A Constructivist approach to challenging men's violence against women

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Abstract

Men's abuse and violence in intimate partner relationships is a worldwide problem of which there is a growing awareness. This paper will look at a model of practice developed in rural Victoria that seeks to enable men to take responsibility for their abusive behaviour and to commit to a process of behaviour change. The SHED (Self-Help Ending Domestics) Project uses a constructivist approach to challenging men's violence against women and children and it encompasses assessment, groupwork, and an integrated, collaborative model of intervention between agencies.

Keywords: men's violence against women; intimate partner violence; men's behaviour change; personal construct theory.

Introduction

This paper discusses one approach to challenging men's violence against women. The approach is based on applied research into best practice frameworks for men's behaviour change programs and the utilizing of personal construct theory as part of a repertoire of intervention strategies. The aim of this approach is to increase safety of women and children as well as addressing subtle controlling behaviours by men. This reflection will describe the approach taken and how it works in practice in a particular setting, as well as some of the key issues and insights from the experience.

Setting

Almost thirteen years ago at Moe, in the Latrobe Valley of Victoria, the Men's SHED (Self-Help Ending Domestics) Project began at the request of women workers at the local community health service, tired of picking up the pieces after incidents of family violence. Their intention was to use the small amount of funding available to them at the time, for family violence prevention, to establish a project for men to take responsibility and to learn to relate non-abusively and non-violently with their families. The underlying aim of this continuing project is the safety and well-being of women and children (Laming, 1996; 1998; 2000; 2003; 2005b; 2006)

At the outset of the SHED Project in 1994, a reference group was established representing some of the key local agencies at the time. Since 1996 the various coordinators/managers of the Regional Women's Domestic Violence Support Service have been members of the SHED reference group, along with representatives from Community Corrections, the Community Health Service, other relevant welfare agencies, and in more recent years, Victoria Police. The membership of the reference group reflects the need for men's behaviour change programs to be accountable, to consistently support women and children's right to safety and well-being and at the same time, hold men responsible for their abuse and violence (Younger, 1995; Strategic Partners, 2003; Wheeler, 2006).

Such accountability to women's DV support services in particular, is essential for the efficacy and credibility of a men's behaviour change project like SHED and is fundamental to an integrated approach to family violence within the wider context of patriarchy and male privilege in our society, where men commonly use power and control to serve their own ends.

Gender inequality

Male privilege is prevalent in many parts of the world as witnessed by WHO statistics (2002), and closer to home, the recent report *The Health Costs of Violence: Measuring the Burden of Disease Caused by Intimate Partner Violence* (VicHealth 2004). This Victorian report states that intimate partner violence is 'prevalent' with one in five women reporting being abused in adulthood; is 'serious' since for women of 15-44 years of age, it is the single biggest factor contributing to sickness, disability and death in Victoria; and is 'preventable' since inequality of power and resource distribution between men and women is a major factor underpinning the likelihood of abuse according to WHO (2002) and OWP (2002) (VicHealth, 2004:10). Structured inequality between genders supports and enables women's vulnerability to abuse (WHO 2002). This is not new knowledge and women's groups worldwide have been instrumental in raising public awareness of these issues for at least the past twenty-five years.

Most abuse is not at the hands of strangers. 'Women are more vulnerable to intimate partner violence than to violence in any other context (OWP 2002) and are overwhelmingly more likely than men to be the victims of this form of violence (ABS 2003)' (VicHealth 2004:10). If the health costs of men's violence against women are not compelling motivation enough to challenge it, then the economic costs might be. The economic cost to the Australian economy is $8.1 billion per year (Statewide Steering Committee Report 2005:12). Perhaps this is the reason there now seems to be the political will to address the problem of family violence effectively (OWP, 2001; 2002; Strategic Partners, 2003; Statewide Steering Committee Report, 2005).

As well as the huge costs listed above, intimate partner violence also has long term effects on children (VicHealth 2004). According to a recent Victorian report, children were present at 48% of police attendances for family violence in Victoria in 2002-3. The resulting possible harmful effects are depression, withdrawal, low self-esteem, poor performance at school, truancy, aggression, tantrums and anxiety, so that, family violence is the greatest single predictor of future intimate partner violent behaviour by those young people, when they are in relationships themselves (Statewide Steering Committee Report 2005:12). This picture is replicated again and again in the stories that emerge from men in the SHED groups.

Integrated inter-agency response

An integrated inter-agency response to family violence utilises 'men's behaviour change programs that are able to support women and children's rights to safety and challenge men to end their use of violence without police or judicial involvement' (SSCRFV, 2005:8). This is also a preventative measure that presents the opportunity for abusers to change their behaviour before it escalates. If the violence escalates then 'well-managed criminal justice based projects delivering a structured program

focusing on the offender and the offending behaviour are more likely than other forms of criminal justice interventions to reduce or eliminate violence and intimidating behaviour' (Dobash et al. 1996: x). Men's behaviour change programs such as the SHED Project, provide an integrated approach to family violence that is both preventative as well as engaging with the criminal justice system.

The commitment by men's behaviour change programs to protocols or memorandums of understanding, with other agencies (for example, Domestic Violence Services, Department of Human Services Protective Services, Corrections, Magistrates' Courts, Victoria Police, Alcohol and Drug Services, Centres Against Sexual Assault) as indicated by a consistent inter-agency referral process, are essential (Office of Women's Policy, 2001:20; Strategic Partners, 2003:101; Wheeler, 2006:64).

The SHED Project

The SHED Project is based on research in which I developed a framework for a men's behaviour change program, based on best practice overseas and in Australia, as part of a Master of Social Work degree. The SHED Project has five main components: first, assessment and counseling; second, the men's ongoing group (intake); third,, the men's responsibility program, (a closed twelve week group); fourth, the inter-agency family violence network; and fifth,, community education. A full description can be found in the *SHED Manual: For workers engaging in men's behaviour change to shed abusive beliefs and violence* (Laming 2005b), which places men's behaviour change programs in an integrated response to family violence.

Assessment

Men are generally referred to the SHED Project by local welfare agencies or by statutory organisations, or by family members. Indeed, this latter category makes up about fifty per cent of all referrals. It is true to say that no-one wants to attend a behaviour change program initially, though for some, that changes over time. Every man has some degree of resistance, denial, and resentment regarding the predicament he finds himself in and most men want to blame someone else and avoid taking any responsibility for their destructive behaviour.

In such situations the role of the intake worker is to engage and establish rapport by encouraging and inviting the man to tell his story as part of the assessment, and to listen with an incredulous approach. This is not the same as colluding, which needs to be avoided and guarded against stringently. It is more akin to trying to make sense of the offender's reality and story, how he constructs his world, how he sees his relationship with his family, how he constructs his abusive behaviour, and what meaning it has for him. .And yet this is only part of the worker's role in the assessment interview. Another major part is to challenge the man about his abusive beliefs, especially by presenting him with alternatives to violent behaviours and the chance to learn strategies to change by joining similar men in a regular group. By identifying with the man's struggle to stay non-violent and letting him know that he is not alone, the facilitator strengthens the man's resolve to change.

Groupwork

For men who have been violent at home, the understanding that they can opt for change is very relevant. It means that they need not be victims of their biography, or see themselves as such, nor feel sorry for themselves. They can create their own interpretation and hence, reconstruct their lives. They are presented with the possibility that they do not have to remain violent: they are able to change. There is reason for hope, and they are able to choose which direction their life might take.

When working with abusive men, practitioners must act reflexively; they are continually challenged to ask themselves whether they also use this type of behaviour in their own family. Otherwise, an occupational hazard for the male worker is to collude with the abuser and feel sorry for him, or to identify with him and support his sense of threatened privilege that is used to justify his abusive behaviour.

Groupwork is a key part of the men's behaviour change program and it is essential on the one hand, to challenge individual men about their abusive and violent behaviour, and on the other to also address the structures in society that support and allow such abusive behaviour. These structures take many forms; inequality in the work place, in management, in politics - in every sphere of life male privilege sustains abusive behaviours. When men who see it as their right to be in power and control, feel threatened, they often see the use of force or intimidation or violence as legitimate to maintain what they regard as the just order of things.

What we need to do, as Fisher (2000:436) says, is to 'provide help and assistance to the individual in order to allow them to make immediate sense of the feeling of threat, chaos and fragmentation that can occur during the early stages of change'. Fisher goes on to say that in assisting someone to take on a new construction of themselves, a slow and careful process has to be adopted 'in order to overcome the fear, threat etc from a future that is unknown' (2000:436). Similarly, Bannister (1970:31) compares the process to a rotting ship that has to be rebuilt at sea if it is to be saved from sinking. It can only be rebuilt by replacing one plank at a time and 'rapidly replacing it so that, given good fortune, we may eventually sail in an entirely new ship'. Taking change gradually is also echoed by Kelly's (1955/1991) exhortation to clinicians to ensure that when they invite a person to find a new meaning in an aspect of their life, or to change their construing (for example, the meaning of yelling, intimidating, threatening, mind games or hitting, where the man justifies it on the grounds that she or the children deserve it), they do it at the client's pace. This is a central part of the SHED group facilitator's role.

Group facilitators are there to promote and facilitate a process in which the participants provide each other with multiple examples of alternative behaviours and multiple points of support for respectful 'newly developing beliefs' as well as confrontation for old, 'socially pervasive' abusive beliefs (Russell, 1995: 51). A multifaceted therapeutic environment offers many supports and opportunities for men to reinforce their change process from abusive to respectful beliefs and behaviours. In this way, 'therapeutic groups, rather than individual therapy', are regarded as the best intervention strategy (Russell, 1995: 51). A central role of the group facilitators, is to ensure that the group process is one that fosters change towards non-violence, and not one that colludes to perpetuate it.

Questions help to enable and engender the required change in a group process, especially those questions using an incredulous and invitational approach. The posing of 'what if …?' is an important strategy of practitioners in the SHED groups. In working with violent men, the strategy of putting to them the question 'what if?' regarding their behaviour change to non-violence can be very powerful (Laming 2005a). For example, a SHED group facilitator might ask questions like "how would you feel if you were threatened in a jealous rage and then told it was a sign of love for you!?" or "what might happen next time if you decided to trust your partner and not be jealous?" or "what would you feel like if you were humiliated or intimidated in this way?" and facilitate a group discussion about these questions. Macrae and Andrew (2000:35) note how it is part of the role of group facilitators in men's behaviour change groups to ask questions that invite the participants to investigate a range of possible constructions and interpretations of their situation. They relate the philosophy of Paulo Freire (1972) to the work of Pence and Paymar in Duluth (1993), as they both believed in initiating and facilitating change through asking people to think critically about relationships and justice by inviting them to tell their stories. For example: "who holds the power in this relationship and how, specifically, do they do that? or "how is this power used to control others and what beliefs underpin the inequality and abuse?" or "what would happen if there was equality in this relationship and both parties had an fair say in important decisions?" The asking of such questions consistently of an abusive man, no matter with whom he comes into contact, or which welfare agency he has to attend, is well supported by an integrated collaborative response to family violence by agencies.

Feedback from partners

Partner contact as part of the ongoing assessment of the man, is fundamental to best practice and is used whenever possible and always in an independent and confidential manner (Laming, 2006; Wheeler, 2006). This however, is a problematic area of practice since the safety of the partner and children is paramount, and in about half the cases of men who attend the SHED, they are already separated. At the same time, there is clear evidence that when a man's account in assessment and group interventions, is tested against the account of his partner and he knows that his behaviour is under regular review, the chance of his taking responsibility and being committed to ongoing behaviour change increases (Laming, 2005b).

The men attending the SHED groups know that limited confidentiality applies in regard to their threatening of violence to family members, or to themselves. They also know that where appropriate, the facilitator will check with the man's partner about his progress,, as this is the only true indicator of change. It is also important to give the man's partner feedback about his participation or not, and about any risk indicators that he is displaying.

There is an increasing demand for evidence of the effectiveness of men's behaviour change programs in getting men to take responsibility and stop their abuse. 'The evaluations of programs for men and perpetrators need to be ongoing with identified performance indicators of effectiveness and methodologies that include feedback from partners and ex-partners' (Strategic Partners 2003:99). Such evaluations would give women an opportunity to make an informed decision about whether they and their

children are safe on the basis of what is indicated, which includes the limitations of any program.

A man who knows that his account will be compared to his partner's story is less likely to continue to engage in denial of his abuse, excusing it in some way, minimizing it or blaming his family for what he has done. This is especially so if the behaviour change group that he is part of, consistently holds him responsible, does not collude in his excusing or blaming, challenging him to be 'fair dinkum' and supporting him in facing the awfulness of what he has done and in staying committed to changing his behaviour towards his wife and children. Often a key moment for a man is when he realises that the fear, anxiety, pain and uncertainty that his partner and children feel as a result of his behaviour, is very like what he felt at times as a small child. This link is regularly re-inforced during the group sessions to enable the man to gain a deep sense of the ramifications of his behaviour. Since more than half the men attending SHED for their violent and abusive behaviour, have themselves been victims of physical or emotional abuse in childhood, the question of how to prevent further abuse is crucial (Laming 2005b).

Prevention

One of the underlying motivations for initiating the SHED Project was the recognition that it makes more sense to prevent this abuse, if possible, than to keep trying to pick up the pieces after family violence incidents. It is better to identify and stop the men who are at the top of the cliff pushing the women off, than to only rush around with ambulances picking up the dying and injured at the bottom. It seems to me that it is essential to do both the rescuing and the preventing of further risk, which includes educating the community about the ramifications of such behaviour, in order to change attitudes and social constructions of what it means to be a man, including being non-controlling and non-abusive.

As a community, we have to ensure that 'domestic terrorists' who scare and terrify their families, are challenged consistently and held responsible. By educating men to change their controlling and abusive behaviour that keeps their family in fear, victims are supported. Paradoxically, men are generally appalled at the realisation that their families are living in fear of them. Hence, the way a man is challenged, and the timing, is as crucial as the way a victim is supported and empowered, if he is to change his abusive and controlling behaviour. An abusive man needs both support in his efforts to change and strong and consistent confrontation about his bullying behaviour, in order to see that he can make different, respectful, choices about how he treats his family.

That men's violence against women is socially constructed and individually willed (Dankwort and Rausch 2000:937) means that men attending the men's behaviour change program should be given some basic tools to recognise the structured nature of men's power and control in our society, as well as learn ways to change their own individually chosen abusive behaviour. Behaviour change for individual men is problematic without the society as a whole shifting its social construction that engenders men's violence against women. No matter how much an individual man takes responsibility for his abuse in a program like SHED, he still lives in a

patriarchal culture that more often than not, condones and allows his abusive behaviour, sometimes overtly but mostly subtly.

However, one way that a man can be supported and challenged to change is by enabling him to tell his story and being ready to hear what his abuse means for him. Proposing the use of personal construct theory does not discount other ways of working with men, rather it is used to complement existing approaches, such as narrative therapy (Jenkins 1990), crisis intervention and individual counselling.

Ten years ago, there was very little published about the application of personal construct theory specifically in relation to men's violence and abuse. However, Houston (1998) focused on offenders in general and she sums up the applicability of personal construct theory (PCT) to working with violent men by making a number of points that are very relevant to our discussion: (i) PCT offers a framework for understanding the world as offenders see it; (ii) it enables the possibility of a better understanding of the reasons why offenders fail to learn from their past; (iii) PCT gives an insight into offenders' resistance to change; (iv) PCT offers a more collaborative means of working with people, in which some responsibility for the change process is taken by them; (v) it creates space for offenders to change; and (vi) it provides the tools for understanding better how offenders view and construct their world, and also provides a means for measuring changes in that construction (Houston 1998: 26–27).

Underlying principle of choice

Personal construct theory holds that everyone has to acknowledge their responsibility for their own behaviours and attitudes (Dalton and Dunnett, 1992; Winter, 1992) and hence, that violence, like any behaviour, is a choice that is learned and can be unlearnt. For someone to change, they must first acknowledge their behaviour and take responsibility for it. According to personal construct theory, 'all our present interpretations of the universe are subject to revision or replacement' (Kelly, 1955/1991). This relates to the philosophical assumption of 'constructive alternativism' (Winter, 1992) which is very applicable to working with men who behave abusively or violently. It says to them and to the world at large that they do have a choice about the way they behave, that if they are abusive they are choosing that alternative out of a range of options, and that there is hope for change if they accept their 'response-ability'. This is usually a very new and confronting re-framing of their position as abusive men.

Response-ability

It is the applicability of constructive alternativism for working with men who have been abusive or violent that is most appealing. This is because it presents the possibility for change, links it with response-ability and then skills them up to be non-violent. Because the stakes are so high, so, potentially is the motivation. Constructive alternativism for the practitioner can mean that there are many different methods, tools and strategies, as well as perspectives, views and constructs to choose from. For the abusive man, it means that he can choose to construe his life and relationships differently and to live non-violently, even though this may be very difficult for him. He is able to make such a choice because he has been enabled to anticipate that the

results will be better for him if he does (e.g. not lose his family, not get a conviction nor go to gaol). The realisation of this choice available gives the man hope.

Most abusive men do not seem to entertain the possibility that there are other ways of interpreting a situation. Constructive alternativism confronts their traditional excuses of having no control over their behaviour because it is the result of anger, reaction to being 'wound up', being intoxicated or a range of other reasons.. At the same time, to state that there is a choice and that '… no one needs to be completely hemmed in by circumstances …' (Kelly, 1955/1991) offers hope to both the perpetrator and to the victim that he can and will cease being violent. This latter as a source of hope for victims is also problematic if it leads them into further danger, an important factor to be considered by the group facilitator in terms of being circumspect about offering unrealistic hope of change(Frances, 1997).

Choosing a different track

Working with 'domestic terrorists' in the SHED Project involves educating them about both the abusive 'track' (Kelly 1955/1991: 694) they have been following as a result of lessons learnt growing up, and also about other alternative tracks they could choose instead of the abusive one. A boy growing up with abusive role models may never have had a chance to choose something different or even to know that an alternative track exists.

Hence, SHED is about providing men with a chance to experience such an alternative and it is also about empowering women to see that they have a right not to be left on an abusive track, looking over their shoulder anxiously to see whether the 'train' is approaching to run them over. The initial stage of assessment is crucial if the chance of change is not to be derailed, In a men's behaviour change program, it is the meanings of individual men that can lead to the possibility of their individual change.

Conclusion

Our experience in the SHED Project research regarding the application of personal construct theory and its tools is that it can make a contribution to challenging and preventing men's violence against women. This article has reflected on the place of a constructivist approach in an integrated response to family violence and has provided another piece of the jigsaw that represents challenging and preventing men's violence against women. The place of assessment, groupwork, questions and prevention are linked to a constructivist philosophy that is respectful of people, yet consistent in confronting abuse and bullying behaviour by men, against women and children.

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