

# Responding to men's violence

## An interview with Nancy Gray

Nancy Gray lives and works in Halifax Nova Scotia. The focus of her work is responding to partner abuse through community work, group work as well as education initiatives.

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In their work with men who have enacted violence against their partners, a team of workers at New Start, in Halifax, Canada, draws upon the metaphor of 'migration of identity' to assist men to move away from violence and domination and towards different forms of masculinity. In this thoughtful and reflective two-part interview, Nancy Gray describes some of the key ideas that inform their work. The first part of the interview conveys how the migration of identity map and the re-authoring conversations map can be put to work with men who are violent. It also conveys some of the unexpected discoveries that emerge as a result. The interviewer was David Denborough.

Keywords: domestic violence, perpetrators, migration of identity, masculinity, re-authoring, racism, gender

## PART ONE: IDENTIFYING MIGRATIONS OF IDENTITY

*Nancy, to begin with could you just say a little bit about the work of New Start and your team?*

The work we are involved with focuses on responding to men's violence against their women partners. Many of the men who come for counselling have been mandated through the court system, and a disproportionate number are from marginalised communities. I work with the men, while colleagues respond to the women who have been subjected to violence. The partnership we have developed between those of us who work with the men, and those who work with the women is critical to our work. It's a team approach, and these days we have a team of women workers from a range of different cultural backgrounds.

*Can I ask you about some of the ideas that assist you in thinking about your work with men who have been violent?*

In working with men to address the violence they have perpetrated to others, I have found the

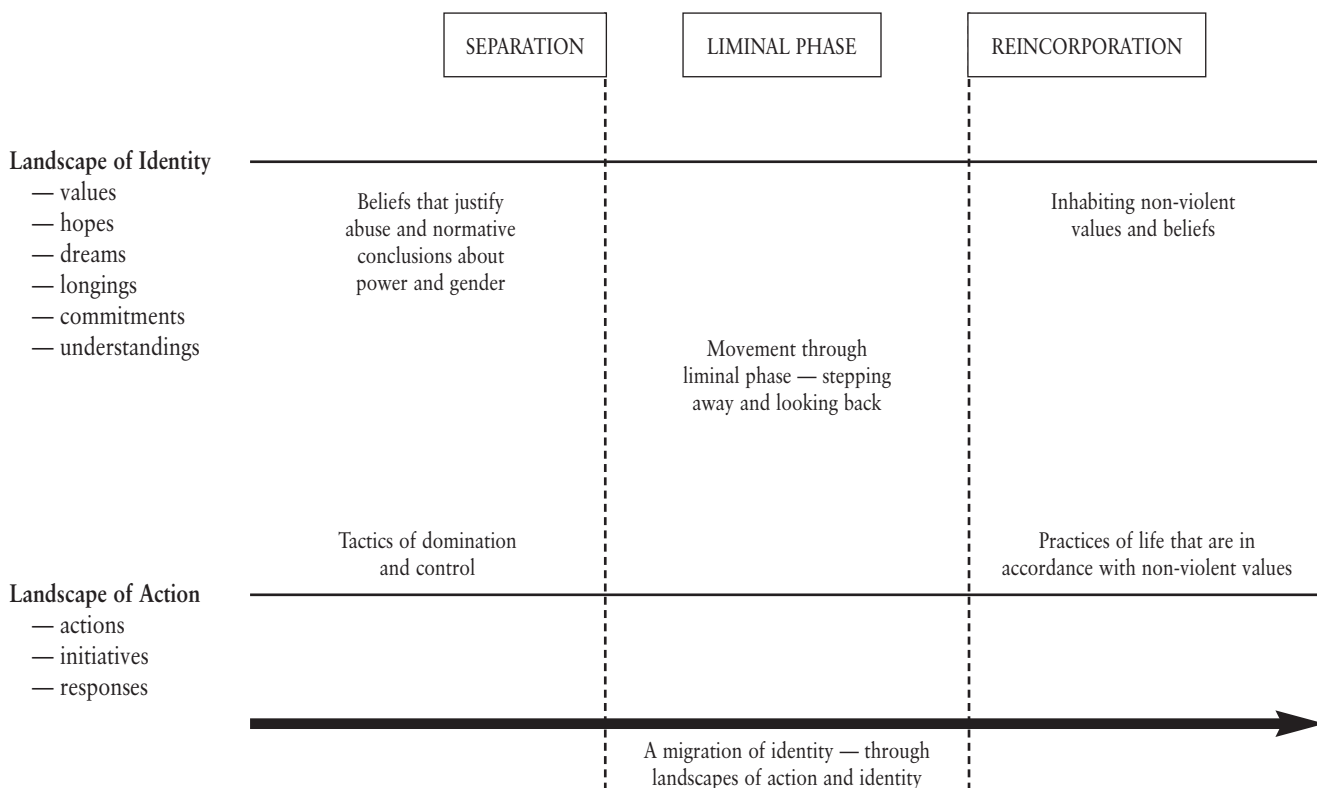
migration of identity map, and the re-authoring map, described by Michael White (1995) extremely helpful. These maps are enabling men to chart a movement away from violence and dominating practices and towards different forms of masculinity.

In the diagram below, I have melded these two maps. This diagram evokes the concept of 'migration of identity' which involves three stages (separation, liminality and reincorporation) and describes how this occurs across two landscapes – the landscape of action and the landscape of identity.

*Can you describe why the metaphor of a migration of identity is proving helpful in your work with men about issues of violence?*

The migration of identity map provides a framework for me to conceptualise what men are moving away from (tactics of domination and control and beliefs that justify abuse), and also what they are moving towards (non-violent actions and ways of inhabiting non-violent values, beliefs, hopes and dreams).

Significantly, this map also highlights the transitions and confusions that may occur as they



separate from the practices and beliefs they were recruited into and which they have used for years to justify abuse. Stepping away from violence and abuse, and from relational practices based on dominance, involves stepping into uncertainty that characterises the liminal phase in any rite of passage (Turner 1969). The liminal phase in this process involves stepping away from past practices and looking back at them, while at the same time looking forwards to what might be possible.

*Why is it that you have then superimposed the re-authoring conversations map?*

By superimposing the re-authoring conversations map onto the migration of identity map, it draws my attention to how my conversations with men explore both the landscape of action (in relation to their actions, initiatives, responses) and the landscape of identity (in relation to their beliefs, realisations, hopes, dreams, longings, commitments, etc). The re-authoring map also draws my attention to considerations of story and history. It reminds me that one of my tasks is to assist men in re-authoring story-lines of identity that will support non-violent ways of living.

*Okay, can we look first at the separation phase? What are some of the tasks involved for you in this part of the work?*

There are many different types of listening and enquiry involved in this work. For instance, early conversations require listening for the beliefs that support abuse in order for these to be externalised. They also involve enquiring as to the real effects of the violence. If there are moments in which the man alludes to or speaks about the consequences of violence for his partner, for him or for his children, I seek to explore this in more detail. And at the same time, I am listening for openings to other stories about values and hopes the man may hold that are in contrast to abusive ways of being. Throughout these conversations, I am seeking to attend to the seriousness of the violence, consistently exploring its real effects on the lives of all concerned, and I'm also asking about alternative preferences the man has for his life and relationships.

But perhaps most significantly, for these men, identifying movement away from lifestyles of violence requires naming and then separating from the hegemony of what has become to them a 'routine masculinity'. The problem is, this 'routine masculinity' is bound up with notions of control, domination and violence. In my experience, in order to separate from this hegemony, there must be an enquiry into how they were recruited into these forms of masculinity in the first place.

These men's practices of domination, callousness, and brutality came from somewhere. They learnt these ways of being somewhere, somehow. Asking them to describe how they were recruited into these, and how these practices became routine in their life, creates space for them to then take a position on the effects of this training and to separate from its lessons. It also opens space for them to speak about their past experience of the effects of abuse and domination tactics. This process of deconstructing dominant beliefs that support male violence against women can involve an exposé of the social history of relations of power in the man's life.

Exploring together this context of these men's lives, how they have become recruited into violent ways of being, enables me to stay de-centred in these conversations. This de-centred practice was elusive to me until I started to ask men about the stories of masculinity they were groomed in. Now, together, we try to identify and give names to ways of being men that are 'known and familiar' to them and this acts as the first step in separation.

*Do these conversations also touch on experiences of violence that the man may have been subject to?*

Without it becoming a central theme of our conversations, it seems important to acknowledge the experiences of violence that many men have lived through, and the dominant expectations that have accompanied these experiences. As one man described recently, 'You act like nothing bothers you, and after a while you start to believe it'. To enable men to name this recruitment into callousness can create the first steps in being able to separate from it and to develop an increasing awareness of the effects of violence in their own lives and the lives of others.

Sometimes, men draw parallels between their recruitment into certain forms of masculinity and various survival practices they learned to protect themselves at a young age from other men's violence. Many young men seem to have learned violent ways of being from older male kin who claimed they were wanting to 'toughen them up'. This 'toughening up' process is often akin to abuse.

Gradually, we find a language to describe the ways in which these men were recruited into dominating ways of being. Some common characterisations include: 'acting tough', 'acting like a blow fish', or developing an 'alpha male mentality'.

*What are some of the sorts of questions that are helpful in characterising these dominating ways of being?*

There are lots of different sorts of questions. They might include:

- What are the dominant and familiar stories about the way men are supposed to be?
- How did you learn about this?
- What do you notice about the effects of these expectations?
- What's your position on the effects of these expectations?

Although many men claim that they grew up being told never to hit a woman, and may have told themselves that if they saw any man being violent to a woman that they would intervene, dominating and controlling tactics tend to have a long history. A man's practices of domination can invariably be connected to a broader social context of domination and the ongoing normalising of rigid gender expectations. Asking questions that deconstruct settled certainties about gender expectations, and that enquire as to the effects of certain gender expectations which give rise to abuse, can create a shift in position from justifying abuse to protesting abuse. Invariably, this protest can then be linked to hopes and dreams of a different sort of life, and these alternative hopes and dreams also have history.

To give a better description of how this process works, I'll include an extract from a conversation with a man called Bert. The discourse that Bert wishes to

separate from has been named by him as 'alpha male mentality'. An alternative story-line of 'being a good person' emerges as the conversation continues.

### **AN EXAMPLE OF A MIGRATION OF IDENTITY – MOVING AWAY FROM AN 'ALPHA MALE MENTALITY'**

Nancy: So, you're on a path of separating from an 'alpha male mentality'. Can I ask you more about that? We've talked before about this 'alpha male mentality', that it's a way of imagining life, and a way of actually living life. Many of the men I meet with, especially recently, have been talking about certain ideas about ways of being a man gets them to escalate in ways they're ashamed of – pushing, shoving, hitting. This 'alpha male thing' seems to be about dominating ...

Bert: Yeah, in my mind that's the alpha male mentality, for sure.

Nancy: Where do you think this comes from? I imagine wolves when you speak about it ... Is it like that, is it about domination?

Bert: It is like someone seeking to dominate the rest of the pack. Yeah. I find that the need to be more dominant than somebody else is something I see ingrained in most men. Even men who are good to their significant other – other aspects of their life are very much influenced by the alpha male mentality.

### **EXPLORING THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF DOMINATING PRACTICES**

Nancy: How do you think this happens? Do you think men learn to be this way because of this dominant culture, so many messages from a young age ...

Bert: I think it's learned ... If you look at native culture, my culture, women are the ones who used to run things, and they didn't have that alpha male mentality. It's hard to explain.

With Mi'kmaq culture, pre-colonialism, I don't believe the men were 'alpha male'; everything was much more equal. But since colonialism, because of the influences on so many different levels, in my community now, many men are very 'alpha male' oriented.

### INVITING REFLEXIVITY

Bert: A part of the whole alpha male mentality is to divide things up, to think of things as being either 'weak' or 'not weak'. I used to think crying was 'weak' – that men aren't supposed to cry because to cry means you are weak. I really did believe this. My previous partner used to say 'That's not true', but I would find every excuse to keep my belief alive.

Nancy: So studying the idea of the 'alpha male mentality', looking at it, noticing it, thinking about it, has helped you to separate from it?

Bert: Yeah, for sure. Before, I thought it was just part of what men do, you know? This is a man, so this is what he is like. I thought things had to be that way. But if I realise that this is just an idea, a powerful idea, ingrained on me by somebody else ... well that's different ...

### MOVING AWAY FROM DOMINANT BELIEFS

Bert: My dad was a very alpha male person. And the way I look at it now, I can see now how he put that on me ... how I learnt this from him ... and he probably learnt it from somebody else ... But before, when my partner used to challenge me, I'd say: 'That's just the way men are'. And if she'd question that, then I'd be like 'Well, that's the way I was raised'. I would always fight to keep this alpha male belief alive. It was such a strong belief for me. But the truth is ... it's bullshit. To be a different sort of man is not weakness.

### REFERENCING VALUES AS GUIDES

Nancy: What values are you finding are good guides along this path ...?

Bert: In order to be a good person, you have to, like, throw away that whole alpha male thing. That's my biggest thing. It's very hurtful to the spirit. It inhibits life. Some of my friends get upset when I bring a certain friend around, their whole attitude changes ... because he's homosexual. They don't take the time to see what I see. All I see is this great person. I don't care what he does in his spare time; it's none of my business. He's always treated me respectfully. They're intimidated by the fact that he doesn't have that alpha male mentality. I don't think it's the homosexuality that's intimidating, it's more the fact that he's more effeminate, he doesn't have that mentality ...

Nancy: It sounds like it's important to you to 'be a good person' ... can you say more about what you mean by this? And what's the history of this in your life?

*Can I ask you about the liminal phase now? What are some of the tasks involved in this part of the work?*

The liminal phase involves 'stepping away and looking back'. Once the man has taken a position in relation to 'alpha male mentality', it's possible to look back at the real effects of the domination, control and violence on the lives of others and on his own life.

Within the liminal phase, it's also critical to explore the moments of separation from violence, and from beliefs that justify violence. These small acts of movement need to be researched. We explore the chinks in these stories, the moments they have sought out other ways of being men, ways that are not in accord with violence.

And we also 'step away and look forwards' by asking questions that speculate about future action:

- How important is it to you to find alternative possibilities? Why?
- Can you remember moments or particular times when you were acting in other ways?
- What values and commitments will support you to move away from those dominant stories?
- How will you practise / demonstrate other ways of being a man?

It's important to note that during this entire process of research, the conversations also consistently reference and reflect back on the effects of abuse on others, particularly those who may still be living in fear. I keep in close contact with my colleague Catherine Hennigar-Shuh who works with the women partners so that women's experiences continue to inform all aspects of this work.

*I know that you have a particular interest in language, and in counselling conversations being orientated towards local knowledge and the words and phrases used by those who are consulting you. Can you say more about why you see this as important in your work with men?*

In conversations about abuse and violence, one of the things that often takes place is a gradual realisation by the men of the diversity of practices that can be abusive. Often men, and women for that matter, begin to develop an increasing discernment about practices of abuse. This is an important aspect of the migration of identity. Where once something was taken for granted, over time as the migration occurs, various practices are discerned to be abusive, as harmful, and as contrary to their hopes for their lives and relationships.

But different people and communities have different language about these practices and different forms of discernment. For instance, in some of the communities we are working with, a common realisation is 'I didn't realise that hollering could be abusive' or 'I didn't know put-downs could be a part of violence'. I have become very interested in these different expressions. They catch my attention. Paying attention to local language and particular phrases seems to lead to some very interesting conversations.

Some of these conversations assist in the

process of discernment. For instance, there may not be a local vocabulary for talking about 'abuse' but there may be a local way of discussing 'troubles'. I can start conversations by asking questions like: 'If people don't talk about abuse, how do they talk about the troubles that create hurt in relationships?' In doing so, I am trying to find ways of discussing these issues in the language of the people who consult me, rather than relying on a professional vocabulary. I am also trying to create a scaffold in which people can more easily and readily speak about what has probably gone unspoken.

Other sorts of questions can also assist men to discern what is harmful in relationships. If a man has mentioned that he knows sometimes that something has been wrong because of the look he sees in his partner's eyes, I might ask: 'What would you call those moments when you look in your partner's eyes after you've done something that you're ashamed of? And what would she call those moments?' These sorts of explorations involve finding a language to discuss these issues, rather than importing a language and imposing it upon them. This is also about generating a language and the skills with which to discern harm, to respond to it, and to prevent it.

*I know that you have an interest in poetry ... it seems a bit of a leap between poetry and conversations about violence, but do you see any connection?*

Perhaps in some ways I bring a poetic determination to pay attention to the metaphors people use, to the attributions of meaning embedded in their phrases, to the cadences of people's expressions, and even to those moments of wordlessness that can be imbued with meaning. There is a poetic aspect to this work and I sometimes draw upon the words of poets whom I admire as guidance. Adrienne Rich (1974), for example, in her poem 'Diving into the wreck', reminds us that 'the words are maps, the words are purposes'. This helps me to ask more questions about the meaning of particular words that people are using and to be curious about the development of actions and initiatives that connect with certain phrases.

This attention to 'experience-near' language seems very relevant in listening for the ways in



which men have been recruited into, experienced, and enacted practices of violence, and also in listening for the dreams, hopes and values that are often implicit in these conversations. At times, other hopes are 'absent but implicit' (White 2000) and that requires different listening.

*You mentioned earlier how these conversations take place in both the landscape of action and the landscape of identity. Why is it important for you to be listening for these men's dreams, hopes and values?*

Once, I may have asked the same question. I would have wondered how this was relevant to them addressing their violence and keeping their partner and/or children safe. But my views on this have changed. Finding ways to thicken the stories of men's commitment to addressing their violence is a key part of this work. It's not all that is involved, but it is significant, as it provides a foundation for them on which to build new ways of being men, new ways of living, forms of life that are free of violence. Seeking to identify the values and principles that the man wants to inform his actions, his relationships and his life, is directly related to making it possible for a migration of identity to take place.

There is an interesting story as to how I became more interested in asking men about their dreams, hopes and longings. I recall one young man who used to come and visit. He used to drop in rather than making an appointment. And, if I was free, we would sit and talk. He would talk about having seen friends die on the street. He would sit and look out the window rather than at me while we spoke, and we would hear the sounds of the street while he would say 'It's like a war out there'. As a young Black man, the metaphor of war seemed quite realistic as the prevalence of violent deaths of young Black men in North America at present is quite staggering. At the same time as describing the 'war' he experienced all around him, he would speak of the times of his childhood when he had spent days in the woods at his grandmother's place. These quiet times, alone in the woods, were described with such longing. Because he had just dropped in to talk, and I wasn't in 'therapist role', I realised I was listening differently. I was more open to listening for the longings, the hopes and dreams that were a part of his stories. It was in these 'non-

therapeutic' (or non-mandated) conversations that I came to realise that I needed to spend more time listening for and then exploring some of those other longings, laments and hopes for life. The men I am working with who are engaged in naming and addressing abuse and its effects, do not express longings, laments or dreams that relate to wanting to have been involved in more violence, more death, more destruction. Instead, these men or young men often express certain longings which represent their hopes for change. In talking with them, I am reminded of the words of Langston Hughes (2004): 'What happens to a dream deferred?' There are many traces that can often be retrieved.

Of course, it is then vitally important to link these longings, dreams and hopes, back to actions in the real world. Re-authoring conversations involve linking these hopes, dreams and longings to actions that the men have taken, are taking or could take, to redress harm that has been done, to prevent further harm, and to create the sort of relationships and experiences that are based more on safety and respect.

*Has this approach led to changes in the sorts of conversations you are now having with men?*

If our conversations have unearthed and described the values, dreams, longing that the man wants to have inform his actions, then when I am seeking out responsible stories (Jenkins 1990), stories about times when the man may have taken steps to minimise or address the effects of his actions, I can do this in a way that is free from dogmatism, that is free from any sense of extending punishment in my questions, or any sense of moral superiority. The search for responsible stories becomes collaborative; it is in accord with the man's expressions of hopes, dreams and longings and this leads me to a different experience of the work.

I have also begun to notice an increasing poignancy in many of the moments of conversations with these men and this has been very surprising to me. When men start to speak about their longings, hopes or laments, they often begin to speak about their mothers, or about their brothers whom they may have lost to violence. In the midst of conversations about violence, I am now finding myself listening and responding to very tender stories.

I think that I see openings to these sorts of stories now where once I would have missed them. For instance, when working with big guys who come in with their arms bare and lots of tattoos, once I may have been quite intimidated by this appearance. But I have become increasingly curious about the markings they have chosen, about their piercings or tattoos, because I have discovered that often these are highly symbolic and full of meaning. I recall a time I was asking questions about what was significant to one man, why it was that he wanted to address issues of violence in his life, and he opened his shirt to show me a tattoo he had over his heart. It was a portrait of his brother's face, his twin brother. He and his brother had lived through incredible violence when they were young and his brother had died as a result of violence. This man was wearing his brother on his heart. Enlisting his brother's memory in his efforts to free his life of violence was extremely powerful and effective. It was his brother who had known about the history of violence in his life. It was his brother who knew what they had both witnessed. And it was his brother who would have known what sort of man he wanted to become.

Finding ways for men to speak about the sort of people they wish to become, and then tracing the history of this commitment, can lead to significant stories. If it isn't brothers who are implicated in these stories, it is often mothers or grandmothers. I recall one man, a huge man, whose life had been saturated in violence that he had both lived through and perpetrated. When he first walked into my room, I was conscious that I felt afraid of him. But over time, I came to hear about his commitments to living a non-violent life and where they had come from. He spoke of his grandmother and the stories she would tell, including particular cultural stories. He also spoke of his brother. These were evocative, loving conversations. Gradually, I witnessed this man begin to enact in his daily life his commitment to turning his life around. Doing so was in many ways a tribute to his grandmother and all that she had meant to him. The explanations for why men wish to turn their lives around often involve stories of loss, or stories of tribute. I have found exploring these sorts of stories to be invaluable in this work.

*I know that outsider-witness practices are also an important part of your work. Can you say more about this?*

When I first started using outsider-witnesses in this work, I was quite nervous and unsure about the process. So I began by asking the men I was seeing if they would be happy for a student to simply sit in on our sessions as a listener. I was surprised how the men were usually comfortable with this. They seemed to really enjoy hearing the students reflect back on what they had heard. Of course, there are plenty of hazards and accompanying responsibilities involved in inviting outsider-witness responses. It has been really helpful to think through what sorts of responses will contribute to the development of responsible story-lines and will assist men to undertake a migration away from practices of domination and control.

When I started using outsider-witness practices in groups, I discovered this was very effective. It seems that the men particularly appreciate being in the listener role. As much as anything else, they seem to notice practicing *how* to listen. In the groups they learn to listen to the stories of other men's lives, to the stories from female students and workers who act as outsider witnesses, and also to the stories of their own lives. Significantly, they report that this sort of experience of listening helps them to go back and listen differently to their partners. Very often, one of the first key steps they describe in separating from violence and violent ways of being, is learning how to listen and not jump in and interrupt. In terms of living non-violent lives, listening is often a very underrated skill.

*We have spoken about the separation phase, and the liminal phase of this work. Can you say a little about the reincorporation stage? What is required for men to get to the point of reincorporation?*

In order for men to make a full migration to be living a non-violent life, they must, in collaboration with others, find ways to fully inhabit a range of new values, beliefs and ways of being. This is a significant migration and it doesn't happen overnight! The dreams or hopes that they have identified for their lives must be linked to actions, they must be enacted as practices in all areas of life. Certain



hopes and dreams require certain skills and knowledges of living and these need to be developed – practices of respect, of care, of discernment. They must also be practised in a range of different circumstances, under different pressures. The preferred story-line cannot just exist in words; it must be played out in day-to-day action.

At the same time, the man must come to an ever-richer understanding of what it is that he has separated from. A rich knowledge of the practices of abuse and violence, the ways in which these came to inform his life, and a full appreciation of the effects of violence, are other entire realms that need to develop. With these understandings come skills to detect and then prevent practices of domination and control. Creating contexts by which others can offer continuing feedback is also often a critical aspect of this work.

None of this takes place in isolation. This is not solely an individualistic project or process. A whole range of relational skills and negotiations may also be required. And ideally, significant others can be found who can assist a man in this process of migration. Of course, his woman partner would not be expected in any way to play this role. She herself is undergoing a different migration of identity, one which involves reclaiming her life from the effects of abuse, and which also requires significant supports from others.

*We seem to have travelled quite a distance in this conversation, Nancy; do you have any reflections on what we have talked about so far?*

It's interesting that I used the word 'tender' earlier to describe some of the poignant conversations involved in this work. I wouldn't have used that word once. I might have thought it, but I wouldn't have said it aloud. When I started doing this work, some of those who had been working in this area for some time said to me, 'You're gonna have to act a little tougher. Otherwise they're not going to take you seriously'. I found this disturbing. It was implying that it's not okay to speak with a soft voice, that no-one would take me seriously as a woman unless I acted more like a certain sort of man. These ideas are pervasive in the field. When I see myself on videotapes I sometimes worry: 'Am I speaking too softly? Is that my gender socialisation creeping in?'

But I do not believe that my tasks in this work are confrontational in a conventional sense. I also don't think being a woman makes this work more difficult. Whoever the therapist or group facilitator, there are plenty of dilemmas involved in talking about violence and attempting to deconstruct routine assumptions about gender and power.

*That seems an appropriate place to take a short break! Then I'd like to ask you about the community work you and your team are engaged with.*

## **PART TWO: FROM THE OFFICE TO THE COMMUNITY**

Addressing men's violence to women will require more than individual or group responses. Developing ways to assist communities to address violence is an additional theme of the work of New Start. In this second part of the interview, Nancy Gray tells the story of how partnerships with communities have been built and the developments that are flowing from this.

*In recent years, I know that your work has not only involved individual counselling and group work, but also broader community engagement. Can you tell me the story of how this has occurred?*

When I first started here, all of our work occurred in groups rather than through individual conversations. I recall one large group in particular that had about twenty-two men in it. There were five Black men in this group who were very quiet and they all sat together – very intense and very quiet. Both facilitators of the group were white. As one of these facilitators, it seemed important to find ways for us to be able to discuss issues of racism alongside considerations of sexism, and yet I felt really awkward about this. The men were mandated to be there, and I felt unsure how to discuss issues of racism in this context.

These African Canadian men had often been sent to the group by a parole officer and were expected to speak to me about their lives, their relationships and their violence. But why should they trust me, as a white person, as a white woman? I started to pay attention to these issues in the room, and how they were influencing the conversations in the group. At that time, the group was being run according to a certain curriculum which was presented as a series

of truths about how to think about equality between men and women without any consideration of the complexities of race, socioeconomic privilege etc. In paying attention to the experience of the African Canadian men in the group, I became more curious about my own discomfort. Some of this discomfort related to how to ask questions about the effects of racism, and an uncertainty about the real effects of our power and privilege as facilitators in that context (see Cain 2006). But there were other concerns too which related to the ways in which Black men have been objectified as part of the history of racism, and also to white women's complicity in this both historically and in the present. Acknowledging this started to make me question some aspects of our role as facilitators. I was aware that parole officers often want 'progress reports' and that if certain men were not speaking at all in the group then as facilitators we had a responsibility to document this. But if the African Canadian men were not speaking in the group because both facilitators were white, and the African Canadian men then got reported to parole officers for not participating, were we potentially replicating racism in our work? At the same time, we are employed to address issues of men's violence to women, so we were challenged to come up with alternative ways of working<sup>1</sup>.

Hiring women of African heritage and Native American heritage to our staff has been one response to this situation, but there have been others too. We have sought to take the conversations about men's violence back into the communities where violence had been taking place.

*Can you describe how this move towards community engagement has taken place?*

It really began with the five men I mentioned earlier. As I felt uncomfortable with how things were progressing in the group, I started to have more conversations one-on-one with these men, particularly when they came to our centre voluntarily. I would explore with the men what some of the restraints were in being able to talk about abuse, including the fact that they would had to come downtown into a building in which all the staff were white, and in a context similar to those in which they have routinely experienced racism in the past. I would ask questions like, 'How hard is it to talk

about abuse (men's violence to women), when you yourself may have been subjected to injustices?' And, 'Who else would notice what it takes to be able to do this?' These kinds of questions would open up richer conversations, conversations that we hadn't up until then been able to have in the mixed group.

Through these conversations, I also came to learn about the communities these men live in, communities that I had never been to and didn't know much about. Over time, in these one-on-one conversations I began to learn more about talking about racism and gained more of a sense of how to proceed with those conversations. That's not to say I felt comfortable, but I started to notice that some men didn't want to talk about issues of race and racism with me, and that was okay with me, while others did.

One man in particular, and then others, began to say, 'You should come out to my community. We should have groups out there. We should have discussions out there'. The idea of having conversations out in the communities had actually been a long-held hope of one of my colleagues, Catherine Hennigar-Shuh, who works with the women partners. For some time, Catherine had spoken of our responsibilities to develop partnerships with these communities, but I had always resisted this. I didn't feel I could take this on as I wanted to prioritise not having a huge waiting list for the service. I felt our energies had to go into providing our key service of counselling and groups. But when I had become uncomfortable about what was occurring in the groups, when I started to hear more about what it took for the men to come downtown to talk, and when the men started asking us to come out to their communities, I was convinced that we had to develop another approach to this work.

There was a particular conversation that brought this home to me. I was speaking with a man who was just starting to realise the effects of the emotional abuse and controlling behaviour that his partner had experienced in his actions for many years. When I asked him, 'Who else could you have these conversations with? Who else could you talk to in your community about these matters?', he said that he didn't know. But he very much wanted to speak with others and asked if together we could

generate some ideas. So this was one of the things we did together. I would ask questions like:

- Who else could you talk to about this?
- Who would want to listen?
- How could you bring the topic up?

When he then asked me to come out to speak with members of his community, I said, 'Well, would you do that with me? Would you speak with me about these issues of abuse to a group of men at the church? Could I support you to do that? What could this look like?'

We then created a list of people who might be interested to come to such a public meeting, and in making that list, I thought for the first time that this community approach could actually work. The people on this list became a sort of 'steering committee'. Included were women from the communities who some years earlier had made a video/documentary about domestic violence called 'No more secrets' (Hamilton 1999).

*Am I right in thinking that some of the men you were meeting with wanted to try to deal with the issue of violence in their community as well as dealing with it in their own lives and relationships?*

Yes. And there was a tragic story that provided impetus to this. The same man who asked us to visit his community told us a story of what had occurred there recently. A woman who had been subjected to terrible violence by her husband had tried to seek help. She spoke to different people in the community, including the pastor, but no-one knew how to help her. Her husband had apparently threatened to come after her and kill her if she left him, so, after much anguish, she took her own life. She set her own car on fire in the community and burnt to death.

The shock and sorrow of this woman's life and death provided the impetus for community action on this issue. Her death had profoundly shocked the man who I was speaking with. He told me this story as his way of explaining how important it was that conversations happen back in his community. He described how he had never thought that he was abusive, because he had only thought of physical beatings as abuse. He said that he was now starting to notice more the abusive practices within his

community and in his life, and that he wanted to have more conversations with people about this. Previously, he hadn't seen himself as someone who would talk with other men about abuse, but after the death of the woman in his community, he wanted to take some action.

Once he told me this, I started asking other men if they thought it was important for them to talk to others in their community about these issues. And this generated a second list of people to involve in community conversations. This was a list of men who had come for counselling and who would like to be contacted again in order to be a part of community discussions.

So then we started to hold discussions and public meetings in the communities. This process is still going. In fact, we're really still just beginning. We have included in this journal some of the documents that have been created in these community discussions from the words of the women and men in the African Nova Scotian communities. (For another perspective on these community consultations, see 'Caring about violence and our communities' by Amanda Reddick in this issue.)

As community conversations continue, and as these documents are more widely circulated, community members are hoping that collaborative community action can develop to address violence and promote safety in their homes, families and neighbourhoods. As I said, it's still early days, but we have come quite a long way from the group conversations in which the African Canadian men sat silently throughout.

*Can I just ask you one further question, Nancy? As you have been engaging with these conversations with men from African Canadian communities, has this influenced the conversations you have with men of European heritage or other cultures?*

Yes, I think it has. Certainly, when I am working with men who have migrated from other countries, who don't have English as a first language, or who have come to Canada from very different cultural backgrounds, I am now more curious about their experiences of life. This doesn't just relate to an increased interest in issues of racism but also their experiences of migration and how this has influenced their sense of identity and belonging. I am also interested in any confusion they may have

had about Canadian laws and the police and criminal justice system. I am interested in exploring all of this as these conversations often lead me to hear about some of the values, hopes and preferences of these men. And having heard this, there is the opportunity to explore how they might live their lives more in accordance with some of these values and hopes.

In terms of my conversations with white men, what stands out for me is how poverty and deprivation has played a significant part in so many of their lives. I don't mean to suggest that only men from poor backgrounds are violent, far from it, but these are the men whose lives are least resourced and more problematised under the influence of the criminal justice system, and who are most often referred to our program. Since the conversations about racism with Afro-Canadian men have led in productive directions in relation to addressing their individual violence and the violence in their communities, I am now more interested in speaking with those white men whose lives have been affected by poverty and deprivation about their experiences. I no longer see the issues in the broader context of men's lives as something to avoid. Quite the opposite; I am increasingly interested in how exploring this broader context of men's lives can enable men to address issues of violence.

For instance, when talking with men who've been imprisoned, I now routinely ask them about their time in prison and experiences of racism, homophobia, aggression and violence. Of course, in these conversations I am always conscious of the fact that the aim is to assist this man to address the violence he has enacted against others, and against his partner in particular. But enquiring into the broader context of men's lives makes this more possible, not less. It establishes trust and understanding and enables us to have much more detailed conversations about abuse that has been perpetrated. It also provides many more entry points into conversations about the effects of abuse and violence, as well as many more entry points into the hopes and commitments the man may have that are not in accordance with violence and domination.

I am also increasingly interested in broadening conversations about violence, enabling communities to discuss and take collective action in addressing these issues. These are important developments for

our team – and the more we learn to work together, it seems that there is much more that can be done. Taking the time to slow down, to collaborate and consult seems crucial and challenging. It also seems to be opening many new possible ways of identifying abuse and supporting women and men to live without violence.

*Thanks, Nancy, for sharing these stories with us. And please pass on our appreciation to all those who have been involved in the conversations you have been describing. I am sure practitioners in other places will draw ideas and hope from the work that is taking place here in Nova Scotia.*

## NOTE

- <sup>1</sup> I have found Tionda Cain's writings (2006) very helpful in this area. Tionda has written: 'More and more I am seeing the necessity of white people taking up the challenge of educating other white people about racism. I am more interested in talking about the strategies people of color are employing to resist the negative impacts of racism in their lives, about how they are getting by without white privilege. I want to talk about how things like gender, class, age and sexual orientation impact a person's experience of racism. I want to talk about what it means to heal from racism's devastating effects while still constantly being bombarded with racism on a daily basis ... But these are difficult conversations to have in a room full of white people'. (p.141)

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