

The questions posed by our work with women who have experienced sexual abuse

Sue Mann

**Sue Mann has worked in Adelaide in the area of
childhood sexual abuse for the last four and a half
years. She is also a member of the Dulwich Centre
teaching faculty and can be contacted
c/o Dulwich Centre.**

This paper is one in a series by Sue Mann focusing on some of the most complex and challenging questions that arise in work with women who have experienced sexual abuse as children. In this paper the author describes the principles which shape her approach in this work, as well as responses to questions about sex work and sexual identity that have arisen in her conversations with women. This paper was delivered as a keynote at the second International Summer School of Narrative Practice in November 2004.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Before I begin, I want to acknowledge that the sorts of questions and concerns I will be discussing here are not abstract, or distant from our own lives. Quite the opposite: the stories I will be telling here could be my story, your story, or the story of your colleague or family member. This is just one of the reasons why I find this work so meaningful and significant.

INTRODUCTION

For many years I have been interested in how much we as counselors learn from the people who consult with us in therapy. When I first began working with women around the effects of child sexual abuse in their lives, I was given a blank book by a friend who invited me to keep a record of what I was learning from the women who were consulting me: about the effects of abuse, about practices of abuse of power, about the ways women and children reclaim their lives from the effects of child sexual abuse. This book has been a constant reminder to me of what I want to stay close to in this work.

In this paper, I want to discuss some of the questions that women have asked me in the course of our work together. These are questions that have invited me to really think, to puzzle, to contemplate. At times they have made me sit back with no idea what to say in response. I am sure these questions will be familiar to many of you. They include:

- Will I end up being like him/like her (the person who was abusive)?
 - Will I ever get over it, forget it, and not remember it? Does this ever go away?
 - Will I ever be the person I was meant to be?
 - How long does it take to do this?
 - How can I trust you?
 - Have you been abused?
 - How can you do this work?
 - Was all the sex I had as a teenager because of the abuse?
 - Is the reason I am a sex worker because of the abuse?
 - Am I lesbian/gay/queer because of the abuse?
 - How could a person who loved me, abuse me at the same time?
 - How can I hold onto my love for the person who abused me?
- My partner and I are into S&M – is this because of the abuse?
 - I want to remember what happened – can you help me remember?

These are some of the more complex questions that I am quite commonly asked in the course of this work. It seems to me that although these questions are asked by individuals, they are really collective questions and I would very much like your collective assistance with them. This paper is the first of a series of responses that I am planning to write in relation to these sorts of questions. If you have thoughts and reflections about any of these questions I'd love to talk with you or have you write to me. When I am asked these questions I often think how wonderful it would be if I could call on others in that moment to assist me in responding. My hope is, that this writing can generate a sense of connection around these and other questions that will act against experiences of isolation in the therapy and in relation to some of the isolating effects of abuse. Perhaps if we collaboratively generate some writing that responds to these questions this can assist all of us in the future when someone asks us one of these questions, or when we ask one of these questions ourselves.

There are also a number of key questions that I ask myself as a therapist. These include:

- How do I want to position myself in relation to these women who are coming to talk with me?
- How do you get started in the work? What do you do in the first session?
- What keeps hope for something different alive in women's lives?
- How do I bring the political into the conversations without giving a lecture?
- What is the effect for therapists in hearing these descriptions of abuse and having these images of abuse in our thinking and on our own sexual lives?

In this paper, there is not the space to discuss all of these questions. Instead, I am going to focus on how I want to position myself in hearing from women who have been subjected to sexual abuse as children. And then I will consider two questions that I am sometimes asked by those who consult me:

1. Am I a sex worker because of the abuse?
2. Am I lesbian/gay/queer because of the abuse?

POSITIONING MYSELF AS A THERAPIST

Firstly, I want to consider how I wish to position myself in hearing from women who have been subjected to sexual abuse as children.

At about the same time that I began working with women who have experienced sexual abuse, I read some notes taken at a workshop at which Paul Browde, a therapist from New York had spoken about what it meant to him to speak about his own experience of being HIV positive. What he said was "I've stood in front of audiences to start telling the story and I can't. I can't. It's just not going to work. You can feel that the energy's not right. I'm not going to speak into that listening. So, listening has a shape and I think the listening shapes the speaking... I would say all people want to tell their story.

I just think it's about finding the right person to listen to them or the right kind of listening to allow people to tell their story" (see Browde & Nossell 2000).

It was especially timely for me to think about this. I had been noticing the carefulness and hopefulness with which women were coming to these conversations with me and how important it was for some of the women to be able to ask questions about my practices, my beliefs in relation to abuse and how therapy happens. I was noticing how beginning therapy is in many ways like beginning a journey together and how important it is to check out who you want to take with you on these journeys. When women first come to speak to me I try to stay aware of this. I try to stay aware that they are probably considering whether to invite me to go on this journey with them and how we might go about this.

While many women have had very good previous experiences of therapy, I also frequently hear from women about experiences of counseling which they do not want to have again. I hear about forms of helping which had involved talk about 'getting over it', 'leaving it behind you and getting on with your life' or about not being listened to. I also hear about how women were invited into feeling further blame and silencing in relation to some of the choices they had made in their lives – 'She said she couldn't work with me while I was sex working'. Occasionally, I have also heard of experiences of help that were described by the women as further abuse.

This is the context in which many women wish to know about me and my practices. And these are the sorts of experiences that shape the care that women take to try to find the kind of 'listening space' they will feel comfortable and confident within. I am therefore interested in hearing more about what would suit them in the conversations we

might share. I am interested to know how this telling of their stories could be more in line with what women are looking for. How can I contribute to a different experience of this telling? And what stories would I hope that these women could tell of their experience of our conversations together?

It seems significant to me to remain acutely aware of what it has taken for a particular woman to get through the door of my office, but also to have made the initial phone call to our service. Upon enquiring, I learned that one woman had visited our service with her partner the weekend before to practise walking in to the building.

She then ensured that she arrived one hour before her appointment and tried three times to come through the door of our service before she was able to. Another woman told me how she rang our service three times and hung up each time before she stayed on the phone and waited for an answer. I am sure that these stories are not unfamiliar to you. What is it that these stories speak to? What might they say about these women's hopes and desires for something different in their lives? What does it say about the importance they place on getting free of the effects of abuse in their lives? What skills are implicit in these stories? What values?

CREATING A LISTENING SPACE

Thinking about the sort of listening space I want to provide for the women who consult me has been a useful concept. Creating a listening space is a concept I think I can achieve. I don't have any sense that I can be a perfect therapist, provide miracle cures or even develop brilliant lines of enquiry. But I can provide a thoughtful and careful listening space and this idea sustains me and supports me in my work. Naming and becoming clearer about the kind of listening space that I wish to create is an ongoing project for me. My hope in sharing my thinking about this is that it might assist and support others in considering the kind of listening space they wish to stand within during this work. Describing what sort of listening space I wish to create has also enabled me to define some of my commitments, values and intentions in this work. It might be useful to outline some of these here:

1. To make visible the politics and power of abuse

I want to create a place where the context of abuse is visible, where abuses of power can be named and where the politics of experience can be spoken about. So much about abuse has to do with the use of power to define a child's meaning of their experiences. I want to create a context for therapy that acknowledges this, that

creates space for deconstructing the shame, silencing and blame that accompanies many abusive acts of power (Herman 1992).

2. To doubly listen

I want to listen in ways that elicit not only stories of abuse, but also women's stories of how they responded to this abuse. I want to listen not only to stories of distress but also stories that describe the values and commitments these women hold that are absent but implicit in the distress they have experienced (White 2003; 2004).

3. To listen for multiple stories

I want to hear stories about the women other than the stories that the abuse has told them about themselves. I don't want to listen only to the descriptions of their identities that are shaped by critical voices. I want to hear the versions of themselves told by the kinder, more acknowledging voices.

4. To practice in a de-centred way

I want to create a space that has the women's own solution knowledges at the centre of our conversations. I wish to find ways to listen and inquire that reconnect her with her own knowledge and experience of influence in her life.

5. To link with community

I want to create a space where the community of people who make up each woman's life is acknowledged and in some way involved in our conversations. Even if I am meeting with an individual woman, our conversations can explore who is most precious to her and how their influence can assist in reclaiming her life from the effects of abuse. I want to ensure that the contribution of these significant people is not over looked or diminished by the therapeutic context or made invisible by privileging the process of therapy over the rest of the woman's life.

6. To listen in ways that acknowledge many ways of living

I want to create a space that opens possibilities for each woman to consider her own preferences for her life, whether or not these fit with dominant discourses of normality. I hope our conversations will provide scope to explore complex and diverse ways of living.

7. To acknowledge contributions to my own life

I want to listen in ways that pay attention to how the women who meet with me contribute to and shape my life. I want to conceptualise my practice as a two-way process.

8. To understand this work as a journey

I want to create a space that locates therapy not at the centre of women's efforts in relation to addressing the effects of abuse, but a part of a wider journey. This metaphor of journey supports me in noticing, acknowledging and celebrating the many small, and sometimes huge, steps that women have taken towards their preferred directions in life. It also assists me to remember that this journey began long before the therapy and will most likely continue long after therapy.

9. To create a space where there is no room for pathology

Finally, I want to create a space in which the problem is the problem and is never confused with someone's identity. This to me is about basic fairness. These women have been subjected to abuse. There need to be spaces that enable an exploration of their experience that will never label or pathologise them.

These are nine principles that shape my work as a therapist. They are nine commitments that construct the sort of listening space I want to participate in. This idea of the listening space evokes for me an image of myself with feet planted firmly in my commitment to these ideas. In turn, this helps me stay connected to these commitments in my practice.

Significantly, this listening space is one that I am within every working day. It has to be sustainable for me. Fortunately, these commitments enable conversations that involve many 'visitors' – treasured figures in the lives of the women who meet with me. These might be grandmothers, grandfathers, uncles, sisters, mothers, brothers, fathers, school teachers, dogs, rats, birds, gardens or even oceans.

In addition, I carry with me the many voices of colleagues and women with whom I have consulted over the years who have contributed to my learning.

So, the room can feel pretty full at times – which is just the way I like it!

QUESTIONS I AM SOMETIMES ASKED

I now wish to move on to consider some of the questions that I mentioned earlier. These are questions which are posed to me at times in this work and that I think really deserve thoughtful responses.

The first question I want to consider is: 'Am I a sex worker because of the abuse?'

This is a question that women who have consulted me have asked at various times and in various ways. It

seems significant to acknowledge the political context of this question and what may contribute to it being asked. Within the counseling field, and aspects of the broader culture, there is a powerful assumption that sex work has an inherent relationship to abuse, and this was an assumption that I too have been influenced by. It has only been through conversations with women who have consulted me, and conversations with a colleague, Tamsin Baker, that the effects of this assumption on the women with whom I work has become clearer to me. At the same time, I have come to know more about the ways in which the experience of sex workers is marginalised in our culture. Dominant ideas about sex work can make it difficult for sex workers to find spaces in which they can speak of their experience free from judgment or counsellors' assumptions. When women are also living with the effects of childhood sexual abuse and have experienced feeling shame, silencing and marginalisation in relation to this experience, it makes it even more difficult to find a space to talk.

In realising this, I have become more and more interested in making space for women to talk about the multiplicity of meanings of being involved in sex work. This might involve conversations about what has been important and of value to women about sex work. It might also involve naming and acknowledging that certain experiences of the work have been abusive. And it might involve exploring a wide spectrum of other sorts of experiences if this is what the women wish to discuss with me.

To describe my response to the question 'Am I a sex worker because of the abuse?' it seems appropriate to tell a number of stories. In all three of these stories, at certain times, these women puzzled about whether their involvement in sex work was somehow related to their previous experiences of abuse. This was not, however, the only issue they wanted to discuss. In fact, as time went on, our conversations went in quite different directions.

The approach that I now take in talking about sex work was significantly influenced by the conversations I had with a woman called Sally who met with me several years ago about the many effects of abuse in her life.

Sally's story

Sally had initially come to counseling about the abuse she was subjected to as a child because she had become increasingly isolated and anxious. At one of our meetings she let me know that, up until four years beforehand, she had worked in the sex industry. Sally started being paid

for sex when she was 17. She had left her family because of the abuse she had been experiencing and had moved in with her boyfriend's family. It had been her boyfriend's mother who had introduced her to the sex industry. At the time I remember feeling absolutely outraged at the betrayal of this young woman's hope for care in the home of her boyfriend. And I think at that moment it is probable that my reaction was all too clear to Sally without me saying anything.

My understandings about sex work at the time primarily focused around ideas of:

- how women are exploited by men through sex work;
- how sex work contributes to the objectification of women by men;
- that women are the victims of sex work;
- that sex work contributes to dishonesty in relationships;
- that sex work is participated in by women solely due to their experiences of addiction, poverty and abuse and lack of any other choices;
- that the relationships in the context of sex work are not significant.

All of these thoughts probably rushed through my mind as Sally was talking to me, as well as the thought of a young woman being betrayed by an older woman.

At the same time, I distinctly remember why I didn't stay with my assumption about the meaning of this in Sally's life. I remember why I didn't express my outrage, or ask a question that made my assumptions about the meaning of these events obvious. It was because of the way that Sally was telling me this story. It was a tentative but calm telling – it was like she was simply conveying ordinary information about her job, which she was. Something about Sally's calmness and quiet authority assisted me to step outside my own assumptions and to ask questions about Sally's own knowledges and meanings of this experience, and to ask her what her position was in relation to all of this and why.

What I heard in response were stories about the importance of the community of women sex workers and the support and care that she received from this community. Sally described to me how she was able to share stories of the abuse with some of these women and to experience, for the first time, acknowledgement for her own survival. Of particular importance to Sally was that some of these women shared their stories with her and Sally came to realize that this was not about her – that

she had done nothing wrong. Some of her most important understandings about the acts of abuse she had been subjected to had come from these relationships with other sex workers.

I also came to hear about some of the relationships Sally had with the men who were her clients. In particular, I heard about some relationships that spanned years and in which Sally experienced herself as someone who was loving and lovable. These were contexts in which Sally also learned about being in charge of the touch that she received and gave to others and in which she received acknowledgement for her caring ways and her intelligent companionship.

In hearing about these stories, about how important these connections with other women had been, about the acknowledgment provided, and how she had learned to re-value her body and her loving ways, I asked Sally about who else might know how important these relationships had been to her at the time. What I then heard from Sally was that she had never had the opportunity before to talk about these relationships and their place in her life. The shame and secrecy associated with sex work had had the effect of further silencing her. And so we explored ways in which this community which had been of such significance to Sally could become more visible to her.

These conversations with Sally brought new learnings for me. They resulted in me questioning the dominant understandings that I had at the time about women's experience of sex work and the industry of sex work itself. It is not that I now think that all sex workers have had similar experiences to Sally, but I realize that if I do not question my own assumptions then I will not make space for some women to speak about very important and alternative experiences and meanings of sex work. If my assumptions had won the day, those key people in Sally's life whom we re-remembered (Myerhoff 1982; White 1997; Russell & Carey 2004; Hedtke & Winslade 2004) would never have been spoken about. And these are the very people who would most quickly join Sally in standing against the shame and stigma of abuse as well as the shame and stigma of being a sex worker.

So, it was with these understandings and learnings from Sally that I began meeting with Carol.

TALKING WITH CAROL

About 10 years ago, Carol had been to another therapist who initially had been very helpful to her. After sometime however, Carol decided to end the therapy because she had a sense the therapist thought that unless

she stopped sex working, she would be unlikely to be free from the effects of abuse.

At the time, Carol was working part time in a small retail business which involved serving people, and was also working part time as a sex worker with a friend. When Carol first came to counseling she described herself as feeling overwhelmed by sadness at the abuses she had experienced as a child. This sadness had begun to affect her friendships and this was of real concern to Carol. In our discussions, I had many opportunities to hear from Carol about: what it meant to her to have this sadness around in her life; about what kind of sadness this was; how it had entered her life; and what this sadness was a response to. In these conversations I was also interested in hearing about what this sadness might say about what Carol valued and cherished in her life that had been violated by the abuses she had experienced as a child (White 2000; 2003). Through these conversations, Carol let me know about some of the longings she had; about her commitment to 'straightforward honesty' in her relationships; about wanting difference in her life; about her intolerance for carelessness in relationships; about her care in making space for younger people or people with disabilities or older people to be heard. These are just some of the things that I began to hear about.

As we talked more about these values, Carol let me know about some of what is important to her about being a sex worker. This includes being paid for something that she considers that she is good at and that she enjoys. It also includes the fact that sex work enables her to support herself to travel, to take singing lessons, and to study which are all things that are important to her, and at the same time allows the freedom to be her own boss. What we then began to name were some of the skills that were evident in this work - the skills of negotiation in relation to what she would consent to in the sexual relationship with clients; the skills of knowing how to refuse a service to certain men in certain situations; the skills of knowing when she felt unsafe and how to make herself safe; and the skills of managing the financial negotiation of this service. Carol also spoke about the skills of pleasuring another person and about experiencing pleasure in her own body.

In the course of these conversations, Carol began to describe that these skills represented stands she has made against the effects of abuse. She spoke of reclaiming her body as a site for pleasure and that these feelings were something to be valued and celebrated. She described how this involved being 'big and loving it'. Carol

also spoke of honouring of her own voice in relation to the negotiation of the sexual relationships that she wanted to have with men, and the ways in which these skills shed light on other experiences of living.

In time, Carol began to notice the ways in which some of these skills were present (but not acknowledged) in other parts of her life – including the negotiation of complaint phone calls in the small retail business in which she works, and also how she is able to stand up for the younger people whom she works with in this business.

I was very interested to learn more about the history of these skills and in response to my questions I came to hear of stories about Carol as a child standing up and protecting her younger brother and sister from abuse. I also heard stories about learnings Carol had gained from her mother about appreciating difference. These conversations about Carol's values and skills, and the histories of the values and skills, meant that Carol began to give greater weight to her own opinions and views on matters of importance in her life.

WORKING WITH WILLOW

There is one further story I wish to retell about a woman's relationship to sex work. Last year, I re-told Willow's story to an outsider witness group in a training context. Willow was interested in this occurring because she had not previously been able to find a place to tell the story of her experience of abuse as a child and her responses to this abuse.

In my conversations with Willow, amongst many other things, she had talked about how hooking had provided her with 'quick money' to pay for private legal fees to have her daughter returned to her care. This was particularly significant to her because prior to this action her child had been living under the care of her parents, in Willow's parents' home, which was where Willow had experienced sexual abuse as a child.

Willow believes that it would never have been possible for her to regain custody of her child without paying a private lawyer and that the only way she could do this was through sex work. She described how these were "desperate times" which required "desperate thinking" and hooking was part of this desperate thinking.

Willow worked as a sex worker to try to get her daughter out of what was probably an abusive situation. I know that her relationship with her now adult daughter is of vital importance to her, and that regaining custody would not have been possible without the sex work.

In our conversations I also heard from Willow about certain ethics that she abided by in relation to sex work. I heard stories about how she would support new workers in getting clear about their rights in these working relationships, how she would take action to try to ensure that they were paid properly, and that their health was protected. These were significant steps in a context in which workers' rights are not supported by legislation, or occupational health and safety provisions.

After Willow received letters written by the outsider witnesses, she had this to say:

"The letters were like a blessing for a silenced life. They helped me by recognizing and approving my struggles. I think we all need that – recognition and validation – especially when our stories don't follow accepted paths"

If someone now asks me 'am I sex worker because of the abuse?' I have a very different response than I once would have. Now I am interested in exploring the particular meanings that sex work has for an individual woman. Some aspects of sex work may have been traumatic, others may have been significantly positive. I am interested in hearing the stories that are significant to her, and the values, commitments and hopes that explain why these stories are significant. I am interested in this being a starting point for generating rich descriptions of the woman's life.

I also feel as if I am still just at a starting point in these explorations. And I am interested in what further steps I need to take in order to be ready to respond when I am next asked the question, 'Am I sex worker because of the abuse?'. I am interested in seeking out meaningful ongoing consultation with sex worker rights organizations and thinking more about the broader discourses affecting our views about sex generally and about sex work more particularly. I also wish to learn more about the influence these broader discourses have on not only women sex workers, but also intersex, transgender and male sex workers and how our responses to their experiences can be of assistance rather than promoting of further shame about the choices of work that they have made.

I guess I am particularly interested in a different question now, 'What steps as a therapist can I take to ensure that the listening space I create is one that will be responsive and helpful to those engaged in sex work?'

The next question I wish to consider is an equally complex one.

AM I LESBIAN/GAY/QUEER BECAUSE OF THE ABUSE?

In talking about this question, I will be referring to my work with women who are meeting with me about the effects of child sexual abuse and who also identify as same sex attracted or are wondering about their sexual identity. In doing this I do not want to add to further silencing of men's experience of child sexual abuse, it's just that most of my experience involves talking with women about these matters. I would certainly be interested in hearing from any of you who work with men about your reflections on this question.

Thinking about issues of the politics of sexuality has a history in my life in which many people have been involved. I have learnt from the conversations I have shared with those who consult with me about these matters in their lives, and also from close colleagues. Desmond Ford and Truffy Maginnis have offered particularly significant companionship in this work and the Bfriend service which they run (see www.ucwesleyadelaide.org.au/bfriend/) has contributed to questioning my heterosexist assumptions and those of many others. My relationships with my family have been the source of the most significant learning. Loving people who live differently from me has brought with it a constant questioning and a wish to move beyond the assumptions that have come from living a heterosexual life.

Here I want to just briefly mention some ideas that have been generated in the conversations I have shared with all these people that have been very helpful to me as a therapist.

1. Acknowledging heterosexual dominance

First of all, it seems significant for me to acknowledge that there are enormous social imperatives which support people being heterosexual. In a myriad of ways, heterosexuality is socially, culturally and legally promoted as normal and desirable, and even as blessed by God. This has real implications for those who live heterosexual lives, lesbian lives, bisexual lives or gay lives, and in my work I try to remain aware of these implications.

2. Remain aware of the effect of homophobia

Homophobia can have many effects on people's lives, from the obvious forms of discrimination, threats and violence, to the more subtle. It can introduce doubt into previously supportive relationships; it can separate people from support; it can stop people embracing what suits them best in life, what they prefer. Particularly, I don't think the question, 'Am I lesbian/gay/queer because of the abuse?' can exist without the assistance of homophobia.

The experiences of shame as an effect of abuse, and the shame that can be generated by homophobia leaves some people with few places to negotiate the experience of same sex attraction when they have also experienced sexual abuse as a child. In this work I try to remain aware of the effects of homophobia and to speak with women about their experiences of these effects.

3. Being open to the possibilities beyond lesbian/gay & straight

One of the effects of heterosexism is to dichotomize sexual orientations so that people feel they need to identify as either homosexual or heterosexual, that there is no other territory in which to stand. While some people may identify as gay, or lesbian, or straight, others may identify as queer, as bisexual, as questioning, and still others may move between these different possibilities at different times. I am interested in conversations that remain open to exploring whichever of these options (or others) are relevant to the person concerned.

4. Acknowledging what has probably taken place before someone would ask this question

Due to the pervasiveness of heterosexual dominance, for a person to ask me 'Am I lesbian because of the abuse?', it probably means they have done a lot of thinking about this question. They have probably thought carefully about this for some time and considered what suited them. What's more they may have had to face the risk of being rejected, thrown out of home, disbelieved, not listened to, humiliated and/or displaced within their family because of their sexual preference.

5. Creating space for people to talk about their own knowledges and preferences

In the conversations I have shared with women who have been subject to child sexual abuse, I've noticed that heterosexism has the potential to disconnect them from what they know to be their preferences, or what they may be learning about their preferences. More than this though, the idea that any same-sex attraction they experience may be somehow related to the abuse they experienced further disconnects them from exploring or claiming an alternative sexuality. In such situations it seems all the more significant to create space for the women to talk about their own knowledges about their preferences, the history of this knowledge and what it means to them.

This brings me back to the question, 'Am I lesbian/gay/queer because of the abuse?'

I wish to share a story now of conversations that I had with a woman called Jo. These conversations taught me a great deal.

TALKING WITH JO

Jo came to meet with me because she was unsure whether she had fully dealt with the effects of abuse that she had experienced as a child, and also the effects of abuse that she'd been subjected to by the father of her now adult children. What had her thinking that there was more to be dealt with was that she couldn't put to rest the idea that she might 'be gay' (this was Jo's description). This was an idea that had been in her thinking for several years and one to which she partly attributed the failure of her marriage. Yet each time she ventured towards acting in relation to the idea that she might be gay, she would tell herself that this was "another crazy thing" that she could put down to the abuse. She had gone to considerable lengths to test this theory out by entering into relationships with men who she thought were the kind of men she would want as companions in her life and as male role models for her children. When these relationships didn't continue, she put a great deal of thoughtful analysis into her failings as a person capable of sustaining relationships.

When I met with Jo she had recently decided that she should let her children know what she was thinking, but their response had not been positive and now she was doubting herself. Jo swayed in her conversations with the children between:

1. Wanting to protect her children from the stigma of having a mother who was lesbian. She didn't want them to be singled out around difference because of her choices. She thought they had already experienced enough difficulties because of the effects of poverty when she left the abusive relationship.
2. On the other hand Jo felt like she had a right to her own choices in life now that her children were all grown up
3. At times Jo felt desperate at the thought of losing the respect and love of her children.
4. And after feeling this desperation, Jo would then interpret her dilemma in relation to sexuality as due to her previous experience of abuse. This would bring a sense of relief, "Phew! – it really must be because of the abuse, so I can just forget about it and go back to my conventional life". While these aren't Jo's exact words they convey the sentiment of what she described to me.

Apparently this cycle of thinking would then repeat itself as Jo would notice her attraction to women and then re-start the process of talking herself out of this attraction.

There was something in the way Jo told these stories about her relationships with her children that assisted me to know there was a rich history to be explored. I didn't have a view as to what Jo should be doing in her life, nor any judgment as to whether experiences of childhood sexual abuse influence one's future sexual practice or identity. Instead, the way in which Jo spoke of her children encouraged me to ask questions about her intentions in telling her children that she had been thinking that she 'might be gay'. In asking about this I came to hear more about the commitments that Jo has for mutual respect and loving relationships with her children. I asked about the history of these commitments and learnt that they had begun in her own childhood. I also heard stories about how Jo had tried to protect her children from abuse and abusive situations. I heard that it was because these commitments to the children were so important to Jo that she was able to leave a relationship that had tried to disconnect her from her own knowledges and opinions and sense of influence in her life.

These inquiries led to discoveries that were sometimes quite puzzling to Jo, because her previous stories of herself as a mother had been dominated by ideas of failure. Jo had felt she had failed to provide her children with a stable home, with the presence of a male role model etc. She said that to be talking about stories of herself as a mother that were not about failure but were instead about the commitments that shaped her parenting and their history was quite surprising – and that this was a good surprise.

The ways in which Jo spoke about her attraction to women was also significant to me. I was interested in tracing the history of this attraction to women. So, with Jo's agreement, we discussed this. I was curious about what it had been like for Jo to notice attraction to women – when did this first come into her life, what did it have her thinking, where did these thoughts come from, how did they fit for her? I also asked questions about what effect did noticing this attraction have on her ideas of herself in relationship, on her experience of herself as a person? In time we developed a rich and abundant description of the ways in which this attraction came alive for Jo in feelings of responsiveness in her body and a sense of being more comfortable and at peace with herself.

When Jo asked her version of the question, 'Am I lesbian/gay/queer because of the abuse?', I was not interested in telling her what the answer to this question might be. Nor did I know what the answer was for her. But I was interested in providing a structured conversation in which Jo could begin to name some of her own knowledges, values, beliefs, hopes, desires and ways of living that were important to her. As Jo developed story-lines in her life that spoke of being a mother who values connection with her children; being a woman with principles around openness and honesty; and being someone who has taken particular stands against abuse; this opened possibilities for Jo to see that the ways in which she was responding to her attraction to women was consistent with the principles of living which she holds dear. Tracing the history of her attraction to women, and the effects of this attraction in her life also seemed significant. In turn, these re-authoring processes enabled Jo to develop the narrative resources to then be able to negotiate the question "Am I lesbian/gay/queer because of the abuse?". In fact, over time, Jo began to ask a different question all together – 'How can I go about exploring what sort of sexual life I would like to live?'

At one of our last meetings, Jo let me know that she had been back to her children and let them know that she intended to explore her sexuality, and that she hoped that they could understand how important this was to her. She let them know that her commitment to them would not wane but that she would understand if they might need more time to get to understand that this was important to her – because, after all, she had been thinking about it now for almost ten years. Jo also let me know that what she understood now was that she didn't have to stay with this idea if she did not want to, but also that unless she tried it, she would never know. When I last heard, Jo had made connections with a woman she had met several years earlier who was introducing her to other same-sex attracted women.

Jo has made an ongoing contribution to my work. Our conversations will always remind me that if we are not trying to identify the truth about someone, whether they are lesbian, gay or straight, then different explorations can take place. These may be explorations of the values and commitments that a person holds most dear. Richly describing these might then open different avenues for action.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

Noticing the contributions to my work of the women who meet with me has opened many possibilities. It has led to me considering what sort of listening space I wish to create and it has led to thinking through some of the complex questions that are asked in the course of working with the effects of abuse.

It is my hope that in sharing these ideas here, and in inviting your responses, that we can be joined in this work. I know that this will make a difference to my work and I hope that perhaps it will support you to talk about the complex issues that arise in your work, and to consider the sort of listening space you wish to create in response.

NOTES

- ¹ Most of the women who have spoken to me about these realms have used the word 'gay' to describe their experience of same-sex attraction. While I realise that in other circles the word lesbian or queer might be more commonly used, for the purpose of re-telling this story I have chosen to use the phrasing that Jo was most comfortable with.

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