

## CHAPTER 7

# The Responsibilities

### WORKING WITH MEN WHO HAVE PERPETRATED VIOLENCE

*This chapter outlines an approach to working with men who have perpetrated violence against women.<sup>1</sup> It offers an account of some of the assumptions that orient this work, provides a “map” to guide conversations with men, and includes documentation of certain aspects of these conversations.*

### CONSIDERATIONS OF SAFETY AND PARTNERSHIP

At the outset, it is important to acknowledge that in working with men who have perpetrated violence against women, the first priority is to ensure the safety of women and children. Prior to engaging men in the sort of explorations described in this chapter, steps to protect the safety of women and children are undertaken. What is more, in order to continually gauge the effects of conversations with men, processes of accountability to the experiences of women and children are required (see Hall, 1994; Tamasese & Waldegrave, 1993; Tamasese, Waldegrave, Tuhaka, & Campbell, 1998; White, 1994). These considerations provide the backdrop to the approach to working with men that is outlined here.

## STARTING ASSUMPTIONS

The assumptions that are outlined in this chapter are non-totalizing of men who perpetrate violence. Non-totalizing assumptions open space for men who perpetrate violence to experience an identity that is not defined by their acts of abuse, and to take responsibility for these acts of abuse. These assumptions include the following:

- The men who are referred to me for perpetrating violence are not the originators of the techniques of power they employ.
- The men who are referred to me for perpetrating violence are not the authors of the constructions of men's, women's, and children's identities that are associated with their abusive ways.

These techniques of power and constructions of identity are sponsored by the discourses of men's culture.<sup>2</sup> Among other things, these discourses are characterized by truth claims that are given an objective reality status and that are considered to be universal. These are truth claims about the identity of men, women, and children (e.g., about masculinity); about the nature of life and of the world (e.g., about the "nature" of the relationships of gender); and about the order of things in the world, including matters such as the rankings of importance (e.g., about the nature of men's entitlement).

These discourses of men's culture are also characterized by rules that privilege specific knowledges of men's culture, and that position the knowledges of women and children low down in the hierarchy of knowledge. These include rules about what counts as "legitimate" knowledge; who might possess this knowledge; where this knowledge is to be stored; the circumstances under which this knowledge can be expressed; and the position and location from which this knowledge can be expressed.

*Accomplices and Recruits of Domination*

The assumption that men who perpetrate abuse are not the originators of these techniques of power or the authors of these constructions of identity and gender leads to a perspective that they are accomplices to the projects of domination that are shaped by these discourses. This assumption also leads to the perspective that these men are recruits, and that as recruits, they have undergone an apprenticeship in these abusive ways of being.

This assumption that these men are accomplices and recruits does not diminish the acknowledgment that they are individually responsible for the acts of tyranny that they have perpetrated on the lives of others. But it does support the conclusion that it is the responsibility of men (as a community) to:

- Address abuse.
- Develop an exposé of the discourses of men's culture.
- Make reparation.
- Develop ways of being in the world and in relationships to others that are not exploitative and that are nonabusive.

*The Responsibilities*

Thus, when meeting with men who have perpetrated abuse, it is helpful to think about the "responsibilities." The acknowledgment of responsibility for acts of tyranny that a man has perpetrated on the lives of others, and for the consequences of these acts, is an individual responsibility. These other responsibilities are on the shoulders of men, and, in this approach, individual men who are referred for perpetrating abuse are joined by other men in taking up these responsibilities. These assumptions inform the development of an approach . . .

- That is nonshaming and that is not “other-confrontational” (i.e., an approach that features the strong confrontation of men by others, including counselors).
- In which these men are unlikely to experience their identities being totalized.
- That will set the context for men to critique their own abusive actions and ways of thinking.

### THERAPIST AWARENESS OF THE TECHNIQUES, PRACTICES, AND CONSTRUCTIONS OF DOMINATION

Therapists who work with men who perpetrate abuse have learned much about . . .

- Techniques that are routinely employed by men for reducing culpability (e.g., minimization, denial, blaming, and excusing).
- Overt and covert practices of power (e.g., the reinterpretation of the subject’s history and the isolation of the subject; the utilization of inconsistency; the exceptionalizing of specific individuals, including therapists; methods of intimidation; practices of evaluation of others; and so on).
- Constructions of life and gender identity that are associated with these practices of power (e.g., specific attitudes, mindsets, outlooks, viewpoints, and ways of thinking).

These learnings can be expressed in ways that make it clear that the therapist is not naïve with regard to these techniques, practices, and constructions. For example, upon being subject to practices of covert power (e.g., the exceptionalizing of the therapist—“You are the only person who can truly understand”—or the utilization of the “gaze,” which inverts the focus

of the therapeutic conversation), the therapist can suggest a review of what is happening within the context of the conversation that is hindering progress. For example:

“Something interesting is happening in this conversation. Initially the focus of our discussion was on your actions, and there was a subtle inversion in this focus to the point that we are now talking about my adequacy to be of assistance to you. I have experienced this before, and have recorded this as a practice of power that is a hurdle to progress. In fact, I have developed a list of the sort of strategies that can be employed in this situation that can make it impossible for these therapeutic conversations to be of benefit. I will retrieve this list and suggest that we work through it together, as this will make it more possible for us to spot any further hurdles to the development of our work. If it is okay with you, whenever I spot such hurdles, I will suggest that we consult this list again and talk about how this hurdle might be named and circumvented. In this way, we can be investigative reporters together.”

*Externalizing the Techniques, Practices,  
and Constructions of Dominance*

Another option that sets the scene for more productive conversations is to invite the externalization of these techniques, practices, and constructions. Men can be invited to refer to their experience of the world in further developing this exposé on these techniques, practices, and constructions. These are the techniques of reducing culpability, overt and covert practices of power, and constructions of life and identity associated with these practices that men have witnessed out in the world, from the local community context through to the world stage of international politics. I refer to this as “going macro.” The following conversational “map” provides a guide to this process. This conversational map seeks to make it possible for men to take responsibility for actions of

violence or abuse they have enacted, to take responsibility for proposals of reparation, and to mend what might be mended. The categories described here are avenues for exploration. Responsibility is the *outcome* of these explorations, not the starting point.

GOING MACRO: EXPOSÉ OF TECHNIQUES  
AND PRACTICES OF DOMINATION (DISTANT)

Men can be invited to refer to their experiences of the world and what they have witnessed in relation to techniques and practices of domination. “What options would be open to a man if he intended to dominate women and children? What techniques and practices of domination and coercion are available?” During this exposé, these strategies of domination are documented. This documentation includes where and when the man has witnessed these practices.

EXPOSÉ OF STRATEGIES, TECHNIQUES,  
PRACTICES OF ABUSE (CLOSE)

It then becomes possible to interview men about which of these techniques, practices, and constructions they have been an accomplice to, and to encourage them to identify the processes of recruitment to which they have been subject throughout the history of their lives. The documents that have been generated can be used to scaffold a conversation about whether any of the man’s actions reflect being an instrument of, or accomplice to, this culture of domination. The man can be asked if he recognizes any of his own actions on this list in a minor or major sense. The degree to which he has engaged in the techniques and practices of domination can be rated, by the man, on a scale from 1 to 10. While remaining clear that the man is not the author of these technologies of power, or practices of abuse, all the actions that he has taken that represent being an

accomplice to this culture are acknowledged and documented. This process is contextualizing the man's actions. This doesn't excuse them, nor does it totalize the man as an "abusive man." A man cannot take responsibility for abuse if he identifies as an "abusive man." This process is creating space for the man to start to think about how he might have been an accomplice to, or instrument of, a culture of domination.

EXPOSÉ OF CONSTRUCTS, MEANINGS,  
AND ATTITUDES USED TO JUSTIFY ABUSE (DISTANT)

Men can be invited to develop an exposé of the attitudes that they have witnessed being expressed in men's culture that are used to justify the abuse of others. This does not involve giving a lecture. Instead, men's own observations in relation to attitudes of male supremacy and entitlement can be elicited, providing an opportunity for these attitudes and constructs to be named, categorized, and documented.

EXPOSÉ OF CONSTRUCTS, MEANINGS,  
AND ATTITUDES USED TO JUSTIFY ABUSE (CLOSE)

While recognizing that this is a difficult conversation, it then becomes possible to support the man to develop an exposé of the constructs, meanings, and attitudes that he has used to justify abuse. The man is invited to identify which constructs, meanings, and attitudes he has been an instrument of, or an accomplice to.

IDENTIFICATION OF EXPERIENCES THAT RECRUITED  
THE MAN AS AN ACCOMPLICE/PARTICIPANT/INSTRUMENT  
OF THE CULTURE OF DOMINATION

The man can then be interviewed about the processes of recruitment to which he has been subject throughout his life.

“How did you get introduced to these practices of abuse? What have you seen? When did you first witness such techniques of domination? How were you recruited to act in these ways?” Throughout this process, it remains clear that the man is not the originator of these strategies, techniques, practices, constructs, meanings, and values.

MAPPING SHORT-TERM AND LONG-TERM  
CONSEQUENCES OF ABUSE ON ALL PARTIES  
AND RELATIONSHIPS (DISTANT AND CLOSE)

With the techniques and practices of domination articulated; with the constructs, meanings, and values that are used to justify abuse acknowledged; and having had some chance to identify the ways in which they have become recruits or accomplices to the culture of domination, men can then be supported in mapping the consequences of these techniques, practices, and constructions. This process can begin with speculation about the consequences of abuse in a general sense, not directly speaking about the acts the man has perpetrated. While this conversation is taking place, the therapist can listen carefully for any sign of the man attributing significance to the consequences of abuse. Most men try to diminish the significance of the effects of abuse, so if there is a moment where significance is attributed to the consequences of abuse, this provides an opportunity for further enquiry. How has he managed to attribute this significance?

Following this more general mapping of the effects of abuse, it then becomes possible to return to the macro list generated earlier, and to the techniques and practices of abuse that the man has identified being an accomplice to. The man can then be interviewed about the consequences of these practices of abuse, both short-term and long-term, on the lives of all those involved (woman, man, the relationship, any children, and so on) and their relationships.

The idea of an apology will be meaningless until significance is attributed to the consequences of abuse. Until this attribution is made, there are limited options for men to take to heal what might be healed.

IDENTIFICATION OF UNIQUE OUTCOMES/EXCEPTIONS:  
WHERE THE MAN "DRAWS THE LINE"

During the early stages of this conversational map, the therapist listens for any times in which the man draws a line: "I'd never do this." There is always a bottom line for men, practices in which they would not participate. When these are identified, therapists can respond with a non-normative inquiry. Rather than saying "That's good," therapists can ask, "How come? Why not? Why wouldn't you do that?" At any time, it is possible to go back to the documents that list a range of techniques of domination and ask "Why not these other techniques? How come? I'd like to understand this." This can be the starting point to scaffold conversations: "If this statement doesn't fit a culture of control, what does it fit? If you were to hear another man speak of this, what would you call it?" and so on. If there are certain strategies or attitudes to which the man has not been an accomplice, these indicate to us certain values the man holds that contradict some aspects of a culture of control/domination. These are unique outcomes. These are entry points to other territories of life.

MORE RICHLY DESCRIBING OTHER STORIES/TERRITORIES OF LIFE

The categories of inquiry described thus far contribute to the deconstruction of the discourses of men's culture. It is in the context of these conversations that men experience a degree of separation of their identity from abusive ways of being. It is in this space that points of entry to subordinate

storyline development can be taken up. These points of entry are available in responses to the “why” questions of externalizing conversations, in the form of unique outcomes, or can be garnered from what is absent but implicit in these men’s expressions.

At this point, it is possible to use a range of narrative practices to determine the significance of these unique outcomes, and to richly describe other storylines of identity, other territories of life. It becomes the therapist’s task to more thickly describe the attitudes or practices of life that the man gives value to that don’t fit with abusive practices and attitudes. There will always be a history to what a man gives values to, a history that relates in some way to another sense of being in relationships with women and children. For instance, perhaps the man witnessed something different in another family. We can proceed to trace the history of what the man accords value. These alternative values will fit with some other belief or idea about what it might be wise to do, and some other purpose or dream for life. These other values will not have come out of the blue, which is why historical inquiry is critical.

These reauthoring conversations are essential, for they provide men with an alternative territory of life and identity in which to stand and from which they can strongly critique their own abusive and exploitative actions, and in which they will begin to develop some familiarity with other ways of orienting to their relationship with others and the world. As these alternative territories of identity are further drawn in the context of reauthoring conversations, men begin to engage with and further develop relationship practices that are nonabusive and nonexploitative.

It is in the context of these reauthoring conversations that the meanings of words such as *responsibility*, *respect*, *kindness*, etc., are developed to the extent that they become concepts about life and principles of living. It is this concept develop-

ment that provides the foundation for responsible action and personal agency.

WAYS FORWARD: FORMULATING PROPOSALS FOR  
REPARATION, TO MEND WHAT MIGHT BE MENDED

When men have an alternative territory in which to stand, it becomes possible to talk about ways of going forward. Problem solving is a sophisticated achievement. Persons have to be at a certain distance from the immediacy of their own experience in order to problem-solve. They have to be able to:

- Hypothesize or speculate on what actions are yet to happen (steps that are available to them).
- Predict other people's responses to those actions.
- Develop plans for how they might handle contingencies (e.g., discouraging responses, disqualifying or diminishing responses).

It is therefore necessary to support men in coming up with specific proposals in relation to how they might act, what reactions these actions might receive, and how they might, in turn, respond to those reactions. This process of formulating proposals for action needs to be done in a way that prioritizes women's and children's safety and that renders the man accountable to those people who have been subject to his abuse. Otherwise the man might develop proposals for actions that represent, to him, being more loving or caring in his relationship, but this doesn't necessarily mean that these actions will be experienced by others in the way that the man assumes.

There are a number of points to consider here. First, this process has, as its highest priority, the safety of women and children. Processes of accountability are required in order to ensure that the interests of women and children remain centered at all

times (see Hall, 1994; Tamasese et al., 1998; Tamasese & Waldegrave, 1993; White, 1994). If women do not wish to enter into this process, it does not proceed.

Second, it is not fair to place women in the position of having to come up with proposals for men's actions. Instead, the task is for men to come up with proposals to which women can respond. If a man comes up with a proposal that doesn't work for the woman partner, it's then up to the man to go back and work on the proposal again. The responsibility should never be on women's shoulders to make proposals for men's actions.

Highly particular (not generic) proposals are required about the following:

- Ways of being in relationships
- Acts of reparation
- Acts of apology
- Different relationship acts that will ensure the safety of women and children.

This process involves talking about and making proposals of steps for the man/men to take to ensure the safety of women and children, and then consulting with the women and children about these proposals. As this process might initially be quite fraught for the partner, I often bring in other people who might represent the woman, or find others who can stand with the woman and the children in responding to these proposals. Similarly, I also often involve other men in joining to take responsibility for developing these proposals. These other men may have, in the past, separated from being an accomplice to practices of abuse, or they may be family members (grandfathers, uncles, friends of the family) who place a high value on the safety of women and children and on practices of respect.<sup>3</sup>

## DOCUMENTATION TO ASSIST IN SEPARATING FROM AN ETHIC OF CONTROL

At this point, it is relevant to include two different forms of therapeutic documents that can be used in work with men who have perpetrated violence. The first of these involves a letter that invites men to rigorously reflect on the ways in which their actions in the course of a day have been influenced by an ethic of control or an ethic of care.<sup>4</sup>

*Dear \_\_\_\_\_,*

*The following is a brief summary of some of the thoughts that came out of our conversation. They are not cast in stone, and you will probably want to modify these terms and make alterations to these lists of elements. I have put this together in response to your request for a map of your own. In drawing out these distinctions around elements of the ethic of control and the ethic of care, I am not proposing that it is possible to always engage with the ethic of care to the exclusion of the ethic of control. But it is clear from your own observations that your life has become more heavily weighted on the left-hand side of these distinctions, although you do have the ability to more significantly invest yourself in expressions of life that reflect those elements on the right-hand side. I believe that the exercise that I have proposed will help speed a re-weighting of your life and provide you with a growing sense of authenticity.*

*In this exercise, take a diary and rule a line down the middle of each page. On each and every day, spend an hour reflecting on the events of the day with the purpose of sorting your actions into the left- and right-hand columns. Give special attention to identifying the habits of thought and action that give rise to those elements of expression entered into the left-hand column, and to the purposes, values, beliefs, hopes, and dreams that inspire those elements of expression in*

*the right-hand column. With this exercise, insist on absolute honesty with yourself.*

*Yours sincerely,  
Michael White*

<b>ETHIC OF CONTROL</b>	<b>ETHIC OF CARE</b>
On my terms	Trusting of others
Control of self/others as priority	Partnership/cooperation as priority
Conditioned responses	Responsiveness to others
On automatic	Spontaneity
Seen to be right	Honesty in regard to truth and personal failings
Emotionally disconnected	Emotionally connected
Sense of entitlement	Humility
The elements that make up this ethic of control are founded on certain habits of thought and action. These habits of thought and action can be quite intoxicating and toxic. Giving one's life over to these habits renders one's life an instrument of the ethic of control.	The elements that make up this ethic of care are founded on integrity and on certain skills of relationship that open space for one's own life and for the lives of others. Engaging with this ethic contributes to the development of a congruence of preferred purposes, values, beliefs, hopes, and dreams, on the one hand, and one's actions, on the other hand.

## DOCUMENTING RICH STORY DEVELOPMENT

Documentation can also play a part in the rich development of subordinate storylines. I do not believe that we have attended

to even 50% of the task of working with men who have perpetrated violence if we have not fostered the rich development of subordinate storylines of these men's lives. As men start to experience a degree of separation of their identity from abusive ways of being, reauthoring conversations can begin. As mentioned above, these conversations trace the histories of certain values a man holds that contradict some aspects of a culture of control/domination. It is the context of this historical inquiry that words such as *friendship*, *loyalty*, *honesty*, *kindness*, and *caring* are developed into concepts about life and principles of living. And as mentioned before, it is this concept development that provides the foundation for men to take action to redress the harms they have done and to heal what can be healed.

The letter below was written to follow up a conversation that took place in a maximum security men's prison in Sydney in a special antiviolence unit. All the men in this unit have histories of perpetrating significant violence. They have all also volunteered to attend the unit. The head psychologist, Rachael Hagggett, invited me and David Denborough to visit the unit and conduct a series of interviews. The following letter recaps a reauthoring conversation that linked Anthony's current efforts to turn things around in his life to a number of significant friendships and relationships. The letter also summarizes the reflections offered by an outsider-witness group who responded to the interview.

*Dear Anthony,*

*It was great to meet with you yesterday and to be introduced, through our conversation, to your friend David, your grandfather, and your mother Susan. This letter is just a chance to recap some of the stories that you spoke about so that there can be a written record of these.*

*Anthony, you spoke so clearly about how your current efforts to turn things around in your life are linked to your friendship with David. You described how his death affected you and that this is contributing to your determination to make changes in your life. You spoke about how you don't want to see your friends getting hurt.*

*We heard about your childhood friendship with David. You spoke about your soccer-playing days together and your love of sport, and we could just picture the two of you out on the field together. You described David as “full of life, with a good heart.” It sounds like he was also very funny and that his humor really added something to your life. You described what your connection with David stood for in your life—“friendship, loyalty, honesty, kindness, and caring.”*

*It wasn’t just the good times that you shared. You spoke about how you and David had something in common in relation to your stepfathers. You spoke about how your stepfather was “very cold to me,” and it sounds like this was also true for David.*

*Then, when David’s mother was imprisoned, he came to live with you. You shared your clothes with him. You said: “He could lean on me.” And, “If I was feeling down he’d play a part in lifting me up.” You described the times when you would sit outside the prison waiting for him after he had visited his mum. And we wondered what it might have meant for David to have you there for him at these times. We heard how you became brothers to each other.*

*You also described how David was close to your mother, Susan. And how, since you were in prison, he would take Susan shopping. It sounded like not only were you brothers to each other, but that David also became a son to your mother.*

*We then came to hear about your grandfather, who sounded like a very interesting and kind man. You described how he would take you and David to soccer, how he spoke eight languages, and how he would give you quizzes in all sorts of things. If you got the answer right, he would say, “Spot on, kid.”*

*Anthony, you spoke about how you were not violent during these years, that you were quiet, you worked hard, and loved sports and your friendship with David. You described how when David was around, you weren’t in trouble.*

*We heard that things started to go wrong after your grandfather’s death. That around the same time you got into a relationship with a girl who was using drugs and that you started using too. You spoke about how “I was 15 then and that’s when things started going downhill.”*

*It was from then on that violence became part of your life. During this time, you said that David was always trying to “get me to wake up.” He used to visit you in prison, and he was always valuing your life.*

*When David was killed, it sounds like you were at a crossroads. When your grandfather died, when you were 15, things “started going downhill.” But when David was killed, it sounds like you took a different path, like there was a legacy from your grandfather and from David that you picked up. One of the psychologists who was listening said that it sounded like you had found a precious stone or an heirloom that you started to polish, that you started to treasure. And that this is why you are working so hard in the unit, trying to make changes.*

*You spoke about how you are now trying to get back into your life those things that were there when you were younger— the “friendship, loyalty, honesty, kindness, and caring” that you had with David.*

*You said, “I want to do this for my mum.” You said that your mum had been through so much, that you had put her through so much, but that she has already begun seeing the changes that you are making. “She has seen a lot of changes,” you said. And that “she’s got hope that I’ve woken up to myself.”*

*Toward the end of the conversation, it was like David and your grandfather and Susan were somehow with us in the room. You said that if David were there, he’d probably say, “About time you snapped out of it!” You said that he’d be happy. You said that your grandfather would probably say, “Spot on, kid.” You said, “He’d feel proud, how he used to feel about me.” You told us something else that your grandfather used to say to you: “When you are trying to do something difficult, think about it, take your time, and do it properly.”*

*After you listened to the reflections from the team, you said that a number of things stood out for you:*

- *“The comraderie of my early friendship with David”*
- *“The warmth” that was described by one of the team*
- *“How one team member could relate because they also didn’t have a father”*

- *“How they acknowledged the pain”*
- *“The image of the precious rock”*
- *“It meant a lot to me that they got emotional. Their understanding makes a difference. It means I will work harder.”*

*You talked about how you will take this experience away with you.*

*We have also taken away our experience of meeting with you, Anthony. Thanks again for introducing us to David, your grandfather, and Susan. And we hope to see you again later in the year.*

*Warm regards,*

*Michael White and David Denborough*

This letter documents a one-off interview. I have included it here not because it is an example of long-term effective work, but because it illustrates the possibilities of this practice. It describes the sort of reauthoring process that can more richly describe stories/territories of life that can then provide the foundation for the formulation of proposals for reparation, to mend what might be mended, and to prevent further harm.

## THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF MEN TO ADDRESS VIOLENCE

This chapter has outlined an approach to working with men who have perpetrated violence. Within this approach, violence is not viewed as an aberration but as intimately linked to the discourses of men’s culture. This observation underscores the importance of men’s responsibility to address this violence—the importance of this being on the shoulders of *men*, rather than on the shoulders of an individual man.

On account of this perspective, it is routine to invite other men to join this work, men who could be considered “alumni.”

These are men who have volunteered to join me in my work with other men who are following in their footsteps, in addressing the abuses of men's culture. Men with insider knowledge of these abusive ways are well positioned to contribute to the exposé of techniques employed for reducing culpability, of overt and covert practices of power, and of those constructions of life and of gender identity that privilege domination. These men have a dual role: They contribute significantly to the development of an exposé of the discourses of men's culture that inform actions that are abusive, and they also participate as outsider-witnesses in contributing to the development of the subordinate storylines of the man's life.

These outsider-witness retellings are vital in the repositioning of men who perpetrate abuse. Among other things, this is a repositioning from which it becomes possible for these men to become interested in how they've been an instrument of men's culture and to find ways to challenge this. It is in this context that dominant discourses of men's culture are deconstructed, and in which men experience a degree of separation of their identity from abusive ways of being. As men begin to experience this separation and to step into different territories of identity, it becomes increasingly possible to strongly critique their own abusive actions and to initiate reparation.

## EDITOR'S NOTES

1. This chapter limits its scope to describing an approach to working with heterosexual men in relation to violence against their women partners. The paper does not consider same-sex or transgender experience, nor does it seek to deconstruct the terms "man" and "men." It also does

not engage with considerations of cultural difference. For discussion about some of these concerns see Yuen & White (2007).

2. For more descriptions of what is meant by “men’s culture,” see White (1992).

3. For a detailed example of involving other men in this process, see White (2001).

4. Michael drew upon the work of Sharon Welch (1990) in these descriptions of the ethic of control and the ethic of care.