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Liberation from self-blame:
Working with men who have experienced childhood sexual abuse

by

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Introduction

This paper explores ways of working with men who have experienced child sexual abuse. It explores some of the difficulties that these men may face in our current social, political and cultural context. The paper explores the practical implications of the fact that male sexual abuse occurs within a male-dominated culture and that the large majority of perpetrators are other men. It describes how, for men who have been subject to sexual abuse, dominant constructions of masculinity can contribute to the silencing of their experience and to stories of self-blame. It explores the complex task that males who have experienced abuse from older men face in creating their own preferred masculine identity, and describes a number of therapeutic themes that I have found helpful in working with men on these issues.

At the outset I wish to acknowledge that within this paper I write from
the position of a professional therapist working with men who have experienced childhood sexual abuse with all of the responsibilities that this brings. I want to be clear that there are some invitations of professionalism that I wish to decline. I have tried not to place survivor’s speech at the mercy of detached theory and observation. I have tried not to imply at any point that helping professionals know something about survivors’ experience that survivors themselves do not know. Like many people who have taken the position of a professional role in speaking up for those who have experienced sexual abuse, I have my own personal reasons for doing so. I feel strongly that no one can represent the experience of all those who have been affected by child sexual abuse. The work described in this paper has primarily been informed by conversations I have shared with men about their experiences of childhood sexual abuse. I have a commitment to honouring their expertise. As Alcoff & Gray (1993, p.282) describe: We need to transform arrangements of speaking to create spaces where survivors are authorised to be both witnesses and experts, both reporters of experience and theorists of experience. I hope that this paper contributes to such a proposal. I invite critique of the ideas within this paper and look forward to hearing people’s feedback.

Background

Inquiries carried out by women involved in the most recent wave of the women’s movement into the prevalence of childhood sexual abuse in western countries have resulted in indications of the extent of abuse experienced by both female and male children. Although definite figures are impossible to ascertain, it is now clear that sexual abuse occurs to both female and male children in substantial numbers. With the extent of the problem becoming more acknowledged, women workers, writers and researchers over the last twenty years have developed a substantial body of literature on childhood sexual abuse. Primarily this work has focused on female victims. We as men seem to have been much slower to respond to the knowledge of the sexual abuse of male children.

Recently this has begun to change. Men’s experience of childhood sexual abuse has begun to gain prominence, and a body of knowledge concerning the issue is now being developed. Certain male writers have recently claimed that the reason the issue of male childhood sexual abuse has been silent for so long is due to, of all things, feminism and that it has been the ‘Men’s Movement’ which has brought the issue to light. This does not ring true to me. In my experience, the primary initiative to respond to male victims of sexual abuse has come from women researchers, such as Nasjleti (1980) who, in advocating for greater attention to the sexual abuse of female children, noted that the occurrence of male victims had been severely underestimated. What’s more, it has been the work of women that has enabled abuse to be able to be talked about, and it is generally the women in men’s lives who have supported them to address their experiences of abuse.

It is my experience from working with men who have experienced childhood sexual abuse, that ‘the speaking out and naming of sexual abuse’ by the women’s movement has made it far more possible for these men to come forward. Feminist writers and therapists in their liberation work with women who have been subjected to abuse, are probably having the greatest direct and vicarious impact on the unloaking of the occurrence of sexual abuse against males. From my practice experience the effect of this liberation appears to be particularly resonating with young men. It appears that the social change in the 1970s and 1980s has created the possibility for men who grew up in these years to disclose experiences of abuse.

Still it is hard for many men to find a safe context to speak of their own experiences of sexual abuse. The majority of men who are demonstrating a willingness to disclose abuse, as in many areas of men’s health, are often seeking counselling at a point when the issues they are facing have become intensely serious and they feel they are out of control. It is often the partners or mothers of these young men who are making the initial request for counselling on the man’s behalf. Often these men have had contact with other human service agencies in relation to various issues or occurrences, for example, a suicide attempt, the use of alcohol and drugs, a relationship break-up, issues of anger and violence, experiences in the juvenile justice or prison system, the birth of their first child, or struggles they are having with mental health issues. By the time these men are referred to our service they have generally already disclosed experiences of sexual abuse. How we as professionals respond depends upon our theoretical understandings.
Theoretical understandings

In order to respond to men who have experienced child sexual abuse it seems important to understand the effects of childhood sexual abuse on their lives. The effects of childhood sexual abuse seem to depend upon two separate factors. Firstly, the trauma associated with the actual event or events and the manipulation experienced from the perpetrator. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly in relation to the ongoing effects of abuse, are the meanings that are made of the abuse by those who have been subject to it. These meanings are greatly influenced by the broader cultural understandings of gender and power, and beliefs associated with the attribution of responsibility.

People who are subjected to childhood sexual abuse make meaning out of these events. These understandings that they generate and/or are recruited into in relation to the abuse often impose negative implications for how they define and express themselves in life. Often these understandings involve a belief that something about themselves or their actions was central to the abuse occurring, as White (1994, p.83) describes:

These understandings invariably feature themes of culpability and unworthiness; that somehow the person deserved the abuse or had it coming to them, or could have stopped it if they really wanted to.

People who experience abuse and are recruited into negative stories about themselves may often be involved in self-destructive and self-abusive behaviours that more or less confirm their negative understanding and definition of themselves. These ways of being can then become central to how they construct reality and their identity.

This process of recruitment into negative understandings of their lives and actions can occur for both females and males who have experienced childhood sexual abuse. There are however, I believe, significant differences in the experience of females and males due to the dominant construction of gender relations in this culture. Many writers have documented how the experience of sexual abuse for women occurs within the context of patriarchy and the effect that this can have on making meaning out of the abuse. Here I wish to focus on how gender relations and dominant constructions of masculinity can affect the ways in which men respond to the experience of sexual abuse. More particularly, I wish to focus on the ways in which dominant constructions of masculinity can contribute to the silencing of experience and to stories of self-blame.

Locating the sexual abuse of males within the broader context of patriarchy

Despite the achievements of the women's movement, men's violence and control in the private sphere still threatens so many homes, and men's ways of being in the public sphere continue to shape our culture in ways that deny alternative experiences, voices and ways of being. I believe that it is important to acknowledge that the sexual abuse of male children and adolescents occurs within a male-dominated culture. This seems important not only for ethical reasons but because the ways in which masculinity is understood has a profound effect on therapeutic practice with males who have been subject to sexual abuse.

An understanding of men's power and privilege can lead to explorations of the dominant constructions of masculinity. In turn this can provide important avenues to explore with male survivors of sexual abuse.

I also believe that it is important to acknowledge that the sexual abuse of males (as with females) is predominantly perpetrated by older men. This is not to deny the existence of abuse of young males by women - especially as the reporting of such occurrences seems to be increasing.

It is, however, an important acknowledgement because it makes the link between childhood sexual abuse and dominant constructions of masculinity. It also creates space to begin to explore the complex task that faces males who have experienced abuse from older men in creating their own preferred masculine identity.

Elsewhere writers have described the ways in which the maintenance of inequitable gender relations depends upon the maintenance of dominant constructions of masculinity. Dominant constructions of masculinity privilege a particular blueprint of manhood, and set certain criteria for male experience and behaviour. These criteria, which vary across history and culture, refer to personal characteristics and ways of being. In present day Australia, despite recent challenges, dominant constructions of masculinity still dictate to a large
degree that men should be unemotional but logical; independent; hard but fair; benevolent but not vulnerable; physically strong; attractive to women; sexually dominant, and so on.

Dominant constructions of masculinity influence personal characteristics and ways of being as well as significantly influencing ways of relating with women, children and other men. Notions of male superiority to women, of adults’ power over children, and of heterosexual dominance and homophobia, conspire within the dominant constructions of masculinity to influence relationships between men, women and children.

These dominant notions of manhood go a considerable way in explaining the extent of sexual abuse in our culture. They also shed light on the difficulties that male survivors of childhood sexual abuse may experience. The dominant constructions of masculinity have many ramifications for males who have been subject to childhood sexual abuse. Here I will discuss just three.

1. Males are not supposed to be 'victims'

Male victims of childhood sexual abuse are caught in a paradox of sorts. By the fact of their gender they are a member of a dominant group. Yet experiencing violation in the form of abuse goes against the membership of this privileged group and contradicts dominant men’s ways of being. The result can often be a resounding silence and a recruitment into feeling ‘less than a man’. Dominant constructions of male identity often serve to further recruit males who have been subject to abuse into understanding the abuse as a problem within themselves.

Within dominant constructions of masculinity, certain ideas prevail that victimisation is the outcome of deficiency. These ideas can reverberate intensely in relation to sexual abuse, beyond deficiency to inferiority and compulsion. Complex notions of masculine identity – which are themselves bound up in the construction of inequitable gender relations - can result in males who have been subject to abuse experiencing profound self-blame, as Mendel (1993, p.25) describes:

... the failure to protect seems entirely internalised: the men in this study experience themselves as deficient, unmanning, and incompetent because they could not provide themselves with adequate protection against abuse. The sense of self-blame is exacerbated by the ‘myth of complicity’, as Gerber (1990) terms it, in which the male victim assumes he must have been an active, willing participant in his childhood sexual activity. The message to the male victim is not simply that if he was abused he must not be a man, but also that if he is a man he must not have been abused.

2. Homophobia & heterosexual dominance

Homophobia and heterosexual dominance can be further agents for secrecy and confusion. Confusion about sexuality is often a common effect for males who have been subject to child sexual abuse. Young men are particularly vulnerable to being recruited into a questioning of their sexuality based on another person’s abusive acts. A story is often created by those perpetrating the abuse in which a disclosure will result in a questioning of the young man’s manhood, and assumptions about his identity. This can greatly contribute to the silencing of their experience.

For young men in the process of constructing their own sexual identity, to experience men’s sexuality as an oppressive force can have long-term consequences. Where the perpetrator of abuse has been a man, finding a way through the complexities of separating abuse from same-sex contact, and standing up to reactions of homophobia at the time of disclosures can be profoundly confusing.

Young men who have been subject to sexual abuse and are trying to establish or re-establish their sexual identity, can also be influenced by heterosexual dominance in ways that impact upon others. Dominant constructions of masculinity invite young men to obtain membership of their male peer group through demonstrating homophobic actions and actions that are based on ideas of male sexual entitlement to women. For male survivors of sexual abuse, finding a way through these issues can be enormously complex.

3. From victim to perpetrator

A further complication for males in their attempts to address the effects of childhood sexual abuse is the link often made between being a victim of sexual abuse and being a perpetrator of abuse. Various research studies have shown that many sex offenders have experienced childhood sexual abuse. However, this evidence in no way proves causality; nor does it prove that it
is in any way more likely for males who have experienced abuse to become perpetrators of abuse; nor does it in any way indicate that perpetrating childhood sexual abuse is dependant on prior victimisation. Furthermore, the data indicates that most males who experience childhood sexual abuse do not go on to sexually offend.¹⁰

The ways in which the connection between sexual victimisation and later sexual offending are comprehended by the community as exemplified by how the issue is publicised, with the media citing simple explanations for complex problems. Many elements of the mainstream media have given the impression that a male who is sexually abused is likely to become a sex offender. And yet the vast majority of males who suffer childhood sexual abuse do not go on to become sex offenders. Promoting the construction of ‘Victim to Perpetrator’ is not strictly valid. What’s worse is that it is restrictive and potentially self-fulfilling.

Exploring the effects of sexual abuse and the association between victimisation and offending seems important. However, how can we ensure that we remain aware of the effects of the questions we ask, the research we promote? How can we keep in touch with how our explorations impact on the people affected by sexual abuse?

To pathologise sexual abuse as a ‘cycle of violence’ is to run the risk of obscuring personal agency. It is to run the risk of becoming complicit with ideas of biological determinism. Furthermore, it can unwittingly support the dominant constructions of male sexuality that imply that men are not in control, nor responsible for, their sexual impulses.

For males who have been subject to childhood sexual abuse, the need to deconstruct ideas about becoming a perpetrator can be important. This can be made more difficult by therapeutic approaches that contribute to metaphors of ‘being wounded’, or being ‘damaged goods’. These metaphors can unwittingly contribute to pathologising practices, to self-blame, and to feelings of powerlessness in relation to moving from ‘victim to perpetrator’.

Thinking about ways to have conversations with men who have experienced child sexual abuse

By the time people disclose an experience of abuse they have often been silenced for a significant time. When they do speak out they are then vulnerable to many types of scrutiny. This scrutiny may have the purpose of disproving and disbelieving the story, it may simply be testing the credibility of the story, or it may be a scrutiny constructed in a way that changes the meaning of the story. Some forms of scrutiny construct the act of speaking out as a ‘confession’. In subtle ways, people who have experienced abuse may be seen as having to ‘own up’, ‘face up’ or ‘show themselves for real’ - in other words, confess.

There are a number of dangers in situating survivor speech in a confessional discourse structure (see Alcoff & Gray 1993). For one thing, to confess by its literal meaning is to admit to some level of culpability. But there are also some more complex repercussions. Just as the act of confession is linked to absolution, so too can the act of disclosure become seen as essential to achieve resolution or recovery. What is missed in this assertion is that the choices people make whether to disclose or not, who to tell, and more importantly who not to tell, are in themselves choices and acts of survival and resilience. Emotional, financial and physical difficulties can result from disclosures, and these problems in some circumstances can be seen to critically outweigh the support a person may receive should they disclose (Alcoff & Gray 1993, p.281). In my own experience, men have chosen only to disclose to a select person or persons and myself. This is because of the perceived risks, the jeopardy of their personal, social and professional lives, and the fear of the likely attribution made by others that the disclosure somehow ‘explains everything’. How can we ensure that we respect people’s decisions and resist the temptation to suggest that they will need to ‘come clean’ one day? How can we ensure that as therapists we are never in the position of ‘absolving’? After all, what do survivors of sexual abuse or other abuses of trust have to confess to?

The following therapeutic themes are based on an acknowledgement that sexual abuse is an attack. In my experience, understanding sexual abuse as an attack which people resist, can allow for people’s stories to be deconstructed and reconstructed in the process of therapeutic conversations. It can allow men who have experienced childhood sexual abuse to take a position of standing against
the effects of the abuse as well as against dominant ideas about men’s ways of being. I believe that situating sexual abuse as an attack places men’s experience in a different context, one which limits the possibility for survivor’s stories to be located within a confessional discourse, and one which creates the possibility to unfold what strength and courage can accomplish - namely liberation from self-blame.

These themes or principles are not listed in any particular order. They are ideas that have been helpful in my joining with men to name abuse and liberate from self-blame. They operate simultaneously with the men I consult with and, as such, they can often be used interchangeably from the early consultations to the latter. Where I have used examples of people’s stories these have not been developed from specific individuals. They are stories which encapsulate many stories I have been witness to. The approach is not prescriptive. Particular themes are introduced according to the needs of the individual therapeutic journey. Some principles may not be helpful to individuals, and ways of questioning may often need to be modified to suit an individual’s needs.

Naming the strategies of ‘silencing’, honouring what it takes to survive when silenced, and acknowledging the courage it takes to speak.

I believe that it is important to acknowledge that, when men attend counselling to address experiences of childhood sexual abuse, they are making a stand against the prevailing ideas of manhood and for alternative ways of being. These alternative ways of being are often informed by notions of caring, compassion and justice for themselves and for others. In my experience, it can be helpful in the initial counselling session to acknowledge the restraints that men and young men face in attending counselling. Men might be grappling with their own surprise that they have spoken out about the abuse. They may also have a number of internalised stories informed by self-blame as to why the abuse occurred. In the initial meeting with a man who has been subject to sexual abuse, I put significant energy into talking about the restraints of men’s dominant ways of being and how these restraints can make attending counselling more difficult.

Liberation from self-blame

One small but significant step involves taking part of the responsibility for naming abuse by initially acknowledging the reason for the man’s attendance. Naming childhood sexual abuse early in the conversation is an important step in taking a stand against the silencing of male disclosure of sexual victimisation. It helps to guard against men being in a position in which they feel they have been hiding something, and interrupts any chance of the conversation entering a confessional discourse (see Alcoff & Gray 1993). By naming the abuse myself this can often lead to conversations about the silencing of abuse and the man’s experiences of this. I have found the following questions open space for helpful conversations on this topic:

- What is it about the sorts of conclusions other people make about abuse that has made it hard for you to speak of your experiences?
- What is it about the ways in which men are ‘supposed to be’ that has made it hard for you to speak of your experiences?
- When you knew it wasn’t safe to name your experiences of abuse and you had to remain silent, what was it that enabled you to get through?
- What does this say about your own internal strength?
- Would this fit with a story of weakness or a story of courage?
- What messages do you think it might give people if they knew we were talking about this issue?
- In choosing to talk about the abuse, could this mean that you are beginning a process of standing against the abuse?

Conversations can develop from these sorts of questions that allow the man to position himself in overt ways against the effects of abuse. These conversations promote an acknowledgement of stories of strength and self-protection in the man’s response to the experience of abuse.

Unmasking the politics of power

Recruitment into self-blame often relies upon a denial of the power imbalances inherent in situations of abuse. Many men who have been subject to
abuse have been recruited into a story that states that they should have been able to stop the abuse through physical or other means. It is not uncommon for men to be looking back at themselves as a ten-year-old thinking that they should have stopped a thirty-year-old man from abusing them. It is also common for men to have internalised a story of weakness in relation to the way they responded as a child to the abuse. Additionally, some men have been recruited into attributing the occurrence of the abuse to some behaviour or characteristic that they displayed as a child.

All of these stories of self-blame rely in some way on a denial of the abuse of power to which the child was subjected. Conversations that expose relations of power - both generally in relation to adults’ authority over children, and specifically in relation to the acts of the perpetrator of abuse - can be freeing of self-blame. We explore the ways in which abuse becomes possible due to relations of power, through the use of manipulation, ‘trickery’ and privilege that works to cloud children’s experience. Through exposing aspects of abusive thinking a number of therapeutic conversations can evolve.

We expose the manipulations of those who abuse. For example, one young man I was consulting with spoke about how the man responsible for the abuse would say to his mother, ‘Isn’t he a lovely kid? He is so affectionate, he’s always wanting to sit on my lap.’ Another young man described how his uncle suggested his sexually abusive behaviour was connected to the fact that the young man would walk through the house with only a towel around him.

A further tactic of power that is often articulated involves the ways in which the abuse has been named. Often the ways in which males have come to understand experiences of childhood sexual abuse have been influenced by the perpetrator’s description of meaning which has mystified the tactics of abuse. One common term used for this mystification is ‘mucking about’. In some situations this understanding can become aligned to self-blame, as it positions the abuse as interational and fails to acknowledge the power imbalance.

Creating a context in which men can separate themselves from interational understandings of the abuse and in which they can name their experience is an important part of the process. It involves great care, however, in order to ensure that as a counsellor I am not simply imposing yet another meaning upon their experience. The following sorts of questions can facilitate these conversations:

- I know that the man who abused you told you that the sexual abuse was ‘a bit of mucking around’, but I also remember in our conversations you speaking about your experience of fear and shock at his actions towards you. Does fear and shock fit with ‘mucking about’ or would there be a more fitting description?
- What would this description be?
- Would this description make it more or less possible for you to move away from self-blame?

Exposing the strategies of power and creating a context so that the abuse can be named enables a greater understanding about abuse and those who abuse. In these conversations it is often articulated how those who abuse look for opportunities to abuse; construct meanings that justify their own desires and actions; mystify their actions; and place responsibility for their actions on the young person. This process makes more visible the responsibility that adults have to children and adolescents. It allows for an understanding that the sexual abuse occurred due to the actions of the adult and how these actions occurred within a broader context of children’s powerlessness. This sets the scene for standing against self-blame and valuing child, adolescent and adult ways of coping.

Disempowering ‘self-blame’ and honouring alternative stories

When people present to counsellors about their experiences of abuse they more often than not bring with them a story of culpability - a belief that they in some way were responsible for the actions of the perpetrator of the abuse. They have often been recruited into believing that their own ways of being were central to being abused or to the abuse continuing. This ought not to be too surprising. Recruiting the victim into a sense of responsibility for the abuse is often an important strategy that enables abuse to continue. In response to this situation, a central part of the therapeutic response is to externalise ‘self-blame’, to explore its effects and tactics, and to create opportunities for honouring hidden or devalued stories about the individual’s response to the abuse. These
stories have often been overtly or covertly interpreted by others as maladaptive or deficient. Reclaiming these stories and the preferred interpretations of them is an important aspect of this work. Four types of alternative stories have come to light in my consultations with men who have experienced sexual abuse as children: stories of protest, resistance, resilience, and connection.

1. Stories of protest

Stories of protest can often be found amongst stories of self-blame. Ben, in speaking of his experience of the abuse, shamefully acknowledged how he cried during the abuse and how he saw this as pathetic. He spoke of how he had questioned why he didn't as an eleven-year-old fight off a thirty-nine-year-old man. These statements of self-blame could perhaps also be seen as an invitation to honour tears as protest. The following questions served to open this possibility:

- What do you think an adult might make of an eleven-year-old crying?
- Would crying be an approval of what is happening to the child?
- What would it take for a thirty-nine-year-old man to ignore a child's distress and continue his actions?
- If crying was not an approval does that have it fit better with a protest?

From questions like these a conversation can begin to construct a story of protest.

2. Stories of resistance

Men who have experienced sexual abuse often relate stories of how their identities have been constructed by others as 'juvenile delinquent' or 'anti-social teenager'. An example of this is where an adolescent might fail to attend family functions or truant from school because this might be the location where the abuse occurred or where the perpetrator may be present. Whereas these actions have in the past been construed as pathology or weakness, they can alternatively be understood as acts of resistance.

George, for example, spoke of how as a teenager he had been sexually abused by a teacher. He spoke of how he refused to go to school, and of how when at school he would smoke and not be complicit with school rules. He spoke of how this resulted in him being suspended and eventually expelled. He had never spoken about the abuse at the time. Due to his behaviour he was described in terms such as unco-operative, delinquent, lazy, and having no future. He internalised these descriptions.

Hidden stories of courage and resistance quickly surfaced in response to the following questions:

- When you spoke of your experience of being silenced, do you think that this influenced you to make some other sort of statement like challenging rules?
- Would your actions of 'rebellion' at school have been more or less likely if the abuse had not of occurred?
- Did these actions of rebellion have you thinking it was more or less likely the abuse would continue?
- If this is so, would your actions be more fitting with laziness or more fitting with resistance?

Stories of resistance became increasingly open to George as conversations informed by these sorts of questions continued.

3. Stories of resilience

Further avenues for the exploration of stories of survival are often found in men's solitary pursuits. In my experience men often speak about the games they played alone, or their imaginary friends who allowed them to escape into a world of their own. Over the years these experiences may have been interpreted by others to construct a negative story about themselves of being a 'loner' or a 'dreamer'. Once explored more fully, however, these experiences of solitary pursuits often become more available to support stories of resilience - stories of how they kept themselves sane and safe.

Philip, for example, was abused by his older brother, described how as a child he would often play on his own for hours in an old car wreck. He would spend hours imagining that he was a racing car driver who was having to make up lost ground. On each occasion he would eventually come from behind and win the race on the last lap. Philip spoke of how he had
internalised other family members’ views of his intelligence. He retold accounts of his brother taunting his ways of surviving with phrases such as ‘small things amuse small minds’. In my conversations with Philip we began to uncover the significance of Philip’s resilience. The following questions provided a context for these conversations.

- Given you have told me how you experienced virtually no control of your life when you had to share the same room as your brother, was playing racing cars an area of your life where you experienced control?
- From playing this game and experiencing a sense of control over your own life, what message did this give you about hope for the future?
- Did this make it more or less possible to feel safe? Why?
- Did it take imagination to play racing cars?
- Does this discovery and appreciation of imagination stand against your brother’s questioning of your intelligence?

Gradually a story of resilience became more available to Philip.

4. Stories of connection

Many men who have been subject to abuse describe experiencing a sense of profound isolation. As men tell their story, however, exceptions to this isolation are often revealed. Stories of connection to other people in the past and present can work against a problem-saturated story of disconnection to others. In some cases men begin to confront self-blame by acknowledging the significance of various positive relationships they have built with others.

Chad, for example, had experienced disempowerment and self-blame as a result of being raped by a family friend when he was thirteen years old. The perpetrator was charged and convicted. Following this, Chad’s family remained silent about the abuse and encouraged him to forget about the assault. Chad began to experience a general sense of ‘not fitting in’ with other people. He blamed himself and felt his experience of abuse was known to others by the way he looked and acted. Due to the influence of self-blame, Chad believed people saw him as inferior.

As we explored Chad’s experience he recalled a teacher who had noticed his skills in creative writing. The teacher had given him encouragement to use his ‘flair’ and this had been an experience that stood outside of the reign of self-blame. Following this re-discovery Chad began to recognise friends that had stood against negative self-talk. He recalled being unsuccessful at exams and how he and a small group of friends (who had also been unsuccessful at exams) had joined in mateship. He spoke of how this had helped to challenge the negative influences of self-blame. Some questions helped this process:

- I understand that at school you felt ‘doomed to fail’, yet despite this you have remembered your teacher’s recognition of your ‘flair’ and her encouragement. What do you put this down to?
- What do you think she saw in you that she wanted to encourage?
- Would this remembering be an action that stands against feeling a failure?
- Did your connection with your mates around the problem with exams have you feeling more or less different?
- What might it tell you about yourself that others may have seen you as a mate?

Acknowledging acts of protest, resistance, resilience and connection in the present

These stories of protest, resistance, resilience and connection are often supported by actions that the men are taking in their lives in the present. Yet self-blame can attempt to recruit the men into seeing these actions as negative or ‘maladaptive’. Some of the men who I have consulted with have demonstrated significant protest when they have feared that others may be vulnerable to the actions of the person who perpetrated abuse against them.

Imran, for example, had never disclosed to anyone about being sexually abused by his uncle. His experience of being silenced had been significant in his younger years. This changed for Imran as an adult man when he heard that his uncle was facing criminal charges and had enlisted the support of Imran’s parents to defend the charges. This caused substantial distress for Imran. Knowing the effects of not being believed, he quickly decided to speak out to
support his nieces.

This action in the present stood alongside Imran’s actions of protest as a child when he refused to be left in the company of his uncle. We traced this connection in our conversations.

Imran spoke out telling his parents, aunty and partner of the abuse he had been subjected to, and he offered statements to the police and welfare authorities. This was a difficult process as people began to question Imran as to why he had not disclosed his abuse as a child. Despite many invitations to question his experience of being silenced as a child and to blame himself, Imran was able to hold onto his experience of himself as a young man who had stood against abuse. The stories of protest and resilience that he had developed in relation to his earlier experiences held firmly under great stress.

Imran was able to show his strength as an adult to speak up for young children. We explored what this meant for Imran. Imran was also able to take further steps against self-blame through his connection with his nieces. He came to identify more clearly the predatory nature of his uncle’s abuse. He came to see that his uncle had not differentiated between children but that his abuse was opportunistic.

Those who were aligned to his uncle’s denial of the abuse initially dismissed Imran’s disclosure - stating that this was fuelled by a ‘vendetta’. Yet Imran persisted in speaking out and was supported by his sister who had also experienced abuse from the same uncle. The uncle’s partner at this stage began to take Imran and his sister seriously and the support for his uncle’s denial was withdrawn.

Tracing the links between Imran’s earlier actions of resilience and protest with these current stories of resistance and connection - with his nieces and his sister - enabled Imran to become clearer about what he had always stood for in his life. In this way, actions of protest in the present provided rich opportunity for the re-storying of Imran’s life away from stories of isolation and self-blame and towards stories of connection and justice.

Talking about physiological responses

Self-blame is often associated with the physiological responses that some men experience during sexual abuse. Self-blame is quick to construct the meaning that a physiological response is a sign of consent. Many men experience great confusion in relation to this issue, particularly as in many cases the victim’s physiological response has been used by the perpetrator to justify his actions.

Finding non-confronting ways to speak about this issue can be challenging. Speaking about the experiences of other men who have experienced abuse can perhaps make the conversations easier. I often name that other men I have spoken to have experienced an erection or ejaculation during abuse, while taking care to acknowledge that this may or may not be the experience of the man I am speaking with. Offering information about physiological responses is another alternative. Practical information about how if the penis is touched in certain ways it will react, and how if the prostate is pressured from the wall of the anus it can cause ejaculation, can assist the process of liberation from self-blame. Citing evidence of how these physiological responses are involuntary actions that in no way imply consent or desire seems important. Lew (1993) and Hunter (1990) have both documented that physiological response during sexual abuse is a common experience of male victims of sexual abuse. I have found these references helpful to assist in disempowering self-blame.

Challenging pathological notions of disorder or damage

Many of the men and young men with whom I have consulted in relation to childhood sexual abuse have been subject to psychological and/or psychiatric assessments which have at times contributed to notions of a ‘damaged identity’. In some circumstances the way in which psychiatric or psychological labels are applied to men who have experienced abuse can inadvertently encourage self-blame, silencing, powerlessness and guilt. Pathological notions of damage can situate the effects of abuse as beyond the person’s power. They can imply that the effects of abuse are now characteristic of the person’s identity. This can have
significant implications for the avenues open to men to resolve the problems they are experiencing and their ability to take personal responsibility.

Finding ways to acknowledge the man’s understanding of the origin of the mental health issue he may be facing can be a liberating process. Similarly for those who have been recruited into believing that they are ‘going crazy’, tracing the reasons for this ‘craziness’ can be a grounding experience and one that brings substantial relief. For some men, making the link between their experience of depression and their experience of abuse has changed the meaning of psychiatric treatment and has been a precursor to finding their own healing ways.

George, for example, when referred to a psychiatric casualty department because of serious concerns about his suicidal thinking, made it clear how important it was to him that the connection between his state of mind and the abuse he experienced was acknowledged. As I waited with him to be admitted he consistently asked, ‘Do they know why I am here?’ and ‘Do they know what happened?’ in a way that was clearly making a statement about the abuse and where responsibility lay for his state of mind. In our conversations and our liaison with psychiatric staff, George’s experience of depression and self-hate were clearly attributed to his experience of being subjected to childhood sexual abuse. George said that this attribution made it more possible for him to regain clarity and power over his own life.

Dimitri’s story provides another example. Dimitri has a significant history of contact with the mental health system. The following extract comes from a conversation in which we celebrated some of the steps he has taken in dealing with his experience of childhood sexual abuse and the increased independence he has gained from the mental health system.

Patrick: That’s something we have talked about, how feeling crazy was connected to a lot of the effects of abuse we wrote on the board that time.

Dimitri: Yeah.

Patrick: And that there hasn’t been much room given by the mental health system to talk about the effects of the abuse.

Dimitri: Yeah, about ten years of it and the doctors didn’t say anything about it.

Patrick: How do you think they failed to hear about your experience of the problem?

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Dimitri: The system just took me under its wing, but didn’t recognise what had happened. They sort of took power away in a lot of ways.

Patrick: There have been some pretty big moves for you in asking to move away from the group home. Is that a stand you have made about having more power in decisions about your life?

Dimitri: Yeah.

Patrick: How have you done this?

Dimitri: Through not having to go to hospital so much and getting my own place, I can do more of my own thing without them knowing.

Pathological understandings of the effects of abuse serve to silence the history of these effects and fail to locate responsibility for these effects with the abuse and the abuser. Finding ways to trace the history and responsibility can be a liberating process.

Pathological understandings of the effects of abuse can also inadvertently increase a man’s sense of powerlessness over his own life and actions. In my experience of consulting with young men who have been subjected to abuse, a significant proportion have been given a diagnosis of disorders such as ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder) and Conduct Disorder. These diagnoses can have implications for the young man’s development and also for his relationships with significant others. Max, for example, reported that, ‘I can just about get away with anything at home because of the abuse and what the doctor said about having ADD’. Max felt absolved from any sense of responsibility to find ways to protest the effects of abuse or other problems in his life. The diagnosis constructed his life and identity as problematic. In this way Max was left in a position in which the significant people in his life had pathological understandings of his actions, and his identity. This had implications for his behaviour and his attribution of personal responsibility for his future. The need to find ways of inviting men who have experienced abuse to feel an increased sense of personal agency and with it an increased responsibility for their actions is discussed below.
Deconstructing interactional notions of entrapment in an abuse cycle

As discussed earlier, it is common within the media, within service delivery, policy and individual practice, for links to be made in relation to males being subjected to abuse and going on to perpetrate abuse. It is not uncommon for men to express concern that because they experienced childhood sexual abuse they may have a predisposition to also act in sexually abusive ways. When men express this concern I am interested in addressing three areas. Firstly, to establish whether or not they have ever acted in a sexually abusive way. Secondly, to explore how they have come to this concern of theirs in relation to the propensity to abuse. Thirdly, to invite them to be clear about their position in relation to being for or against sexually abusive behaviour, and to explore the meanings of such a stand in their life. Various questions facilitate explorations in these areas.

- Have you ever been concerned that you would ever behave in a sexually abusive way?
- Are you worried you may have acted in ways that are sexually abusive?
- Would naming your concerns be a stand against sexual abuse?
- Is this what you want?
- Is one of the effects of abuse to encourage you to think you could become sexually abusive yourself? Why?
- Is this a position aligned to self-blame?
- Given you have expressed concern to me about the thought of becoming sexually abusive, what does this say about what you are wanting for your life?
- Would naming your concern make it more or less likely for you to act abusively?
- Why do you suppose people who have experienced abuse believe they might go on to abuse?

Creating space within therapeutic conversations for men to speak of their concerns in relation to acting abusively to others seems very important. In circumstances where the man has had concerns about the chance of him abusing others because of his sexual victimisation, it is an opportunity to invite the man to see these concerns as a continuation of his stand against the effects of sexual abuse. It is an opportunity to make a clear distinction between having thoughts of abusing to actually abusing other people. It is an opportunity to invite the man to take a position in relation to the power of choice. It is possible to make clearer the distinction between being subject to abuse and subjecting others to abuse.

When a man does disclose that he has been responsible for sexually abusive actions, this then provides a starting-point to address these issues. In most situations I then refer these men to specialised counsellors who can work conjointly on the issue of being subjected to sexual abuse and later acting abusively. While being clear to in no way diminish the effects that the man’s sexually abusive actions may have had on others, nor to deny in any way his responsibility for those actions, it is sometimes possible to situate the man’s disclosure of abusive actions as an indication of his intentions not to act abusively. This can begin a process of talking about steps of redress and steps necessary to prevent further harm.

Within these conversations I am careful not to assume that the man has had thoughts he could sexually abuse others. I am careful to speak in ways that do not imply that he has or has not acted in sexually abusive ways.

These sorts of conversations are especially relevant in situations in which men speak of how abuse has occurred to a significant proportion of family members across generations. Deconstructing understandings of the inevitability of abuse, or the cycle of victim to perpetrator, can enable men to be explicit about their own sense of self-power and responsibility. It also creates more room for the man’s identity to be based on alternative ways of being a man, ways based on respect and care.

Standing against the reproduction of male violence

Like myself, the males I consult with live within dominant men’s culture. As a result, many of them may be involved in practices that are subjugating of others. Some men may be involved in acts of violence, while others may have
an exaggerated sense of entitlement in their relationships with others. Finding ways to invite men who have been subjected to abuse to take steps towards developing a congruency in their positions against violence and abuse is an important part of this work.

Often a central issue for the men who consult with me is their experience of anger in relation to the abuse they experienced as a child. The ways in which this anger is understood makes a significant difference to its consequences. This anger can be understood as legitimate rage in response to violent actions. Within the dominant ideas of masculinity, however, experiences of anger and rage are all too often seen as connected to, and as justifying of, violent and aggressive acts - acts that replicate the worst of masculine culture. Acknowledging injustice and the rightful response of rage seems important. Expressions of anger are understandable and often act as catalysts for seeking redress and for stepping outside of notions of self-blame. However, when expressions of anger replicate abuse and are aligned with dominant forms of oppressive masculinity, they are often counter-productive not only for the man himself but for those around him.

Inviting men to speak of their histories of protest against violence and abuse creates a context in which they can take a stand against all forms of abusive actions. Through exploring these men’s experiences of abuse, stories of standing against abuse are often articulated in great detail. Philip, for example, began to understand his actions as developing a ‘personal loyalty’ against abuse and for alternative ways of being a man. The stories of protest against the abuse he was subjected to came to represent for him a stand against dominant men’s ways of being in the world. They began to be seen as congruent with a stand against all forms of violence and control.

The following questions informed our conversations:

- In relation to the stories that we have shared together, of the ways you resisted the effects of abuse, do these stories paint a picture of you being pro-violence or against violence?
- Who would be the least surprised that you are determined to find non-violent ways of being?
- What stories would they share about you if they were here?
- In facing up to the ways in which your partner experiences some of your

behaviour as controlling, is this a further step in standing against violence?

- In acknowledging these times when you have replicated violence or felt like replicating violence, what does this say about the life you wish to lead?

When talking about the issue of anger, the following questions have been a useful guide:

- What are some of the different sorts of anger? What can they lead to?
- As men, what are we taught about ways of expressing anger?
- When you talked about your anger at the abuse you were subjected to, was this anger a statement of belief that you deserved to be treated respectfully?
- Are there other times when you experience an anger that stands up for respectful ways of being?
- What does this sort of anger look like?
- What sort of actions does it lead to?
- Are there times when you experience different sorts of anger? An anger that can lead to disrespectful ways?
- What are some ways that this anger could be expressed that would fit with your preferred ways of being?

Men have mentioned various ways of expressing anger that do not replicate violence or abuse including: writing letters of testimony; writing letters to the people who were responsible for the abuse; and inviting significant persons to therapy sessions to honour the man’s experiences of injustice and the ways he has got through them.

These conversations about men’s violence and anger aim to enable men to take a stand, not only against the abuse they have been subjected to, but also against abuse and violence more generally. These conversations seek to clarify the sort of lives that the men wish to lead. Appreciating their own histories of resisting violent ways of being often clarifies and builds upon what they want for their lives. The conversations contribute to living lives based on non-violent ways of being.
Acknowledgement and testimony of preferred ways of being

During the therapeutic journey there are often opportunities to acknowledge and celebrate the terrain that has been traversed and all that has been accomplished. Finding ways of confirming alternative stories of survival and resilience, as well as stories of alternative ways of being men, is a continual process. For some men, formalising what has occurred in their lives, the changes they have made, feels important. During the final stages of consulting together we often create a document of identity which details the journey the man has taken. Holding a ceremony and inviting significant others to attend and reflect upon the changes that have occurred can be powerfully acknowledging. In some circumstances it is preferred that I document some of our important conversations in the form of a letter which can then serve as a testimony to the man’s work.

My experience of this work

Being witness to stories of abuse and sorrow, of powerlessness and grief, and being witness to stories of protest, resilience and self-care, I experience as a privilege. Speaking with other men as they separate themselves from the worst extremes of masculine culture and seek to create for themselves new, alternative ways of being men, offers me, as a man, a sense of hopefulness. It offers me a sense that as men we can build upon alternative ways of relating and begin to redress the harm caused by masculine ways of being to women, children and ourselves.

Central to this sense of hopefulness are processes of accountability. As discussed throughout this paper, working with men who have been subjected to abuse occurs within a broader context of adult power over children, professional’s power over those who consult with them, men’s violence and inequitable gender relations. Finding ways to consistently name that I may unwittingly reproduce oppressive practices, and finding ways to ensure that I am working in ways that are transparent and accountable to those who are consulting me as well as to women workers in the field, enables me to find hope, sustenance and joy in this work.

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I also must find space to say that persisting to get this paper completed and finding a way forward through some tough moments has been my own little ‘Everest’. I would like to thank those people who supported me. I would especially like to thank Lester Rigney for his passionate pep talk that reignited my determination to write about this issue.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that it is due to the courage and trust of those men and young men with whom I have consulted that this paper has been written. The work described has evolved through our conversations and the therapeutic relationships that we have built together.
Notes

1. First published in the 1998 No.4 Dulwich Centre Journal. Republished here with permission. This paper is to provide the basis for a detailed practice write-up to be produced by the Adelaide Central Mission.

2. Patrick O'Leary is currently undertaking PhD studies at Flinders University of South Australia and is working as a counsellor in a part-time capacity at the Adelaide Central Mission. He can be contacted at Dulwich Centre Publications, Hut St PO Box 7192, Adelaide 5000, South Australia, or on email: SAPJOL@sigma.sss.flinders.edu.au


6. A recent review of North American studies has revealed that approximately 30% of all childhood sexual abuse victims are male (Holmes, Offen & Waller 1997).


10. Hansen and Slater (1988, cited in Romano & DeLuca 1997) studied literature and found an average of 28% of sex offenders had experienced child sexual abuse, whilst Bagley (1994, cited in Romano & DeLuca 1997) found a figure of 15.5%. More recently Ryan et al. (1996) found that 39.1% of child molesters had experienced child sexual assault. Locally in South Australia the Adolescent Sexual Abuse Prevention Program (1996, cited Hall & O'Leary 1997) found that 37% of adolescent sex offenders had been abused as children.

11. I was introduced to the ideas within this section by Maxine Joy.

References


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