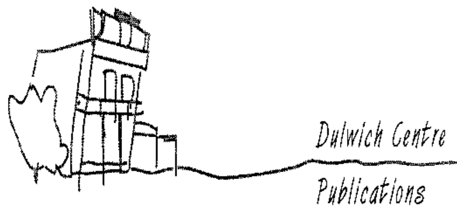

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Thank you! We really appreciate it.

Talking with men who have used violence in intimate relationships

An interview with Tod Augusta-Scott

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Tod Augusta-Scott works with men who have used violence in their intimate relationships. This interview considers a number of key themes in this work, including ways of inviting men to consider the effects of their violence; ways of exploring expressions of shame and remorse; the importance of developing alternative story-lines of respect and responsibility; approaches to group work; and the use of documentation. The interview also provides Tod with the opportunity to reflect upon his own work practices and performance of masculinity. The interviewer was David Denborough.

Keywords: domestic violence, intimate violence, perpetrators, men, violence against women

Tod, I'm interested to know more about your work with men who have used violence in their partner relationships. I have heard you say that one of the places you now start your enquiry about the effects of this abuse relates to the effects the abuse has had on the man himself. As I understand it, this is quite different from the approach you used to take. Can you tell me more about this, and what this new approach makes possible?

For men to stop their violence, I find having them study the effects of their violence on others very important. Men are often preoccupied with avoiding or denying the effects of the violence on others, which often continues the abuse. As a result, acknowledging these painful and traumatic effects helps men stop hurting those they care about. To stop men's violence against women, I also find it important to model a caring relationship with the man that, in turn, challenges dominant masculinity in various ways. While previously using an educative approach, I focused on the effects of men's violence on others while not acknowledging the effects of men's own violence on themselves. In the former approach we used in this work, we focused little on the negative effects that the abuse was having on a man's life. Instead we focused primarily on the benefits, power and privilege that the violence accorded to men.

We were concerned about focusing on the effects men's violence had on themselves for a number of reasons. We were concerned that by acknowledging the effects of the violence on men we might somehow blur the distinctions between the effects on men and the terrorising effects men's violence often has on their female partners and children. Clearly, there are significant differences between these effects, which I eventually invite men to consider. We also connect these differences in the conversations to a political, gendered analysis of men's violence against women.

We were also concerned that if we enquired as to the negative effects that the violence or abuse was having on the man's life, that this would in some way position them as 'victims' and would reduce their sense of responsibility for using violence. In hindsight, this was constructing people's lives in dichotomous ways: they were either a perpetrator or a victim, either responsible or not responsible, either enacting power and privilege or experiencing negative effects. Now, I am interested in moving beyond these dichotomies.

I am also interested in taking up a different position in the conversations. Historically, I took up a position which I think men quickly identified as 'disapproving' of them. Men could sense that I was thinking solely of the people they had hurt. This neglect of the men's painful experiences of their own violence also came from an either/or framework – believing that I either had to prioritise the wellbeing of the person who had been subjected to violence or the person who had enacted it. Now I realise I can care for both. More than this, I think it is important for the work to do so. I think it's possible to find ways to be caring and respectful of him as he addresses his violence, while at the same time being caring and respectful of his partner.

This practice of men caring for men in this manner runs counter to dominant masculine culture. Often, men who consult with me about their violence initially assume that I as a man am *not* going to care about them; that I will believe they can take care of themselves because they are men. They assume my caring will only be for their female partners and children. They may also enter the conversation with an assumption that I will be adopting an adversarial or oppositional relationship with them because they have experienced many such relationships of domination with other men. It is often startling for them to experience a sense of caring in this context. My caring of them often leads them into being more caring and thoughtful about their partner and their children. And this is one of the key purposes of my work.

With all these thoughts in mind, sometimes I do start conversations by asking the man about the effects that the violence is having on him, on his life. Interestingly, in asking men about the effects of violence on themselves, I find that very often men will then initiate conversations about the effects of violence on their partners and children. Earlier, I was concerned that asking them about the effects of violence on their own lives would have contributed to a 'poor me', self-absorbed conversation that absolved himself of responsibility for his actions. I find, however, that caring conversations about how violence affects his life rarely leads to this result. When I initiate conversations with men about the

effects of the violence on themselves, I often find that they use this as a foundation to talk about the effects of the violence on others. Further, exploring the effects of their violence on themselves, while also focusing on their responsibility, helps develop men's motivation to address it.

Once these conversations about the real effects of the violence are taking place what happens then? What are some of the openings for change that you may notice in these discussions?

As the effects of the violence are thoroughly acknowledged, often men will then express some sense of remorse or guilt about their actions. In the past, my work was significantly influenced by the concept of the 'cycle of violence'. This concept can be helpful in some ways, but, in working with men, it often had the effect of pathologising any expressions of shame or remorse. I once would have understood these expressions *only* in terms of their place in a cycle of violence – whereby they invited the woman partner to stay in the relationship and put her at risk of further abuse. As a result, I would simply interrupt men's experiences of remorse and shame and redirect them to focus on their partner's and children's experiences.

While expressions of remorse and guilt can be evidence of men being preoccupied with their own pain and avoiding responsibility, these expressions of pain can also be possible openings. Now I invite men to make distinctions between irresponsible expressions of shame such as repeated 'hollow promises and apologies' for the abuse, and the responsible expressions of shame which may lead to sincere apologies and stopping the abuse. The expressions of remorse and shame that can lead to taking responsibility are expressions I am now looking for. I now ask questions to draw these experiences of shame and remorse forward, to have them more richly described in the conversation. We can explore together what is 'absent but implicit' (White 2000) in these expressions of shame. I ask men: 'What is inferred by the fact that you feel ashamed about your abusive behaviour? What does this imply about what you actually prefer, value, and what you consider important?' These expressions of shame or remorse become entry points into conversations about the man's preferences for life and relationships. I try to give permission for men to experience shame or remorse while talking about their violence. I have been influenced by Alan Jenkins' work (1990, 1996, 1998a, 1998b) in this regard.

Can you say more about what this change in addressing men's shame and remorse is making possible?

Prior to exploring the possible responsible meanings of shame and remorse, the more shame a man felt as they talked about issues of violence, the more problematic the man experienced himself to be. The more aware they became of the effects of their violence, and the more the violence was uncovered and discussed, the more likely it was for men to develop negative identity conclusions: 'Oh, my God, I'm really bad'. In my experience, these negative identity conclusions are not helpful. They do not lessen the likelihood of further harm. In fact, they can make further violence more likely, as men continue to perform these negative identity conclusions.

By asking questions about the meaning of remorse and shame, men's actions in facing the violence, experiencing the remorse, and taking action to lessen the likelihood of further harm, can come to be associated with self-respect. In fact, the intensity of the shame can come to be equated with the intensity of their commitment to wanting loving non-violent relationships. Questions such as: 'Would you respect yourself more for addressing the violence or for avoiding it?' and 'Do you think it takes more integrity to face these issues or to run from them?' can assist in this process. Along with these questions, I invite the man to consider the difference his willingness to stop his violence will make to his partner, his children, and himself and their relationships together. Men often report having the dawning awareness that their children and partner will feel safer, more respected, and loved.

In some ways, we are then creating a conversational space in which the man feels increasingly 'bad' as they gradually face the severity of their violence and increasingly 'good' for both feeling 'bad' and connecting with their self-respect for working to end the violence. Developing these two experiences at once seems important. I do not

wish to lessen a man's feelings of remorse or regret or shame. And, equally, I seek to explore the meanings of these so that rather than being left with negative identity conclusions about these experiences, instead these feelings are entry points for further exploration of the man's hopes, dreams and wishes for his relationships and for his life.

I'd like to ask you more about the importance of not simply leaving a man with a negative sense of himself and his life. Can you say more about this and how this is relevant in relation to addressing violence?

In my experience, a self-narrative of 'loser' or 'failure' is not helpful in addressing violence. In fact, it often supports the continued perpetration of abuse. If a man believes that he is a 'failure' then the chances are high that he will 'fail' in his efforts at addressing issues of violence. If he believes that he is a 'loser' then it's likely that he will lose touch with the very values and commitments that he will need to hold onto in order to create a life free from abuse.

Part of my task is to try and interrupt any story-line of identity that is contributing to the perpetration of violence and to enable the man to leave my office with an alternative narrative or story about themselves, an alternative narrative that does support the continued perpetration of violence.

In early conceptions of this work, I sometimes inadvertently reinforced negative story-lines of identity. For instance, we often believed that a man's preference was only for power and control and built our counselling practice around this assumption. Because I thought men only wanted power and control, I was also making implicit assumptions that I cared more about the lives of these men's children and partners than the men did. It was somehow up to me then to impose my good values over the negative values of the man who was consulting me. I was providing little scaffolding for the development of alternative story-lines of identity. There was no other place for them to step into, no other identity to perform.

Not surprisingly, this approach would result in resistance from men, and in turn, we interpreted men's resistance as evidence of them not wanting to change and wanting to protect their power and control – our beliefs about their singular motives were again solidified. Our reasoning was self-sealing.

Now, I am interested in a different approach, one which explores openings to alternative story-lines, one that creates space for men to step into different territories of identity and to speak about what it is that they care about, value, and hope for in their relationships, and then to take actions to realise these hopes.

I imagine that once men start to speak about these alternative story-lines, which include hopes for their relationships without violence, that there is still a great deal to be done. How are these alternative story-lines developed?

There are a number of ways this takes place. Once a man has started to speak about certain values or hopes that are contrary to those that sponsor violence, we try to explore the history of these values. We trace an alternative story-line across time and try to identify who from the person's past would know about these values. Michael White's (1995) ideas in relation to re-authoring are central to this. Sometimes, I also trace the problem-saturated story-line so that men can clearly identify how they were recruited into the negative identity conclusions about themselves which have supported perpetrating abuse. This process offers men another means of separating from this story-line, externalising it, and challenging it.

A second key step involves finding an audience to these preferred story-lines. Exploring these matters within groups often provides an instant audience. And often I have a student or a colleague from my office, the local sexual assault agency, or the local women's shelter who play the role of audience.

A third key element to this work involves documentation. In my conversations with men, I use a big notepad (i.e. a white board) on which I record the words spoken by men. They see their own language documented in written form and are often quite startled by this. It's often the first time they've been a witness or audience to their own words. As I record the men's descriptions of their abuse, I'm continuously asking them to consider, 'how would you prefer your relationship to be? What types of qualities are important to you in a relationship?' It's often the first time that they've articulated the sorts

of loving, caring relationships that they are hoping for. Witnessing their own hopes and commitments in written form is often surprising to them. Once it is articulated and then documented, there often seems to be a greater clarity and certain actions to support these hopes become a priority.

Their preferred values, the history of these, and audience responses can all be recorded on the big notepad in what becomes a kind of therapeutic document. These documents are also created so that men can leave the session with them. Near the end of the session, either the man or I write over what is on the big notepad. In this process there is a sort of 're-telling' of the man's preferred identity, who he is committed to being in the world. Men often report referring to these documents at home to help interrupt the escalation toward abuse. As men notice themselves escalating, some report looking at the documents to remind themselves of their values and who is really important to them. These practices of using a big note pad during individual conversations with men are influenced by the work of Art Fisher.

I'd like to hear more about the work in groups that you are involved in. Are there ways in which the stories of men who have already taken steps in addressing violence in their lives can be of value to those who are still trying to separate from violent and abusive ways of being?

I have set this up in groups in which there are men who are in very different stages of addressing violence in their lives. In this situation, I have set up a context whereby newcomers to the group interview the experienced guys. Sometimes the experienced guys are invited to attend only the first session of a group or they may remain. I coach these conversations and some of the key questions include:

- What do you know now that you wish you would have known at the beginning of the process?
- What were some of the most challenging parts of the change process that you have encountered?
- What have been some of the most rewarding experiences along the way?

I ask the experienced men about the journey they have been through, the obstacles they faced, and what was significant to them in terms of addressing the violence they had enacted to others. Within these contexts, I have found it extremely helpful to interview not only men who are still with their partners, but also men who have now addressed the violence in their lives but who are no longer in relationships with their partners. This can go a long way in assisting those newcomers to the group who are in a desperate state about the possibility (or reality) of losing the relationship with their partner. For them to see that a meaningful life can be created even when the violence has led to an end to the relationship, can lessen the man's desperation and in turn this can increase the safety of the women concerned. Having a chance to listen to men who have been through the process of coming to terms with the extent and effects of their violence to others, and who are crafting non-violent lives can be sincerely inspiring to newcomers to the group.

This process is also a good one for the more experienced men. They are able to speak about the journey they have been on in front of a very receptive audience and to reflect on the changes that they've made. Often, their willingness to be interviewed is also a part of demonstrating a continuing commitment to try to play a part in addressing the broader issues of men's violence in the community.

This orientation of creating contexts for the sharing of knowledge between men who have gone some way to address these issues with those who are still very much struggling with them, seems quite different from the educational model often used in this area of work. Are there other ways in which you have moved away from an 'educational' perspective?

Early on, the groups used to be organised in didactic ways. For instance we might have a session on 'active listening' in which we would 'teach' active listening skills. We made an assumption that men didn't know the skills to be in a 'functional' relationship and that it was our role to try to teach them the required skills. At the end of the educational session we would then give out a professional handout on 'active listening'.

Then we changed this to a format in which we would ask questions about their experiences of listening and communication and try to elicit the group members' ideas and perspectives on these issues, but at the end of the session we would again give out a professional handout with the implication that what was on the handout was the 'correct' way to listen and act in relationships. Unfortunately, the initial knowledge and skills for living generated by the men were inadvertently dishonoured.

Now, we have conversations with men about what they find helpful and unhelpful in many different areas of their lives – whether this be in relation to communication, demonstrating respect, sexual respect, parenting, or other issues that they wish to explore. I take notes during these discussions and then generate handouts from these notes that I hand out the next week. These handouts contain the words, ideas and perspectives of group members on these issues.

Sometimes, I also bring in handouts that have been generated by other men in past groups. These are not handed out as if they are 'the correct' ways of living. Instead, I describe that these documents were generated by other men dealing with similar things who said that they were happy for us to share their words in the hope that they might be helpful to others. Maybe it will be relevant, maybe it won't. This is quite a different orientation than the previous didactic approach.

I like this idea of building a knowledge base amongst men who are working on this issue. This is a way of honouring the efforts of these men, and also honouring the efforts of other people in these men's lives who have contributed to their knowledge of these issues (including their partners).

At all times, this is seen as a collective work in progress. We are men trying to come up with ways of addressing men's violence and being responsible to our relationships. These conversations among men remain in dialogue in various ways with the female partners, their counsellor and their advocates.

When people leave the group at the end of the program, is there some way in which this transition is marked? And is there some way in which a context is created which describes how we are all 'works in progress'?

When people complete the group we don't wish to set up the implication that the work of addressing violence in their lives is complete. We don't want to assume that somehow a 'goal' has been reached and we can stop thinking about it.

Early on, men would ask for certificates to indicate that they had participated in the program and we would not provide these. We thought that any sort of certificate would imply completion and the accomplishment of goals. We also thought the certificates could be seen as us 'certifying' a man as 'safe', never to hurt anyone again. Sometimes men at the end of a group are nervous about the idea of having a certificate. They are nervous about the same things we have been sometimes nervous about. They have said to us: 'I don't want to think that I'm done' or 'I don't want myself to go to sleep and not continue to make the effort in my relationships'.

The program is now informed by a language of values and preferences rather than static goals. I now recognise that certificates do not have to reflect static, fixed, structuralist identity conclusions of being 'completed' or 'finished' – instead, they can reflect a man's values that he struggles to be accountable and committed to on a daily basis. We now offer the members of the group the chance to develop the words that they would like to have on their certificates. We have a template and we collaborate with men on what is written on their certificates. Men come to appreciate this is a day-by-day process. And so, what might be written on their certificate are words that reflect this.

In the same way that I've talked myself through the conversation, I invite men to make a shift from thinking of the certificate as a sign of completion to thinking of it as like a therapeutic document, or a marker of a step on the journey. The certificate then acknowledges that they've participated in a group and then lists some of the values and practices of accountability and responsibility they are committed to in the future. These certificates are prepared during the second-last session, and during the final session I give these certificates in a formal way to the participants, at which point both the man and myself sign off on them. I have permission to share Daniel's 'certificate of recognition' that he created:

'Daniel is committed not to be overconfident. He is also committed to practice respect, love,

and caring for his family, friends and society. He is accomplishing the ability to step back and look at a situation before he reacts to it. He has a long way to go, but he is on his way.'

Tod, I also wanted to ask a more personal question about the influences of this work on your own life and your own sense of being a man. Does this work change your own sense of masculinity?

I grew up in a family and in a context in which there was a lot of space for me to find my own way with masculinity. There was a lot of permission not to adopt dominant masculine ways of being. The irony is, that it was when I started working in the domestic violence field that I increasingly adopted dominant masculine practices. It was when facilitating the groups for men around issues of violence that I adopted a kind of rugged individualism and confrontational ways. I began to take on a 'policing role' and with this came a range of masculine practices that had not been such a part of my life earlier on.

Connecting with a poststructuralist framework, however, meant questioning all of this and in some ways has felt like a return home. I no longer feel that I need to adopt a dominant masculine stance, an oppositional or tough approach. So, in terms of my own relationship with masculinity, it feels like I adopted a more dominant form of masculinity as I entered domestic violence work, the very field that is committed to disrupting masculinity. The field is changing now and I am pleased about these changes.

And now, having adopted an invitational approach, I hear stories of courage, of sorrow and of repair as men face and stop their violence. I get to witness people moving their lives towards what it is they value and this is inspiring to me. It opens possibilities in my own life, possibilities that include facing up to harm done and seeking repair – both personally and professionally. Professionally, I worked within the same community over the last twelve years, and so, of course, some men who I was confronting in groups before, ended up coming back to the program. They noticed the changes to my way of working. After a few sessions, one man said, 'You've changed!' When I'm in these situations, I am in the position of acknowledging that I've made mistakes, and that I regret them. In those moments we are in that similar space together: facing our mistakes, responsibility and shame. It's not only about them needing to change, it's also about me being on a journey that's questioning the real effects of my practice and trying to do something different. I've had this happen a number of times and some men in groups relish being able to talk with me about *my* mistakes. Witnessing men face their regret and remorse over their past actions has allowed me to find avenues to face my shame over my past professional practices.

This may seem a slightly strange question, but if you could have a bit of a chat to yourself back in those days when you were working in more confrontational ways, is there anything in particular you would like to say? Is there a particular learning that you'd wish you could pass onto the worker that you once were?

I think I'd just have a conversation about trying to clarify the role of the therapist or group worker. In my work now, I see my role as focusing on creating possibilities for these men to step into alternative stories about their identity, stories that are based on non-violent values, stories that make it possible for them to live and enact loving and caring relationships. Back then, I thought my role was one of policing. I was focused primarily on the possibility that men might be dishonest and manipulative. I was constantly worried about whether I was being lied to, or misled, or deceived. I thought I had to 'police' the men to be honest. I, however, no longer step into the role of policing men with whom I work. I leave that to others.

I think there is an important place for policing, and a place for judgement and there are others in the justice system that play those roles. There are probation officers, judges, courts, child protection workers and, of course, the police themselves. These are important roles for communicating, policing, and implementing community values. In fact, most of the conversations I have with men who have perpetrated violence only happen because these men are mandated to attend by these community partners.

My role, however, is to try to create possibilities

for these men to develop alternative identity stories, stories that they can perform and live. Part of this performance is a man eventually taking responsibility to 'police' himself, holding himself accountable for the effects of his ideas, feelings, and actions. I want to invite forward a man's possible preference for honest, respectful relationships. For example, rather than infer the man is withholding as a result of being essentially dishonest, I tell him that I assume he will only share honestly with me about the painful and personal details of his life over time as he feels safe and respected by me. In the context of these conversations, I find offering men a caring and trusting relationship increases their honesty and willingness to take responsibility to stop their violence.

I find trying to police or confront men within therapy conversations or group conversations does little to promote honesty or responsibility. Instead it promotes evasion and resistance, and I end up feeling responsible for bringing about all change. When I took on the role of policing group members, this kept certain identity descriptions in place, making presumptions that men only lie and manipulate. I'm not saying that men do not lie or manipulate. But it's not all that they stand for in life; nor does this reflect all of their practices.

And it's not my role to try to catch them in a lie. Instead, it's my role to find some different territory in which these men can stand, where different possibilities for their lives and relationships can emerge. It's my job to find ways for these men to step into different identities, shaped by different values ... values that will respect the women, children and other men in their lives.

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