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# *Men and Their Violence: Terrifying Others and Afraid of Themselves.*

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## **The Experience of Group-work with Men who are Violent**

### *Men in Prison: Gaolers and Prisoners.*

My most significant professional experience of encountering oppressive masculinity close up was as a social worker in a prison setting. The prison I worked in was a small local establishment on the outskirts of Glasgow which held men who were involved in usually petty but often persistent offending, many of whom had alcohol problems. If anything marked out these men it seemed to be a lack of power rather than an excess of it.

However there was a constant presence of low level insidious oppressive intimidation and controlling of women in the expectations of the prisoners and in indeed of the Institution staff themselves. While officially no-one was serving a sentence for assaulting a partner, there was a steady procession to my door of men asking me to tell their wives not to send them in letters which caused them to feel guilty. Wives were not to let men know of their troubles at home! This 'disturbed' the men, which in turn affected their lives as prisoners and thus the running of the Institution. Consequently there was real pressure upon wives to stay silent. This was particularly borne out to me one evening after telephones had been introduced to the prison. The recreation area was busy with men on the phone to their wives and girlfriends. It was clear from what they were saying and from the complaints they brought to my office next morning that the telephone was not just a means of keeping in touch, but a highly effective tool for monitoring their partners' movements, demanding visits and other similar activities.

### *Containing prisoners: containing women.*

The intimidation, oppression and monitoring which the men experienced in the prison seemed to be replicated by that which they in turn exercised upon their partners. What struck me was the negativity of the entire experience; the way in which men's lives were so restricted and how defeated they were. In their dealings with partners they demanded and expected a great deal. While they believed that they should be independent of, or protected from, the problems in their partners' lives, it was clear that they were in fact very dependent on these women, and would get nasty if their needs were not met. It was also evident that the men took very little responsibility for themselves

as people. This was clearly deemed to be normal male behaviour in this setting. The routine oppression and ignoring of women other than to attend to men's needs was the norm.

### *Doing 'normal' violence.*

One of the first things we notice in working in with men who are violent in their relationships is that most of them are 'just normal' and certainly will present themselves as such. We know of course that these men vary considerably in terms of the danger they actually present to themselves and their partners, and in terms of the range or problems they experience. Some will be at different stages in terms of their use of violence to partners. Research tells us that some will be violent only to partners, and otherwise commonly conformist or law abiding. Others will be actively involved in offending behaviour and will be violent generally. However with the odd exception they are unlikely to attract the label of psychopath, or extremely dangerous or violent offender which other speakers will be discussing elsewhere today.

### *Violence is Wrong... But! (The story the man tells.)*

Men will seek to establish their normality by the story they tell of their violence. This will almost always be a different story from that told by the woman (should she be prepared to tell it). The man will invariably refer to his violence as an incident, something that has happened ...in the past. The woman will recognise it as part of a process. The man will usually see it only as physical, whereas from women we know that the physical violence is only part of a wide range of tactics which men employ to abuse and control them.

### *Expanding the definition of violence.*

It is important to begin very quickly to expand the definition of violence that is we need to look at in this work. In the Programme that I was involved in men came to us via the courts and as a result of an act of *physical violence*. *We had to use this as a starting point, but had to get beyond this in order to be clear with men about the nature of violence. In our first session with any men then we needed to get them to accept that we were dealing with a more complex and insidious process than physical assault. We worked all the time with the following definition up on a wall.*

## DEFINITION OF VIOLENCE

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*'Physical violence is the use of physical force to hurt, to intimidate (that is to strike fear into), to punish, to control, or to force another person to do something against their will.'*

It is essential to establish this quickly because we know that we are working in situations where there are real dynamic risks of men continuing to be violent again, and we needed to construct the concept of men being able to take some responsibility for themselves to make themselves safe.

'Making myself safe'.

To work with men in these groups is to be engaged in a long process where one is encouraging men to move from a position of Denial to one of Acceptance of Responsibility. Most men also seek to establish their normality as ordinary men by engaging (often very persistently, sometimes they never stop!) in an extremely robust process of denial. The following statements are commonly encountered.

## DENIAL, MINIMISATION AND BLAME

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- It was her fault! She was asking for it!
- I just snapped!
- It was the drink!
- She made me do it!
- It was only a slap!
- Any man would do the same!

By these powerful defences – of Denial, Minimisation and Blame, the man -

- Asserts his normality (any man would do the same in these circumstances)
- Invites your sympathy (he lives with a crazy or demanding woman and was provoked).
- He very often presents himself as the victim!
- He is also telling you that normally such a thing would never happen.
- The circumstances were acute or exceptional!
- Drink was involved.
- He reached a point where he just snapped!
- Most of all he is telling you that he was *passive in all of this*.
- Things just take over him!

Really the man is saying, we should be focusing on HER! So let's leave him alone. (In fact as health care or social service professionals we do already; we know that many women, particularly those who live with violent or offending men are fearful of our gaze).

"It was in the past. I'm out of all that now so I don't need to look at myself."

### **Provocation!**

The man is telling you and himself that "I was provoked!" If we accept the idea of provocation we are in some difficulty. It is important then to separate out the idea that someone can provoke a feeling in you from the fact that they then have responsibility for your taking that feeling and being violent. (One of the major fault lines running through what counts as effectiveness I think lies around this argument. Is it enough to learn 'control' when someone provokes you? Or is it possible to move beyond that idea to the concept of being more fully responsible for the way you deal with your feelings and actions?)

### *From denial to responsibility.*

How then might we begin to engage with men to make some inroads into this process of denial to some acceptance of personal responsibility? We do not do this by blame or accusation and it seems fruitless to tell many of the men that we deal with that they are behaving in this way to abuse their power. They may feel themselves to be the opposite, - quite powerless.

### *Men's fear about coming into the group.*

We know that most men are highly nervous about coming into the space where they are expected to look at their behaviour. In order to engage with them more effectively therefore it helps to ask them what they think the problem is, and what it is they are hoping to get out the group.

### *What men want out of groups.*

- She needs to come here. She's the problem!
- I want to be able to communicate without losing my temper!
- I want to get things back to the way they were....before I was violent!
- I want to control my temper and jealousy!
- To be able to walk away before things get out of hand!
- Understanding what it was all about!
- To be able to have a drink without losing control!

### *Afraid of themselves and frightening to others.*

For most men then the experience of coming into a group is an intimidating one. We have seen that some are confused about their use of violence and abusive behaviour, and seek to deflect this by use of denial, blame and minimisation.

They may be quite oblivious to any unhappiness they create in their current relationship although they may know there is something wrong at home, at work, with their health and with the lack of control they have over their lives. This is a Pandora's Box which it is dangerous to open. All this is worth hiding from others, behind the mask of competence which most men are compelled to wear in their day to day lives.

My experience has been that many men who are violent and both frightening to others are frightening to themselves. This is partly so because (and this point is not being made in a sentimentalised or overly psychotherapeutic way) they do not know themselves. They do not know what makes them tick!

(Here we have an immediate quandary about the nature of counselling approaches. Is our function to get men to 'know themselves' or to know what makes them tick? I would argue that in the small time frame we often have to work with men, and to get them to be safe fast, we have to work on the latter. The former can be worked on as well but

it is the walk that is needed, not only the talk!)

## ANGER

Those of us who work in this area are crucially aware we are not dealing with anger; we are dealing with violence that comes from men's struggle about power. This is often a problem when psychologists run anger management programmes for men who are violent to partners. Many men can be routinely violent without necessarily being angry. Mind games, financial control and isolation are not about anger, they are about power!

However we ignore anger at our peril. We have seen that men often describe their problem as one of anger.

How men tick!

One way in which we can begin to un-pick the idea of the man's problem being one of anger is to look at a situation where an ordinary man, Joe, seems to have lost the place at the end of a busy and frustrating but quite normal day and ended up somehow using violence against his partner Helen.

(SEE CASE STUDY: JOE AND HELEN)

As you can see from this case study there are a number of questions that we get the men in the group to consider. Of particular importance at this early stage are the notions involved in the following questions:

- □Q. 2. What does Joe want the situation to be?
- Q. 3. What does Joe do?  
(What are his actions, statements, gestures, tone of voice etc.)
- Q. 4. Why does Joe think he can treat Helen like this?
- Q. 5. What does Joe Gain and Lose here?

Here the answers essentially boil down to the fact that Joe wants and expects two things from Helen.

### AUTHORITY RECOGNISED AND SERVICES PROVIDED

He expects his needs to be met by Helen (as he defines them) Here his needs are about getting his tea! Peace and quiet! Helen to have things just the way he wants them! He wants his authority recognised! Here Helen isn't doing that, she is arguing back telling him that he's useless!

This kind of case study we have found to be useful. Firstly in the early stages it takes the heat off the man concerned; he can see a situation which looks familiar thus it is less threatening. Also however it begins to reveal that the problem which he has probably defined as one of temper control is actually about much more. It is about how he feels certainly, but it is also about how he thinks about his expectations of

living with Helen and what she is supposed to be like in their relationship. We can begin then to broaden out the scope of the material to be scrutinised as being about Tom's expectations of himself as a man and the rights and obligations, as well as the pressures and responsibilities this bestows upon him.

Later on in the group we will look with men at their 'violent incidents' – or 'arrest events' and see how these fit into the overall pattern of his violence.

### *From 'violent incident' to 'pattern of violent / abusive behaviour.'*

What we also see is that we are talking about something that is more than a Violent Incident. We are actually recognising that there is a pattern of violence and abuse going on here. There is also intention behind Tom's actions. There is meaning to the behaviour. Where there is meaning there is less mystery. If it is not so mysterious the Tom might have more control over himself than he thinks!

### *What women tell us.*

What women tell us about male violence though is that it doesn't really matter whether Tom's tea was on the table ready or not. If it was, he might not be ready to eat it just as he came in the door! If the kids were up, then they should be in bed after Tom's busy day! If they were in bed then Tom might feel aggrieved about the fact that she hadn't thought it important enough for them to be up when dad gets in. In short he is always finding fault!

So we need to be aware of this considerable dissonance between what men tell us, and what women tell us when we work with men.

This means that we need to be aware that men are actually lying much of the time, or at least hiding their behaviour from us and themselves. But in a way this is also the man's reality or his defence, of how he wants to present his 'problem' to us. What we can see instead from this case study, is a man who appears to be consistently unhappy, domineering, unpredictable and controlling.

### *Why this need to control?*

In the workshop we will look at a number of issues which as men learn to be men, so they need to be 'in control' of themselves, and of others. Of course they learn the pretence of being in control – if indeed this is ever desirable – and thereafter spend much of their life behind this mask of control.

In our work in the groups with men we can see that many of the problems which they create for their relationships, for their partnerships and for their own lives arise out of this need to be in control of themselves and of those around them. This message is of course sanctioned by the patriarchal society in which we live and which reinforces these messages for the men.

However when they come along it is not particularly effective to say to

these men, who may be unemployed, living in poverty, poorly educated, rejected from school etc. that they are violent because they abuse power. In fact they often feel very powerless. And it is in working with how men deal with power and lack of power and what this means to them that we need to build in to the work we do in groups. This constantly impacts on men's emotions and feelings and makes them dependent but thinking they ought to be independent at the same time.

What are men's violence groups like this trying to achieve?

- □ Safety for women and children
- Helping men move from stance of being passive (victim) to being responsible for their own behaviour.
- Helping men move from violence being problem 'over which men have no control' to one in which men can see purpose, intention and choice behind their actions and words.
- Helping men see that they use violence for a purpose (gains and losses).
- Their violence is not just physical.
- That men need to nurture themselves.

#### *Groups cannot solve all men's problems*

Groups cannot in themselves solve all of the men's problems but they can serve a useful part in providing both challenge and support for men who want to begin to live non abusively.

#### *What do we need to know as workers?*

- All of us operate on a continuum of violent and abusive behaviour.
- This work will touch us personally and make us feel uneasy.
- People *are capable of changing their behaviour.*
- However we need also to be sceptical about some of the claims men make about changing their behaviour.
- Many men will not give up power.
- Many men will *not be able to give up power and will struggle to do so.*
- Many men will try to use us in order to convince partners they are changing (usually they won't believe them).
- Our main aim is not to believe that we can change men – no matter how good our programme. The main aim is to ensure that women and children are safe from men's violence.

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