

**AS IF THEY WERE HUMAN:**  
A Different Take on Perpetrator Accountability



I chose the title of this little zine for two reasons. In part, I did this to invoke the way these words can be said in scorn or disgust: "...As if they're human!" There is a common sentiment in which perpetrators of sexual violence are understood to be inhuman monsters. And there is a common approach to dealing with these perpetrators – visible everywhere from vigilante justice to mainstream domestic violence programs to prisons – which reflects how our culture treats everything it deems less than human (including everything that is nonhuman): namely, these things must be dominated, overpowered, destroyed, controlled, or made to obey.

(It is worth mentioning that most of what is dominated in this way is directly oppressed and exploited for material gain. Although perpetrators as such are not oppressed or exploited – indeed, they are themselves oppressors and exploiters – the system of power does exploit the *fear* of perpetrators thoroughly. Thus the fear and dehumanization are spread through the propaganda of those in power, but only as far as it serves their interests. When, for example, rich white men are reported for sexually assaulting someone, they become martyrs instead of monsters.)

More importantly, the title of this zine is a reference to how I feel perpetrators should be treated: *as if they were human*. Because they are human. The mainstream portrays perpetrators as hopeless cases, who care about nothing in life other than power and control. While it is certainly clear that those who sexually assault, abuse, or rape others *do* care quite a bit about power and control, it is disingenuous to declare that those are the only things they care about. As with all humans, humans who are also perpetrators have many desires and wishes for their lives.

As with all humans, these diverse desires and wishes often conflict with one another.

Tod Augusta-Scott is the first author I have ever come across who conveys the innate humanity possessed by those people who have sexually assaulted, abused, or raped others. In his work as a counselor to abusive men, he works to connect perpetrators with their own humanity in order to assist them in taking responsibility for their violence and becoming accountable. Augusta-Scott's work is grounded in feminism, in challenging gender essentialism, and in creating new stories for one's own life.

Instead of taking an aggressive, confrontational approach and shutting a perpetrator down whenever they veer from accepting the dehumanizing story that is supposed to define them, Augusta-Scott's approach helps the perpetrator understand how the abuse conflicts with other wishes the perpetrator may have for their life: love, respect, intimacy, companionship. In this way, people who work with perpetrators on accountability no longer become police, but rather collaborators in ending the abuse. I feel that radical community accountability efforts could learn a great deal from this alternative approach.

With no further ado, three articles by Tod Augusta-Scott.

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## **Dichotomies in the Power and Control Story:**

*Exploring multiple stories about men who choose abuse in intimate relationships*

Tod Augusta-Scott<sup>1</sup>

## **Introduction**

For a number of years I have worked with men who have used violence against their female partners, and during this time I have utilised the power and control story as a grand narrative to explain the entirety of battering. The power and control story states that men *want* power and control, *use* power and control ('tactics'), and *get* power and control by abusing their female partners (Pence & Paymar 1993; Paymar 2000; Emerge 2000). The power and control story is told through the Power and Control Wheel (Pence & Paymar 1993). Gradually, however, I have recognised how the power and control story as a grand narrative is often unable to account for the multiple, complex, and often contradictory stories men tell me about their abusive behaviour.<sup>2</sup> Many of these stories

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<sup>2</sup>One of the creators of the Power and Control Wheel, Ellen Pence (1999) also seems to be moving away from thinking of the power and control story as a grand narrative that can explain battering in its entirety. Pence (1999) writes, 'It was the cases themselves that

(along with the power and control story) seem important to address in ending battering. Some of these other stories involve men's desires for loving and respectful relationships, men's experiences of injustice and powerlessness, men's shame, and men's fears. Believing in the significance of the power and control story, I did not acknowledge the importance of any other stories. In hindsight, I believe this was in part due to the influence of dichotomous thinking. Dichotomous thinking restrained me from accepting stories that contradict the power and control story. As well, I did not notice how both my practice and how I defined the men within the power and control grand narrative were being influenced by dominant masculinity.

More recently, I have begun to use the therapeutic approach developed by Alan Jenkins (1990, 1991, 1994, 1996, 1997, 1998). Through using this therapeutic approach, I have moved away from dichotomous thinking and toward identifying in my work the importance of the multiple, complex, and contradictory stories about battering.<sup>3</sup> As well, I have been able to weaken the influence of dominant masculinity on both my intervention practice and how I define those with whom I work. This article draws on my own experiences as well as qualitative research I have conducted with other counsellors who use the power and control story in their

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created the chink in each of our theoretical suits of armour. Speaking for myself, I found that many of the men I interviewed did not seem to articulate a desire for power over their female partner. Although I relentlessly took every opportunity to point out to the men in the groups that they were so motivated and merely in denial...' (p. 29).

<sup>3</sup>I want to acknowledge Art Fisher of Alternatives – A Domestic Abuse Intervention Program, Bridgewater, Nova Scotia, Canada for our collaboration in identifying dichotomous thinking in our work.

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work with men who batter (Augusta-Scott 1999).<sup>4</sup>

## Historical Context

The power and control story developed from the efforts of the battered women's movement to challenge the prevailing mental health and legal responses to battering. Often therapeutic interventions with battering were perceived as colluding with the men not taking responsibility for their abusive behavior. Rather than focusing men on taking responsibility to stop their abuse, therapeutic interventions were seen as exacerbating a man's irresponsible stories by suggesting that his abuse is *caused* by his female partner, abuse in his childhood, 'impulse control disorder,' low self-esteem, alcohol, and so forth. In contrast, the power and control story focused on both the intentionality of the men's abusive behaviour and the men's responsibility to stop it. The power and control story informed the development of education groups (as opposed to therapy groups) which were designed to hold men accountable and responsible for their abusive behaviour. Therapy was said to ignore the significance of the gender stories as well as individualise, pathologise, and de-politicise the issue of men's violence against women. In contrast, the power and control grand narrative was meant to politicise the issue and highlight the significant influence of the traditional gender stories

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<sup>4</sup>The research involves interviews I conducted with six of my colleagues, in Nova Scotia, Canada, who work with men who batter. I interviewed the counsellors at their place of work for intervention programs funded by the Nova Scotia Department of Community Services. I conducted semi-structured ninety minute interviews with two female and four male counsellors based on a prepared outline. To ensure the anonymity of those involved, all names have been changed and identifying information omitted.

on battering (Pence & Shepard 1999).

The battered women's movement also saw the legal system as unresponsive to women who were abused by their partners. This unresponsiveness was interpreted as an indication of how communities collude with men who batter. By emphasising the intentionality of the abuse and the men's responsibility for it, the battered women's movement used the power and control story to mobilise communities to hold the men accountable and responsible for their actions through the legal system (Pence & Shepard 1999).

The power and control story was developed from the experiences of women who have been abused by their male partners. The battered women's movement identified the importance of including the stories of these women in defining the problem of battering. In particular the movement identified the importance of intervention work with men needing to be accountable to female partners and their stories of the abuse. As a result, many of the intervention programs hold themselves accountable to the female partners by contacting them directly to hear about their experiences of the abuse and any changes that may be happening while the man is in the program (Pence & Shepard 1999).

The work of the battered women's movement, and its attention to relations of power and issues of accountability have changed the shape of responses to men's violence in many positive ways. Our understanding of these issues has been changed dramatically. Workers and communities are now engaged in thinking through how to avoid colluding in men's violence because of the work of the battered women's movement.

I engaged with the power and control story because of commitments that I share in common with the battered women's movement. I maintain these

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commitments. In this paper I wish to explore some of the unintended consequences of understanding men's violence solely through the power and control story, and some alternatives which I am currently exploring. One of the unintended consequences of the power and control story is that it can obscure the multiple desires that men who batter have for their lives and relationships.

### Stories of men's desires

The power and control grand narrative states that men batter because they *want* power and control. Along with many of the counsellors I interviewed, I have used the power and control story to explain battering. In so doing, workers define the men in terms of wanting power and control over their partners. When asked what men are wanting to achieve through battering, one of the workers, Dorothy, responded:

*Maintaining power and control, that's why they batter and that's how they maintain it, to keep it. They don't want to let it go, they want to be in charge, they want to be the boss and they want to have power over somebody at all cost to themselves, to their partner, to their children. And sometimes it sounds that easy and if we could spell it out that easy but it's really hard for them to get that and understand that.*

While Alan Jenkins (1990) notices men's desires for power and control, he also identifies men's desires for relationships based on love, respect, and closeness. Jenkins (1996) states, 'Most of the men I see are not wanting relationships in which they abuse those whom they love. I believe that their preferred ways of being and relating are respectful and equitable, despite their disrespectful practices' (p.120).

Following this, I have begun to explore the

multiple stories of men's desires. Of course, just because a man *says* he wants love, respect, and equality in a relationship, I do not assume that he has an immediate and profound understanding of these ideas and practices. Naming these values is a starting point. The men will spend the rest of their time in the program exploring the complexity and importance of these ideas to developing intimate relationships. Jenkins (1990) writes:

*Whilst I respect the man's argument for non-violence and mutuality, I do not regard them as evidence of his readiness to cease violence or engage new behaviour. They are regarded as a point of reference which he has provided and to which the therapist can return throughout therapy and compare and contrast the man's action. I am not concerned about the 'truth' of the arguments – whether they are true representations of his feelings, socially desirable responses or attempts to deceive the therapist. I regard them as beginning steps towards responsibility and integrity and invite the man to entertain these ideas in a variety of ways. (p.72)*

I have come to believe that in the process of challenging men's violence, noticing men's desires for relationships based on love, respect, and caring is important. Often by naming these desires the men experience themselves as resisting traditional masculine ideas about men only wanting power and control and not caring about love and respect. For example, in an early group session I invite the men to identify their relationship desires and I put them on a flip chart. In one particular group, after the flip chart paper was almost filled with many of the men's desires such as trust, respect and so forth, a large man cautiously said, 'I want...love in my relationship'. The man was cautious because he thought the other men in the group might shame him for wanting 'love' in his relationship. Instead, the group recognised his courage in standing up to the traditional masculine script.

In noticing men's multiple desires, it is then

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“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.

possible to invite the men to notice how their desires for love, respect, and intimacy are thwarted by abusive practices and sexist beliefs about relationships. The men can then evaluate for themselves if abusive behaviour is achieving the loving and close relationship they want. Through the process of noticing these other stories about men's desires and evaluating their practices, men can become self-motivated to change.

Dichotomous thinking led me and my co-workers to believe that men want either power and control or love and equality. In contrast, Jenkins notices that often the men's desires are contradictory. Men often want *both* power over their partners *and* equal, respectful relationships at the same time. Focusing on men's desire for love and respect does not mean that men do not also want power and control in their relationships. Dichotomous thinking prevented me from noticing the complexity and contradictions in the men's desires. To maintain the power and control story, dichotomous thinking led me to dismiss men's desires for respect and love which contradict this story. When men would say they loved their partners or children, we believed they were insincere and simply trying to avoid responsibility for their 'real' intentions of wanting power and control.

By negating men's desires for loving and close relationships, the grand narrative of power and control may inadvertently replicate dominant masculinity by insisting these men only care about power and control and do not care about respectful, caring relationships. As well, in retrospect, I never realised how my implicit (and often explicit) assumptions about the men' desires (i.e., that they wanted power and control and were not concerned about the well being of their children or partner) often fuelled the men's anger toward myself. This anger was defined as men's 'denial' and 'control tactics' in their efforts to mask

their desires for power and control. Avoiding dichotomous thinking, and being open to the multiplicity of men's desires, is creating new options for collaborating with men in addressing their abusive actions.

### **The abuse 'working' and 'not working'**

The power and control story states that men not only *want* power and control but they also *use* power and control ('tactics') and *get* the effects (i.e., power and control) that they want through battering. Early in the intervention process, men often avoid taking responsibility for their calculating, intentional, and deliberate *use* of abusive behaviour (e.g., many men say, 'I just lost it' or 'I was out of control'). To hold the men responsible for their intentional *use* of abuse, we used the power and control story to emphasise that the abuse is calculated, they 'didn't just lose it', and were no 'out of control'. Toward this end, the men's abuse was defined as 'control tactics' (Pence & Paymar 1993). As well, early in the intervention process, men often avoid taking responsibility for the effects of the abuse (e.g., many men say, 'I didn't mean it'). To hold the men responsible for the intended effects they *get* from the abuse (i.e., power and control), we used the power and control story to insist that the men 'did mean it', that they did get what they wanted from the abuse. We emphasised the intended effects of the abuse and de-emphasised the unintended effects. To emphasise the intended effects of the abuse, we described what the men *get* from the abuse in terms of 'payoffs', 'benefits', and 'privileges' (Pence & Paymar 1993; Paymar 2000). Further to this, to emphasise both the calculated *use* of abuse and the intended effects the men *get* from it, we defined the abuse as 'working'. One of the workers I interviewed, Kirk, reported:

(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

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 interpretations 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 evaluations 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

*Men batter because it works. It works. It works to get them what they want. I believe abuse can be reduced down to two reasons: one reason is you want to make your partner do something, the other reason is you want to stop her from doing something. The bottom line is it works.*

Dichotomous thinking led me and my co-workers to believe that the violence must be considered as either calculated or not calculated; either the effects are intentional or unintentional; the men either 'mean it' or 'do not mean it'; the abuse was either 'working' or 'not working'. While Jenkins (1990) also only emphasises the calculated and intentional *use* of abuse,<sup>5</sup> in terms of the effects the men *get* from the abuse, he finds it helpful to emphasise how the abuse might *both* 'work' *and* 'not work' at the same time. Jenkins invites the men to notice the ways in which they are *not* achieving what they want through using violence in their intimate relationships. The men are encouraged to notice how the abuse is taking them away from the loving and respectful relationships they want. Through inviting the man to notice how the abuse is *not* working, the counselors can create a context in which the man is more likely to develop self-motivation to end the abuse.

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<sup>5</sup>In contrast, Goldner (1998) finds it helpful to notice how the abuse is often both calculated and uncalculated, how the men are often both 'in control' and 'out of control'. She writes: 'from a both/and perspective, violence is best conceptualized as simultaneously wilful and impulse-ridden, as both instrumental and dissociative...treatment is most effective in helping men take responsibility for being violent when the therapist can rhetorically encompass both the intentional and impulsive dimensions of their experience' (p.279). She works with men in a way that both expands the man's self-description (i.e., noticing his agency and responsibility) without negating his experience. To acknowledge both positions she asks the men questions like, 'What made you choose to lose it?', 'Can you remember the moment when you chose to lose it?' (p.279).

Jenkins (1990) identifies how men's 'power and control tactics' often reflect a man's misguided attempts to build a relationship that is respectful and loving. To get their relationships to 'work', these men often follow the traditional gender stories they have had told to them (i.e., men are to work outside the home, be rational, make decisions while women are to make the relationships in the family 'work' by being the emotional care takers, peace keepers, and nurture relationships). These traditional gender stories often act as a recipe that men and women are influenced by to achieve caring and respectful relationships. This recipe is often misguided and does not lead people to the relationships they want. As a result of this misguided recipe, when the relationship is *not* working and he is abusive, he *blames* her for not being nurturing enough or for not being the peace keeper. If the woman is influenced by these traditional gender stories, she will also blame herself for his abuse and the relationship failing. When the relationship is not working, the man's misguided attempts to fix it often involve trying to control her, to get her to live up to her responsibilities. Jenkins (1990) invites the men to notice how this 'misguided recipe' does not actually lead to the respectful, caring relationships they want.

The result of primarily emphasizing the idea that men are *getting* what they want by beating their female partners (i.e., the men are achieving the power and control they desire) led myself and my coworkers to be pessimistic about the men ever changing. We inadvertently smothered the men's motivation to change by insisting that their violence was 'working' to get them what they 'want'. Believing the men had little motivation to change, we believed we had to be in opposition to the men, challenging and confronting them to change. This dynamic was often fuelled further by implicit dichotomies

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

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.<sup>2</sup> 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

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<sup>2</sup>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).

in our intervention that suggested the workers were good, the men were bad; that workers were right, the men wrong, and so forth.

Dichotomous thinking led us to negate any possible contradictions between the men's desires and the *effects* of their violence. Rather than accepting that there may be a contradiction between men's desires for respectful relationships and the effects of their violence, we inferred the men were being dishonest about their respectful intentions. To maintain the idea that the violence was calculated and 'working' to get them what they want, we implicitly suggested that the men knew 'exactly what they are doing'. We implied that there were no unintended or unwanted effects of the abuse. (While implying the men knew 'exactly what they are doing', at the same time, we invited the men to study the effects of their violence. In retrospect, I recognise that, presumably, if the men knew 'exactly what they were doing', they would not have to study the effects of their violence – they would already know them. This contradiction in the approach may have created confusion for the men.) While the men's behavior is often calculated, in terms of the effects of the abuse, they often *both* 'know what they are doing' (e.g., winning an 'argument') *and* 'do not know what they are doing' (e.g., destroying the relationships) at the same time. Often they both 'mean it' (i.e., intend the effects) and 'do not mean it' (i.e., do not intend the effects of their violence). After being asked what difference it made to study the effects of the abuse on his partner and children, one of the men in my group, Daniel, explained:

*I don't think I ever accidentally said anything in my life to hurt somebody. If I said something to hurt somebody, I said it because I wanted to hurt them. However, to be able to feel how bad they felt and how bad I hurt them gives me a real perspective on what I've done, the pain I've caused, and the damage I've done...I didn't realise how bad it was. I was*

*doing it to win, I was going to win...All I was winning was driving people away from me.*

Daniel describes both knowing and not knowing the effects of his abuse. He describes 'meaning it' and 'not meaning it'. He illustrates the calculated nature of the abuse, while at the same time illustrating the un-calculated effects. Acknowledging these complexities allows workers to join with a man's respectful intentions, to emphasise how the abuse is 'not working' as a means of developing a man's self-motivation to stop it, and to invite him to take responsibility for the effects of his abuse whether he intended them or not.

### **Stories of power and powerlessness**

Consistent with the story of abuse 'working', the power and control grand narrative defines the men as having power and control. Dichotomous thinking leads counsellors to believe that a person is either powerful or powerless and prevents workers from considering that the men are often *both* powerful *and* powerless at the same time. Often men do have power and control in these relationships. At the same time, the power and control story prevented us from noticing men's experiences of powerlessness both inside and outside of their intimate relationships.

Inside their intimate relationship, many men only achieve a momentary feeling of power and control through beating their female partners. Often the feeling of power and control is fleeting, and is quickly followed by feelings of shame, self-disgust, and powerlessness to change their relationships or themselves. As well, many of the men I work with experience an extreme emotional and social dependency on their female partners. Many men in desperation will say, 'she's all I've got'. Men's

acknowledge its effects on their partners. For example, prior to being referred to have conversations with me, many men have experiences 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



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.<sup>1</sup> 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

emotional and social dependency on their female partners often leads to feelings of powerlessness over their own emotional life and their relationships with others (Jenkins 1990). The power and control story helps counsellors notice how intimate relationships are sites of power for men, but the same story prevented us from noticing how intimate relationships are also sites of powerlessness. By defining men primarily as powerful and in control, the power and control story seems to risk replicating dominant masculinity by ignoring men's experiences of powerlessness.

Often women experience their partners as both powerful and powerless. However, for women who may only experience him as powerful (as the power and control grand narrative suggests), he may still experience himself as powerless at the same time. There may be a contradiction between how she is experiencing him and how he is experiencing himself. Talking about his feelings of powerlessness, does not dismiss or negate that she may experience him as very powerful. Both experiences may happen at the same time. Often the men and women have very different experiences of their relationship. Dichotomous thinking leads counselors to believe they must validate as 'true' either the men's story or the women's story. That there are different experiences of the relationship does not mean counselors have to choose to validate one over the other. Both experiences can be acknowledged. As we confront the complexity of ending abuse, often it is important to notice many of these seemingly conflicting stories. I have found that noticing the men's experiences of reliance, dependency and powerlessness in their intimate relationships is important in having men end their abuse (Jenkins 1990; Kane, Staiger & Ricciardelli 2000). Having the men move away from the social expectations of relying on their female

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<sup>1</sup>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 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).

partners to meet the men's own social-emotional responsibilities can be important in ending abuse. Having the men take responsibility for their own emotional and social independence within an intimate relationship gives them a sense of power and control over their own feelings and relationships. This experience of power and control seems to decrease the abuse. By ignoring men's dependency on women, the power and control story seems to risk replicating dominant masculinity in masking men's dependency on women and 'women's work' in the lives of men.

By defining the men as powerful and not powerless, the dichotomous thinking informing the power and control story also prevented us from accounting for the men's experiences of powerlessness and injustice outside of their intimate relationships.<sup>6</sup> Many of the men I work with are marginalised by poverty, racism, and lack of access to education. Many of these men do not experience beating their female partners as resulting in any type of sustainable 'power' and 'privilege'. The power and control story may create dissonance and alienation for many of these men. The power and control story informed by dichotomous thinking kept me from noticing that battering often leads these men to feel even further marginalised (McKendy 1997, p.168).

One of the workers I interviewed, Kirk, noticed the dissonance between the power and control story and the lived experiences of many of the men with whom he works. Kirk states:

*In group I talk about differences in power and racial differences and I lay that out on the line. Not as much as I*

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<sup>6</sup>I appreciate researcher John P. McKendy's (1997) observation that the men's experiences of social injustice such as class are often 'seen-but-unnoticed' (p.135) in some work with men who abuse in intimate relationships.

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

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 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 conversation 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

*think would be good most of the time, but as much as I can do comfortably. I'm white, I'm approaching middle age, and I'm usually working with younger black men. Often it doesn't feel appropriate or comfortable as I'm talking to them about power because they are the ones who experience blatant disempowerment by society, they aren't hired for jobs, they are targeted for violence by groups of white men or non-black men, the legal system enforces the law to the max on these guys, the stereotypes abound, and expectations of illegal or illicit behavior follow them everywhere they go. All this stuff is racism, the subtle expectations, the comments, the subtle put downs, always pointing out the difference between them and us.*

Kirk illuminated the tension of simply describing the outcome of battering as 'power and control', especially for men who are oppressed by racism and poverty. He notices the complexity of battering when the power and control story is accompanied by stories of racism and poverty.

### **Responding to the men's experiences of injustice and powerlessness**

Early in the intervention process, men often avoid responsibility for their abuse by blaming it on their experiences of powerlessness and injustice (i.e., poverty, racism, childhood violence, and so forth). When men blame external factors for their abuse, rather than taking responsibility themselves, it seems important to interrupt these irresponsible stories from being told. If programs allow these stories to be told in ways that lessen a man's sense of responsibility for his violence, then this may run the risk of colluding with the man's violence. When I was using the power and control story informed by dichotomous thinking, however, I did not identify any value in the stories men might share of their own experiences of injustice and powerlessness. I saw no way

in which these could be relevant in ending the men's violence. These stories contradicted the power and control story. As a result I often excluded these stories from the change process. Men's experiences of childhood violence, poverty, and racism were all excluded from the change process. Focussing on men's pain, powerlessness, and experiences of injustice was seen as risking excusing the men's behaviour.

In contrast, while Jenkins similarly interrupts stories of injustice and powerlessness if they are being told in an irresponsible manner to excuse the abuse, he also identifies that stories of injustice and stories of powerlessness can be told in a manner that avoids excusing irresponsible behaviour. In fact, Jenkins identifies how such stories can be told in a responsible manner which can be very helpful to end abuse. For example, often within men's stories of their past exist many examples of the men standing up against injustice. Many of the men with whom I work have tried to stop their fathers from beating their mothers. Noticing these experiences where the men have demonstrated their preference for justice helps to 're-story' the men facing their own abuse and taking responsibility for it as consistent with their own preferences. Studying past abuse they have experienced, can also help men understand the current impact of their own abusive behavior. As well, one of the effects of creating a context for men to be able to speak of their own experiences of injustice is that it enables the counselor to model for the man ways of listening and acknowledging the effects of abuse. This is significant because it may enable the man to realise the significance of being open to listening to his partner's experiences of his abuse.

In the past I excluded men's stories of injustice and powerlessness from my conversations with men because

## 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 Laurentis, 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

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.

dichotomous thinking led me and my co-workers to define the men as either perpetrators or victims. As a result, we did not know how to think about and respond to the men as *both perpetrators* of violence against their partners *and*, at the same time, as people who have been *victims* of violence, poverty, racism, and so forth. I think we were also reluctant to notice how the men were victimised because a 'victim' is defined as someone who is not responsible and who is without agency (Mahoney 1994).<sup>7</sup> Within this framework, we thought to hold the men responsible, we could not talk about them as victims in any way.<sup>8</sup> Moving away from dichotomous thinking I am allowing me to notice how men are often both perpetrators and victims, powerful and powerless, and *responsible* for their abuse all at the same time. I also neglected men's experiences of powerlessness and injustice because I did not realise how these stories can be helpful in ending the men's own violence (Jenkins, 1998). I thought the only way the men would or could tell these stories was in an irresponsible manner to excuse their abusive behaviour.

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<sup>7</sup>Mahoney (1994) writes, 'in our society, agency and victimization are each known by the absence of the other: you are an agent if you are not a victim, and you are not a victim if you are in anyway an agent... This all-agent or all-victim conceptual dichotomy will not be easy to escape or transform' (p.64).

<sup>8</sup>This perpetrator/victim dichotomy also reinforced the idea that the violence was 'working' (vs. 'not working') and the idea that the men know 'exactly what they are doing'. To suggest that the violence was somehow 'not working' or that the men did not know 'exactly what they were doing' was to risk defining them as victims. We thought that defining the men as 'victims' of their own violence might in some way absolve them of their responsibility for it. Therefore, in an effort to hold the men responsible within this dichotomous framework, we thought we had to emphasise the violence 'working' and the men 'knowing exactly what they were doing' and de-emphasised the negative effects of the violence on the men.

We did not know how to invite men to tell these stories responsibly in a way which would lead to them taking more responsibility for their own violence. One of the workers I interviewed, Derrick, reported struggling with the victim/perpetrator dichotomy and his desire to move beyond it:

*I think we really need to integrate working with men as victim and perpetrator. I would hope we would be able to find healthier ways of being able to integrate both of them. Drawing on men's experience of victimisation and using that to be empathetic and to understand the impact of their behavior on their victims. I haven't done it, but I think that would be more holistic. Otherwise, we are separating his experiences as victim and perpetrator and there needs to be some integration...I'm not sure how to do that.*

By only focusing on men as perpetrators, the dichotomous thinking in the power and control story may replicate dominant masculinity by insisting men are not victims, not powerless, and do not feel pain.

### **Stories of men's shame**

By suggesting that men get what they want through battering, the power and control story led us to believe that men do not feel shame over their violence. There is no reason to believe the men would feel shame over battering since, so the story goes, the men only get what they want, they 'like it' (Jones 1994), and they believe battering is 'their right' (Pence & Paymar 1993; Paymar 2000; Emerge 2000). When men 'minimise' the seriousness of the abuse and 'deny' it, these actions are defined solely as 'control tactics' that the men use to maintain power over their partners. As a result, I and my co-workers often adopted an oppositional relationship with the men by confronting and challenging their 'minimising and denial' (Pence & Paymar 1993; Paymar

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

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 let 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

2000; Emerge 2000). As well, the men's explicit displays of remorse, shame, and pain over their violence were seen as insincere or simply reflecting the man's self-pity. They were seen as attempts to get sympathy but not engage in change.

In the past, I did not attend to men's shame in relation to their violence in part because I had adopted an anti-therapeutic position (Mederos 1999). Approaches which focused on the men's shame were constructed as therapeutic, and in my mind this represented colluding with the violence. The power and control story defines the men's displays of shame as 'control tactics' that the men use to manipulate not only their partners but also the counselors. Focusing on the men's shame in a therapeutic manner was understood as colluding with the men in defining themselves as victims (i.e., not responsible). I did not know how to respond to the men's shame and hold them responsible at the same time. In contrast, Jenkins (1990) notices that many men who batter often feel both entitled to have power (i.e., no shame) and, at the same time, feel shame over their violence. Jenkins suggests that when men 'minimise and deny' their violence this can have the effect of creating irresponsible stories and yet, at the same time, the 'minimising and denying' can also be evidence of the men feeling shame and remorse over their violence. Many of the men have learned that it is not acceptable to 'hit a woman'. Jenkins (1994) states:

*When men who have abused begin to accept responsibility for their actions, they face powerful feelings of shame, sadness, and fear, as they begin to think and feel about the harm they have caused and the damage they have done to the ones they love. (p.15)*

Jenkins (1998) also writes:

*They demonstrate considerable minimization of the abuse and accept little responsibility for their actions. These men are frightened of the likely consequences of their actions, and*

*their avoidant and minimizing behaviour masks a profound and pervasive sense of shame. They expect deprecation from others and feel little respect for themselves. Their assaults and subsequent apprehension confirm to themselves that they are 'losers' whose only option is to run and hide from what they have done and what they think it says about them. (p.165)*

In contrast to the counsellor being oppositional and confrontational toward the men's 'minimisation and denial', Jenkins respectfully interrupts the irresponsible stories and at other times 'normalises' the men's minimising and denial as evidence of their shame (Jenkins 1998). He invites the men to consider their shame as evidence that the men do not like their violence, that they are not relating in a manner that fits with what they want for their families.

### **Stories of men's fears**

Questioning dichotomous thinking has also led us to consider men's experiences of 'fear' in this work. In these considerations, it requires care not to conflate the fear and safety issues of women who are subject to men's physical violence on a regular basis, with the fear and safety issues of men who abuse. I do believe, however, that it is relevant for us as workers who are engaging with men who use violence, to consider these men's experiences of 'fear' and 'safety'.<sup>9</sup> To do so is to challenge

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<sup>9</sup>Some feminist writers (Kitzinger & Perkins 1993) have pointed out the ways in which the word 'safety' has been co-opted by psychological language. "Safety" is one of the many words that has been taken over by psychology and its meaning fundamentally altered. The concept of "safety" has a history in the battered women's movement, in which safety meant escape from her batterer, a shelter' (p.145). They point out that while safety once meant a real place where a woman can go to get away from a man's fist, or knife, or gun, now it is seen as anything required to make an individual *feel* safe.

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 intention?
- 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



abusive behavior can challenge excuses and justifications for perpetrating their 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

the dominant gender stories that suggest that men have 'no fear'. It also has practical implications as to how we conduct our work with men.

The power and control story also suggests that the men are not afraid and, in fact, due to their power and control, they feel safe in the world. Only the female partner feels afraid and unsafe. As a result of believing the men felt safe and were not afraid, in the past we did not see a problem with holding groups with large numbers of men that were open to new members every week. In contrast, Jenkins (1998) suggests that often, men who are violent to their partners are afraid. The men are not only afraid of losing their partners, they are afraid of what the abuse might say about them, how they will be treated, and what others will think of them. As well, many of these men have experienced violence and are fearful of other men, especially other men who have been identified as violent. As a result, to address the men's fears, we now have small groups that are not open to new members every week. One of the counsellors I interviewed, Derrick, reflects on not noticing men's fear:

*I think men's fear of other men is something we don't talk about or look at. We kind of plop these men together and we never stop and ask 'what was it like for you in the beginning to be with a group of men?'...I think there is lots going on the first night when they are with twenty men. I think it must blow their minds...we never try to engage them to look at that whole thing.*

Another worker who was interviewed, Sarah, who uses the power and control story, also reports not noticing the men's fears. She reports:

*I never thought about men fearing men. That may very well be. Sometimes we have men in group who do not speak for the first three or four group sessions and we have to draw every word out of them. Maybe that is because they are afraid of who is in the group. Some men name they are shy.*

*That's how they define it. Whether that is out of fear or not I don't know. It will be interesting to explore that. And I think that the men who are really talkative may be talkative as a way of dealing with the fear. Fear of someone having more power than them...The men want to make known who they are and what their presence is. Their territory is marked...I'm the big guy and you're going to listen to me'.*

By ignoring men's fear and shame, the power and control story may risk replicating dominant masculinity in suggesting that men have 'no fear' or pain.

### **Responding to men's fears**

Dichotomous thinking also led me and my co-workers to believe that we must create an intervention which is either respectful of the women *or* respectful of the men; that would be sensitive to women's experiences *or* men's experiences; that will meet either women's interests or men's interests. As a result, we believed that providing emotional safety for men would mean putting women in danger. For example, a counsellor of the intervention program 'Emerge', David Adams (1988) criticised using a non-threatening therapeutic approach (rather than a confrontational approach) because 'taking the time to create a safe environment for the batterer can sometimes mean perpetuating an unsafe environment for his partner' (p.181).

In contrast, Jenkins (1998) suggests that intervention can be and needs to be respectful and safe for both women and men. We do not have to choose between men's interests and women's interests: putting the 'victim's safety first' by stopping a man from beating his female partner is in *both* their interests. My co-workers and I also ignored men's fear of other men because we were focused solely on men's violence *against women* and thought that men's violence against men was unrelated (Schechter 1982,

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 efforts 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 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'

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 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

p.210). In contrast, a range of writers (Kaufman 1987; Goldner et al. 1990) have articulated the ways in which men's violence against other men plays a significant part in constructing dominant forms of masculinity and as such is directly linked to men's violence against women.

Dominant constructions of masculinity support and enable a variety of practices of domination including men's violence against women, men's violence against other men, homophobia, and practices of competition. It is my belief, that in order to stop battering, we need to find ways of challenging all these practices of domination. Within the groups we run for men who have been violent to their female partners, alongside our conversations about taking responsibility for this violence, we have also begun to talk about the effects of men's violence against men, competition, and homophobia. One of the ways in which we do this is by inviting the men in the group to talk about their fears of other men in group. By naming their fears and creating safety guidelines to assist in this process, men experience a context in which they can risk exploring new ways of being. I believe this is assisting participants in the group to step into new ways of being men.<sup>10</sup> The process of inviting the men to consider what safety means for themselves can begin a process of the men considering what safety might mean for their female partners. Again, I

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<sup>10</sup>I appreciate Michael White's ideas on this issue: 'It's really not enough for these men to just take responsibility for the abuse...It is *important to establish a context* in which it becomes possible for these men to separate from some of the dominant ways of being and thinking that inform the abuse....But even this is not enough. It is crucial that we engage with these men in the exploration of *alternative ways of being* and thinking that bring with them new proposals for action in their relationships with their women partners and with their children, and that these proposals be accountable to these women and children [emphasis added].' (McLean 1994, p.71)

am careful not to equate the idea of safety for the men with safety for the women.

In retrospect, by trivialising and ignoring men's fear and the effects of men's violence against men, our intervention in the past may have often replicated dominant masculinity. One of the effects of not noticing men's fear of other men and running large, open groups was that a threatening environment was created. This context stimulated the 'minimising, denying, and blaming' the men sometimes use in relation to their violence, both to abdicate responsibility and also to cover their fear and shame. Unfortunately, we would then respond to the men's minimising and denial by confronting and challenging them. We defined the men's minimising and denial solely in terms of 'control tactics' that they could simply 'drop' whenever they were willing to give up their power and control, and ignored how their expressions of minimising could be related to shame or regret. While we believed that confronting the men's minimising and denial would lessen it, often out confrontation would lead to an increase in minimising and denial because inadvertently we were adding to the shame and fear it was masking. We did not notice how the very group process we put the men in (i.e., large, open groups which involved oppositional confrontation) was stimulating to the very behaviour and dangerous, irresponsible stories we were trying to stop. By not noticing men's fear and engaging the men with oppositional, confrontation and competitive practices, we may replicate the very masculine practices we are trying to change in the men with whom we work (Jenkins 1993).

## **Conclusion**

Using research interviews with those who work with men who batter and my experiences in the field, this

## **Conversations With Men About Women's Violence**

*Ending Men's Violence By Challenging Gender Essentialism*

Tod Augusta-Scott

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. Hambergner &

given me an important goal. And that is to ensure I never ever have another victim. I wish Joshua was on staff here. I believe he could help many others, people like me who know in their hearts, who are sure they are wrong in what they've done.

With Kirk's permission, I shared this letter with Joshua, and he reported that he felt supported and amplified in his commitment to living his values. Joshua stated feeling that this re-authored identity gets stronger as more people recognize and appreciate it.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have illustrated the importance to Joshua of re-authoring his identity and taking responsibility for having sexually abused his daughter. The process of re-authoring has involved Joshua naming his preferred identity and identifying the history of events that might support such identity conclusions about himself. Joshua also identified how he was recruited into a negative identity story about himself. Furthermore, he noticed the way he had acted out this negative story about himself and had attempted to soothe his shame and guilt through self-centered, destructive behavior. For Joshua, re-authoring his identity also involved facing shame and taking responsibility for perpetrating sexual abuse. As a result of re-authoring his identity and studying the effects of violence, Joshua has created a platform for hearing his partner's and his children's experiences of his actions. He is in a position where he can begin the process of making amends to his family and the larger community. In turn, as reflected in Joshua's letters from prison, an audience is developing that supports his efforts to live according to his preferred identity.

article has sought to identify how dichotomous thinking informs the power and control grand narrative and precludes other stories which are important to notice in stopping battering. These other stories include the men's desires for power and control as well as respectful and loving relationships, the violence 'working' and 'not working', the men's experiences of power as well as powerlessness and injustice, the men's entitlement and shame over their violence, and the men's fears. Finally, this article reflects a painful process of noticing how I have often replicated in my work with men who batter the same masculine practices and assumptions which I am trying to change. My intention is to reflexively question my practices and assumptions in the same way I am inviting the men I work with to question theirs.

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<sup>11</sup>Zine transcriber's note: see the bibliography for the citation that 'here' refers to.

## **Letters From Prison**

*Re-Authoring Identity With Men Who Have Perpetrated Sexual Violence*

Tod Augusta-Scott

Joshua is currently in prison for sexually assaulting his daughter over a 3-year period. Joshua is in his early 40s, and his daughter was 11 when the abuse began. I had conversations with Joshua for 18 months prior to his being sentenced to 4 years in prison.<sup>1</sup> Since he has been in prison, Joshua and I have corresponded through letters. In this chapter, I share Joshua's letters, in which he reflects upon our conversations. The conversations have focused on re-authoring his identity in a manner that allows him to take greater responsibility for his abuse and to foster respectful, caring relationships.

Joshua had lived on a low income and has an eight-grade education. Previous to his latest conviction, he had a history of imprisonment and counseling related to lighting fires, stealing, alcoholism, and sexually abusing his 14-year old niece. Partly because of Joshua's work at making amends and taking responsibility (Jenkins, Joy, & Hall, 2003), his wife and their four children, including the daughter he sexually abused (who is now 16), have chosen to reestablish varying degrees of relationships with him. Joshua's family has chosen to reestablish relationships with him not because of feeling pressured or obligated to forgive or forget his actions, of which they have done neither. While expressing their anger, outrage, and disgust, the family continues to love Joshua.

When I first met Joshua, he believed that he was

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<sup>1</sup>The name "Joshua" is a pseudonym, as are all the case names used in the chapter. The stories and letters used in this chapter are all used with the informed consent of those involved.

was okay, lying to himself and others and escaping his feelings through abusing alcohol and sexual abuse. Today, he respects himself for facing his stress and shame rather than avoiding and running from these feelings. He accepts his prison term as part of his larger project to take responsibility and accepts the consequences for his actions.

## **Audience**

Through the process of creating possibilities for restitution, Joshua has been able to perform and circulate his preferred identity with others. The sexual assault worker, the students, the transition house worker, and those in prison with Joshua have all become part of an audience for the changes he is making. The feedback from this audience supports and strengthens Joshua's commitment to his re-authored identity, which continues the life-long journey of accepting the shame and responsibility for having sexually abused his daughter (White, 1995). The audience's circulation of this re-authored story about Joshua and the audience's belief and trust in his re-authored identity help Joshua sustain the changes he is making over time.

Unexpectedly, I recently received a letter from a man in prison whom I do not know. The person is part of Joshua's audience, a witness to Joshua's attempts at restitution. The letter was written by Kirk, one of the men Joshua is talking with in prison who also sexually abused one of his children. He wrote,

I know that Joshua has told you about our conversations. You are very correct in assuming that they are unique. With any other person, I'd be beaten by now. Joshua has helped me understand how wrong I've been in what I did....He has convinced me that he actually cares about what happens to me. He says I have also helped him with his guilt and that makes me feel useful for the first time in years....He has also

other guys the good in them. And I know for a fact these guys can do good things and maybe have no more victims.

There are other guys I talk to also, and two of these guys want me to move into their [prison] house. They said I understand them better than they do themselves. When I talk to these guys, we talk about everything, they tell me things they can't tell other people. I have built a trust with each and every one of these guys. They cry, they even hug me. I love being there for them, they need someone who has been there and understands them. I am so amazed how many of them open up to me, and only me. I know they feel so comfortable with me and they know I truly care (and I do care, Tod)...I thought that was great. I feel I am doing some very important things here, Tod and it is helping me in return. Well I must go for now Tod, take care. Joshua

Through helping other men in prison take responsibility for their sexual abuse, Joshua is practicing a different way of being in the world. Rather than “pretending,” he practices being honest with himself and others, taking responsibility, and facing his shame and embarrassment. Joshua is not overconfident about the changes he is making. He is humble about these changes. It is not surprising that Joshua may be the “only” person some men have initially talked with, given these are sexual offenses being disclosed in the context of prison. He has not lost sight of his personal journey by becoming overzealous or evangelistic toward others as though he has it “all figured out.” As the effects of Joshua's behavior will not be forgotten, he does not forget or cast off his shame for perpetrating sexual abuse. Joshua manages his shame through a reclaiming of his integrity through respectful and responsible actions over time (Jenkins et al. 2003).

Joshua remains vigilant in taking responsibility for monitoring his thoughts and feelings every day. Previously, to cope with the stress and shame of going to prison for 4 years, he would have “pretended” everything

“bad,” “disgusting,” and “dirty.” He felt ashamed about himself and reported feeling this way for a long time. Furthermore, Joshua believed that his identity was fixed, static, and therefore unchangeable. He felt he had no choice over who he was or how he acted. He reported that he acted in destructive ways simply because this is the way he was: essentially “bad,” “disgusting,” and “dirty.” These negative identity conclusions supported Joshua's continuing destructive behavior. White (2004) indicates that our lives are constituted through stories. While we live and construct stories about ourselves, these stories also live and construct us (Bruner, 2002; White, 1995). Change was made more difficult by Joshua's identity being further totalized by labels such as “abuser” and “sex offender.”

In this chapter, I illustrate some of the processes of inviting Joshua to re-author his identity to help him take responsibility and make amends for sexually abusing his daughter. This process has involved him naming his preferred identity, which has been supported by noticing the various times in his life—the unique outcomes—when he acted according to his preferred values and commitments. Furthermore, re-authoring has involved noticing the traumatic experiences in his life in which he was recruited into a negative story about himself. This negative story has contributed to and reinforced his destructive behavior. The re-authoring process has also involved Joshua facing shame both for perpetrating sexual abuse and for the other self-centered destructive ways he used to avoid shame.

Through Joshua's letters to me, I also share Joshua's attempts at making amends that have, in turn, created an audience for his re-authored identity. This process of re-authoring identity has helped create a context in which Joshua can continue the work of making

amends to his wife and his children.

### **Preferred Identity**

Re-authoring identity with a postmodern sensibility amplifies the fluid, changeable nature of identity. Through this lens, the process of re-authoring identity focuses on people's agency, preferences, and values in relationships rather than a fixed, unchangeable essence. In my first conversation with Joshua, we began to create alternative possibilities of who he might be, and can be, by my asking him what was important to him in relationships. I asked him what his values were and what kinds of relationships he would prefer to have with his wife and children. Joshua began to talk about what he wanted for his wife and children in terms of their safety, respect, and being cared for. Like many men, Joshua was surprised to identify what is really important to him, that is, what his values are. Many men I work with have not considered their preferences for loving, caring, respectful relationships. Often the influences of dominant gender stories preclude men I talk with from focusing on their relationships in a nurturing manner because to do so is considered "women's work."

The re-authoring identity process explored various times in Joshua's life when he lived these values and preferences (White, 1995). Joshua identified times when he *acted* contrary to the problem-saturated story about himself, times when his preferences for justice and fairness, for example, were evident (Jenkins, 1998a, 2005; White, 1995). These events, or unique outcomes, contradicted the problem-saturated story of his identity, in which he perceived himself as being without agency and unable to change. (Although Joshua and I focused on re-authoring his identity through exploring both "unique

his conversations with a man who is also in prison for sexual assault:

He said in group that he didn't like what he saw in his past actions. In fact, he became very depressed about them. So I asked him today about them and why he felt so bad. He said he couldn't believe the things he did and he hated himself. He said he felt so guilty and ashamed. So much so that he wanted to die. So I told him I felt the same way last summer. Then I said, "You should feel good about feeling so bad."

He said, "What are you crazy!"

I said, "No, but think about it—if you have those feelings, then that means you care, that means that you are human, that means you have started to heal."

So after a while he came back and said to me, "I thought about what you said, and I see what you mean." He said, "I feel pretty good. I'm not a monster. I *can* be a good person."

I said, "Yes you can." And he opened up and told me everything about his case and stopped a few times to cry. It was so emotional, Tod. I wish you were there. We talked for about 3 hours—I should say, he talked. It was the best thing ever to see. And I just got done talking to him this afternoon, and he is real happy, and he feels real good about himself. It is the most amazing thing to see someone take such deep negative feelings and emotions and turn them into good ones. He keeps thanking me and says he sees things so different now. He wants me to go walking with him tonight and meet some other guys that are in for the same thing we are.

Having the opportunity to help others move away from abuse resonates with Joshua's preference to stand against injustice. Joshua provides these men with a platform with which they can begin the process of taking responsibility and making amends. Joshua continued,

I must say, Tod, I feel great about myself, and I think I am doing good things, helping kids read, getting more education, and being a friend to these guys and helping them see what they are capable of. And that all comes from you passing it on to me. And I feel great to pass it on to others. You showed me the good in me, and now I have a chance to show



been victimized. There is also no expectation that engaging in restitution carries any sense of entitlement for reconciliation. If the abused person wants to have contact, he or she is entitled to determine the level of reconnection (Jenkins et al., 2003). Joshua is extending himself without expecting any form of acceptance or pardon in return. He invests in making amends with the knowledge that his behavior can never be undone or forgotten (Jenkins et al., 2003).

Joshua eventually decided that he wanted to make restitution to the larger community. As a result, he initiated a conversation with myself and the sexual assault worker at the local sexual assault center. Joshua's intention was to give back to the community by helping those who work with people hurt by abuse. He wanted to give people trying to help a greater understanding of those who are perpetrating sexual abuse. Furthermore, toward this end, Joshua recently acted as a consultant for three university students conducting research on clinical interventions for those who have perpetrated sexual abuse. In addition, Joshua was willing to be interviewed by men in front of a local transition house worker. The sexual assault worker, transition house worker, and the students reported being struck by the honesty and courage Joshua demonstrated in confronting what he had done to his daughter. They also spoke of finding the conversations very hopeful.

Along with working to make restitution with his family and professionals in his immediate community, Joshua has continued to repair the effects of what he has done to the community in other ways. Joshua is now listening to many other men who are in prison for their sexually abusive behavior. In an effort to stop abuse, he now devotes many hours of his day trying to be helpful to others who have perpetrated sexual abuse. Joshua shared

outcomes” and painful events in his life that recruited him into negative identity conclusions about himself, this chapter primarily focuses on the latter.)

Identifying his preferences and values, his preferred identity, has allowed Joshua to confront his own abusive behavior on the basis of his own values and ethics. As a result, the process of taking responsibility for his sexual abuse of his daughter, ending it, and making amends can be a journey of self-respect and integrity (Jenkins, 1998b, 2006). Rather than continuing to perform his former identity story about himself, now Joshua increasingly performs his preferred, alternative identity story. The process of Joshua's naming his preferences allows me to join him against his perpetration of violence and the ideas that support it, rather than adopting a position of being against him.

An important part of the re-authoring process involved moving away from dichotomous thinking. Previously, I believed men wanted either power and control in their relationships or respectful relationships (Augusta-Scott, 2003). I thought men either perpetrated abuse or acted respectfully. By moving away from dichotomous thinking, I have been able to notice that men often want both power and control and loving, nurturing relationships. While men perpetrate abuse in their families, they often also want to be caring, respectful fathers. By moving away from dichotomous thinking and acknowledging the contradictions in people's lives, I now notice how people's practices often contradict their preferred values and preferences.<sup>2</sup>

### **Recruitment Into Negative Identity Conclusions**

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<sup>2</sup>Re-authoring does not simply create new positive identity conclusions, which rely upon essentialist, humanist notions such as a person's “fundamental goodness” or “true self” (White, 2004).

Joshua's choices to sexually abuse his daughter were influenced by his acting out negative identity conclusions and his preoccupation with avoiding, numbing, or soothing his own shame and pain. The following narrative of Joshua's life focuses on those experiences in which he was recruited into negative identity conclusions about himself (i.e., that he is “bad,” “disgusting,” and “dirty”). These identity conclusions support his sexual abuse of his daughter. By identifying the experiences in Joshua's life in which he *learned* these negative identity conclusions about himself, he has been able to recognize that his identity is not innate, natural, and static but, rather, fluid and changeable. As a result, Joshua has been able to challenge these identity conclusions and move closer to his preferences for fairness and justice.

Talking about Joshua's past experiences of victimization and injustice does not create excuses, justify, or mitigate Joshua's responsibility for choosing to sexually abuse his daughter. Joshua's own childhood abuse did not *cause* him to sexually abuse others. Most people who are sexually abused do not abuse others. The meaning Joshua made of his having been abused, however, informed his choices to sexually abuse. Through being sexually abused, Joshua was recruited into believing that he was “dirty,” “bad,” and “disgusting,” and, therefore, he acted accordingly. As a result, investigating this meaning he made about himself for having been sexually abused is important to interrupting Joshua's perpetration of sexual abuse.

Previously, dichotomous thinking led me to believe I needed to work with a man as either a perpetrator or a victim. Furthermore, to acknowledge he was a victim in any way meant that somehow he was no longer responsible for his actions. By moving away from

of his abusive behavior, Joshua demonstrates how connecting with his preferred values and identity increases his capacity to take responsibility. He now draws on his own ethics and values to tolerate his experience of shame and confront his irresponsible behavior. Joshua is able to move away from a problem-saturated narrative about himself and entertain other possibilities of who he can be.

### **Restitution**

Through establishing his preferred identity and his ability to face his violence and shame, Joshua is able to both stop the abuse and work on addressing the effects the abuse has had and may have on others. Joshua is able to study himself and hear directly from his partner and children about the effects of his choices on them.

Over the last 2 ½ years, Joshua has worked to address the effects of perpetrating sexual abuse on his family. Rather than focus only on his own experience, *restitution* involves Joshua investing in understanding his daughter and others' experiences of his perpetration of sexual abuse. This process of making amends involves accepting the shame and responsibility for such actions. He has committed to studying others' experiences of his sexual abuse of his daughter. He has engaged in numerous conversations with his family in which they express their pain, anger, and disappointment. Through these conversations, Joshua listens and works to take full responsibility for the effects of his actions on all of them.

Restitution shifts the focus from Joshua's own pain or from making hollow promises and apologies, such as those he has previously made. Restitution does not require a response of forgiveness from those who have

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person's “fundamental goodness” or “true self” (White, 2004).

The idea is not to lessen men's feelings of shame. Rather, the re-authoring of identity both amplifies and honors men's experiences of shame. The process is not one of "forgive and forget"; rather, it is one of remembering and living with the shame of having sexually abused one's daughter. Joshua recognizes that re-authoring his identity does not serve to mitigate his responsibility for, or the seriousness of, the pain and suffering he has caused others through sexually assaulting his daughter. He remains connected to the shame of sexually abusing his daughter. The re-authoring of his identity has made it possible for him to confront the story of himself that supported his abusive behavior. Joshua wrote,

    Tod, do you remember when I used to say to myself, "I'm bad," "I am evil," "I am no good for anyone or anything"? Well, I realized I was right, but only at certain times. There's no denying I was all those things. But I also realize I was a real Dad to my children at time too and I was a good person at times toward other people. And I was a good husband to my wife at times too. So I asked myself which of the two different types of personality do I want.... Well, of course, I want to be the good person. But to really be a true good person, I believe I have to deal with that bad person that was in me. I know our talks have helped me see that I wasn't always bad and that I can change my bad ways into good ways. I have been doing a lot of thinking about who I am and who I want to be.

Joshua demonstrates that while he is constructing a preferred identity story about himself, his life remains multistoried. His preferred story of himself does not negate or dismiss his history of destructive behavior and the traumatic effects it has had and continues to have on others.<sup>5</sup> rather than distancing him from the seriousness

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<sup>5</sup>Again, re-authoring does not simply create new positive identity conclusions that rely upon essentialist, humanist notions such as a

dichotomous thinking, I have been able to work with Joshua as someone who is both powerful and powerless, who has both perpetrated abuse and been abused, and who is still responsible for his actions (Augusta-Scott, 2003).

Initially, when I invited Joshua to talk about his past, he resisted, reporting that other counselors had also asked him about his history. He was reluctant to talk about his abusive experiences because he did not want to make excuses for his abuse and he did not see any connection between his own abuse and his abuse of his daughter. Joshua also avoided talking about being abused because he thought these experiences reinforced negative identity conclusions about himself (i.e., that he is "bad," "disgusting," and "dirty"). Conversations about Joshua's past started only after he began to study the effects of sexual abuse on his daughter.<sup>3</sup> As he studied his

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<sup>3</sup>For various reasons, men often deny and minimize the seriousness of the effects of their violence on others. Men's motivation for stopping their violence is significantly increased when they are invited to *acknowledge the effects* of their violence on what and who is important to them. Along with abusing others, most men I work with have been abused themselves. Many men who deny and minimize the seriousness of the effects their violence has on others also deny and minimize the seriousness of the effects of others' violence on themselves. Working to interrupt the violence involves encouraging men to appreciate the experience of being victimized by violence through studying the effects of violence upon both themselves and others. In the context of studying men's values and preferences, inviting men to study the effects of violence on themselves and others increases their motivation and capacity to take responsibility for responding to these effects.

Inviting men to take responsibility for responding to the effects of their violence on others involves men considering unhelpful and helpful responses to the effects of violence. Many men respond to the violence inflicted on them by denying and avoiding it. Rather than face these traumatic experiences, many men respond to the effects by trying to soothe, numb, and comfort themselves through drugs, alcohol, gambling, and sexual abuse. (In the beginning of

daughter's experience, he began to remember his own experiences of childhood sexual abuse. For the first 10 years of his life, Joshua was regularly sexually assaulted and terrorized by his older brothers and their friends. Each day, he would run to and from school, hiding along the way in an effort to avoid his brothers and their friends. He blamed himself for the abuse and concluded that he was “bad,” “dirty,” and “disgusting” and that there was something wrong with him. Joshua felt guilty and ashamed. He reported feeling alone, hurt, scared, and isolated throughout this time period. He also stated much of his childhood was spent “pretending” that he was all right.

As we continued to study the effects abuse had had

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my conversations with Joshua, he was aware of trying to avoid and soothe his painful feelings but was unclear about the traumatic experiences that the feelings were associated with. In one conversation, Joshua reported that he had recently confided in his sister that he thought he had been sexually abused as a child. His sister confirmed that he had been). When men become self-absorbed with their own pain, they remain unaware of others' experiences. Men are invited to face rather than avoid their traumatic experiences. As men find more helpful ways of responding to their own pain, they also find helpful ways of responding to the pain they have caused others.

Previously, in accordance with the dominant domestic violence approach (Pence & Paymar, 1993), I restricted the study of the effects of abuse to include only the effects on those whom men had hurt. The process of studying the effects of men's violence on others became much more profound when I also invited men to study the effects of violence on themselves. When men study others' experiences of violence, they often gain insight into their own experiences of violence. Conversely, as men study their own experiences of violence, they gain a greater understanding of others' experiences. Men's experiences are often both similar to and different from experiences of those they have hurt. The process of studying the effects eventually involves hearing directly from those they have hurt.

daughter. He has been better able to take responsibility and face his shame when it is defined as evidence of his preferred identity (Jenkins, 1998a, 2005).

Encouraging men to take responsibility and face their shame about their abusive behavior without changing the meaning they make of this shame is unhelpful. Again, initially, men often define their shame as evidence of negative identity conclusions about themselves (i.e., that they are “bad”). The negative fixed identity conclusions support men's choices to perpetrate sexual abuse. Without changing the meaning of the shame, the process of acknowledging their violence and shame can inadvertently reinforce the negative identity conclusions, which subsequently support the continuation of the sexual abuse.

The shame Joshua feels and accepts now reflects his taking responsibility for sexually assaulting his daughter. Through the process of re-authoring his identity, he now associated his shame with his actions as opposed to a fixed negative identity. The meaning he makes of his shame no longer supports the negative identity conclusions that render invisible his ability to change. Joshua also defines his shame as evidence of his preferences for actions that support caring, respectful relationships.

More recently, Joshua has begun to have conversations with others who are in prison for perpetrating sexual abuse. He has begun helping them define their shame in reference to their behavior and as a reflection of their preferences for fair and respectful relationships. Joshua wrote,

One guy said there is no hope for him because he has hurt so many people and done so many bad things. He said when he looks back he hurts so bad for what he has done. I tell him *that* is his hope, having those hurting feelings. That's where the changes can really take place. And I explain to him that is his conscience and empathy.

- What difference would it have made if your father would have done for you what you are now doing for your children?
- What difference will facing the abuse make to your partner (Jenkins, 1998a)?

Through these questions, men often feel shame and grief about having perpetrated abuse, and, at the same time, they feel a sense of integrity for acknowledging these feelings and their commitment to stopping the abuse.

In one of his letters to me, Joshua wrote about his shame over sexually abusing his daughter as being evidence of his preference to be a caring, respectful father:

That makes me feel even more guilty. But those feelings are what tell me where my true values are. So feeling guilty and ashamed for the pain I caused my daughter and wife and others is what I would call healthy guilt and shame. It's not at all like the guilt and shame I felt as a kid when I was going through different kinds of abuse. Those feelings as a child were misplaced or phony. I think they were meant for my brothers and their friends, and other people in the community.

He explained that the shame and guilt he felt as a kid needed to be accepted by those who abused him, “my brothers and their friends, and other people in the community.” Men are invited to attribute responsibility for the abuse to the person who perpetrated the abuse rather than the person who is victimized by it. As mentioned earlier, Joshua realized that in the same way his daughter was not responsible for the sexual violence he had done to her, he had not been responsible for the sexual violence done to him. Through this process, Joshua was also able to identify that he had not been responsible for his father's or his friend's death or his daughter's diabetes, as the problem-saturated story about himself had led him to believe. At the same time, Joshua identified the importance of his accepting the shame for abusing his

on him, Joshua was mortified as he began to acknowledge that perhaps his daughter might also feel responsible, bad, dirty, and disgusting because of his sexual abuse of her. In studying the effects of his abuse on his daughter, Joshua firmly believed that it was he, not his daughter, who was completely to blame and responsible for the abuse. By remembering his past, he began to wonder if perhaps he also had not been responsible for the abuse that had happened to him. Rather than continuing to blame himself, he started to think that perhaps those who abused him in childhood had been completely responsible for abusing him, just as he had been for abusing his daughter.

In addition, by identifying how he had been recruited into thinking of himself as “bad” and “disgusting,” Joshua was able to challenge the idea that his identity was fixed and static. He began to realize that he had learned these negative identity conclusions about himself; they were not natural or innate. He began to realize he had choices about how he acted and who he wanted to be. He could choose to live according to his preferred values and practices rather than believing his participation in destructive behavior was inevitable. Joshua expressed relief that he was not fated to live his life repeating the destructive behaviors that confirmed the painful negative identity conclusions about himself.

Joshua's negative identity conclusions had been reinforced as he continued to experience traumatic experiences and to use destructive behavior to cope with these experiences. For example, at the age of 10, Joshua's father moved himself and his family to another community but did not include Joshua's older brother. Joshua described his father as the only person with whom he was close. He reported that his life got better in the absence of his brother and he did not have to pretend and

lie to himself that everything was okay. By this time, Joshua was 16, and his father had been suffering from diabetes for a number of years. One day, Joshua's father requested that he help bring buckets of water to the neighbors. After Joshua refused, his father began to lift the buckets of water himself and had a heart attack in the driveway. Joshua went to the driveway and held his father in his arms as he died. He blamed himself for not helping his father, reporting, "I killed my father." From this experience, Joshua concluded he was bad, and he felt ashamed and guilty. The meaning Joshua made of his father's death supported the narrative about himself that he was "bad," "disgusting," and "dirty."

Having lost his father, the only person with whom he was close, Joshua's feelings of "overwhelming loneliness, fear, and desperation" returned. He was then sent back to live with the older brother who had previously sexually assaulted him. At this point, centered on his own pain, Joshua began to make himself feel better by drinking, stealing, lighting fires, and sexually assaulting his niece. Joshua performed the negative identity conclusions through acting out these destructive, self-centered behaviors. These behaviors, in turn, confirmed the negative identity.

Upon leaving prison at age 28 for stealing and lighting fires, Joshua reported feeling better for the next 10 years, no longer "pretending" and instead being honest with himself and others. He then experiences another traumatic event when working with a close friend on a road construction crew. Joshua was responsible for safety on the work site and was advised of the dangers of the steamroller to the work crew. Shortly after, Joshua witnessed his friend being crushed by the steamroller. As with his father, Joshua remembers holding his friend's dead body in his arm. Joshua blamed himself for his

and ashamed?

Often in response to these questions men begin to identify their experiences of shame as evidence of their values and preferences for love and respect over violence. Constructing their shame as evidence of their desire for loving relationships gives men permission to feel shame and, in turn, creates the opportunity to study and stop the abuse.

This inquiry constructs the path of stopping the abuse as one of integrity that will lead to self-respect. When men face their violence through facing their shame, they are able to build self-respect (Jenkins, 1998b, 2006). Some lines of inquiry that help facilitate this process are as follows (Jenkins, 1998a):

- Does it take more courage to face up to the abuse (as you are doing here) or to run from it, make excuses for it, and blame others?
- Do you think facing up to your abuse makes you stronger or weaker over time?
- Would you respect yourself more for facing up or for avoiding the abuse and just leaving it to others to think about?

The process of Joshua facing his violence and shame has helped re-author an identity he prefers. Other lines of inquiry that serve to amplify Joshua's sense of integrity for taking the path of facing and stopping the abuse are as follows:

- What might your willingness to stop the abuse mean to your children?
- What difference will it make to be taking the time to stop and think about what you have put them through?

he could interrupt his escalation towards abuse.

### **Re-Authoring Identity Through Facing Shame**

In the context of work with violence, re-authoring identity often involved exploring the meaning men make of the shame they experience for perpetrating abuse. Often men see their shame as evidence of negative identity conclusions they hold about themselves. Alternatively, in the process of re-authoring identity, men are invited to consider how shame over their actions may be considered evidence of their values and preferences in relationships. Men can see their shame as evidence that they prefer to stand against abuse and build respectful, caring relationships. Rather than associating his shame with a fixed identity, a self that he thinks cannot be changed, through the process of re-authoring identity, a man associated the shame with his behavior. He considers how his actions may have been a mistake rather than defining himself as a mistake. The shame he feels about his behavior is defined as evidence of his values and preferences not to participate in such irresponsible behavior.<sup>4</sup>

In this work, the process of re-authoring identity involves asking a man what his experience of shame might say about his values or what is important to him. Alan Jenkins (1998a, 2005) developed lines of inquiry to help facilitate this process:

- What would it say about you if you could tell me about the abuse and not feel low and ashamed?
- What does it say about you that you do feel low

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<sup>4</sup>Many have contributed to these distinctions about shame. Some popular authors are Bradshaw (1988), Brown (2004), Gilligan (1997), and Luskin (2003).

friend's death, which reinforced the negative identity conclusions he held about himself. He interpreted this event as more evidence that he was “bad” and was again flooded with feelings of guilt, shame, and overwhelming loneliness, as he had experienced in childhood. He began to have nightmares of his experiences of childhood sexual abuse and began thinking of suicide. To avoid his shame over his identity, which he felt he could not change, Joshua again began to abuse drugs and alcohol.

Shortly after his friend's tragic death Joshua's daughter was diagnosed with diabetes. Because he assumed his daughter has genetically inherited her diabetes from him, Joshua also blamed himself for her diabetes. The meaning Joshua attached to this experience reinforced his negative identity conclusions about himself. His feeling of overwhelming loneliness, isolation, and fear were further intensified because he thought his daughter was going to die and leave him, as his father had. Joshua continued “pretending” everything was okay, lying to himself and others. At this time, he increased his misuse of alcohol and drugs to make himself feel better; eventually, he began to sexually abuse his daughter.

### **Preoccupation With Self: Studying Justification and Excuses**

Part of Joshua taking responsibility for sexually abusing his daughter has involved acknowledging how he was preoccupied with his own pain and the irresponsible manner he used to cope with his painful feelings. This process has involved studying and confronting the ideas and excuses Joshua had used to justify abusing his daughter. Through clearly identifying these justifications and excuses, he has been better able to interrupt and challenge them. Joshua had told himself he was

comforting his daughter so that she would not feel empty and alone as he did. In the moments leading up to the abuse, along with telling himself he was doing it for her benefit, he had also told himself that she liked it. He had chosen to interpret the positive attention his daughter sought from him or gave him as evidence that she liked his sexual attention. Joshua has realized he had taught his daughter that she had to be sexual in order to get her father's attention. In our conversations, he has also spent many sessions exploring how he ignored his daughter's resistance to the abuse (e.g., she would not look at him, etc.) and how he had pressured her not to tell anyone. Joshua identified the ways he had tricked, manipulated, and silenced his daughter and how he justified these actions to himself.

Joshua reported that part of his sexual abuse of his daughter was related to his inability to maintain a sexual relationship with an adult, that is, his wife. He felt inadequate about himself and believed he was unable to emotionally negotiate an adult sexual relationship with his wife and turned to his daughter instead. At times, when he was abusing his daughter, Joshua called her "Sue" rather than "Susan" as he usually did. Upon studying this distinction, Joshua identified that when he called her "Sue," he was able to pretend he was having sex with an adult rather than his daughter "Susan." Joshua reported that this pretending made the sexual abuse seem momentarily okay.

Reflecting back on our conversation, Joshua wrote a letter about the painful effects others' violence had had on him and the destructive ways he used to soothe, numb, and avoid his own pain:

But the biggest problem I had was that deep sense of loneliness, guilt, shame, feeling lost, hurting inside all the time, and I didn't know why I was hurting. And I would drink and do other things I shouldn't, to make myself feel good. But was I ever fooling myself. Those so-called good

feelings were for short times only, and I always felt worse after. It's the same as the sexual abuse on Susan. It made me feel good because I thought she felt good by me doing that to her. But after I abused her I felt worse. I believe the drinking, setting of fires (for my own selfish need for attention), and the sexual abuse I did was all a phony way to make me feel good.

In this letter, Joshua identified his preoccupation with his own pain and his attempts to make himself feel better. In another letter, Joshua reflected on the process of studying the "triggers" and self-centered justifications that led to sexually assaulting his daughter. By identifying the "warning signs" and excuses, Joshua began to interrupt and challenge the ideas and not escalate toward abuse. Joshua wrote:

I am the person I want to be now. But the trick is to stay that person. I know there's a lot of different triggers that might send me back into that bad person way. But I know what those triggers are now, so hopefully I can see it coming. I know that I take traumatic events in my life way too hard and see them different and worse than other people. But the biggest thing that is helping me change is that fact that I have and am dealing with my childhood with you, Tod. I have never told anyone about my childhood. Only you know, and now [my wife] Mary. But I won't keep it a secret anymore. I have been and will continue to look at my whole life and sort through all the painful things in my life. Because I believe that's a key to getting better.

Joshua named the importance of studying his childhood to notice how he was recruited into the negative identity conclusions that influenced his choices to enact sexual abuse and other irresponsible behavior. Rather than running from the pain and trauma, Joshua was facing it and finding responsible ways to attend to the effects of the abuse on himself. He also identified the importance of continuing to study and monitor his thoughts, feelings, and the possible "triggers" that may lead to abuse, so that