Creating ripples:

Fostering collective healing from and resistance to sexual violence through friendships

by Michelle Dang

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Abstract

Social responses to sexual violence matter. Yet in Australia, and in many other places, responses to sexual violence have become highly professionalised, individualised and privatised, reducing the possibilities for healing redress. Exploring friendships and community responses to violence may increase the possibilities for healing, justice and solidarity. This paper describes a project that honoured and made visible community-based responses to sexual violence. The project sought to enable contribution by eliciting ways in which friends have supported survivors, and ways in which survivors have contributed to their friends and others. The project was guided by narrative practices including re-authoring conversations, outsider witnessing and collective documentation.

Key words: enabling contribution, sexual violence, collective documents, damage-centred narratives, friendship, narrative practice

Introduction

Sexual violence is a social problem and ending it requires social transformation. We cannot challenge rape culture unless we undo the societal structures that enable violence to happen in the first place. But despite decades of feminist activism highlighting the political nature of private problems, social transformation has not been the focus of mainstream anti-violence organisations. Professional therapeutic and legal responses to sexual violence overwhelmingly focus on individual support and advocacy. Rarely are friends, family or the broader community invited into meaningful actions to resist rape culture and support survivors. Community members are not seen as active citizens, but merely passive recipients of information.

The practices described in this paper emerged from witnessing the way individualised and professionalised practices inadvertently reinforce individualism and victim-blaming and limit the possibilities for fostering broader social change. Under neoliberal and therapeutic discourses, survivors/victims are represented as 'damaged', 'unregulated', 'emotionally unstable' and in need of fixing. My point is not to discredit individual therapeutic services, as many survivors find healing in therapy; rather, my concern is the overwhelming focus on the supposed pathology of individual survivors, and subsequently, the obscuring of and inattention to the societal structures that cause individual pain. As Vikki Reynolds (2010, p. 3) has stated, 'the problem is not in our heads or in ourselves; it is in the real world where there is a lack of justice'.

These critiques are not new. My work has been shouldered up by writers who have interrogated the effects of therapeutic culture and governance on local coping strategies (Pupavac, 2001), on medicalising and pathologising people's pain, and on individualising and depoliticising issues of power and oppression (Kitzinger & Perkins, 1993). These ideas have prompted me to reflect on a number of questions:

- In what ways can we resist individualism, damage-centred narratives and collective passivity in order to nurture hope, solidarity or mutuality within communities?
- How might we invite friends and allies to take responsibility and act in solidarity, so that the weight of resisting rape culture and recovery does not fall entirely to victims?
- How do we avoid separating healing from justice or therapy from social action?

In grappling with big questions about social transformation, I have decided to turn to small everyday strategies that foster a culture of solidarity and community accountability. I am interested in how our everyday practices as therapists and social workers can create social conditions in which violence is no longer condoned. More specifically, I am interested in how we build on friendships as a way of building collective healing from and resistance to sexual violence.

Creating Ripples

In 2016, I embarked on a project named Creating Ripples to foster community responsibility and solidarity with survivors. Creating Ripples was a project that sought to exchange stories of friendship, solidarity and resistance among survivors and their friends and allies in the aftermath of sexual violence. The name of the project stemmed from the idea that acts of friendship can create ripples in the lives of people who have experienced sexual violence, and in the broader community.

I used narrative practices, including re-authoring conversations, outsider witnessing and collective documents, to elicit and animate stories of friendships that have contributed towards healing and justice for survivors. I also sought to bring forth stories about how survivors have made contributions to their friends and supported social change. The acknowledgement of two-way, and in some cases multi-directional, contributions between survivors and their friends was one of the key aims of this project. My hope was that people who may have felt 'burdened by a sense of failure and hopelessness' might 'come to experience making contributions to the lives of others' (Denborough, 2008, p. 69).

An ethical framework

My interest in friendship as a form of community accountability is informed by an ethical framework that centres transformative justice (Creative Interventions, n.d.; INCITE!, n.d.), intersectional feminism (Ahmed, 2017; McKenzie, 2014) and the ethics of solidarity and mutual contribution (Barreto & Grandesso, 2010; Reynolds, 2010). These influences led me towards alternative frameworks for addressing trauma (Cvetkovich, 2003; Denborough, 2006; Reynolds, 2010). They focused my attention on seeing and supporting survivors and their communities as allies, healers, political organisers and agents capable of contributing to social change.

The ethical framework for the project was survivor-centred, and favoured autonomy over paternalism, and

transformative justice over the politics of exclusion and disposability. These ethics have a long history that can be traced back to prison abolition movements (Critical Resistance, n.d.; Spade, 2015), community accountability work (Creative Interventions, n.d.; Incite!, n.d.) and popular education (hooks, 1994; Horton & Freire, 1990), each of which has been at the forefront of questioning institutional violence and pushing for alternative forms of justice. Prison abolition and community accountability are about finding local and decentralised strategies to respond to injustices, without replicating state violence, and without causing further harm to survivors and communities.

My project was also guided by Tuck's (2009) critique of 'damaged-centred narratives', which offers a really useful understanding to the perils of seeing people as passive or damaged. Tuck (2009) contends that if we locate problems within people, we start to see them as damaged, depleted, ruined and hopeless. Folks who are 'mentally unstable', 'in crisis', 'dissociative' and 'unregulated' become 'damaged goods' – a danger to themselves and others. Rape victims are constantly put through the wringer of such labels.

This damage narrative extends to the way we view communities. Communities are often deemed too hard, or too complicated, to work with. In fact, communities are often framed as problems themselves. The problem with dismissing a community as damaged or 'too complicated' is that it leaves no room to nurture hope, solidarity or mutuality within communities. Damage narratives spread what Barreto (in Barreto & Grandesso, 2010, p. 34) has termed 'psychic misery', leading people to lose faith in themselves as a result of their knowledges being disqualified.

Friendship matters

The desire to nurture hope, solidarity and mutuality within communities led me to focus on friendships. This focus was intentional. Friendships are under-theorised and under-valued, and friends are rarely included in therapeutic 'interventions'. This is despite the reality that survivors often turn first to friends and family at the earliest stages of violence (Kim, 2007). Although survivors can receive victim-blaming and unhelpful responses from friends and family, these networks can also provide immediate and culturally appropriate responses. As friends are often situated in the survivor's community, they are generally among the first to witness the severity of perpetrators' tricks and tactics, and the hardships that survivors experience on a day-to-day basis. Due to their closeness to the survivor, they are often the most motivated to demand and support change (Kim, 2007).

Friendship can be easily dismissed as 'light and fluffy'; however, I think that honouring and amplifying acts of friendship can be a form of solidarity and resistance. As Deterr (2017) has stated, 'friendship and resistance are interconnected: when we are supported, we are more willing to confront that which threatens to destroy our worlds'. Friendship here means making commitments to each other and acting with and for others.

The context of Creating Ripples

Creating Ripples took place with the support of my former colleagues at the Brisbane Rape and Incest Survivors Support Centre (BRISSC), and of course, the willingness of participants to partake in the project. The project was undertaken during an eight week 'support and social action' group for survivors of sexual violence at BRISSC. My co-facilitator and I had a mandate to run a group that attended to support and social action themes, and the invitation to partake in Creating Ripples was well received. There were 10 participants who contributed to the project. Eight identified as women and two identified as gender non-binary. I introduced the project to the group as being about 'enabling contributions' and 'honouring acts of resistance and support'.

Creating Ripples took place midway through the group, after we had developed a collective analysis of rape culture, the messages it gives survivors and the effects it has on survivors. Embedding this project within a broader conversation around rape culture, including harmful community responses to sexual violence, helped avoid simplistic, romanticised or depoliticised understandings of friendship. Eliciting stories of positive and negative social responses also achieved a 'double-storied testimony' (Denborough, 2008), attending to both trauma and survival. Within friendships there exist possibilities for harm and possibilities for healing. Naming the harm of unhelpful community responses to rape culture not only honours survival and resistance, it also paves the way for re-storing memory of local healing practices and knowledge.

Unearthing stories of friendship through re-authoring conversations

I used re-authoring conversations as a starting point for constructing a collective document, as I found it the most useful practice for unearthing and richly describing the ways the survivors and their friends had responded to sexual violence. I provided the group with clear guidelines for the process. Participants gathered in groups of three, with each

person taking turns to be the note-taker, the interviewer and the narrator. Each narrator had 15 minutes to respond to the questions posed by their interviewer. At the completion of this interview, I asked participants to rotate roles. We then returned to the larger group to discuss the process and to further acknowledge the stories we had heard. I wrote down participants' responses and also collected their notes to use in the collective document.

Often in outsider-witness practices or in re-authoring conversations, it is the practitioner who asks the questions and takes the notes. I sought to decentre myself and to centre the knowledges of the participants by providing an opportunity for the participants to take turns undertaking all three roles. This also highlighted their skills as interviewers, narrators and note-takers.

I provided seven questions for the interviewers to ask the narrators. These questions were adapted from Michael White's (2007) re-authoring conversations map:

1. Describe a time when a friend or a group of friends took an action (in response to sexual violence) that you felt was supportive or caring. Remember, the action didn't have be heroic or grand!
2. What name would you give your friend's action? (e.g. act of solidarity, act of care)
3. What does this action say about your friend's values, knowledges or ways of being?
4. What meaning did your friend's actions have for you or what difference did they make
    - in terms of your healing journey?
    - in relation to your resistance to sexual violence/ rape culture?
5. Were your friend's actions connected to, or supported by, broader groups or practices that they are part of? That is, are there cultural practices, family histories or particular social movements that supported them to take the action they did?
6. How was your friend's action informed or enriched by their experiences or understanding of oppression and violence?
7. What might it mean to your friend that they took this action? What difference might it have made for them?

These questions alternate between 'landscape of action' and 'landscape of identity' concerns (see M. White, 2007). Their purpose was to deepen the often-subordinate storyline of solidarity between survivors and their friends. The questions made it possible for the participants to think and/ or feel differently about themselves, about their friendships and about survivors as a collective. Through questions 1, 2, 3, 5 and 6, I wanted to make visible the skills, values, knowledges and wisdoms of friends.

Here are some of the stories of kindness, solidarity and care that were shared in response:

> I didn't tell [my best friend] for many years because of anxiety. It was very difficult as she had been involved with the abuser. But she was very good – generous, caring and non-judgemental. I would say she valued our friendship more than their past.

> A friend came with me to see a gynaecologist. This helped me to feel comfortable. This shows to me that she values comfort, safety, boundaries, understanding of the impact that sexual violence has. She has an understanding of the world and has been part of many social action groups.

> My Aunt Jillian made herself accessible any time of day/night for three years. She put her personal and business life on hold for me in order to take my calls at any time I needed her when my flashbacks happened. She helped me breathe through the trauma as each flashback occurred. She kept me alive.

I was conscious of minimising accounts of heroism and individualism, so question 5 is a landscape of social action question that emphasises the cultural and political histories that friends may have been connected to:

> I knew that my friend held rich knowledge and understanding of oppression and violence. She grew up in a very conservative Catholic family in a rural Queensland town. This led her to live a life separate from her biological family, and had made her close friends her surrogate family. She is an activist, feminist and artist/zine maker well known in her local community and has very strong values and beliefs that aim to dismantle patriarchal, capitalistic institutions.

> I didn't tell anyone for a long time. But my partner encouraged me to speak up to my mother and brother who perpetrated the violence. [My partner] grew up in a minority group in Lebanon where he saw shootings, family and sexual violence. He also had to flee due to oppression and danger, which gave him compassion and understanding of being an outsider.

> His resistance has carried over to Australia through his support for minority groups and support for women to be treated equally.

Question 4 is a dual question that disrupts the binary of healing and justice. It acknowledges that acts of friendship can be supportive, not only in terms of healing, but also by creating justice. That is, friendship can be the basis for community accountability and political action. This was beautifully demonstrated by this response:

> About two years ago now, I was sexually harassed at a gig I was playing at. I was made to feel violated and really uncomfortable by the drunk bar manager. So, in response, I wrote a really honest review of the bar and the manager and posted it on Yelp [a website hosting reviews of businesses]. My story was removed twice, but I kept on posting it back up every time it got removed. A close friend of mine, with my consent, shared my experience on Facebook, along with the link to the review. Other friends shared the link around until it stirred quite a lot of attention among people in the music and arts community. The story went kind of viral. Local bands even boycotted playing shows at this bar as an act of support and resistance to sexual violence against women.

My favourite question is the last question as it counters the dominant narrative that being a friend or ally to a survivor is a burden. This question opened up conversations about how friends had been moved and transported through a relationship with a survivor. Here are some of the responses:

> It was satisfying for him to care for someone and to see the changes in me. It made our relationship better. He was patient and waited for me. We went through it all and it has reached the point where things are good between us. So it was worth the wait.

> My experience paved the way for other females/ transgender folk to openly speak about similar experiences they'd had with the same bar manager and his bar/venue … This one act of resistance ... meant that people in the music community, who I had never heard speak openly about sexual violence and rape culture, were in fact making space to talk about creating safe spaces for women so that we didn't have to encounter sexual violence at shows. It created an unsettling feeling for a lot of people, and I was glad about it.

The responses to this question demonstrate that healing and justice are not unidirectional: the contributions of allies and survivors are multidirectional. This perspective challenges us to move away from charity towards more dignifying partnerships based on mutual respect and mutual contribution (Bracho, 2000). Storying mutual contributions can be a step towards what Barb Wingard (2000) has described as facilitating dignifying and re-grading conversations in which we hear about stories of hope and stories of pride.

Considerations for creating a collective document

I was drawn to collective documentation as a methodology for Creating Ripples because it not only responds to collective trauma and its effects, but also addresses the effects of isolation. Isolation often combines with stigma and shame to inhibit survivors of sexual violence from connecting with others. Further, many social action strategies and events are inaccessible or too daunting for survivors to engage with. For these reasons, creating a collective document from participants' stories, and using the document to make a contribution to others, seemed like a very fitting methodology.

The development of a collective document led to some important ethical and practical considerations. In particular, there were considerations regarding:

- being transparent with participants about the facilitator's intentions for the project, making it clear that the document produced will be made public, and discussing issues of confidentiality and disclosure
- preparing note-takers to 'rescue people's words' (Newman, 2008) and take accurate and legible notes
- checking and rechecking, and providing participants with opportunities to provide feedback on the draft document.

It was also important to attend to the politics of representation and experience. The first draft of the collective document contained a participant's story about the support provided by her male partner. It read as though Kelly (name changed) was saved or healed because of her partner, and that he was the catalyst for her confronting the perpetrator. I wanted the document to recognise the supportive actions that men have taken; however, replicating the narrative of male allies as saviours is highly problematic as it can erase women's autonomy and agency, and reinscribe male privilege and dominance. I also wanted to avoid implying or promoting the idea that it is simple or safe for survivors to disclose their experience or to confront the perpetrator.

After consulting with a colleague, we agreed to speak with Kelly about our concerns. In the phone call, I told Kelly that I wanted to check the accuracy of the notes, which had been taken by another participant. I also explained our concerns about how the story was represented. To my surprise, Kelly said that she shared these concerns, but hadn't wanted to 'make a big fuss about it'. So over the phone, we made some amendments to her story, and she left the call feeling that the story was more accurate. This experience reaffirmed the importance of not erasing power, complexity and contradictions within the stories we tell (Tuck, 2009). A transparent and collaborative co-editing process enabled us to build further trust and develop our analyses.

Thickening the preferred story

The next part of the project was facilitating an oral reading of the collective document so that the subordinate stories of acts of support could be thickened, retold and re-performed (Yuen, 2007). During the final group session, I asked five participants to read the document aloud. It was an incredibly moving and powerful moment, listening to the participants read and honour each other's stories. In that moment, there was a sense of connection among the stories and a sense of shared struggle and resistance. This oral ritual provided a forum for the creation of a social memory of resistance and sustenance. It contributed to restoring memory of local healing practices and knowledge (Denborough, 2008). This in turn, this acted as an antidote to the imposition of outsider healing knowledges.

Fostering solidarity and collective responsibility

One of the intentions of this project was to invite friends and allies to bear witness to stories of friendship in order to foster solidarity and responsibility. I wanted to offer a way for allies to read the collective document and be called into solidarity. By solidarity, I mean taking actions of support or resistance that centre the needs of the survivor.
To facilitate this, the collective document was shared with selected friends and allies of participants. I invited participants to share the document with their friends (particularly those referred to in their stories) and I shared the document with allies who I knew would be interested in responding. The document was attached to a series of outsider-witness questions (M. White, 2007):

1. When reading 'Creating Ripples', were there particular words or stories that captured you or moved you? Why?
2. Where do these stories take you in terms of understanding the complexities and struggles of survivors of sexual violence?
3. What difference does it make to you to read this? Did it spark a new idea or give you food for thought?
4. What actions might you take in light of this new idea or understanding?

The second question was an attempt to acknowledge the complexities for survivors, and to avoid romanticising friendships. I was cognisant that the collective document celebrated positive social responses from friends. The risk of talking exclusively about positive social responses, in the absence of accounts of struggles, is that it may minimise or silences those struggles.

The last question was included to spur outsider witnesses into taking action. In reflecting on the history of outsider-witness practices, Cheryl White (2016) shared that the intention for outsider witnessing was for it to be not just a set of therapeutic questions about personal resonance, but also linked to social action. The questions require witnesses to take responsibility for acting differently as a result of hearing a particular testimony. I think this is a critical element to outsider-witness practice, but it takes on additional significance in the context of friendships. For friends, allies and practitioners to offer comforting words without taking action, is to unfairly place the onus of responsibility on the individual survivor to challenge these injustices. An ethic of solidarity and community accountability presses us to consider what we are actually going to do as a result of witnessing a survivor's story. For people who benefit from or are implicated in rape culture or male privilege, there is an added obligation to resist rape culture.

Finally, outsider-witnessing questions place actions in the context of the social histories of skills, values and knowledges (Barreto & Grandesso, 2010). This helps allies to avoid framing accounts of actions supporting survivors in terms of heroism. Contextualising and historicising actions also underscores the resources that cultures and communities have to support survivors. This can lead to more people being invited into communities of concern and resistance.

Facilitating a ceremony of contribution

One of the most exciting parts of this process was seeing how the stories within the collective document affected the people who read them. To date, we have received eight outsider-witness letters from friends and allies.

In the last session of the support and social action group, I brought in two outsider-witness letters to share. I invited the participants to provide a response to the letters if they felt moved by them. This process was intended to facilitate acknowledgement of the contributions the outsider witnesses have made to survivors. Below, I share letters from two of the eight outsider witness respondents.

Dear Wimin,

I feel warmth and hope knowing that acts of kindness, care and solidarity exist and that these can occur in different ways within different relationships (with friends, partners, extended family members and 'strangers'). It makes me think that friendship isn't a category of relationship so much as a set of qualities that can exist anywhere.

I was moved and cried a bit when I read the sentence, 'she kept me alive', because it is something I relate to. I think sometimes our mortality (or our experience of our own awareness of death) can sharpen what matters most, and what matters most (friendship) can keep us alive. It makes me think about our interdependence, but also how in moments of crisis (or prolonged moments of silence/repression/shame as I think it often is for survivors of sexual violence), we are sometimes dependent on another person, maybe wholly dependent, like we really could not get through things without them, and I think I pathologised this in me for a while, but I think it is also just okay – a reality, a fragile reality.

Finally, one of the other moments I was particularly moved by (because it was all amazing to read) was when a survivor wrote about being supported to heal while in a romantic/sexual relationship … I'm trying to say that I think I want to find ways of loving and supporting another human being who may be a survivor of sexual violence while also having my healing journey respected. I think this is possible, and I have hope. If I can support survivors of sexual violence in my friendship circles and community then I can transfer those lessons to my sexual relationships and vice versa.

Thank you again for being brave and sharing your stories.

With ripples,
Anonymous

Dear authors of the Creating Ripples document,

Thank you very much for sharing your stories, I found them very moving and they had me thinking quite a lot about actions of solidarity, resistance and accountability.

The story that stood out most to me was the one about the person playing at the bar who experienced sexual harassment and violation from the drunk bar manager and about the individual, friendship and collective responses to this. This stands out to me for two reasons. First, it reminds me how men have often made bars unsafe and disrespectful places for women. The second reason is something I feel deeply ashamed about. I am a white heterosexual man and this story reminded me far too closely of a time about 15 years ago when I was told to leave a bar because I had attempted to kiss the female lead singer of the band. And there was also another occasion about seven years ago when I was asked to leave a bar because I had touched a woman on the buttock.

Thinking about this story has me think about the ways I have participated in, and contributed to, discourses of men's culture such as 'getting women', treating women as objects and acting as if women's bodies are not their own, and of my own shameful actions.

There are a number of things I feel compelled to do as a result of these stronger understandings. Firstly, I want to apologise to the person in this story for acting in similar ways to the man she spoke about in her story. Secondly, my friends sometimes bring up the stories of these actions to make fun of me. When they do this in future I want to say clearly to them that I feel shame for these actions and for harm they would have caused these women. This is not because I want to stop my friends from bringing the stories up, but because I don't want them to be considered 'fun' or 'funny' stories. They are stories of shame for me and harm for those women.

With great appreciation and respect and with solidarity for your safety,
Anonymous

The pride, appreciation and excitement from hearing these words of profound acknowledgement was palpable and enlivening. As the letters were being read out, I noticed that the participants were hanging on every expression. The letters were a moving and honouring response to their stories. In many ways this was a ceremony of contribution.

As Denborough (2008) noted, because outsider witnesses speak about how they have been changed in some positive way by what they have heard, this enables the person at the centre of the ceremony to experience making a contribution to the lives of the outsider witnesses.

Rippling out

Since the group finished, I have shared the document with many other survivors and allies, both locally and internationally.[1] It is exciting that the participants' stories are rippling out beyond the support and social action group. I hope the practices shared in this paper will be of assistance to those supporting survivors, and that they will inspire counsellors and activists to re-value friendships for movements towards healing and justice. Although this project addressed sexual violence specifically, it has relevance to other social justice work. I encourage people to change and adapt these practices to make them culturally relevant and resonant for the communities that they are working with.

In the face of sexual violence and rape culture, we can tell our stories in ways that restore people's dignity, and we can take actions based on solidarity and mutual respect. As my work continues, I feel an immense sense of gratitude for the 10 participants who shared their stories of survival and resistance with me and with each other. Not only did these acts make a difference to the participants' healing journeys, but they also made a difference to their friends and the broader community. The following words from one of the participants seem a fitting way to end this paper: 'Their act of support created a chain reaction and a ripple effect that tackled rape culture head on, aiming to dismantle it. We were both enriched by our experience, realising that a small disruption really does work!'

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Notes

1 If you would like a copy of the collective document, please email me at michelledang5@gmail.com

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Dear Reader