entered into with enthusiasm, because, I believe, their personal abuse had never been allowed to be brought forth. It was an easy step then to invite the men to consider which of these beliefs and practices were part of their own relationships, and to invite them to stand against these practices. This

approach enabled me to identify with them, and to reflect on my own experiences of 'power'. I further invited men to consider a set of ideas that would allow for a context of respectful relationships in their own experience of abuse, and to identify the extent to which these ideas for respectful relationships existed within their own relationship.

White (1995: 157) maintains that 'when men attend carefully to the effects of these experiences of abuse, they actually reach a point where they can name abuse for what it is, and appreciate the full impact of the violence that they have perpetrated upon others'. Jenkins' (1991: 186) definition of abuse includes the idea that 'the initiator experiences a sense of entitlement which exceeds his responsibility for the welfare of others' and includes the notion of 'lack of consciousness about the impact of their behaviours on others'. Men's speculations on the ideas of women about men, and on their own experience of abuse, opened another window, and I could now invite men to speculate on what sort of actions by men would account for the ideas that women had, and what sort of thinking would allow men to act in this fashion towards women. I found that it was important in these discussions always to make a clear distinction between 'blame' and 'responsibility' (Jenkins, 1991) and to address ideas of accountability that led to the development of formal apologies. I was stuck by the similarity of the ideas that allowed for the existence of abuse of men by other men, and the ideas that allowed for the continuation of men's abuse of women. I started to understand more fully the assertions of Chodorow (1978) that capitalism and patriarchy are almost inextricably bound up, but that is another story.

My own experience of 'fathering', crucial in my own life, led me to a different description of 'fathering' than the one prescribed by patriarchy. Fathering, to me, means a personal involvement in all aspects of my children's lives—a repudiation of the narrow role implied in 'wait till your father gets home'. I started to speak with men about the importance they placed on fathering in their lives, and found that most of them regretted the dehumanising definition that required them to be a 'breadwinner' only, and thus often to be absent fathers. I found that many men were saddened by their non involvement in parenting, and the validating of their desire to be involved with their children allowed them to start to stand up to the dictates of patriarchy. Men often entered into eager discussion of the strategies that would allow them to become more involved parents.

Armundson (1992: 3) suggests that 'by adopting a gender sensitive approach ... it is possible to rename and reconceptualise many of the behaviours that have been traditionally viewed as problematic in male clients'. So I am able to acknowledge men's desires to be good fathers and to have good relationships (by being good providers) and to challenge them to embrace a broader story—of being both, by standing up to the ideas of patriarchy. Armundson also suggests (*ibid.*, 25) that 'we place men's habits as a source of solution rather than the basis of a problem' and that we

invite men to provide 'honest protection [and a] clear commitment to defend the weaker' (ibid., 35). Such a reframe has allowed me to challenge men with statements like 'you must protect your family ... defend them against your moods'. Within this framework, men were much more inclined to view 'time out' and 'safety plans' for their families as sensible, and much more willing to make 'declarations of intent' about their future actions. They were willing to document these practices for the sake of their partners.

Chodorow helped me a great deal by providing further insight into the nature of men. Previously, I had tried to use the concept of 'patriarchy' to understand the context for abuse, but my efforts to do so had usually led me into conflict with men who denied that this definition fitted them. Chodorow locates gender identification in connectedness/separation, asserting that 'the basic masculine self is separate ... a boy must categorise himself as someone apart and so define masculinity negatively, as that which is not feminine and/or not connected to women' (1978: 169–176). This allowed a simple statement that defined men as being 'not women'.

This explanation seems to allow men to understand their lack of expressive emotionality and their 'fear of commitment and inability to connect intimately with others' (Leupnitz, 1988: 179). It seems to help them understand how they simultaneously want and fear 'intimacy'. Chodorow also points out that this process of identification with what is 'separate' and 'not woman' breaks the tie between the affective process and the learning role. This interpretation helped men understand how their violence can be acted out without cognitive countermands (Horsfall, 1991: 124), and how they needed to develop a concept of masculinity that was not based on deficit—rather than attending 'anger management programs'. That explanation allowed me to enter into discussions with men about the influence of patriarchy in their lives, without becoming involved in arguments.

Accepting Adams' (1989: 41) invitation to 'enter into the process [with men] without judgement and without collusion, while standing equally in the process with the women he has hurt', I have been challenged to explore my own thoughts and feelings about men and masculinity. I think that doing this for myself has allowed me to challenge men without fearing their reaction. I agree with Patterson (1991: 206), who says that 'if men want to work on their violence, I now warn them about the journey'. Crago (1996), commenting on the role of 'hero' in the lives of men, noted that in folklore, ballads and traditional romance narratives, a man often engaged on a difficult, lonely journey, at the end of which his courage is validated by the love of a fair maiden 'to whom he gives his heart'. Noting the belief that 'without a woman a man's masculinity is dubious' (Gordon and Meths, 1990: 58) led me to suggest to the men that they embark on a 'hero's quest to find their own heart and to hold it themselves' rather than entrusting it to another. White (1995: 161) warns that

as men, we are of man's culture, and we can never stand outside it': daring to be different must apply to the therapist as well as the perpetrator, and so my own quest is part of the journey.

I can identify with Jenkins' warning of the perpetrator's ability to invite others (me) to accept responsibility for him, and to work harder than he does: 'the more forcefully we argue for responsibility, the more we invite the perpetrator to argue for the avoidance of responsibility' (Jenkins, 1991: 193). So I have adopted a more laid-back, relaxed style, and frequently take a one down position, re-asking frequently, 'what do you want for your relationship?' Reading Jenkins has also made me realise that I am limited to offering 'invitations to change' only.

Scutt (in McGregor and Hopkins, 1991) argues that 'men who do not speak out against the violence of their brothers are in favour of it', and I wonder about the degree to which I can do this. Many writers agree that the domain of change regarding violence has to be exercised by men and I have found that I can, after discussing abuse in their own lives, invite violent men to consider ways that they can stand up against violence in the wider society. In one situation, this involved men contemplating lobbying a State minister to ensure that the formation of a men's group should not be at the expense of women's services.

I find that my relationship with violent men has changed, and continues to change. I myself have changed. I no longer see these men as an aberrant group, as a class apart, but am now able to identify that I have common ground with them on the importance of relationship, on fathering, and on the experience of (at least) institutional abuse. It has allowed me also to acknowledge that I belong to the privileged group called 'man' and to position myself with other men in dismantling the structures that allow abuse to continue.

I found a striking change in how I related to the men I was working with. I no longer cringed at the thought of them coming, but actually looked forward to the types of conversations that were now possible. I also found that I liked them as men. This enabled me to do many things that I had always done with violent men, but in the context of my new relationship with them, those actions had different outcomes, both for them and for me. I came to understand that 'it is the therapeutic relationship that holds the key to [the] work' (Kottler, Sexton and Whiston, 1994: xi). My quest for a heart was both completed and begun.

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Rights

by Peter K. Jordan*

Can you tell me my rights?
I've got a right to my kids—
I've got some rights,
haven't I?

She hasn't the right
to take my children away from me—
She's taken my rights
hasn't she?

Courts can take away my rights.
How does a judge know what's right?
I've lost my rights
I want to put things right—
Can't I?

Courts aren't interested in my rights
How can they say what's right?
I know what's right—
Don't I?

Do children have rights?
Who looks after kids' rights?
Does anybody care what's right?
Who says what's right?
Don't I?

*See author note, p. 137.