



## Building bridges across stories:

Developing cross-cultural partnerships to challenge masculinity

by Nicolás Mosso Tupper



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### Abstract

This paper explores the possibilities of developing cross-cultural partnerships to support men in defying dominant prescriptions of masculinity. It focuses on the individual stories of two men of different ages and experiences living on different continents, and shows the coming together of their stories. Both undertook a migration of identity away from dominating ideas and beliefs that justified harm and abuse, and towards a preferred form of masculinity aligned with their values, and with practices of dignity and nonviolence. Through the creation, translation and sharing of documents of resistance, each of these men was able to contribute to the other, and to receive something in return. This helped to counteract the sense of isolation often experienced by men who depart from dominant masculinities and seek to inhabit a more ethical way of being. It also enabled cross-cultural insights about the operations of power. I hope the story of these two men and their improbable partnership will inspire more partnerships that support the questioning of cultural ideas about how we perform gender, and that it will invite practitioners to notice and attend to acts of resistance to non-liberative ways of being.

**Key words: masculinity; cross-cultural; partnerships; violence; alcohol; ethical restoration; documentation; narrative practice**

Mosso Tupper, N. (2023). Building bridges across stories: Developing cross-cultural partnerships to challenge masculinity. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, (1), 33–42. <https://doi.org/10.4320/DMFX2738>

Author pronouns: he/him

It is not uncommon to find that some of the people consulting us are facing similar problems. In fact, I often find myself meeting with multiple people who are dealing with similar issues. A substantial number of men who consult with me have expressed that they do not feel comfortable with how they think about themselves as men or with actions they have undertaken as a result. Many have started to question the way they perform masculinity and are opening up to new and diverse preferred ways of being a man.

Although I will touch on the issue, the focus of this paper is not on work with men who have used violence in their relationships and the possibilities for responding (see Jenkins, 2006, 2009; Lindemann, 2001; Yuen & C. White, 2007). My main intention in the following pages is to explore the possibilities for developing cross-cultural partnerships to defy dominant prescriptions of masculinity. These partnerships have been fostered through the use of documents of resistance and the creation of bridges across stories.

I will share the stories of two men: Fernando, a 22-year-old college student from Chile, and Chris, a 60-year-old journalist from Australia. Given the many cultural differences between Australia and Chile, I was quite surprised to hear many similar expressions from these men who were not only living on opposite sides of the world, but were also in different stages of their lives.

## Meeting Fernando

I met Fernando in early 2018 while working in a psychological clinic in the centre of Santiago in Chile. Fernando was an 18-year-old college student, and he was unsure about which degree to pursue. In the beginning, our conversations focused on his relationship with his older brother, Lucas, who was consuming multiple drugs and had recently been given a diagnosis of schizophrenia. Fernando had a complex relationship with his brother, as Lucas could be violent, especially when under the influence of marijuana, which was quite often. Fernando, the youngest of five siblings, had been responding to his older brother with matched aggressiveness. Back then, we worked on some of the many skills Fernando had to respond to those situations in ways that were safe for both him and Lucas. I saw Fernando until October of that year when we both felt confident that he had enough knowledge and skills to navigate this complex relationship.

I did not hear from Fernando until a year later, in November of 2019. Back then, I knew that I would be moving to Australia at the end of the year, and I recognised that I would be dealing with all the complexities of that move. So when Fernando asked me if we could start seeing each other again, I said that if we were to have more than a few meetings, they would have to be online. This was before COVID-19 times, and it would be a new experience for both of us. After some thought, we agreed to give it a try and see how we both felt.

This time, Fernando was dealing with something completely different. And while it was great to hear from him again and to learn how much his relationship with his brother had changed in the past year, it is not always the best when people get back in touch as it often means that they are dealing with hardship again. During our first meeting, Fernando explained that he had been concerned about how his relationship with his partner had been unfolding. Fernando described how, because he came from a stigmatised part of the city, his partner's family tended to make derogatory comments, which affected his self-esteem and how he looked at himself and his family. Even though he did not agree with the comments, Fernando said that he was finding it hard to shake them off and felt embarrassed about inviting his partner over to his house.

With time, Fernando started to connect to his life and roots in a different way. He began to talk about the effort some members of his family had made so that he could study and go to university – an opportunity that not all of his siblings had. And while he could recognise his privilege in relation to other family members, Fernando was also proud about how much he had worked to get to where he was in life. The conversations about shame started to dissipate as stories that honoured his family's history gained more strength.

After meeting for a couple of months, Fernando and I decided that it would be a good idea to stop having our sessions. At that time, I remember seeing Fernando much more comfortable with who he was.

### ***Inviting conversations of masculinity***

In January of 2021, I received a message from Fernando saying that he had broken up with his partner and would like to talk once again. I was still living and working in Adelaide so we met over video calls. During our second meeting, Fernando began to name something new he had been dealing with. He called this a "rage attack". Fernando said that he felt "toxic" when

he was under the influence of these rage attacks and connected them with feelings like “pain” and “suffering”, which he did not want for his life.

I asked Fernando to tell me more about these rage attacks he had been facing. Fernando told me that when he was growing up, his dad had been an aggressive man, and Fernando had witnessed his older brother fighting with their father on multiple occasions. He had discussed this with his brothers; they often said how lucky he was to have been the youngest sibling because he didn't experience the physical punishments they were subjected to. Nevertheless, Fernando explained to me that in order to resist the violence that he had experienced and witnessed, he had found in rage a useful ally as a young child to stay safe.

I was curious about how he had been resisting the effects of rage attack in the present, but I also felt like I needed to know more about the consequences of the actions he took when under its influence. Fernando said that rage attack had grown stronger when he argued with his then partner, and that afterwards he would feel “guilty” and “like a monster”. He even felt like taking his own life because of this.

### ***Moving away from abuse: The separation phase***

I sought to conceptualise what Fernando was moving away from: beliefs that justify abuse, and also conclusions and ideas about gender and power – what Fernando was describing as “rage attacks” and feeling “toxic”. I also sought to understand what he was moving towards: forms of masculinity aligned with his hopes and values. This line of exploration was inspired by Nancy Gray's work responding to men's violence (Gray, 2006) and Michael White's use of a “migration of identity” metaphor (M. White, 1995, 2007; after Turner, 1969). This metaphor can be used to help men “chart a movement away from violence and dominating practices and towards different forms of masculinity” (Gray, 2006, p. 4) through stages of separation, liminality and reincorporation (M. White, 1995, p. 100).

My initial intention was for Fernando to create some space between himself and some of the beliefs that can justify domination and control.

In the following conversation, I invited Fernando to create a rich description of rage attack. He described how rage fed insecurity, particularly about his body. Even though he and his former partner had broken up months before, he still felt jealous and often found himself thinking about her having sex with other men.

This made him feel enraged and insecure about himself and his body: “I just start to think that I'm trash, that I'm disposable ... It makes me think about my muscles, or lack of them, and the size of my penis. It makes me think she may feel more pleasure with her current partner, so I feel insecure.” The effects of these ideas led to negative conclusions about who he was as a person.

I asked Fernando about why he felt jealous, and to consider where this set of ideas about sexuality and body standards had come from. Fernando thought that most of these ideas “come from society ... and from the world of pornography. It makes me feel like I'm toxic”. Fernando said that he did not agree with any of the ideas he had described, but he could not stop thinking about them.

At this point in the conversation, Fernando had mentioned a few concepts that I was curious about. He had talked about “insecurity” about himself and his body; he had talked about “rage”, which appeared during arguments but also came as an effect of some intrusive thoughts; and he had talked about feeling “toxic”. He had also named “ideas that come from society” about bodies, sizes and shapes.

I asked Fernando if there were connections among these ideas or maybe a common plot. And if they did have something in common, perhaps he could think of a way we could name these ideas that so far seemed to appear very close together, but not necessarily together. Fernando quickly said, “Yes! It's not hard to see that it is toxic masculinity. It's not just masculinity, but it's a toxic masculinity”. My idea here was to make this problem more tangible as it appeared to be blurry and abstract, but at the same time, it was taking up too much space in various areas of Fernando's life.

### ***Looking back, moving forward: The liminal phase***

At our next meeting, I invited Fernando to take a step back and look at what we had been discussing. I mentioned what I thought had been some relevant topics of conversation. Fernando rapidly started to describe other aspects of his life he had noticed being affected by “toxic masculinity”.

Fernando mentioned that he often felt like he was “competing with other men”, especially “competing for women”. Even if only in his head, he found himself constantly comparing himself to others. Fernando was sure that this form of masculinity invited him to compete with others, which ended up leading to more insecurity.

Once again, Fernando did not agree with these ideas. When I asked him why he did not agree with these ideas, Fernando said that they “try to convince me that women can be possessed, not as an object, but as an ‘achievement’ by hooking up with more women or things like that”. I then asked him how he could resist those ideas. “I try to resist these ideas by being aware that they are not good ideas because they reduce the dignity of women, and I do not want to become someone like that. Understanding that helps me.”

During this time, I could already hear an intention and a concrete movement away from abuse and dominant forms of masculinity and towards a preferred identity that was distinct from being “toxic” and “a monster”. However, it was also important that Fernando continue to develop and move away from the tactics of dominant forms of masculinity.

This led to a conversation about dignity, which seemed to be something Fernando greatly valued. Fernando mentioned that he had learnt dignity from his mother and that it was a significant value she had taught him. At this point, I invited him to tell me a story about how that had come to be. I intended to move between the landscape of identity and the landscape of action (M. White, 2007), so I invited Fernando to think of possibilities for ethical restitution that would be aligned with the value of dignity, and with moving away from a sense of repentance and merely wanting to apologise because it’s “the right thing to do” (Jenkins, 2006). Some questions that I would ask to invite reflection about whether an apology might have a restorative effect are:

- What is the purpose of your apology?
- Who is this apology in service of?
- What do you think the other person will gain from your apology, and what do you think you will gain?

After this meeting, Fernando and I both had the feeling that our topic of discussion was clearly relevant. Fernando said at the end of our session that it seemed like we had managed to “hit the nail on the head”.

### ***Inhabiting nonviolent values and creating documents of resistance: The reincorporation phase***

During our conversations, Fernando had described holding beliefs that served the purpose of justifying abuse and tactics of domination and control. Through

our discussions, Fernando had been able to take a step back from these beliefs and had started to live his life through nonviolent values and concrete actions aligned with these values. He had made substantial changes to his daily practices to live in accordance with nonviolence.

Our conversations at this point had started to touch on many different ideas and topics, so Fernando and I thought it would be a good idea to document our conversations. We decided to set up a shared online document in which I could ask questions and he could write his responses. Because I had the practice of taking notes during conversations, I provided Fernando with a few key words or topics from the conversations we’d had so he could expand on them. Focusing on the landscape of identity, I provided Fernando with two big categories:

- beliefs and tactics that allow for abuse: competitiveness, rage, social standards, jealousy, social media, ideas of success and guilt
- practices and values I want for my life: dignity, nonviolence, damage-repair and self-love.

In response to the first category of beliefs and tactics that allow for abuse, Fernando wrote:

The idea of *competitiveness* with other men, especially “competing for women”. It is not wrong to fight for what you want in life, but it is not good to compare yourself with other men to see who the “alpha male” is or who “gets the women”. Women are not a trophy.

Here Fernando described some of the beliefs that justify or normalise abuse towards women (competitiveness) and briefly mentioned something he wanted for his own life (not comparing myself to see who “gets more women”). Because I hoped that Fernando would create a description close to his own experience, I then wrote on the document some questions inspired by the externalisation map (M. White, 2007).

Nicolás: Fernando, what would you call this first idea? Is competitiveness the best way of naming this? If that is the name you find the most accurate, how do you think competitiveness is trying to convince men that they can possess women?

Fernando: I think this “competitiveness” or “comparing myself” is due to insecurities. A better name for it might be “masculine competitiveness”.



I believe that this idea suggests that women can be possessed, not as an object, but as an “achievement” by hooking up with more women or things like that. I try to resist these ideas by being aware that they are not positive because they reduce the dignity of women, and I do not want to become someone like that. I don’t have to comply with cultural standards that are unfair and have been built based on outdated and unrealistic logics. Understanding that helps me.

Nicolás: Fernando, you mentioned that you are measuring yourself against “cultural standards” – what do you mean by that? Where do you think these cultural standards come from?

Fernando: By “cultural standards” I mean certain “norms” or ideals that are understood in our [Chilean] society as something optimal in the eyes of others. But this is something merely cultural, and it is built by the same people, collectively. I think because of the history of the country, we often believe we must compete with others.<sup>1</sup>

Nicolás: I think it’s great that you are aware of the impact of these cultural standards in your life. What steps do you think you can take to live farther apart from the cultural standards and closer to dignity, as you mentioned before?

Fernando: Those ideals have hurt me, and I have ended up hurting others as well as a result. When I compare myself, I feel lesser for not meeting the expectations of the dominant ideas. Knowing this helps me to be more authentic and show myself to others. I don’t have to be ashamed of being myself. This helps me reduce my anger, jealousy and self-esteem problems, at least so that those ideas lose strength. I think [the other values] will serve me for a lifetime and [help me] build the person I want to be. I am not where I would like to be yet, but I have made significant progress, and I want to keep moving forward. I want to be a healthy and happy person. And I think I can do it. I want my acts to be more in line with my values and not with dominant social ideas.

We continued working on the document between sessions, adding, changing and editing concepts. I continued to ask questions in the shared document until we both felt comfortable with how rich the document was – although we also understood that there were plenty more stories that could have been added.

After we finished writing, Fernando decided to print and keep a hardcopy of the document on his nightstand. Whenever he felt rage, competitiveness or another face of “toxic masculinity” attempting to crawl back into his life, Fernando would lay down on his bed and read his document.

## Meeting Chris

In April of 2021, I started working in an alcohol and other drugs rehabilitation program in Adelaide, Australia. In my second week there, I met Chris, who was 60 years old. When I first met him, it was hard not to feel curious about this person in front of me. Chris seemed highly motivated and appeared to have a passion for telling stories. In our first meeting, Chris seemed eager to adequately explain to me who he was and why he had decided to consult the program – I barely got to ask him any questions at all!

Chris began by telling me that he was a journalist, and that in 1993, he had been sent for several months to Yatala Prison for protecting a source in court. This had led to what Chris called “thirty years of struggling with depression” leading to “serious alcohol dependency”. He and his family had struggled as a result: “My family had come to their wits’ end constantly finding empty bottles hidden in the house and my car.”

Throughout this meeting and our next one, Chris told me about what he and his family had to endure due to “alcoholism”. However, there had also been clear attempts to resist these effects: “Alcohol is not going to control my life.”

Chris and his family had a harrowing experience at the beginning of the year when Chris’ wife attempted to take her own life. He recalled finding her “lying in a pool of blood on our kitchen floor, having tried to end her life because she could no longer cope with my lies”. Chris felt highly responsible for this situation: “My actions nearly cost me my wife’s life ... I suddenly realised I had become so absorbed in myself and my pain that

I had failed to see the impact that my pain, my addiction and my behaviour were having on those closest to me.”

In our subsequent conversations, we continued to challenge some of the past beliefs that Chris had used to justify his actions. However, these conversations seemed quite heavy for Chris, with the realisation of the pain he had caused his family. We discussed his frustration at coming to realise this and the guilt as well: “I could hear what they were saying, but I felt so frustrated because they could not see that I ‘had this’. I was in complete control. I was lying the whole time!”

Following the same ideas as the work I was doing with Fernando, once Chris had begun moving away from the beliefs and tactics that allowed abuse in his life, I invited Chris to collaborate in documenting some of the ideas and topics we had discussed.

## Linking stories

When working with people who have developed significant knowledge through their experiences, I always seek to find ways of sharing it with others who may find it helpful. The experience of sharing hard-won knowledge can “bring a sense that their suffering has not been for nothing” (Denborough, 2008, p. 3).

Because I was working concurrently with Fernando and Chris, I thought I would invite them to share their newly acquired knowledge, and hopefully develop a sense of partnership between them.

I found that overlapping the re-authoring conversations map (M. White, 2007) with the three phases of definitional ceremony (M. White, 2000), as seen in Figure 1, was a helpful guide to structuring their interaction.

	<b>Creating bridges: Telling of the story</b>	<b>Developing partnerships: Re-telling of the story</b>	<b>Inhabiting ethical identities: Re-telling of the re-telling:</b>
<b>Landscape of identity</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Values</li> <li>• Hopes</li> <li>• Dreams</li> <li>• Longings</li> <li>• Commitments</li> <li>• Understandings</li> </ul>	A. Beliefs that justify abuse <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Non-liberative traditions</li> <li>• Cultural and normative understandings about gender</li> </ul> B. Nonviolent values and beliefs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Liberative traditions</li> <li>• Liberative cultural understandings of gender</li> </ul>	A. Cultural and non-liberative understandings are contrasted B. Cultural and liberative understandings are contrasted C. Sense of partnership starts to develop	A. Moving away from: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Notion of nostalgia</li> <li>• Notion of apologies and forgiveness</li> </ul> B. Katarsis to understandings of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Remorse and restorative action</li> </ul>
<b>Landscape of action</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Actions</li> <li>• Initiatives</li> <li>• Responses</li> </ul>	A. Tactics of domination and control <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Non-liberative stories and rituals</li> </ul> B. Practices of life that are aligned with nonviolent values	A. Cultural practices of life are questioned B. Space for new initiatives is created	A. Moving away from <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Act of apologies in line with notions nostalgia and forgiveness</li> </ul> B. Katarsis to new ways of performing masculinity: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Practices of ethical restorative action</li> </ul>

Figure 1: Overlaying re-authoring conversations and the phases of definitional ceremony

### ***Creating bridges: Telling of the story***

Because Chris was an English speaker and Fernando spoke Spanish, I figured that if we met up on a video call, it would be a bit hard for them to communicate, even if I was interpreting. It was also tricky to find the right time due to the time difference between Santiago and Adelaide.

Then I thought that I could translate the very rich documents of resistance they had each written. They had described values and understandings that had in the past allowed them to abuse and hurt people they loved. They had shared stories about how that came to be, and they had declared how they now opposed those ideas. They had also described the values they wanted for their lives and narrated stories and practices that were aligned with these preferred values.

I thought that we could share the translated documents and then record each man's responses for the other. I proposed that we meet to read and discuss the documents, and suggested that this might give each the opportunity to both contribute to and receive something from another man, on the other side of the world, who, despite age and cultural differences, had dealt with similar issues.

My intention was also to invite them to further consider how some of their previous ideas and tactics were related to cultural and non-liberative traditions, and to foster a sense of belonging and liberation that was distinct from the oppressive ideas they had both described. I hoped to create space for justice and reparation and to give each the possibility to contribute to someone else's life through sharing stories about attempting to live away from violence and abuse (Lacey, 2005).

I believe that understanding the non-liberative traditions that come from our culture is crucial. Often, it is not until we can look at our culture in contrast with others that we can see the non-liberative aspects of it (Tamasese & C. White, 2007). However, it is important to keep in mind that this understanding must not be used as a means to justify abuse and harm we have done to others, but as a way to take a step back from our own culture and look with a critical eye at our ways of being.

The intention of developing this partnership was also that these two men who were now actively contesting patriarchal forms of masculinity – and beginning to identify the effects of the new lifestyles they were creating – might be supported to resist the commonly

felt sense of isolation faced by men who depart from dominant masculinities, and which can often be dissuasive for men who are starting to inhabit a more ethical way of being (M. White, 1992).

### ***Developing partnerships: The re-telling of the story***

I met with Chris and read through Fernando's document with him. My initial plan for this meeting had been to go over the four categories of inquiry used in definitional ceremonies – expression, image, personal resonance and transport (M. White, 2000) – with an ethical focus on restorative action.

I began by asking Chris what had most caught his attention in Fernando's document.

Chris: There are a lot of things I resonate with, a lot of things in common, especially about the outside expectations. This has been part of my own road: setting my dreams, my desires and my objectives based on outside expectations. And what's worse, I've put them on other people. I made it other people's responsibility for them to fulfil these desires. I made it like a box of expectations to my wife, my kids, and told them, "You have to make me feel better, feel fulfilled". So my relationships turned into a constant negotiation. I look back now, and just like Fernando, I realise that has been influenced by society and social media ... Now I see the effect of this on my kids, on them wanting to get the perfect photo all the time, to always want to upload the right angle, and even to use photoshop to edit their photos. Sometimes it breaks my heart to hear my kids talking about how they want to "sell that image", and then I look at myself and realise that I'm still doing it, maybe in a more traditional way, in the way I speak, or the things I give value to, instead of Instagram. I feel really guilty about it. I think Fernando and I feel guilty.

Here, what Fernando was calling "cultural standards", Chris called "outside expectations". I have found that in such slightly different namings, creative responses can occur as they suggest a different perspective on a similar subject. My intention was for Chris to describe what was resonant for him in a way that was near to his own experience, and not for him to adopt Fernando's ideas.

Nicolás: Yes, that is very much in line with what Fernando was saying. It seems like there are many points in common, many bridges that connect your stories. Do you think that crossing those bridges invites you to relate with guilt differently?

Chris: I hear Fernando's story and the childhood he went through, and I have to take my hat off. I understand he didn't grow up on the best side of the city, and that alone can sometimes defeat people, or make them believe that they are never going to get away from that, and you start to become a prisoner in your own city, you start to think that there's nothing you can do. And I think that the fact that he is studying at a university now really shows how you can have really positive life changes. I think that's a massive goal to achieve. I think it installs an idea in my mind – a new perspective on the power that we have over our lives. I think I can continue to feel defeated, or I can embrace it and seek a different victory.

Nicolás: Does it invite you to think differently about guilt as well?

Chris: Yes, for sure. Seeing that Fernando has been able to affect so much change in his life despite all of the things he has had to deal with gives me the strength to do something about this guilt, and not to continue demanding for others to make me feel better about myself, to think of what I can do to repair what I've done – the damage and pain that I've caused to my wife and kids.

I have found that having someone acknowledge and create a sense of partnership around the idea that there is more to our identities, stories and traditions than causing harm to others can facilitate a movement away from the ideas of "repentance" or "forgiveness" from the Judeo-Christian tradition, and closer to initiatives that are aligned with ethical restorative action (Jenkins, 2006). As partnerships are a form of relationship that invites accountability and consideration of the needs of the counterpart, they are often a good beginning point in the journey of "becoming ethical" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 157, 2009). Because there is always more to our identities,

bringing light to those sometimes-invisible stories can allow us to take a step forward in this political journey.

### ***Inhabiting ethical identities: The re-telling of the re-telling***

After meeting with Chris, I transcribed and translated our conversation. I later met with Fernando and read him the transcript. So he could experience someone re-telling his story directly to him, Fernando read my side of the interview and I read Chris' words to him. I then invited Fernando to share the effect on him of hearing his own story reflected back in Chris' words.

Fernando: When I listened to Chris' story for the first time, I thought it was really powerful and heavy at the same time. He had been in prison, and in a way, I thought to myself that if he had been able to overcome all of that, I can surely overcome and deal with what I've been dealing with myself. And it's funny because now I hear Chris saying the same thing about my story. It's a really powerful feeling. It makes me feel connected to him in that way, and it gives me the strength to keep going on this path that I've been on for the last couple of months. It feels like we are supporting each other, even at a distance.

Nicolás: And thinking about this support that you are providing to each other, what do you believe it can enable in your life in the future? Do you think this partnership can open space for anything new in your life?

Fernando: Maybe in my intimate relationships in the future, it can help me move away from guilt as something that doesn't allow me to make right what I've done. I know now that I've done things that are wrong in the past, and it seems like guilt can show me that those things are wrong, but it doesn't help me to address the damage or restore the relationship. Guilt sometimes convinces me to keep thinking about myself, to think "I'm a monster". And I think having Chris recognise other aspects of my life, like the fact that I had a hard time growing up, is giving me strength to move past guilt and to think of restoring what I've done, to stop focusing on myself, and to think of



the experience of others and how can I do better in the future.

Nicolás: So I'm understanding that having Chris' companionship is enabling you to take different actions in the future that involve focusing less on yourself, and more on thinking of the experience of the other person, is that right?

Fernando: Yes, that's right. Feeling that companionship and knowing that we have both dealt with similar situations gives me the strength to focus less on myself. In a way, I feel like I have Chris now looking after me, while I look after him, even if we can't speak to each other because of the language barrier. I hope we can stay connected.

At this stage, Fernando was able to easily recognise the effects that developing this partnership with Chris was having on him in terms of moving away from keeping a focus on himself and towards focusing on "the experience of others". The intention at this stage was for Fernando to develop a sense of agency that would give space for the creation and consolidation of initiatives that oppose practices aligned with abuse – a sense of personal agency that had as its cornerstone the partnership that was created through the building of bridges between stories. At this point, people often reclaim a new sense of ethical identity that is more aligned with their ethical striving, and they can begin to recognise relevant aspects of their identities that had previously been subjugated to fixed and dominant ideas of identity (Jenkins, 2006, 2009).

Seeing our cultures in contrast also became relevant to me as a practitioner. When working with Fernando, a person of similar age and cultural background to me, my questions were influenced by my own experience of being a man in Chile. However, given my cultural and age differences from Chris, after our conversations, I would often be filled with curiosity, and would look forward to exploring with Fernando some of the topics Chris had brought up. For example, after Chris described how ideas about masculinity in Australia had been shaped through that country's participation in the Vietnam War, I was prompted to re-explore with Fernando how the recent history of Chile had influenced us as men – an idea I had previously overlooked.

## Final considerations

When we work with people individually, it can seem as if each person's experience is so unique and exceptional that their knowledge may not be useful to other people. However, there is always more to be drawn from people's experiences. It has been through initiating improbable partnerships that I have been most surprised at the connections people make, based not only on their similarities, but on what is different and particular about them, especially when we are tackling what seems to be a massive problem. I have found that the contrast of experiences creates space for creative responses.

With Fernando and Chris, coming from such different backgrounds enabled them to take a step back and question some of the notions of what "being a man" meant in their contexts and the importance that this notion represented in their lives. At one point in our conversation, after hearing descriptions of masculine stereotypes in Chile, Chris said to Fernando and me that "it seems Chile has its own Crocodile Dundee!" (He then explained this cultural reference to us both!)

I hope the story of these two men and their improbable partnership will spark more partnerships that support questioning about how we perform gender. I also hope that it will invite therapists and practitioners to understand and focus more on the responses and acts of resistance that men enact, rather than to exclusively focus on determined and static ideas of a person's identity that more often than not simply help to reproduce violence. It becomes relevant to challenge the responses we provide to men who have abused, especially those that reproduce more violence through police action, and to welcome more grassroots and community-based responses that can provide space for *ways of becoming* that can leave behind dominant cultural restraints and move towards rediscovering our ethical strivings (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Jenkins, 2006). At the same time, it is pressing that the work and partnerships we develop with men become accountable to women as well. This involves opening our work to gender partnerships and feedback, and at same time, that we move away from hierarchical notions of accountability that reproduce patriarchal structures and move closer to a process that "enables the exploration and critique of work practices, yet does not invite a defensive reaction" (Hall, 1994, p. 10).

## Note

<sup>1</sup> Later, I asked Fernando to explain what he meant by “the history of the country” and how it was related to the idea that “we must compete with others”. He mentioned that he was referring to Chile’s history of neoliberal policies that were enforced through a dictatorship (1973–1990), which he found to have a “significant negative influence on our daily lives”. This invited discussion of some other non-liberative traditions that seemed “natural at first” and “simply a part of our lives”. This allowed us to move to a conversation that shed light on other spaces that were under the influence of “masculine competitiveness” in Fernando’s life.

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