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Conversations With Men About Women's Violence

Ending Men's Violence by Challenging Gender Essentialism

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Dominant approaches to domestic violence (Adams & Cayouette, 2002; Dobash, Dobash, Wilson, & Daly, 1992; Pence, 2002; Pence & Paymar, 1993) are very helpful in focusing the field on both men's responsibility and the significant influence the dominant-gender stories have on men's choices to abuse their partners. Within this dominant approach, battering is explained by the power and control story that states that men want, use, and get power and control through abusing their female partners (Pence & Paymar, 1993). While the power and control story is very important in my conversations with men, I have begun to notice other stories that are also important in ending men's violence (Augusta-Scott, 2003). Previously, I relied exclusively on the power and control story to explain battering. This grand narrative disqualified alternative stories influencing people's decisions to perpetrate abuse in relationships.

The dominant domestic violence approach and the power and control story are influenced by gender essentialism. Essentialist ideas about gender maintain that men are abusive and women are not and that women are victims and men are not (Brown, 2001; Fuss, 1989; Segal, 1990). This formulation

of gender significantly informed my early training in work with men who abused their partners (Pence & Paymar, 1993). Any attempts men made to talk about their own experiences of being abused were thought of as attempts to avoid responsibility and were interrupted immediately. Furthermore, if a women's aggressive behavior was acknowledged, it was defined solely as self-defense, not abuse (e.g., Hamberger & Potente, 1994).

As I was introduced to postmodernism, I began to challenge my faith in grand narratives that purported to explain everything about a subject (Lyotard, 1984). Narrative therapy helped me appreciate the multiple and often contradictory stories that are important to acknowledge in my efforts to end men's violence against women. One of these stories that had previously been smothered by the grand narrative of the power and control story is that some of the men's partners perpetrated abuse themselves.

I began acknowledging women's abusive behavior once I had conversations with women and listened to their accounts of their own behavior. Gender essentialism had previously influenced my practice by leading me to believe women were not strong or powerful enough to hurt men. When I began to have conversations with partners, women directly challenged this gender essentialism. Women resisted me essentializing them as powerless victims and, in turn, defining all their aggressive behavior as "self-defense." Women acknowledged being abused and held their male partners responsible for their choices. At the same time, these women expressed shame over perpetrating abuse against their partners that involved a range of abusive behavior. Many expressed remorse for shaming their male partners because they did not live up to traditional male gender expectations, such as earning enough money. In a more extreme situation, a woman showed up in my office unannounced. She was distraught. She had just left her partner in his house after having used an ax to chop up his front porch. While she had been abused, she did not define or want to define her behavior as self-defense.

These clinical observations of women's abusive behavior are also supported by a growing body of research on heterosexual relationships (Johnson, 1995; Johnson & Ferraro, 2000; Pearson, 1997; Segal, 1990) and same-sex relationships (Renzetti & Miley, 1996; Ristock, 2002). Acknowledging women's violence does not necessitate concluding that women and men perpetrate abuse equally, in terms of the degree, frequency, or effects of the abuse. I am also not suggesting that all men's partners whom I work with perpetrate abuse. Often men alone perpetrate abuse in relationships; sometimes women and men abuse each other; and occasionally, only women perpetrate abuse. My thesis is, simply, for men who abuse and are abused by their partners, it is often helpful to talk about both of these experiences in our efforts to stop men's violence against women.

By acknowledging women's abusive behavior in conversations with men, I am not creating a narrative of systemic causality, blaming his abusive behavior on hers. He needs to stop his abuse even if she does not. In my earlier work, I was concerned that acknowledging women's abuse might mitigate men's responsibility for having used abusive behavior. Now I can acknowledge how both women and men are responsible for their choices. As I moved away from dichotomous thinking (Derrida, 1980, 1998), I was able to acknowledge both women's and men's power and powerlessness, their experiences of perpetrating abuse and being victimized by abuse, and their responsibility for their own choices. Recognizing this complexity has helped me hear men's stories differently and assisted in the rewriting of identity stories for men that move them past the gender essentializing and totalizing stories of them.

Rather than excusing men's abusive behavior, acknowledging is helpful in assisting men to take responsibility to stop their abuse. In this chapter, I demonstrate how inviting men to talk of their partners' abusive behavior can challenge excuses and justifications for perpetrating abusive behavior, challenge gender essentialism, and create conversations with men that are fair to both men and their partners.

Studying Excuses and Justifications

Sometimes men blame their abuse on their partners' behavior. When this happens, I invite men to study how these excuses and justifications support their choice to abuse. In the past, I interrupted men and redirected them to look at their own behavior. This response, ironically, often thwarted exploration of the excuses and justifications. Now, when a man is blaming his abuse on his partner, I write down the excuse on a big notepad (i.e., a large white board) in full view of him and invite him to become curious about the idea and to study it. The big notepad serves to externalize these ideas (White & Epston, 1990) by actually putting the problem or the ideas outside of the man; this way, the conversation focuses on the ideas rather than on the man. This process allows me to collaborate with the man against the ideas and practices, rather than opposing him.

Men often justify the abuse and their expectations of their partners and themselves by invoking naturalistic accounts of gender (e.g., "Boys will be boys"; "You know how women are"). Traditional gender expectations often

lead men to excessively rely and depend on their partners emotionally and socially in relationships (Jenkins, 1990). This traditional gender story often leads men (and women) to expect women to be peacekeepers and nurturers. As a result, when men use abusive behavior, they often blame their partners for not having solved the conflict, not making everyone feel better, or not keeping the peace (Jenkins, 1990). I find it helpful to disrupt this gender essentialism by inquiring about where men have learned these ideas about women and men:

- When did you learn the idea that all women are nurturing?
- What do women and men learn from society about women and men's responsibilities in a relationship?
- If a man were influenced by these ideas, how might these ideas affect the trust, caring, and respect in his relationship over time?

Often the responses to these questions lead to an exploration of the social expectations of women and men in relationships. Men are also invited to explore the effects of justifying and excusing their abuse by blaming it on their partners. By studying the effects of this idea, men often become critical of it. The following questions help facilitate this exploration:

- How strong has the influence this idea—that your partner is to blame for your choices to abuse—been on your life?
- Where have you let this idea lead you?
- What has this idea blinded you from seeing about your partner and her feelings and intentions?
- What effect does the idea (that a man's partner is to blame for his violence) have on a relationship over time?
- How has this idea stopped you from building the relationship you prefer? (Jenkins, 1998)

Men distance themselves from the idea that "she's to blame" when they explore the influence this idea has on their choices. I also ask externalizing questions that highlight how the idea that his partner is to blame for his abusive behavior restrains him from taking responsibility for his behavior:

- If a man wanted to stop his abuse but thought that his partner was to blame for it, would he try to control himself or try to control her?
- Would the idea that his partner is to blame increase or decrease the abusive and controlling behavior over time? (Jenkins, 1998)

To continue to focus the man on his responsibility for his choices and move him away from blaming and relying on his partner to stop his violence, I ask the following questions:

- How have these ideas led you to see your problem with control as your partner's problem?
- How has this idea prevented you from taking control of yourself?
- Who has worked harder to stop your abuse and prevent violence, you or your partner? (Jenkins, 1998)

Typically, men themselves begin to resist the idea that their abusive behavior is their partners' fault. Toward this end, I ask men directly, "Whose job is it to stop your violence?" (Jenkins, 1998). When I ask this question, most men will say it is their job. Within this context, I can invite men to reflect on how they may have previously relied on their partners to take responsibility to stop their own violence:

- Who has been studying your violence and its effects the most up until now, you or your partner?
- Who needs to be studying how you work yourself up to abuse?
- Who needs to be thinking about the effects of the abuse?
- What would happen if you continued to rely on your partner to do your work for you?
- Could you handle a relationship in which you control your own violence, or do you need your partner to try to control it for you by keeping her quiet or "walking on eggshells" around you?
- Do you want to take action to put the brakes on yourself, or would you rather leave it to your partner to continue to try to stop the abuse for you? (Jenkins, 1998)

At the same time I explore men's efforts to provide excuses or justifications for their abusive behavior, I might ask men to talk about what a partner would have to do to take responsibility for her own abusive behavior. As a man talks (indignantly) about his partner's abusive behavior, I often invite him to develop a definition of *responsibility* using his partner as an example. Through this process of defining and exploring women's behavior, men are often able to articulate what the woman would have to do to take responsibility for her own choices to perpetrate abuse. I ask the following questions:

- Who is responsible for stopping your partner's abusive behavior?
- What would happen if she blamed you for her choices to use abuse in the relationship?
- What would it mean if your partner could slow down and think about the effects of her behavior on you?

Once the man has established this definition of responsibility, I invite him to apply it to himself and ask him what he would have to do to take

responsibility. I am then able to ask him, "Who is responsible for stopping your abusive behavior?" Most men do not argue for a double standard, one definition of responsibility for her and another for him. Most men conclude that they both have to take responsibility, and, toward this end, men often affirm their commitment to take responsibility, whether their partners do or not.

Sometimes men are influenced by the idea that "I can't change if she won't change." To guard against this idea, I ask men the following questions:

- If your partner is being unreasonable or abusive, how can you respond to her to get closer to the relationship you want?
- Are you saying that even if your partner is not taking responsibility and is yelling at you that you still value taking responsibility?
- If she decides to go down the path of "disrespect," are you saying that you still want to go down your own path of "respect" rather than follow her down the path of "disrespect"?

The idea "I can't change if she won't change" leads men to believe that to stop their own abusive behavior, their partners would have to stop their unreasonable or even abusive behavior. When men make this statement, they are often (erroneously) equating responsibility for making a relationship work with responsibility for stopping abuse, and I invite men to distinguish between the two. I often agree with men's statement: "It takes two" to make a relationship work, and both partners are responsible for contributing to the relationship in respectful ways. But if he doesn't stop his abuse, the relationship will not work. If she doesn't stop her abuse, the relationship will not work. I invite men to consider that while it takes two to make a relationship work, it takes only him to stop his own abusive behavior.

Gender

To acknowledge women's abusive behavior, I had to change how I think about gender. While previously, I believed gender was socially constructed, my practice often essentialized gender as fixed, static, and immutable (de Lauretis, 1985, 1990). Rather than viewing women and men as being biologically determined, I viewed them as socially determined (Brown, 2001). I began to question the gender essentialism influencing my work when I realized how my use of the power and control story as a grand narrative to explain men's violence actually replicated traditional gender ideas: Men are powerful perpetrators, and women are powerless victims (Augusta-Scott, 2003).

In an effort to resist gender essentialism, I now find it helpful to think of gender as *stories* that are told about women and men. Thinking of gender as stories also allows me to recognize that people are more complex and contradictory than the traditional gender stories suggest. When I talk of "women" and "men," I am not talking about how women and men *are*, but rather the *stories* that are told about how women and men are. For example, there are many ways men are nurturing and caring that do not get "storied" into the world. By thinking of gender as story, I am able to move away from the essentializing and universalizing of women and men.

While gender stories do not fully *determine* women and men, they powerfully *influence* people's choices and behavior. This distinction allows me to explore with women and men how they participate in, are influenced by, and resist the gender stories. I also find it helpful to understand gender as a *performance* (Butler, 1990; 2004; Halberstam, 1998). Thinking of gender as a practice challenges the patriarchal idea that masculinity and femininity are fixed, natural, immutable biological identities. Noticing how "masculinity," for example, is a practice or performance allows me to notice how both women and men practice behavior that is constructed as "dominant masculinity." For example, by thinking of gender as a performance, I can notice how women practice "dominant masculinity" as they perpetrate abusive behavior.

The dominant domestic violence approach reproduces gender stories and presumes a totalizing, monolithic, or universal influence of these stories on women and men. In contrast, I now notice that gender stories influence these relationships in multiple ways. For example, the gender stories influence men's choices to perpetrate abuse to establish power and control over their partners (Pence & Paymar, 1993). At the same time, by promoting the idea that women are primarily weak, powerless, and peaceful, these gender stories also render invisible women's power and perpetration of abuse. By acknowledging the multiple influences of gender stories, the process of inviting men to take responsibility to stop their abusive behavior has become increasingly nuanced.

Creating Respect by Challenging Gender Essentialism

For therapeutic conversations to move men toward respectful relationships with others required that I ensured that my conversations with men were fair and respectful (Jenkins, 1998). For my conversations to be effective in addressing men's disrespectful practices, I needed to also examine my behavior toward them. If I wished to have men commit to stand against their own perpetrations of injustice, I had to make a similar commitment. I am reminded of Gandhi's famous words, "Be the change you wish to see in the world."

Creating antiessentialist conversations often involves allowing men to talk about their experiences of being hurt. By essentializing men as tough and strong, I interrupted and disqualified men's emotional accounts of being hurt by their partners. By interrupting men's accounts of being abused by their partners, I not only precluded studying possible justifications and excuses of their violence but also negated men's emotional experiences of being abused. I replicated dominant masculinity by negating men's experiences of pain through challenging and confronting men in an oppositional manner. Not only were men well accustomed to these practices of dominant masculinity, this approach did not offer men alternative ways of relating to others.

Now, rather than interrupt men, I challenge the gender essentialism that influenced my practice by attending to the emotional experience of men who are being hurt by their partners. Challenging the influence of gender essentialism on my practice is important in creating conversations with men that are fair for both men and their partners. Ensuring that the conversations are respectful has been helpful in moving men toward taking responsibility to stop their abuse. Men challenge traditional masculinity by talking about their experiences of being hurt, particularly by women. Through sharing their vulnerabilities and caring for other men in the context of a therapeutic group, men reveal alternative ways of being. Furthermore, by experiencing caring relationships, men can recreate these caring practices with their partners. Rather than engaging in oppositional confrontation, I now challenge men by emphasizing safety and respect (Augusta-Scott, 2003). As a result of feeling safe and respected, men are often able to face the behaviors they are ashamed of and feel most vulnerable discussing for the first time.

The gender essentialism informing my practice created unfair inconsistencies in my conversations with men. Essentialist constructions of men as tough and women as weak define abuse as serious only when women, not men, are abused. For example, I often emphasize how emotional abuse is as serious as physical abuse.[1] If a man reports that *he* used emotional abuse against his partner, I invite him to consider the seriousness of this abuse. In my previous practices, however, if a man reported that *she* used emotional abuse against him, I minimized the seriousness of emotional abuse. I minimized it by automatically defining her behavior as "self-defense" and redirecting him to refocus on his responsibility for hurting her. The implicit message men received was that emotional abuse is serious only when he, not the woman, perpetrates it. Furthermore, I emphasized that he take responsibility for how he was hurting her but demonstrated no concern about her taking responsibility for hurting him. Men experienced this inconsistency as confusing and

unfair. As a result, men often resisted this unfairness, which made having conversations about the seriousness of their own behavior more difficult.

When I challenge gender essentialism and listen to men's experiences of being hurt, they are generally more ready to take responsibility for their own abuse and acknowledge its effects on their partners. For example, prior to being referred to have conversations with me, many men have experienced protection agencies negating their partners' abusive behavior. One man early in a group process exclaimed, "I know what I did was wrong, but I just want to hear someone acknowledge that my wife abused me too." Within a narrative approach, his partner's abuse was acknowledged, and he then began to focus on his own abusive behavior. In contrast, with the dominant discursive approach, I would have shut this conversation down and simply redirected the man to focus on his own behavior.

The dominant approach in domestic violence work assumes that if men talk about their partners' behavior, they are avoiding responsibility by justifying and excusing their own abusive behavior (Pence & Paymar, 1993). There are, however, many times when a man talks about his partner's responsibility for her abusive behavior and is not avoiding responsibility by blaming her. Men often acknowledge both their own and their partners' responsibility for perpetrating abuse at the same time. Many men talk about their experiences of injustice, including their partners' perpetrating abuse, while not excusing or justifying their own abuse or avoiding responsibility. Many men are able to acknowledge their experiences of being hurt while still acknowledging their responsibility for hurting others.

Political Positioning

To acknowledge women's abusive behavior, I also had to change how I communicate my politics in these conversations with women and men. My central political beliefs in this work are that men's violence toward women is oppressive; men's violence is strongly influenced by sexism; and men need to take full responsibility for their abusive behavior (Pence & Paymar, 1993). I try to communicate my politics in conversations through my questions and curiosity rather than imposing my politics on the men or pretending to be neutral. While I invite clients to share their particular experiences, values, and politics with me, I recognize that we both have only partial knowledge and that the ideas put forth are all reflexively shared, valued, and deconstructed. Through these conversations, I reflexively question my own politics and practices in a manner similar to that which I am inviting men to do.

Imposition

In my past work, I communicated my politics by imposing them on men in a challenging and confrontational manner. In accordance with the dominant approach to working with domestic violence, I previously adopted the traditional expert stance in conversations with men. I assumed the role of unilaterally defining the "facts" in a situation: whom to believe and not to believe, and what is true or false.[2] Adopting the expert position led me to take on an interrogative, policing detective role in therapeutic conversations with men. This detective or policing position—Do I believe him or not?—led me to focus on myself rather than what might be helpful for the man and his partner. For example, if I started to believe the man, I became afraid that I was being manipulated, duped, and outwitted in the conversation. Alternatively, by believing him, I feared I would be disappointed if the man perpetrated abuse again. To avoid the emotional risks involved in believing men, I simply assumed the men were dishonest, and I did not believe them. Furthermore, when I did not believe men's stories, I precluded the exploration of their partners' abusive behavior from our conversations.

Contrary to my intentions, the effect of policing men's honesty increased their denial of the abuse and minimization of the seriousness of it. My policing of men implicitly supported the totalizing story that men are dishonest, which they, in turn, often performed for me. Policing men was a way for me to take responsibility for how honest men were with me. By my not policing men and, instead, being curious about their ideas, they get the implicit message that they can be honest if they choose. The result is that most men begin to take responsibility themselves for being honest in the conversation. Early in the conversations, while I am caring of them, they often realize I am not invested in whether or not they are honest. If they choose to be dishonest, they realize I will not be disappointed, hurt, or angry. As a result, men often realize that the only people who will be hurt or "fooled" in the conversation by their dishonesty are themselves. Many men reveal to me in the first conversation, "I might as well be honest with you because if I'm not, I'm only hurting myself." As a result, men are forthcoming with the accounts of their own abuse and their partners, accounts that are often confirmed by their partners.

I have been able to have conversations with men about their partners' abusive behavior by not imposing my politics and adopting the traditional "expert role." I am no longer caught in my emotional dilemma of deciding whether or not to believe a man when listening to his experience of his partner's abusive behavior. Instead, I focus on how I might be helpful to him and his partner. This approach allows me to be curious about the contradictions and complexities involved in a man's and woman's experiences of each

other's abuse. When I hear them both talk of their own perpetration of abuse, I hear their conflicting experiences and accounts of the relationship. I am often in conversations with a woman and man both individually and together. I listen to both in a manner that is attentive to their emotional experiences, while not expressing doubts or taking a stand on the "truth" of the story—not seeking to believe or not believe the person's story. While I have my own interpretation of the situation, I try to remain open to the ambiguity of these conversations, and I can help the couple share their stories and thoughts. I rely on the couple's capacity to make wise decisions as the process moves along. As well, I focus on safety and how they could be best protected (Goldner, 1999; Reichelt, Tjersland, Gulbrandsen, Jensen, & Mossige, 2004).

In situations that involve the criminal justice system or child protection, I am expected to impose my evaluation of a man's level of risk to others and offer a traditional "expert" opinion. For example, when a man has been removed from his home, I am often required to have an opinion about whether or not he is ready to return home. When men argue that they are ready to return home, I am faced with deciding whether or not I agree with them. This responsibility to the court and the larger community is important. There are collaborative ways of dealing with issues of "policing," such as being initially clear with men about the limitations of confidentiality, collaboratively talking about evaluation criteria, and so forth. However, sometimes collaboration is unsuccessful, and I am required to offer an assessment that conflicts with a man's assessment of himself. When I am (necessarily) responsible to impose this "expert position," this practice does strain the therapeutic relationship and, in turn, hinders efforts to stop his abuse. This tension is but one example of the dilemmas faced in this work.

Neutrality

Although I try not to impose my politics on men as I listen to their experiences of their partners' abusive behavior, I do not believe it is possible to adopt a "neutral stance" that is often articulated in the theorizing of family therapy (Minuchin, 1974). I am also not suggesting that therapists try and embrace a "not-knowing stance," as espoused by various relativist postmodern therapists (e.g., Anderson, 1997). These positions cannot account for the therapist's power and seem to reflect modernist ideals about the possibility of being objective or value free (Brown, 2003). The fiction of "objectivity" and "neutrality" does not acknowledge the institutional and relational power the therapist inevitably has in shaping these collaborative therapeutic conversations (Brown, 2001; White, 1992). I want to be reflexively focused

on how my questions and responses are shaped by my own meaning system and politics and how I, in turn, shape the men's responses by the questions I ask them. I have an agenda behind the questions I choose to ask them. For example, my agenda in having them talk of their partners' abusive behavior is both to acknowledge their hurt and to stop their abusive behavior.

I practice a collaborative approach with people (White, 1995) that helps to challenge the traditional expert authority of the therapist. Often, however, therapists seek to challenge the traditional expert authority and power of the therapist by asserting that the therapist is an expert on process rather than content and should thereby adopt a "not-knowing stance" (Anderson, 1997). I find this manner of challenging the traditional expert authority often leads therapists to deny the knowledge and power they have and thereby not take responsibility for it.

Conclusion

The dominant domestic violence discourse resists having conversations with men about their experiences of their partners' abusive behavior. In part, this reflects the gender essentialism that continues to influence the field of domestic violence. When these conversations surface, however, I find that men take more responsibility to stop their own abusive behavior and build respectful relationships. These conversations allow men to challenge their excuses and justifications for abusing their partners. They also help resist gender essentialism, whereby men are totalized to a one-dimensional identity as "perpetrators" and women are reduced to a one-dimensional identity as "victims." My challenging of gender essentialism has created conversations that are more reflective and empathetic to both women and men, moving from confrontational to invitational practices and from centering only on my ideas to collaborating with members of both sexes. I have also changed how I communicate my feminist politics. By using questions and curiosity unexpectedly, accessing men's stories of women's abusive behavior has become an important component within conversations to end men's violence against women.

Notes

1. Initially, I did not make distinctions among the various types of abuse and their severity. I did not realize that emotional abuse may be as serious, more serious, or less serious than physical abuse. I never wanted to consider that occasionally emotional abuse is not as serious as physical abuse, for fear of minimizing the seriousness

of the emotional abuse. Now, I realize the importance of noticing differences in the severity of abuse and different levels of risk in order to respond to a family's particular circumstances in a helpful manner (Johnson & Farraro, 2000).

2. My coworkers and I took this approach with women as well. For example, while our rhetoric was to respect women's choices, often the practice was to tell them what was "really" happening in their relationships, drawing on the power and control story of the dominant domestic violence approach (Pence & Paymar, 1993).

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