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Chapter 9

Working towards cultural change and against sexual assault on campus

There is a long and rich history of grassroots feminist activists raising their voices about sexual harassment and sexual assault in schools, university campuses and on-campus accommodation (often called 'colleges'). This activism has included calling on schools and universities to provide education to reduce gender-based violence, to provide support services to respond to those who have been assaulted, and to implement clear policies and procedures for reporting sexual harassment and sexual assault. This chapter includes stories from women in Australia who have been subjected to sexual assault by school or university peers, and those who stand as allies with them in working for cultural change. In other countries there is also much work being done in relation to sexual harassment and sexual assault in schools and universities, such as the work of narrative practitioner Shelja Sen (2021) in India, who supports young women to explore gender-based discourses that lead to sexual harassment, and recognises their efforts to respond to these forces on their lives and to move in their preferred directions. There is also work being done to support young men to form respectful ways of being in relationships to reduce gender-based violence (Wishart & Maeder, 2018).

This chapter will further demonstrate the use of deconstruction and drawing on current news events and popular culture, as well as exploring the absent but implicit values, beliefs and commitments in expressions of outrage and the actions that

flow from these values, beliefs and commitments. The importance of collective action in working towards cultural change is also explored.

Bella's story

Bella was studying at university and living on campus. Her hope for our sessions was to reduce the effects of anxiety in her life. At the start of our second conversation, Bella described her distress and outrage that a student who also lived on campus had been raped at a local nightclub. Bella asked if we could focus on this, rather than just discussing anxiety. She spoke about the lack of response from police and security at the club, and we discussed the link with societal views about women who drink alcohol. Bella had heard that the police who interviewed the woman who was raped at the club asked questions such as 'How much were you drinking?' Bella named this as victim shaming, and we explored her knowledge of this shaming practice through news reports, books and discussions with friends. Then we discussed issues of consent and a recent effort by university campuses across Australia to provide education about consent at the start of every student's university education. Bella said that her university had implemented a consent module that had to be completed by all students. She told me that this module included ideas such as looking out for one another and that a person can say 'no' to sexual contact at any point, even during sex. The introduction of this module was in response to stories emerging of the high number of sexual assaults that happen on campuses and in university accommodation.

In 2017, the Australian Human Rights Commission (2017b) released a report on sexual violence on campus and provided detailed information to each university about the prevalence of sexual assault of their students. The report also recommended changes to university policies and procedures, with specific actions to better safeguard students and support those who have been assaulted. The current attention to this issue has been made possible in part by 'decades of work by campus-based feminist activists who sought to expose the ingrained culture of abuse and harassment that permeated Australian universities' (Hush, 2020, p. 293). How might we take hold of this momentum of social movement action and bring the social context into our work?

I ask people what they are noticing that connects their story with other stories in the media, or with what they know of current or past social movements. I invite reflections on changes that are occurring and what still needs to happen. This provides space for the person to reflect on their own role in society, and actions they are taking or might choose to take that fit with their beliefs and values. In joining voices and experiences together, people develop a sense of solidarity, which supports hope and sustainability.

Example questions to explore and deconstruct responses from authorities

- What was the response from security or police when the assault was reported?
- What were the effects of this response on you (or, as in Bella's situation, the person who was assaulted)?
- What is your guess about the impact on others who witnessed or heard later about this police response?
- What effect might this have on people seeking help from security or police in the future?
- What influences this attitude by security or police? Are there ideas in society that you think might be connected?
- You mentioned 'victim shaming' (or other discourse). Where did you hear about this – from friends, or in the news or social media?
- What does this phrase or idea mean to you?
- What is the history of this phrase or idea, do you think?

Bella noted that other initiatives the university said it was taking hadn't yet happened. For example, on-campus security was supposedly available to call in a crisis, and was meant to provide an escort home if a student felt unsafe. The woman's friends called security when they discovered she had been raped, but the security officer reportedly said, 'We will get there when we get there'. Other students, including Bella, had found that when they called on-campus security for assistance, they were slow to respond or didn't turn up. I asked Bella about various ways she and other students had responded to this problem. She said that she had reported the problem to the university accommodation service, and that she and other senior residents had been advising and supporting younger students. I asked about the hopes, intentions and values

connected to this action. Bella spoke about her strong desire for people to be safe, and her belief that women have the right to be out in the community enjoying their lives. However, Bella said the advice that she had given was a little at odds with her beliefs and values, focusing on ways to try to *keep yourself safe*, including being aware of drink spiking ('don't leave your drink unattended', 'don't allow someone to buy you a drink') and travelling with friends rather than alone. I asked Bella what her preferred message would be, and she said to tell people 'don't rape'. Bella highlighted that the focus in society is often on ways women should behave to 'keep themselves safe', whereas the focus should be on men taking responsibility for their own behaviour, and supporting their friends to treat women with respect. She told me about various devices to detect drink spiking, which were being recommended to students. Bella said, 'It is sad that it has come to that. Education should be about not raping, not about guarding your drink'.

Bella expressed sadness, anger and disgust that this had happened to a woman from her accommodation block. When hearing strong emotions, this is a cue to consider asking about beliefs and values that sit in the background – the absent but implicit (M. White, 2000b). When I asked about what the anger was in relation to, Bella articulated a belief: 'It's 2019. This shouldn't be happening!' She spoke about the anger and almost hopelessness that come from knowing that even with the #MeToo movement making issues of sexual harassment and assault more prominent in people's minds, so many women saying 'we won't stand for this', and the years of work of groups like End Rape on Campus, rape was still happening. She said, 'Society is changing, but I just want rape to stop now!' This strong statement, and her experience of 'almost hopelessness' gave me additional opportunities to explore the absent but implicit and we were again able to traverse the rich landscape of Bella's hopes, values, beliefs and commitments, as well as actions Bella had taken in line with these.

Example questions to explore the absent but implicit

- What is it about this attack in particular that has you experiencing sadness?
- You said you are experiencing anger, and I could hear it in your voice. What is the anger in relation to?

- When you said, ‘Society is changing, but I just want rape to stop now!’ I noticed your passion. Is ‘passion’ the right word?
- When did you first start feeling this strongly about women’s right to safety?
- When you say ‘almost hopelessness’, does that mean there is a little piece of hope left, or is it something else?
- What is it that is driving back hopelessness and inviting a little bit of hope?
- Who else knows about this little bit of hope and supports you in keeping it alive?

Connections between personal stories and social movements

Bella spoke about the belief that things are changing and that she can be part of that change. She recalled various moments that had encouraged her, such as the way former Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard had called out misogyny in parliament.¹ This opened the way for me to ask about the steps she and others were taking as a result of this hope and the belief that things are changing. We discussed that she can be, and already is, a part of that change. Bella spoke about university events she and others had helped organise to support men to explore what’s meant by ‘toxic masculinity’ and to find other ways to be a man. It brought her hope, seeing that men were working together with women to host this event. Bella spoke about being an active bystander, calling people to account for their sexist jokes, or jokes that condone sexual assault. She spoke about the importance of being a good friend to other women and being supported by other women – a two-way flow. Bella also said she had been initiating friendships with younger students and being available to listen. This had resulted in young women speaking to her about their experiences of unsafe and disrespectful relationships, and about sexual harassment and assault. Bella had been

¹ The famous ‘misogyny speech’ occurred in parliament in 2012 while Julia Gillard was serving as Prime Minister. Gillard was the first and as yet the only female prime minister of Australia. She has since written several books, including editing the feminist collection, *Not now, not ever: Ten years on from the misogyny speech* (Gillard, 2022).

able to offer assurance, care and referral to appropriate services. Above all, she said, the young women appreciated that she believed them.

In the back of my mind as we were discussing these things were some songs I had heard on the radio. I mentioned to Bella that I had heard in recent years songs by female singer-songwriters challenging the culture of sexual harassment and assault, and a song by a man who was telling other men that if a woman is too drunk to walk, then she is too drunk to give consent. We wondered together about whether cultural change is making these songs more common, or whether the songs are supporting culture to change, or whether it is happening in both directions.

In circling back to the reason Bella had originally come to see me, we were both happily surprised that anxiety had not overtaken Bella since she had heard about the rape. We explored the ways she had been taking care of herself, which anxiety did not like, such as staying connected to friends, getting some exercise, and pausing and assessing an anxious thought. It was useful for Bella to notice anxiety's intentions such as keeping her in her room and then decide if this was the direction she wanted her life to go in.

In place of hopelessness, Bella chose to focus on 'What can I do now?' She thought about further steps she could take on campus, such as shutting down victim-shaming rumours in relation to the recent assault, and instead opening up further conversations about mutual support and solidarity among women and men. She could invite other senior residents to also be on the lookout for inappropriate jokes or rumours. This was part of our discussion about ways Bella could stay connected to the movement to end gendered violence, rather than take it on as her responsibility alone (which might fit more with anxiety's agenda of making her responsible for everything). This sparked the idea of following up with the university again *as a group of senior residents* about the security issues and other aspects of addressing sexual assault, such as clear reporting guidelines and support for people who have been subjected to assault.

Example questions to draw a connection between a personal story and a social movement

- What is it like to hear about similar stories from friends, in the media or on social media? (This could be asked through separate questions, or choose the most relevant)
- Does hearing about this from others offer you something useful, such as a sense of not being alone in the experience or that others understand?
- Do you remember the name of someone who shared their story? Or can you tell me what you remember of their story?
- What stands out to you about this story?
- How does it connect with your story or the concern we have been discussing?
- When you hear people speaking of their own experience to the media, does this make it harder or easier to speak with your friends about your experience? Or perhaps it makes no difference or a bit of both?
- When you hear people speaking in the media, such as [Brittany Higgins, Grace Tame² or whomever the person relates to in their own culture], does it support hope, or a move towards action, or something else?
- What would you call it? How would you describe this sense?
- You mentioned wanting to ‘take action’³ – what changes would you like to see in our society?
- What might be your next step in this?
- Who are you already joining with, or who might you join with?
- In feminism, there is an idea that voices are stronger together. Does this connect with you in some way?

² Grace Tame is an Australian activist advocating for survivors of sexual assault, especially in relation to law reform. She uses the hashtag #LetHerSpeak. Grace Tame was named Australian of the Year in 2021.

³ ‘Action’ is not meant to equate to speaking publicly about one’s own experience. There are a range of actions that might be taken to connect with a social movement. There should be no agenda or pressure from the practitioner to take action, or imply what that action might look like.

- Does it connect to other philosophies you believe in or social movements you are a part of or you respect (such as Black Lives Matter, the union movement, the Indigenous land rights movement)?
- In taking the steps you have already taken, or in thinking about potential steps, what value does this connect with?
- What is the history of this value in your life?

When I asked Bella about the history of her values and commitments, she said

My values come from my family. I believe attitudes are learnt. All my life my mother and grandmother have asked me, 'What kind of human being do you want to be? What effect do you want to have in this world?' So I've thought about this often, and the most important things to me are not about money or status, but about being kind, supporting people, and letting my family and friends know that they are loved. When I think about taking a step or not, or thinking about how to respond to a situation, this question helps me decide what to do – it keeps me accountable. 'Who do I want to be?' It makes me focus on my values. I want to have a positive impact on the world, and so supporting women and helping men change their attitude is part of that.

Collective action to protest sexual violence

Recently, many young women have spoken out on social media about their experiences of sexual harassment at school and sexual assault at parties with other students from their school (or for those at single-sex schools, with students from their 'brother' school). In Sydney, where I live, there have been a lot of stories from former students of elite private schools. There are wonderings about whether the large number of sexual assaults is caused by a lack of education about consent or whether there is a stronger sense of entitlement among private school boys due to class privilege (Leser & Chrysanthos, 2021). Some young people who have spoken to me say that some private school boys they know have a sense that they will be able to 'get away with it' because their father is a lawyer or has plenty of money to pay a lawyer. One voice that has added a lot of momentum to the call for better education about consent and respectful relationships is Chanel Contos. Three days after federal staffer Brittany Higgins' allegations about being raped in Parliament House were made public, Contos started an online petition to address harassment and assault in schools. After

hearing stories from multiple friends about their subjection to sexual assault, she initiated a petition for consent to be included in high-school sex education and established an online space⁴ for young women to share their stories. In three weeks, she had garnered 30 000 signatures and almost 5000 testimonies (Contos, 2021) from girls who were current or former students of elite private schools across Australia.

There has been criticism of the feminist movement for focusing on already privileged white, middle-class or upper-class women, and for giving little support or attention to the experiences of interpersonal and state violence, oppression and marginalisation of women of colour (Moreton-Robinson, 2000). Most stories I am hearing in the media are stories from highly educated white middle-class or upper-class women. It seems that little has changed in terms of whose stories are told. When I speak to women who attended public schools, some of them have also experienced sexual assault at parties by school peers, and both women and men remember a culture of misogynistic language and actions by male students in public schools. In addition to the action that is being taken by private school students, public school students are also taking action. When recently in Adelaide, I read an article about female students from Adelaide High School who held a protest against what they perceived to be inaction by the school in response to reports of sexual harassment. One student was quoted as saying, 'We should not have to walk through school halls to be told by male students daily what they will do to us sexually' (DiGirolamo, 2021). The stories are out there, and young people want to be heard.

These stories of sexual assault at parties or harassment by young men who are known to the young women reminded me of what Bella told me of discussions with her friends. Many of her friends described their first sexual experience in a way that raised red flags to Bella. What they were describing didn't sound to Bella like first-time sex, it sounded like assault. Her friends said things like, 'He kept pressuring me', or 'I wanted to leave but he didn't let me'. As they discussed this, Bella and her friends were able to explore what constituted sexual assault, what consent means, and what

⁴ Teachusconsent.com

actions are in line with the respect that they would want in a relationship. They were all horrified to realise how common sexual assault is, and that many young women don't know that pressured sex or sex when a woman is too affected by alcohol or drugs to consent is assault, or that assault from someone you know or trust is still assault. These conversations with her friends informed and fuelled Bella's passion to reach out to younger students.

Many young women have told me that the response from their friends after disclosing sexual assault has been significant to them. For women who were not believed, or who were blamed by their friends for the assault, the result was devastating and had made it much harder to speak to others, or to consider reporting the assault. It hindered efforts to reclaim a sense of wellbeing. This doesn't mean that they won't find healing and justice, but that the road was made harder. In these situations, I am careful to explore how it was that they had managed to speak with me, despite these responses from others. What did it take to even consider booking the appointment? It might have taken courage or self-compassion. We might name this as 'another step towards healing' or 'an action of self-care' or 'a step away from silencing'. I also explore other avenues through which they have sought connection and validation, such as with family members or a different friend. Other connections might be with people they haven't met, such as through podcasts or books from those who have shared their story or taken action for the benefit of others.

I also acknowledge the sense of hurt and betrayal that their friend did not believe them or blamed them. This sense of hurt and betrayal is additional to the anguish and distress caused by the assault.

At times, a person who has been harmed wants to explore a bewildering and harmful response they received from friends or family members. The questions below are aimed at assisting the person to explore the social and political contexts of the response they received. The person may have received different responses from different people. The intention behind this is to separate the person from the problem. We are separating the friend or family member from internalising labels, just as we would for the 'client'. However, this certainly does not reduce the responsibility of the

friend or family member for their response and the harm caused by this response. Nor are we aiming to convince the 'client' that their friend or family member didn't really mean it or really does love them. It is a careful and gentle exploration, which should be guided by the hopes and intentions of the person who has been harmed. If they initiate a conversation about wanting to understand the response they received, then we can tentatively offer an exploration of the social and political context. It is important to note that the effects of this response would first be explored. Some example questions to explore the effects of the response are offered in Chapter 5. The relationship would also need to be evaluated for safety and the person might choose to upgrade or downgrade the status of the relationship using re-membering questions (M. White, 2007). For example, Sarah in Chapter 5 wanted to understand why her mother had blamed her for being raped and why she physically assaulted her. This response had Sarah experiencing shame and self-hate, which led to an eating disorder. We are not aiming to move an internalised label from Sarah only to place a label on her mother, such as 'terrible mother'; however, we are not excusing her mother's response. Sarah and I came to understand that her mother's own experience of being sexually assaulted and shamed and silenced may have shaped her response. Sarah said this was helpful to understand and *didn't* mean that what her mother did was okay. Sarah was able to navigate her relationship with her mother on her own terms, such as only seeing her mother for short periods. Prior to meeting up, Sarah would call first to check out her mother's current thinking, as her mother was also affected by schizophrenia. Simone, whose story is shared in Chapter 5, was able to see that her husband's blaming and shaming response to her rape fit with his pattern of behaviour in the context of ongoing serious physical and emotional abuse. In the past she had been hospitalised due to his use of physical violence, and he had been verbally abusive to her just prior to her leaving the house the evening of the rape. She had gone out to escape his verbal and emotional abuse. Seeing this response from him in the context of gendered intimate partner violence assisted in further discussion of options for Simone to consider in relation to leaving the relationship or putting in additional supports. Similarly, a friend may also be using emotional abuse or more subtle undermining and manipulation tactics, which need to be explored at a suitable time.

These responses often contribute to shame and self-blame, even if the person who was assaulted usually believes that a person who has been assaulted is not at fault.

Some questions to try to make sense of a harmful response from friends/family

- Would you be interested in putting self-blame and shame to the side for the moment, and seeing what might be another way to understand this person's response?
- What reason might there possibly be for your friend or family member to deny that X assaulted you?
- Why might they prefer to think that it didn't happen or that it was consensual?
- You said that believing you might require them to change their opinion of that person. Why might they not be open to changing their opinion of that person?
- You've come up with some possible answers (e.g. They would then have to decide whether or not to change their relationship with the person; they might be expected to support me to go to the police, and they don't want their friend/relative to be in trouble; it would burst the bubble of their image of having the perfect family; they might feel they have let me down because they couldn't protect me). What is it like to consider these possibilities?
- Do you think there was anything else happening that might change over time, such as initial shock or uncertainty about how to respond? Have they said or done anything since that makes you think they might regret their initial response?
- When this person you love blamed you or minimised what happened, do you think they were buying into an idea or message they had heard somewhere else (e.g. women need to be more careful; men can't help themselves if women wear short skirts)? Are there bigger forces at play than just you and them (gender-based violence; male privilege etc.)?
- Does this person's blaming and minimising response fit with what you know of them? Have there been other times when they have blamed or shamed you or others or undermined you or others?

- Is this type of response common in the relationship, or does this really stand out as being an anomaly, an unusual response from them?

If the person states that they are often undermined or blamed by this person, or they express other concerns about the relationship, this should be explored in further detail. It may be a sign that they are being subjected to manipulative practices or coercive control. This can happen in friendships, families or intimate relationships. We might say, 'You've said this undermining has happened quite often. Can you tell me about another one of these times?' Then we might ask, 'Given that this has happened multiple times, would you be willing for us to take a closer look at the ways this person is treating you and the impact of this?' It can be a slow process to help someone explore the relationship and support them to evaluate its safety. The idea of concept development was discussed in Chapter 4 and can assist in exploring such ideas as trust, respect, love and really getting into the details of what these look like, as compared to actions that have been labelled as love but are used to manipulate or control the person. Following the statement of position map 1 (M. White, 2007) will lead to an evaluation question about the manipulative practices or the undermining. We can then ask evaluative questions about the relationship itself, and whether or not the person wants to step away from the relationship.

For those who were believed and supported by friends, this made a positive difference to their sense of themselves and to their healing journey.⁵ Representations on TV and movies in which the woman screams or repeatedly says 'no' mean that women who were affected by drugs or alcohol, or who were in a freeze state, sometimes feel that their response was inadequate. They may doubt whether what happened can be classified as assault.

Olivia came to speak with me about the ongoing effects of a sexual assault that had occurred at a party, when the effects of alcohol meant that she was unable to walk or talk. Despite experiencing negative physical sensations and emotional

⁵ For a more thorough discussion on drawing on friendships as a community response to injustice with women who have survived sexual assault, see Dang, 2018.

responses that fit with her understanding of trauma, Olivia said that at times she got confused about the assault. I asked her what the confusion says or does to confuse her. Olivia said that due to the effects of alcohol, parts of her memory were unclear, so confusion suggested that maybe she wasn't remembering it accurately. We then discussed alcohol and consent, and she was very clear that if someone can't walk or talk then they are too drunk to say 'yes', or to fully understand what is going on, so therefore there is no consent. I asked her what this understanding does to confusion. Olivia said that this helps her know that she was too drunk to give consent, which makes confusion evaporate. We also spoke about the ways she responded to try to protect herself, despite not being able to stop him. Another key thought is that her friends came to find her, and they witnessed her distress and they yelled at him to get away from her. In times of confusion, she draws on this memory of her friends' response immediately after the assault. They came to find Olivia because they knew she was unsafe. They saw her distress, which confirmed that it was not consensual. They yelled at him. I asked her what meaning she took from this, and she said that her friends could immediately see that it was sexual assault, and they were angry at him. She stated that although the assault had negative consequences, such as nightmares, panic, anger outbursts and difficulties with physical intimacy, the knowledge that her friends yelled at the young man who assaulted her comforted her. It made her feel cared for and supported. It also cut through the confusion around alcohol and consent. In recent times, Olivia had told her father about the sexual assault, and he had responded with care and support. Using re-membering questions (M. White, 2007), I was able to assist Olivia to acknowledge the values and the attributes she and her father shared. She enjoyed honouring her dad in our conversation, acknowledging the effects of his care, and considering herself as similar to him. We also discussed the ways Olivia had contributed to the lives of her father and her friends to resist the idea that she was a burden to them. Dang (2018) has taken this a step further, exploring the way the actions taken by supportive family or friends to respond to an assault or to challenge the aspects of culture that make sexual assault possible may also contribute to the friends' own sense of self or to their relationships.

When having conversations with women about sexual assault, I see my role as moving beyond listening well and contributing to healing. I invite contemplation about broader issues of gender-based violence and injustice, and then support connection with other women, either through their own networks, or through sharing stories of knowledge, skills and resistance among the women I have met through my work. These various aspects of the work provide a foundation for local social movement (Denborough, 2008). Some women are already very familiar with thinking about broader issues of injustice and placing their experiences in this context, but for others this is new. Some, like Bella, are already connecting and sharing their skills and knowledges and experiencing a sense of contribution to others, in which case, I hope our conversations fan the flame.

Practitioner reflection

- Which story in this chapter connected with you most? What was it about this story that resonated for you or challenged you in some way?
- What has this got you thinking about?
- What might be different for you or for the people you meet with on account of hearing these stories?
- What small action will you take on account of hearing these stories and being inspired or offered healing or challenged (or something else)?