

# **Conversations in groups with women about their experiences of using anger, abuse & violence**

**By Julie Sach**

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This paper considers gendered constructions of anger and how women's experiences of using anger, abuse and violence may be shaped by these. It also examines the contribution of difficult life experiences like trauma and abuse in shaping women's anger responses. The article describes an evolving approach to group work with women that seeks to address some of these complexities.

Keywords: women, anger, narrative therapy, group work

## SETTING THE CONTEXT

There are two reasons why I have chosen to examine group work with women who experience difficulties with their own anger, abuse and violence. Firstly, I have had my own experiences of anger, which left me ashamed and silent. And secondly, I work at a Family Violence service. This service was originally set up to respond to men who use abuse and violence towards their female partners, but recently the agency has been faced with a dilemma as increasing numbers of women have begun to request an 'anger management' group for themselves.

Literature on appropriate interventions for working with women who use anger, abuse and violence is difficult to find (Dennehy & Severs 2003), and there are few community programs which offer assistance to women to make sense of this issue for themselves. Our service sought to respond to the increasing requests by piloting an 'anger management' program for women. An eight-week group program was developed and as part of my training to become a facilitator for this group, I first attended it as a participant.

During this initial program, despite the best efforts of facilitators, I noticed group participants expressing dissatisfaction with some of the content that was presented to them. During a particular session which involved teaching women how to use 'time-out' as a strategy with their children, one participant said that as a single mother with the child welfare services involved in her life, it was not realistic for her to use such a strategy as leaving young children alone could be construed as 'bad mothering'. As someone preparing to facilitate subsequent groups, I began to consider how the program could take the context of these women's lives more into account, and how any strategies we offered could be workable for the participants. Was there a way to approach this issue that would take as a starting point the experience, skills and knowledge of the participants in the group? In considering this, it seemed important to think more about women's anger.

## THINKING ABOUT 'ANGER' IN WOMEN'S LIVES

'Anger management' is a popular term used when people are wanting assistance for abusive

behaviours, be they male or female. As Trudinger (2000) notes, this term has a ring of certainty to it, it as if 'anger' can be looked at as a discreet entity, and then managed. Yet as I explored the issue of anger with the women who came into our service for assistance, it no longer seemed so simple. I began to wonder about the gender-neutral language of 'anger management' that may have obscured the context in which anger and violence occurred. I noticed that many women told stories of being able to manage anger in some parts of their lives but not in others. They also almost invariably brought with them stories of victimisation and trauma that they had been subjected to in the course of their lives. These stories of abuse were both historical and current. Sometimes they were so disturbing I wondered how they had endured such difficulties. I remember thinking as I listened to these painful accounts that if I had had to experience these things I would be angry too! Many women were still living with partners who used violence and abuse against them, and one told me that if only she could get her anger under control her husband would not have to beat her. A study from the USA reported similar findings – almost all of a group of 108 women who had used violence against a partner in the previous six months had themselves experienced violence from their partner. The greater the frequency of victimisation from partners and experiences of childhood abuse, the more likely it was that the women would use aggression against their partners. Increased exposure to violence also increased the likelihood that the women would experience symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and depression, and, in turn, women with more symptoms of post-traumatic stress were found to be more likely to express anger outwardly towards others (Swan et al. 2005, p.267).

I became very concerned about how best to respond to these women. If their anger was an expression of protest or anguish about the abuse and trauma that they had been subject to, and if the group program only skimmed over the surface of their lives, it could potentially do more harm than good. It did not seem acceptable to me to run a group that did not address some of these wider issues and experiences of the women. I was concerned that any approach to managing anger that

made women calm down and accept their lot in life would implicate us as workers in shutting down a form of anger that may be legitimate in the context of their lives – that anger could even be a force that might be useful to them in making themselves safe. In order to fit with the values of feminism that I cherish, it seemed critical that the group somehow acknowledged the effects of men's abuse in women's lives.

At the same time, however, we faced another dilemma: how to balance this awareness of the broader context of these women's lives while also acknowledging the hurt and pain that their anger, abuse and violence may have caused others. We were aware that many women were referred to the group by the child protection services because there were safety concerns for their children. We wanted any group we ran to contribute to making these children's lives safer, and we were wary that focusing on the effects of the women's victimisation might minimise the harm done to children and diminish the women's sense of responsibility for preventing further harm.

In this paper, I wish to describe how we have developed a group program based on poststructuralist understandings and narrative therapy practices. We hope that this program honours the life experiences and knowledges of women who attend the group in order to address anger, abuse and violence in their lives.

### **THE INFLUENCE OF A POSTSTRUCTURALIST APPROACH TO TALKING WITH WOMEN ABOUT ANGER, ABUSE AND VIOLENCE**

A poststructuralist perspective does not assume an individual 'self' comprising various properties and essences of people's nature. Instead it assumes an interconnected web of relationships that provide us with our sense of identity. As Gergen (1994) has described, our relationships create ourselves, rather than our selves create relationship. Poststructuralist approaches also emphasise the significance of meaning-making. That is to say, the meanings that we give to our experiences of life constitute and are shaping of our lives (Burr 1995; White 1997).

Narrative therapy is an approach that draws on poststructuralist theory, amongst other influences, to find ways of working with people that do not pathologise. This seems particularly relevant in

considering responses to women's anger, as female rage has often become pathologised and medicated through the mental health system (Russell & Carey 2004). In developing our group program we decided to have conversations with women that would explore how this anger came to be in their lives, what its effects were on their relationships and their sense of identity, and how it might be harnessed in ways that would move women closer to their preferred identities. The idea of identity as a social construction has strongly influenced our work.

We also want to acknowledge the contribution of feminism to work with women who have experienced oppressive cultural practices, particularly the influence of poststructuralist/postmodernist feminism (Weedon 1987; Speedy 2001; Hare-Mustin 2001; Russell & Carey 2004). Poststructuralist feminism's emphasis on the plurality of women's experience, as opposed to the idea that 'women' are a single group with an inherent sameness, has proved helpful in our work. It has also assisted us to deconstruct the gendered discourses that make men's anger appear 'natural', while casting women who experience anger as some sort of aberration of femininity.

Michael White's (2003) ideas on exploring the multiple meanings of expressions of pain and distress have opened possibilities for us to inquire as to the multiple meanings of women's expressions of anger. We have become aware that expressions of anger may not only be evidence of entitlement or how much a woman is not coping. A woman's anger may be a form of response to what is being disrespected or disallowed in her current life. Her anger may represent what she is not prepared to give up and consequently what it is that she cherishes, believes in and hopes for. In our work, we hope to explore the multiple meanings of anger in these women's lives in the hope of bringing forward accounts of life that will enable them to change their relationships with anger.

I will now convey the ways in which narrative ideas have been used in our group work with women who wish to curb their own anger, abuse and violence. The group runs for eight to ten weeks and is closed, i.e., no new members join after week two (this is to try to establish a consistent environment so women are not left wondering who may attend). This group is a work in progress, so I offer these descriptions tentatively, knowing that

we are learning more and more as we proceed, based on the feedback the women give us.

## **BACKGROUND TO GROUP**

Before I outline what we do in each group session, I want to consider some of the key principles that have informed our work.

### ***Our stance as facilitators: Creating a certain sort of listening space***

In setting up this group, we gave careful thought to our own stance as facilitators. We found Sue Mann's (2004) questions about this useful to consider:

- How do we want to position ourselves in relation to the women who are coming to talk with us?
- How do we get started in the work? What do we do in the first session?
- What keeps hope for something different alive in women's lives?
- How do we bring the political into conversations without giving a lecture?

We have also been influenced by Sue Mann's (2004) ideas about deliberately creating a certain sort of 'listening space', one that is shaped by particular aspirations and values. The following principles are those that we aspire to in our work with women in groups:

1. To make visible the politics and power relations involved in instances of abuse.
2. To 'doubly listen' – not only to stories of trauma but also to the ways in which women have responded to trauma.
3. To listen for multiple stories about the women's lives.
4. To practice in a de-centred way that focuses on the knowledge and skills of the women in the group.
5. To link women with others in their history, their families, their neighbourhoods and their communities.
6. To listen in ways that acknowledge diverse ways of living.
7. To acknowledge the contributions that the work makes to our own lives as facilitators.

8. To understand that the women in the group will be undertaking a journey of sorts that involves exploring new territories of their lives.
9. To create a space where there is no room for pathology.

### ***Consulting the participants***

The development of our program has occurred through consultation and feedback. In deciding what would be useful for the women we are working with, we often ask their advice on topics we should cover and we solicit their feedback on each exercise we use. One of the most useful pieces of advice they gave us alerted us to the effects of abuse and trauma on their lives. The women asked if they could talk about 'past hurts' and how to 'get over them'. In response, we developed a session on this topic that is described later in this paper.

### ***From expertise to personal agency***

We are conscious that discourses of educator/learner and professional superiority will sometimes invite women in the group to position us as the experts on their lives. For instance, they may request that we give them 'strategies' to deal with their anger. This challenges us to find ways of respectfully declining the invitation of expertise. Whenever this occurs, we ask the group members to brainstorm the things that they have found helpful on whatever the question relates to. We create a list from this discussion that is typed up and brought back to the group the following week. In this way, we create written records of the group's knowledges and skills that women can return to whenever they may experience doubt. We believe that creating these sorts of documents contributes to the participants beginning to value their own insider/local knowledge (Geertz 1983). In turn, this contributes to the women having a greater sense of personal agency in their lives, and more opportunities to renegotiate their relationship with anger.

### ***Flexibility***

We have found it important to be able to shape the group week by week, in response to women's requests for certain topics. We believe that the 'one-size-fits-all' approach to group work delivery does not serve the interests of our clients because it

assumes a homogenous group. It may be far more challenging for us as facilitators, but we have found that it's vital to have a flexible curriculum. While we always have a plan of some general areas we may cover, we also feel free to respond to the current issues that women tell us they are struggling with. This means that as facilitators we can never know exactly where the conversations will lead us! In one group, we spent considerable time talking about women's experiences of grief and loss. This was because they had identified ways in which their anger was a response to these experiences. Interestingly, it was not the experience of grief per se which they linked to their anger, but modernist ideas about grief (Hedtke & Winslade 2004) that dictate a need for 'closure' and 'letting go' of lost loved ones. In deconstructing these ideas, some of the women found opportunities to bring their loved ones closer to them, in ways that were sustaining of them and in ways that changed their relationship to anger.

### **Cultural considerations**

A further principle involves being conscious of our cultural backgrounds as facilitators. I am a fifth generation New Zealand Pakeha (New Zealander of European descent), and Katharina Boehm with whom I facilitate the groups is originally from Germany and has been a resident in New Zealand for fifteen years. Usually at least half of the group identify as Maori, and bring to the group their cultural knowledges which we want to respect and make visible. Within the groups, we try to use the women's language as much as possible and this includes Maori language. We also always try to use the metaphors offered to us by group members. In future, we hope to consult and work more in partnership with Maori and Pacific Island colleagues in order to continue to develop the best program we can for Maori, Pakeha and Pacific Islander women.

## **SESSION 1: COMING TOGETHER**

Prior to the group beginning, we meet individually with each woman and routinely hear descriptions of embarrassment, shame and personal failure. In previous groups we had run we also noticed that there seemed to be considerable shame and distress for women in talking about their own use of anger, abuse and violence. We have therefore

taken a lot of care in how we initiate group discussions on these topics.

### **Group kawa / treaty**

After a gentle introductory round we proceed to negotiate group *kawa* – a Maori word meaning shared understandings of 'how things are done around here'. This provides space for women to speak about what will contribute to a good experience for them in the group. This includes considerations of privacy and avoiding practices of judgement. During this process, we like to add that anyone can pass on any group activity, and for whatever reason. We make it clear that there is no pressure to participate. We have found that the process of negotiating a group *kawa* (sometimes called a treaty) fosters respect, tolerance and safety.

### **Setting a foundation**

We are acutely aware that we need to begin a process of re-storying the women's problem-saturated identity claims before participants will be able to openly share stories of their lives. To facilitate this, we ask the women to interview each other in pairs using the following questions:

- How did you come to be in this group?
- Was it a response to something that happened?
- Can you tell a story about your decision to be here?
- What kind of a step was this, to come to this group?

The following questions then enquire about the women's intentions, hopes, dreams, values and qualities:

- What was your intention in coming to the group?
- What were the hopes and dreams that lead you here?
- What does this step say about what is important in your life?
- What qualities might it suggest about you?
- What does it say about what is important in your life?

### ***Negotiating a name for the group***

After joining together again in one group we then place the last two questions up on a whiteboard and brainstorm the women's collective responses. Having done so, we ask the women to think about the name for this group. We ask: 'Does "Women and Anger" adequately represent who you are or could we come up with a better name?' Through this process, one group chose to call themselves '*Mana Wahine Toa*' – a Maori name meaning 'strong women with courage and respect'. Another group chose to name themselves 'Bridge-Builders', a reference to a currently popular catch-cry, 'build a bridge and get over it'. By choosing this name the women were describing their desire to not let the effects of their pasts continue to shape their present. Our current group has chosen the name 'S.A.S. (Strong Awesome Sisters)'. We have found this process of re-naming the group leaves women feeling more hopeful about their ability to move towards preferred futures.

From this first session's discussion, we also create a handout to be distributed the following week that lists the values/hopes/dreams/aspirations that the group members have identified are important to them. I have listed some examples of these here:

- To attain my right to a violence-free lifestyle
- To respect and accept the rights of others
- To have good relationships with the people who are important to us
- To care for and protect our children
- To be a leader of myself, to live my life according to my own values and beliefs.

In this way, from the very beginning of the group, we are focusing our attention on intentional state understandings<sup>2</sup> (values, hopes, principles, dreams, etc.) rather than internal state understandings (such as concepts of self-esteem, strengths or deficits). Doing so sets a context for women's lives to be joined around shared hopes and aspirations. Further sessions can then build on these foundations.

## **SESSIONS 2 AND 3: GETTING TO KNOW ANGER**

Within women's lives, anger can occur in many different contexts. We believe it is important for women to examine the locations of anger in their lives, so they can identify the times and places when it is present, and also the times and places when it is not. The times and places when anger is not present may represent instances in which the women are demonstrating a sense of agency in relation to anger. The meaning they make of their discoveries can then act as springboard for further discussion. If a woman is only experiencing anger in one area of her life, for example, in contexts involving her partner, it becomes possible to inquire about what the anger relates to. In turn, this can lead to conversations about women's preferred ways of being in their lives.

### ***Many types of anger***

We start with a brainstorm of all the different types of anger women have experienced, such as hurt anger, jealous anger, stressed anger, confused anger, grieving anger, overwhelmed anger ... and this usually generates quite a big list! From this, they work in pairs to interview each other about the different contexts of anger in their lives. This a structured interview as we provide the following list of questions for them to use:

- What kinds of angers are around for you at different times?
- Which anger has created the most problems in your life?
- What supports this kind of anger in your life?
- Did it come into your life as a response to anything that happened to you?
- Where did you learn to 'do' anger?
- Has anger ever been a signal to you that something wasn't right in a situation?
- At what times in your life is this anger around more?
- At what times in your life is this anger around less?
- How do you make sense of the difference?

### ***Distinguishing between anger and violence***

We then introduce an exercise to assist women to differentiate between anger and violence. We ask the women to describe the things that anger tells them which convince them that violence is called for. This brings forward a list of excuses, justifications and blame of others that contribute to violence. We then ask the women to name this list and we create a handout using their name as a title, for instance: 'The Lies of Anger'.

### ***The gender of violence***

We also introduce an exercise that we believe exposes the gendered meanings attributed to anger. We brainstorm the characteristics that are valued in men in our cultures and then those valued in women. We ask the group to consider how the meaning of anger is gendered – what does our society/culture say about men who are angry? What about women who are angry? Is it different? What names does society have for an angry man? An angry woman? What is the effect of those words on women who may experience anger? Whose interests are served by this effect? The purpose of this exercise is to expose the gendered nature of the discourses about anger and to deconstruct these taken-for-granted 'truths'.

### ***Scaling anger***

We then introduce a scale of anger and ask women to name differing intensities of anger from 1 to 10. We also ask them to describe the physical changes they feel in their bodies at these different intensities. This usually provokes a lot of discussion and many times women have told us this has been very useful to them because they have begun to pay more attention to their physical experience of anger. Doing so enables them to develop an 'early warning system'. When they notice certain physical changes they can take action to de-escalate emotion, or to keep other people safe.

To finish these sessions we might ask the following questions:

- Can anger be both helpful and unhelpful?
- How?
- Can anger be a tool for social change?
- Do you know of times when this might have happened? (e.g., the feminist movement, civil rights movement)

- If the anger you have experienced were to start a movement for social change, what would it stand for?

To close, we ask the women to choose one of the qualities they identified in the first session and to tell us a story about that quality in their life. We then try to 'thicken' the stories about this quality. One of the ways we do this is to have the women act as an audience to each other's stories about the qualities in their lives. A second way we do this is to ask the women to introduce to us someone in their life who taught them about the particular quality they have chosen to speak about. This process contributes to a re-storying of the women's identity away from pathologised understandings and towards more preferred themes.

## **SESSION 4: EFFECTS OF ANGER IN OUR LIVES**

This session focuses on the effects of anger and has proved to be very powerful to the women in the groups. We start by asking the women to consider the effects that their anger, abuse and violence has had in the many domains of their life. We document the women's responses on large sheets of paper on which we have pre-written the following headings:

Physical health	Relationship with community members, e.g., neighbours
My sense of myself – what I think about who I am	My view of myself as a mother, sister, aunt, worker, etc.
Social life	Thoughts
Everyday life	Moods/feelings
Relationship with children	Hopes, dreams, sense of the future
Relationship with partner	Work
My wairua (spirit)	Children's lives

When this documentation is complete, we place the lists on the wall and step back and ask the women to evaluate the effects/influence of the problem in these domains of living:

- Is this okay with you that anger should take so much from your life?
- How do you feel about this?
- How is this by you?
- Where do you stand on this?
- What is your position on this?

and so on.

We then ask them to justify these evaluations:

- Why is/isn't this okay for you?
- Why do you feel this way about this?
- How come you're taking this stand/position on this?
- Would you tell me a story about your life that would help me to understand why you would take this position on this development?

and so on.

This session is based on Michael White's statement of position map (1995). The use of externalising language (White & Epston 1990) is very important throughout the ten sessions, but it is especially critical in this session. This exercise seems to assist the women to begin speaking about anger and its effects as separate from themselves. This also seems to enable them to stand back from anger and fully comprehend its effects in their lives.

Women seem to leave this session with a sense of outrage at how much the anger affects their lives and how much this is not okay by them! They seem particularly affected by realising the impact of anger on the lives of their children.

## **SESSIONS 5 & 6: PAST HURTS**

As mentioned earlier, participants had requested the opportunity to speak about how they could 'get over the past hurts' that had happened in their lives which still had the ability to create rage for them. It was clear that the women were referring to past experiences of abuse, violence and trauma. We had some trepidation in addressing this issue, but knew that to ignore it would not be honouring the request from the women, who were clearly struggling with aspects of their histories. We have found Michael White's writings (2004) about responding to trauma extremely helpful, and drew on his material to shape our thinking in this session. We also drew from the

writings of Mann & Russell (2003), Jenkins, Joy & Hall (2003), Silent Too Long (2003), Trowbridge (2003) and Verco (2003) to find ways to respond to women's questions about the effects of sexual abuse and questions about forgiveness.

In planning this session, we were very clear that we did not believe that each woman had to tell us the intimate details of trauma they may have experienced. We start the session by being transparent about this belief and women have responded positively. They have told us of other experiences they have had, often with other professionals, in which they have been pressured to tell in intimate detail what had happened to them. Many have experienced this as re-traumatising.

In order to prevent re-traumatising occurring in this session, we are conscious of wanting to provide a context in which the women can experience a different 'territory of identity' (White 2004), one that is not defined by the trauma, but instead by the women's values, hopes and dreams. To do so, we 'doubly listen' – listening not only to the events of trauma but also to what the women have continued to give value to in their lives, and how they responded to the trauma. White's writings on this subject (2004) have alerted us to the fact that many stories of resistance to trauma get obscured over time, and we wish to bring forward these responses to stand alongside the dominant account which usually casts people as passive recipients. In practice, this process usually takes two group sessions.

### ***Past hurts and the women's responses***

We begin by creating a list of the 'past hurts' which the women have endured. These have often included rape, sexual abuse, physical abuse, bullying at school, death of a loved one, witnessing violence between parents, and so on. Alongside this list, we then note down the responses the women made at the time of the events, and also the responses they have made more recently to cope with these events. We then ask the women to characterise what these steps were about; what they were trying to preserve that was precious to them. We also ask about the effects, past and present of these acts in their lives. This process makes visible not only the 'past hurts' the women have experienced, but also how they have responded to these and what it is that the

women value. They soon see that far from being passive recipients of trauma, they have throughout their lives taken actions in accordance with their values.

### ***Other people's responses***

Often, those who have experienced significant trauma have not only had to deal with the effects of the trauma, but also a range of responses from others that have exacerbated these effects. These may include responses of disbelief, or blame or indifference. To make visible the effects of these responses and the societal discourses that influence them, we ask the women to list the responses from others, past and present, that have not been helpful to them and we then ask the following questions:

- Whose interests are served by these sorts of responses?
- Who is supported?

These two questions help the women to see that often the interests of the person who has used abuse are well-served by these responses and the discourses which inform them. We discuss this fully before moving to questions that are designed to evoke stories of personal agency.

### ***Personal agency***

The following questions create a context for women to experience a sense of personal agency in relation to 'past hurts' they have experienced:

- How come you have survived your life so far, in spite of these messages/responses?
- What strategies have worked for you?
- What has kept you going?
- What has become important to you as a result of what happened to you?
- What do you value?
- What stands have you taken that reflect these values?
- What commitments have you made?
- What qualities have you drawn on to cope?

### ***Linking lives***

To close these sessions, we want to draw attention to people in the women's lives who *have* been supportive and have played parts in assisting

the women on their journeys. To do so, we use remembering practices (White 1997). These assist us to richly describe the contributions of key figures in these women's lives. We also ask the women to reflect on what these key figures saw in them that would have told them that the women would come through their experiences of hard times. In this way, we are inviting the women to see themselves 'through the eyes' of those they have identified as key supporters. Through these conversations, the mutuality of these relationships are emphasised and this enables the women to draw new conclusions about their own worth and value (White & Morgan 2006).

## **SESSION 7: WHAT'S HAPPENING TO ANGER?**

The purpose of this session is to explore fully the times that the women are not being troubled by anger, violence or abuse. These represent unique outcomes or exceptions to the problem story (White & Epston 1990). By exploring these we seek to build upon preferred stories of the women's lives.

### ***Excavating unique outcomes***

We begin by asking each woman to tell us about a time when anger could have got the better of them, but they did not allow it to. We then question them fully about the circumstances of that exception to the dominant story before exploring what these developments reflect about the women's values, hopes and dreams. This approach draws upon the re-authoring conversations map (White 2005). We believe that this session helps the women to appreciate times when they have the upper hand in relation to anger. Our belief is that there are always such exceptions, but sometimes excavation is required to find them, and that is our work.

### ***Noticing changes***

We then set up pairs to talk about all the areas of the women's lives in which anger is affecting them. We ask them to notice if any changes have been occurring over recent weeks and then to report these changes back to the group. In this way, the group begins to act as an audience to these changes, to this 'news of difference'. Our purpose is to 'thicken' (Geertz 1978) stories that do not support or sustain the problem of anger. Our experience of

this process mirrors that described by Freedman and Combs (1996, p.16.): ‘as people began to inhabit and live out these alternative stories, the results went beyond solving problems. Within the new stories, people could live out new self images, new possibilities for relationship, and new futures’. Some of the changes that women have noticed have included:

- I am noticing anger earlier
- I am mentally removing myself from certain situations
- I am telling my partner what is happening for me emotionally now
- I’ve learnt to look at myself differently – I do matter!
- I’m holding *whanau* (family) meetings with my children to talk about things that are important.

### **Reflections on identity**

We then inquire about what these discoveries of change may mean for the women: how they may view themselves differently in the light of these changes, what is becoming possible in their relationships with their children and other important people, and what may be possible in the future.

We also enquire about what might support further changes in their lives. Here is a small sample of their responses:

- Being open to help from friends
- Connectedness with others
- Free education at *Te Wananga o Aotearoa* (A national Maori tertiary institution).

## **SESSION 8: STEPPING INTO RESPONSIBILITY**

The work of Alan Jenkins (1990) has been very helpful in thinking about how to invite women to take responsibility for the effects of their anger, abuse and violence. We have, however, found that women participants seem more inclined to take responsibility for violence they have enacted in comparison to the men with whom we have worked. We wonder whether this is due to women having a lesser sense of entitlement to act in violent ways (although we have worked with women who have had a significant sense of entitlement). Or perhaps

accepting responsibility for harm done in some way leads to a more positive identity claim for women – as dominant constructions of masculinity can construe men’s acts of acknowledging doing harm as ‘weakness’. At the same time, however, society expects women to be the victims of violent crimes, not the perpetrators. If a man commits such acts he is seen as dangerous but acting within an expected gender role. If women commit violent crimes, they are often considered worse than a violent man – as monstrous, crazy or especially evil. These sorts of ideas can complicate the process of coming to terms with what has been done, taking responsibility for it, and preventing further harm.

We are still in the process of developing this topic and at first it was a part of another session. It is only due to feedback from the most recent group of participants that we now feel that the topic of ‘Stepping into responsibility’ is important enough to devote a whole session to it. The following list is what the women have told us helped them take responsibility for their part in anger, abuse and violence:

- Admit it when I am wrong
- Saying sorry and acknowledging the hurt/harm done
- Asking ‘How can I put this right?’
- Following through with actions to put things right
- Offer an explanation without justifying or blaming
- Take consequences – face up to things.

We look forward to developing exercises to further thicken the particular skills and knowledge associated with ‘taking responsibility’.

## **SESSION 9: SAYING GOODBYE AND CONTINUING THE JOURNEY**

So far we have found the women quite reluctant for the group to end, as it has offered a sense of support in their lives. Of course, groups end but relationships do not. The women often continue to keep us up-to-date with what is happening in their lives, and also keep in touch with other group members, if connections have been made. Despite this, the ending of the group is significant and the purpose of this final session is to prepare the

participants for this. We have drawn on the work of McPhie & Chaffey (1998) to create a session that acknowledges what has been shared but also looks ahead to life without the group. The women meet in pairs to ask each other:

- Do you have any fears about being without the group?
- What are they?
- What are you taking away from the group that will help you to stand up to those fears?

### ***Documents to take away***

In narrative therapy, therapeutic documents are very significant and we have experimented with these. We have asked each woman to write a letter to herself that she would find helpful at some point in her future, and which would remind her about the purposes/hopes/dreams she has for her life that anger is intent on undermining. We then post this letter in the weeks following the group. This serves as a reminder to the woman of her thoughts and values and also provides a way for the group to have a continuing presence in her life.

We have also invited the group to write a collective letter to the next group we run – one that might be useful to participants who may be affected by shame and despair.

### ***Taking it back practices***

During this final session we also believe it is important for us as facilitators to take time to acknowledge the contribution the group has made to our lives. For this ‘taking it back practice’ (White 1997), we use the outsider-witness framework (White 2004). We describe:

- what struck chords for us in what we heard throughout the group
- the images this evoked of the women’s lives that were linked to their hopes and aspirations
- what it is in our own lives that accounts for why these things caught our attention
- where this has taken us to in our own lives; how our work or lives have been changed by witnessing the women’s stories.

### ***A final round***

To close the group, we invite a final round asking the women to articulate what have been the most helpful aspects of the group for them. Some of the responses have included:

- ‘Hearing others’ stories, knowing I am not alone’
- ‘Noticing the effects of past hurts’
- ‘I like myself better now’
- ‘Handouts that are our work’
- ‘Permission to just be me’
- ‘Respect for everything’
- ‘Laid back but serious’
- ‘Knowing there are different kinds of anger’
- ‘Understanding the hurt beneath the anger’
- ‘We have created our own answers’
- ‘Not telling us what the experts do’
- ‘Seeing what the anger was doing to my life’
- ‘Life changing’.

### **SOME FURTHER THOUGHTS ...**

Facilitating this group has involved a ‘steep learning curve’ for us as facilitators as we have tried to take the principles of narrative practice and apply these in a group setting. The groups have also been an inspiring experience as we have walked with these women for a part of their journey. We have shared many laughs as we have heard of the courage and resilience of these women, but also many tears as we heard of the pain and trauma they have been subjected to in their lives. Even though we have been witness to this suffering, the group has offered us hope as we have endeavoured to centre the women’s skills and knowledge and to doubly listen. These practices have been an antidote to the ‘overwhelmedness’ that I experienced when facilitating a previous group informed by different ideas.

There have been many challenges along the way and there is still much to do to shape the group in ways that may be even more sustaining of these women’s lives and even more protective of their children. I am very conscious that we have not yet found ways to include wider audiences to witness the developments in the women’s lives. There is also the potential to use outsider-witness practices more within the group itself. As the work continues, we

are learning more and more about the women who seek out these groups and how we might proceed in ways that are useful to them. As I write these words, the faces of the women participants appear before me. It is due to their lives and courage that we are inspired and supported in this work.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> These questions are based on Michael White's statement of position map (1995).
- <sup>2</sup> For discussion of the differences between internal and intentional understandings see White (2001).

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## 8TH INTERNATIONAL NARRATIVE THERAPY AND COMMUNITY WORK CONFERENCE

TO BE HELD IN  
KRISTIANSAND, NORWAY

20TH - 22ND JUNE 2007



Previous narrative therapy conferences have been held in Australia, USA, Mexico, UK and Hong Kong ... now this event is to be held in Scandinavia for the first time!

Over three days and two evenings this conference will feature presentations in relation to:

- issues of abuse & violence
- mental health concerns – depression, psychosis, children of those with mental health difficulties
- creative and hopeful work with individuals, couples, families and communities
- narrative responses to trauma
- considerations of culture, history and the politics of practice
- innovative ways of 'deconstructing addiction'
- narrative responses to grief and loss
- links between the fields of therapy, community work, performance, drama, poetry and the written word

This will be a welcoming and vibrant gathering of practitioners from different parts of the world. Song and music will be heard throughout the days and evenings!

Featuring presenters from all the continents (except perhaps Antarctica!) including: Jill Freedman, Michael White, Shona Russell, David Epston, Gene Combs, Ncazelo Ncube, Allan Holmgren, Maggie Carey, Art Fisher, America Bracho, John Winslade, Lorraine Hedtke, Charles Waldegrave, Taimalieutu Kiwi Tamasese, Tangihaere Walker (Just Therapy Team), Tod Augusta-Scott. As well as a range of local Norwegian presenters including: Geir Lundby, Anne Kathrine Løge & Esben Esther Pirelli Benestad.

***We look forward to seeing you in Kristiansand in June!***