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Creating Islands of Safety for Victims of Violence A critical systems approach

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There are times when I catch myself believing that there is such a thing as something: which is separate from something else.

Gregory Bateson / Nora Bateson 2010

What is a system?

What is a system that functions holistically? Is it being more than each part or individual but relying on the growth potential of each integral part for adaptation and flourishing in the world? Indigenous peoples may find examples of this holism in an eco-system, in a tribe or in a ceremony. Scientists have attuned to this holism in physics and quantum theory for almost one hundred years. Scientist Michael Jackson (2003) writes about creative holism as a “critical systems approach to complex problem situations in relation to management addressing issues within an organisation and with employees” (Jackson, p.62). I would also add that there is something about a system that transcends the “sum of its parts”. While this has been stated widely, I would also say that there is something of the *creative spirit* or *life force* at work in a holistic system; something of the magnificent that can be transformed or created from what was previously considered. While many family therapists sprung from either a scientific background or a more Marxist or secular oriented approach to social work, I believe there was something more at work that extends into the realm of the creative, the mysterious, the transcendent even, although that would be experienced uniquely by each person. Indigenous practice has never distanced itself from spirituality and *mamatowisowin*, the life force and the interconnectedness of all things or the Great Mystery which will be explored later in the chapter. Nora Bateson’s film about her father’s life and thought evokes a recognition of Gregory Bateson’s attunement to these non-secular attributes... a life force that connects us all as beings in nature (Nora Bateson 2010). It was perhaps for this reason that it was impossible to categorise Gregory Bateson into any one particular discipline. However, it is clear that his

contribution to systemic thought reverberated widely in the world of social work and family therapy.

Holistic approaches in relational social work and family therapy in a context of colonisation?

Research in the field of social work and family therapy with Indigenous families in Canada has shown that relational, holistic approaches and practice that considers the whole being of the person and not just the immediate issue, lead more readily to successful outcomes (Carriere & Richardson 2013; Ermine 2000; Freedberg 2015; Littlebear 2000; Rice 2005; Thomas & Green 2007). A holistic approach would generally be client-centred or family-centred, involve mutuality, empathy, decentring of the worker, uplifting of the client's perspective, life experience and ways they have tried to resist mistreatment and preserve their dignity. Dignity is a central human concern, but particularly so in working with Indigenous people who have suffered great humiliation due to colonialism in Canada. In other words, all levels of context from the larger social context to the more immediate contexts of the moment are included.

Segregation is still an issue in Canada. The "Indian Act" (1876) remains in place and there are still barriers to moving beyond it in terms of administering funds to First Nations communities. A much higher proportion of Indigenous people are controlled by every measure of state intervention. They suffer disproportionate prison sentences, child removals, institutionalisation and involuntary psychiatric treatment than the general population (Statistics Canada 2011; Carriere & Richardson 2013; Richardson & Wade 2008). Their experience of injustice, violence, corruption and ignorance at the hands of the Canadian state institutions is apparently greater than any other minority. Their level of education, health and income is lower than the general population. They suffer every indication of poverty and isolation. In response to generations of mistreatment, Indigenous people are gradually becoming less separated from their own cultures and languages as they recover from the previously purposeful effort of the Canadian government to integrate them by systematically annihilating their cultures. It is important to consider this particular history of colonial interaction in order to provide helpful and appropriate social services for Indigenous families (Carriere & Richardson 2013; Richardson & Wade 2008).

Holistic or systemic child protection work also involves considering the multiple contexts of the family, including socio-political conditions, the

particular circumstances of the interaction, and the situational logic through which a victim of violence resists those micro-acts of aggression. It is possible and important to understand the interaction within the family system while recognising the power/power imbalances that are at work within the system. The notion of “gender power” or gender imbalance does not exist in natural ecosystems as it does in human society. The “separate but equal” conditions of many species involved in sexual reproduction have not resulted in human constructed culture, ideologies, values, and priorities that come from abstract thinking and social imperatives. In an attempt to sort out the relationship between mind and nature and the land of *creatura*, where not only material/energetic processes are found but also information processes that he found informed Bateson’s ideas of human interaction with systems. Bateson spoke of the “double description” as his method for investigating the interaction between life forms (Hui et al 2008). In relation to this interaction, Bateson also posed the question:

What pattern connects the crab to the lobster and the orchid to the primrose and all the four of them to me? And me to you? And all the six of us to the amoeba in one direction and to the backward schizophrenic in another?

(Bateson 1979, p.8)

His interest in relationality resonates with the Indigenous epistemology described later in this chapter, indicating there is something at work along the lines of inherent and integral connections between us all. This kind of attention to relationality has much to contribute to health and social care and the ways we hold each other up as part of life on the planet.

Systemic analysis can assist practitioners working with families and in communities to understand interaction in context without blaming victims of violence, asking appropriate questions about the deliberateness of violence in the human realm, about the conditions that engender violence and embolden perpetrators. As systemic or relational practitioners, we can find answers in the social ecology that explain the foundations of violence (e.g. colonialism, patriarchy, social inequality, unfair laws, abuses of power with impunity) rather than seeking explanations for victimhood within the victim. It is important to contest theories about false consciousness and internalised oppression as they are hyper-generalised and abstract sociological theories created by individuals with relative power who do not consider the immediate context of people’s lives. Often, these theories are imposed by people of relative power

onto those with a lower socio-economic standing which can be both unhelpful and elitist. For example, Allan Wade writes that Karl Marx constructed the theory of false consciousness to explain why the proletariat were not rising up to overthrow their oppressors when they failed to live up to his prediction. (Wade, public communication, *Mind the Gap*, 2015). Marx blamed the poor for over-identifying with the bourgeoisie and upper classes; that they sought to emulate their lifestyle rather than overthrow it. Erving Goffman (1963) has offered some insight into this conversation by reminding us that people both identify with what they love and appreciate while resisting that which they oppose.

Similarly, we can contest popular descriptions such as “co-dependency”, or psychodynamic binaries (e.g. he is aggressive because she is passive; I am racist because you have dark skin) in that they fail to acknowledge and understand the resistance and responses of the victim as well as the deliberateness of the violence. Thus, they reproduce a false assumption that victims are passive. A way to avoid engaging in practices that obscure differences in gender, power and access to resources is to elicit both accounts of violence/mistreatment and resistance to aggression (Gilligan, Rogers & Tolman 2013; McCarthy 2010a, Richardson 2009; Richardson & Wade 2012, 2008; Wade 1997). In so doing, it becomes clear that the victim is not passive, did not just “take it”, and that they possess particular, situational knowledges related to safety and protection. These knowledges can be explored through therapeutic conversation and embedded into the safety planning process. When we elicit and elucidate the acts of resistance against violence, these safety knowledges show, for example, how a mother has been trying to protect her child and keep herself safe simultaneously. Due to the unequal power relations between perpetrator and victim, she is unlikely to be able to stop the violence so she must make the best decisions possible within that context. When resistance is understood “in situ”, the situational logic becomes clear and intelligent. Such a conversation can also serve to strengthen the victim’s sense of themselves, their knowledge and acumen, thus putting them in a better position to manage the system and restructure their lives on a more secure foundation. Our role is to help put events (which have often been decontextualised by others) back into context.

Systemic structuring in the Canadian ‘Islands of Safety’ process

“Islands of Safety” is a child protection intervention developed on the West Coast of Canada by Allan Wade and me in order to assist and facil-

itate safety planning with First Nations, Metis and Inuit families in the context of spousal assault. This method offers culturally-based, family therapy informed, response-based approaches to addressing violence and creating more harmonious relationships within families (Richardson & Wade 2008; Richardson & Wade 2013). The Islands of Safety process can also accomplish the following therapeutic tasks: 1) restoring the mother-child bond which is often attacked and damaged by male intimate partner violence, 2) restoring preferred and more culturally-designated family roles and interaction in a way that could be called "decolonising" (e.g. both taking into account past and current colonisation of Indigenous families while attempting to exist outside and beyond it to some degree, while also acknowledging the structural violence within the system). The development of the Islands of Safety model included a process of community consultation with relevant "stakeholders". This included receiving feedback from Indigenous mothers involved in the child welfare system, fathers who have used violence, child protection social workers, Aboriginal/Indigenous child welfare agencies, shelter workers and Indigenous cultural advisors. The model is embedded in a cultural model of traditional Metis/Cree family life (Anderson 1990) and "rounds" of questions informed by preferred ways of living/being. These questions also serve to articulate the ways family members have been resisting violence and its indignity. Research has shown that highlighting resistance knowledges leads to better outcomes for recovery and well-being (Brown 1991; Gillian, Rogers & Tolman 2013; Richardson 2013; Richardson and Wade 2008; Wade 1995, 1997). A typical series of response-based questions would be "When he hit you, how did you respond in that moment... What did you do?" In order to establish the interviewee as a competent person with pre-existing abilities, we would regress chronologically and ask "When did you first notice that he was becoming dangerous?" We would then list and summarise her acts of resistance in context and asking a connecting or "transference of knowledge" question such as "How did you know to do this?"

Application of a critical systems approach

A framework known as a "critical systems approach" was developed by social scientists (Bateson 1979, 1972; Capra 1996; Jackson 2003) to bring to bear more analysis of imbalances, such as social inequality, to systemic thinking. Jackson believed that holistic systems could be used creatively for problem-solving:

Creativity, in a systemic sense, has become possible because of more recent developments in systems methodology.... The "hard systems" methodologies developed were, and still are, efficient at tackling a particular range of problem situations.... System dynamics, organisational cybernetics, complexity theory, soft systems thinking, emancipatory systems thinking and postmodern systems methods were developed.

(Jackson 2003, p.62, 12.6)

One example of systems change that can help the entire eco-system is to stop the adding of toxicity into the system. This could mean addressing pollution but metaphorically, it could refer to addressing violence or mistreatment so that the other (e.g. human) parts of the system may live unimpeded by harm or violence. In the helping professions, social disruption relates to the colonialism, (structural) violence, displacement and the denial of life-sustaining activities. As such, applying a critical systems approach to an activity such as safety planning could be viable. It is important to acknowledge that natural systems do not necessarily refer to human beings who act with intent and deliberation.

Jackson offers a critique of cybernetics (2008), offering discernment between natural and human systems. He says that the defining feature of social organisations is the fact that their component parts are human beings who attribute meaning to their situations and act according to their own purposes. He believes that effort needs to be placed into managing processes of negotiation between different viewpoints and value positions. He writes, "Although cybernetics pays lip service to notions of empowerment and democracy, it actually says little about how individuals can be motivated to perform and how participation and democracy can be arranged." (Jackson 2008, p.108). There isn't an explicit analysis of what happens if there isn't an explicit analysis of what should be done if one individual within the system decides to abuse power and mistreat others. This is a limitation which lies within the systems metaphor. In the family therapy world, there was a famous debate between Jay Haley and Gregory Bateson about this very issue. I will briefly present this debate further along in the paper.

In the Islands of Safety work, we found the systems analysis and metaphor helpful in our work with Indigenous families. Most women continued to include their view of the male abusers as part of the family needing help and healing rather than a part of the system they wanted extricated. In fact, the child protection worker often took issue with the

mother's efforts to include and assist the perpetrator. We were guided by the question, "How could it be safe enough for the child to be in the presence of their father?" Our team prepared and strategised around how to address limitations of the child protection system. For example, we knew from experience that 1) mothers are often encouraged to end their relationships with their partners (which leads to various larger social concerns) in order to keep custody of their children; 2) mothers are often "forbidden" from meeting the violent partner. Through a response-based lens, we understood and acknowledge the mother's safety knowledge. The mothers often found it helpful to talk to her partner and ascertain his state of mind. Child protection professionals saw this as risk rather than risk reduction, even though the child was not present. Finally, it was problematic that 3) the actions of the mother (and father) are often considered outside of any particular context and explained through the use of de-cultured, abstract theories (e.g. she has boundary issues or problems of discernment). Perhaps the most detrimental issue is that of mother-blaming.

Mother-blaming is one form of victim-blaming that is found in the human services. In particular, policies known as "failure to protect" tend to be used to designate the mother as neglectful and responsible for the family crisis (Strega et al 2012). The child protection logic has been that if the father is using violence against the mother it is, in some way, the mother's fault for choosing to be with him. As such, the child tends to be removed from the mother, not the father. Mothers are often subjected to psychological testing with the assumption that she must be psychologically "damaged", either by the violence or even before the violence, and therefore unfit to parent. In applying a systems approach, we would see the problem as located in between people, in the social world and not inside any one individual. Of course, the abuse of power by one member of the system can and must be addressed, but we would avoid individualising a systemic or social problem. We would question society's granting of impunity for male violence in certain contexts and the social systems which fail to adequately address the issue.

The logic of victim-blaming is found less with crimes such as stranger assault, or violence in social settings, such as bar-fights, bank-robberies or muggings; this logic is reserved for cases when the woman has been in an intimate relationship with the perpetrator (Strega et al 2012; Richardson and Wade 2012). One example from our practice is the issue of the victim choosing to meet with the perpetrator. We have observed that women often increase their safety when they meet with their

violent partner at a time and place of their choosing, even if there is a "no contact" order in place. Trying to control a woman's actions around safety can undermine her process. Her situational analysis informs her decision to preserve the relationship, on her terms, with the perpetrator can be useful for information gathering. This decision should not be the business of child protection workers when the child is kept safe in the process, because safety is the goal, not "mother control".

It became important for achieving a positive outcome to continuously re-focus from criticism, judgments and stereotyping to the safety of mother and child. Many of these judgements are underlined by state power and undermine the mother's ability to provide safety (e.g. "Why doesn't she just leave him?", "This is the third time that she has called the police!"). When we focus on what the mother is already knowing and doing, guided by her situational logic and in relation to her understanding of the violence, we access more insight into her safety awareness and orientation. In general, in our experience the absence of a systemic or family therapy orientation to child protection work, along with an application of decontextualised and individualistic psychological theories and labels, undermines safety planning and simply builds a case against the mother (or the non-offending parent in cases of a violent mother). These issues comprise a foundation for how child protection systems do not deal fairly or appropriately with First Nations, Metis and Inuit families in Canada.

Cybernetics

Gregory Bateson was a "grandfather" of cybernetics and systems theory (Bateson 1979, 1972; Boscolo et al 1987). Keeney (1983) identifies other key cybernetic researchers as Heinz von Foerster, Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela. Bateson was interested in how all life forms were connected and how people and environment were mutually influential. He was in awe of the natural world and was masterful at posing thought-provoking questions which highlighted these sacred relational qualities.

Later, his ideas were taken by family therapists, such as Tom Andersen (1987) and the Milan Team (1987) and applied to the study and practice of family therapy and what was called "cybernetic circularity" (Boscolo et al 1987, p.9). The Milan team explained:

by circularity, we mean the capacity of the therapist to conduct his investigation on the basis of feedback from the family on the

basis of the information he elicits about relationships and therefore about difference and change.

(Selvini-Palazolli, Boscolo, Cecchin & Prata 1980, p.11)

Therapists noticed that it was more difficult to invite or provoke change if the family was insulated and too isolated from social influences and outside experiences. For example, when parents integrated some of the learning children were experiencing at school, feedback from teachers, psycho-educational information about social issues and family life, they were more likely to begin to incorporate changes in interaction. A kind of openness was helpful for resolving problems and improving relationships. This knowledge was applied to the concept of "an open system".

Allan Wade and I were both moved and inspired by the contribution of family therapy, including the work of the Milan Team, to addressing problems within families. Nora Bateson's film (2010) about her father's life and work depicts both a practical and an aesthetic interface with Gregory's understanding of the relationship between all things. The ideas shared in this film resonate with Indigenous cosmology in a way that began to explain some of the numinous and what could be considered sacred aspects of inter-species relationships. However, Bateson's articulation of these concepts only takes a few steps down a path into what could be called a spiritual cosmology as depicted by the various belief systems of Indigenous peoples, such as one that guides me, *mamatowisowin*...the Cree word referring to the interconnectedness of all of life, everything and everyone. This experience is knowledge (Ermine 2000, p.106).

Indigenous theory

Mamatowisowin is described by Indigenous cosmologist Willie Ermine as "the capacity of tapping into the "life force" as a means of procreation." It is a "capacity to tap the creative force of the inner space (inside one's being as opposed to in the external world) by the use of all the faculties that constitute our being – it is to exercise inwardness" (p.106). Ermine talks about how the elders, the Old Ones:

Experienced a totality, a wholeness, in inwardness, and effectively created A physical manifestation of the life force by creating community. In doing so, they empowered the people to become the "culture" of accumulated knowledge. The community became paramount by virtue of its role as repository and incubator of total

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tribal knowledge in the form of custom and culture. Each part of the community became an integral part of the Whole flowing movement and was modeled on the inward wholeness and harmony.

(Ermine 2000, p.106)

There is something about this knowledge and holism that is sought in the Islands of Safety process, in the interaction with Indigenous families. There is also something of "two worlds colliding" in child protection processes that necessitate facilitators to be advocates for families, to contest oppressive and colonising processes whenever they interfere with the process. For example, Islands of Safety is based on the practice of upholding and highlighting human dignity and the presence of safety. Dignity is restored by acknowledging past humiliations through colonialism or in social service settings. When a space is created for this type of introductory conversation, the level of trust and risk-taking tends to increase. It is important that the family experiences enough safety to be invited into "risky conversations," a term borrowed from the Fifth Province work in cases where abuse had occurred (McCarthy 2003; Richardson & Reynolds 2015) and that the workers/facilitators are genuinely concerned with how the family is treated in health and social care settings. The facilitators then use the information about "what didn't go well" in other health and social care situations to inform guidelines for the interaction this time around.

In subsequent rounds of questioning, related to the family's safety knowledges and the social responses they have been receiving, professionals and family members around the table are reflect and identify the presence of dignity in the family's interaction or in the mother's attempt to resist her partner's violence. We begin the first round by asking "How is everyone doing now?", "How do things look when your family is getting on well?" and "Is this your first interaction with child protection workers?" The intent of these questions is to establish the competency and dignity of each person, to highlight their preferred ways of being together. We ask about previous interaction with professionals so we can ascertain how that went and if they felt their dignity was upheld or violated. Acknowledging past humiliations in similar processes is one way to demonstrate our commitment to doing a better job this time. We might ask the question, "If we were to really mess up here today and do a bad job, what would that look like?" Often the humour creates a lighter atmosphere in which the family can list their preferences and their fears.

The second round of questioning aims to elicit events – who did what to whom and how did the victims respond to and resist abuse. After documenting a list of resistance strategies and the acts of violence to which they were responding, we ask them “Who else knows about what happened?” This leads into discussing the social responses to the family. We understand that victims of violence and families in which violence has occurred can easily become stigmatised. Once we find out how they are being treated by others (family, friends and professionals), then we elicit and document their responses to the social responses of others. As such, their pre-existing safety knowledge and strategies become apparent. Perhaps most relevant, women can see themselves as active, responding agents and not “someone who just took it!” Perhaps the greatest suffering of victims, after the betrayal and heartbreak, is the feeling that they didn’t do enough to stop it –that is was in some way their fault. We contest this notion implicitly through the questions we ask and through the assumptions embedded within these questions.

In efforts to uphold the dignity of each person, we believe that perpetrators are capable of desisting violence (as many do, often without counselling). We also believe that treating people with dignity is more likely to be helpful than applying shame or righteousness. It is important that the facilitation team share this orientation. In one Islands of Safety meeting, one of the social workers representing the government said she would “pass”, meaning she refused to comment on the dignity of the family. The facilitators had not “prepared” this worker for the meeting, nor known that she would attend, we would not have permitted her to join the meeting unless she was committed to abiding by the process and taking a “one down” position to assume human equality with the family. Generally, it is not difficult to name “dignified interaction” one has witnessed on the part of the family and reflect this back to them. This kind of acknowledgement creates a safer and more uplifted space, similar to that of “The Fifth Province,” where conversation is acknowledged as sacred and where people can share anything with a commitment of all parties to listening and respect (Byrne & McCarthy 2007; McCarthy 2010b). The Fifth Province is a metaphor for a Celtic province in ancient Ireland, a site where Chieftains would meet to discuss matters of state. The Hill of the Kings existed in the centre of Ireland where the four political provinces met thereby constituting a fifth province. It was imagined to be a Druidic site where the Kings and chieftains of various clans came to sort out difficulties, not by fighting. They would lay down their arms and come and talk, and receive counsel from the Druids. It was a place where oppositions came and collided. It was a place of work,

of negotiation, to identify what the issues were... their relationship to other issues. In this way, conversation is a means of weaving together action, interaction and the context in which it is embedded. The ritualistic focus on creating a "sacred space" resonates both through Fifth Province and Islands of Safety work. There is no desire to minimise, categorise or individualise, privatise, de-contextualise or de-genderise asymmetrical interactions involving violence and responses to it, including resistance. Acknowledging that these are issues of life and death, the greatest attention is paid to "the small acts of living" (Goffman 1963) and how they contribute to staying alive in dangerous situations (Wade 1997). Some of the crucial safety practices have been recently documented in an article (Richardson and Reynolds 2015) entitled "Structuring safety in conversations with survivors of torture and residential school." As well, safety is attended to by focusing on human dignity in all aspects of the gathering, although safety is meant to be a "bottom line" rather than a defining goal of human interaction. Through highlighting resistance, knowledge and preferences, Islands of Safety participants may re-envision their highest aspirations for a preferred life.

These aforementioned processes articulate informal guidelines for the process. Islands of Safety is not a "talking circle" where people can say just anything; nor is it a restorative justice process. It is a meeting where the safety of those most harmed is held up over all else in the process of safety planning. The voices and desires of victims are given precedence in guiding the process. The perpetrators have committed to participating safely, without intimidating others and are willing to hear how the violent behaviour has elicited particular responses and resistance of others who are trying to create safety and dignity. For the perpetrator to be included, we used particular criteria to ensure that participation would be meaningful and that there would never be any "backlash" for victims (Richardson and Wade 2008). Unlike some processes of mediation or circles, we do not assume there is an equality of resources, privilege or safety. Rather, we acknowledge the risks, differences in power and what is necessary to create immediate safety in the process.

Collapsing gender and difference – Bateson and obfuscations of power

Islands of Safety is about assisting people to create safety and overcome violence. A key part of understanding, assessing and addressing violence involves a study of power. Power is about the ability to exert one's will in an unimpeded manner (*puissance*) and to make things happen in one's

world (*pouvoir*) (Deleuze cited in Marks, p.60). Foucault (1991) saw power as being at work everywhere, as diffused, embodied in discourse and knowledge. He believed that we are all affected by power and that it is not necessarily a bad thing, sometimes it is just leverage. In terms of exercising power, the role of the Islands of Safety facilitator involves holding knowledge of the system and making sure its policies are realised to the benefit of "safety". For example, this means contesting systemic discrimination against abused mothers. It also means relying on accurate accounts and avoiding misrepresentation. It means upholding the dignity of the person in every interaction and contesting the unjust power of the state where there is unfairness in application of policies.

In some contexts, *pouvoir* involves impunity. Wherever there is power, and particularly oppression and violence at work, there is resistance. The 1960s/1970s West, saw a rise in feminist praxis and a movement towards attention to gender and equality within the context of a largely patriarchal North American society. Sexism was being challenged both in western societies at large and in the patriarchal family (Mander & Rush 1974; Byrne & McCarthy 1999; McCarthy 2001). Wife assault was being identified as a critical social issue and women's resistance to violence in the home would eventually emerge as an important part of analysis and contextual understanding. Inspired by the work of feminists, Indigenous people and writers from the anti-colonial movement, Allan Wade writes:

Whenever persons are badly treated, they resist. That is, alongside each history of violence and oppression, there runs a parallel history of prudent, creative and determined resistance.

(1997, p.23)

These points were introduced into therapeutic conversations by feminist therapists, inviting the field to consider the existence of violence, inequality and imbalances of power in both society and in the therapy room (Mander & Rush 1974; Byrne & McCarthy 1999; McCarthy 2001). An important debate between therapist Jay Haley and Gregory Bateson in debate around the issue of power. Bateson presented his view that power was a myth (1972) but acknowledged that those parties who believed in power were often corrupted by it or sought to abuse it. Rather than believing in the existence of unilateral power, he believed that the parts of the system influence each other (p.486). Haley believed that humans regularly sought to influence one another and often organise themselves into hierarchies, seeking advantage over others (Carr 1991,

p.16). Haley would address this strategically in the therapy session in ways which he believed would improve the functioning of the family. Carr (1991) suggests that both Haley and Bateson worked with only one simplistic definition of power where there are actually several different kinds (p.20). In our work with Islands of Safety, we paid attention to the earlier feminist critiques and were perhaps most moved by Carr's idea that "Mutuality of influence does not imply equality of power".

A central problem with Bateson's position is the assumption that mutual influence implies "a mutual amount of influence". There is no doubt that in any social influence situation both parties are influenced by each other. However, often one party is influenced more than the other. For example, wives are more often seriously physically injured by their husbands than visa versa (Neidig & Friedman, 1984). Children are more often abused by their parents than vice versa.

(Goldstein et al, 1985)

As such, we would contest practices of victim-blaming as well as mutualisations of unilateral violence, such as co-dependency, complementarity (Richardson and Wade 2012). Today, I would add children and children's authors to the list of those who have inspired response-based practice. Indeed, we have had to look beyond the fields of psychology and psychiatry for the inspiration of survivors, former political prisoners and women targeted by men's violence. Wade's article "Small Acts of Living" (1997) documents how the theme of "healthy" resistance is absent from the psychotherapy literature, apart from a few important exceptions (e.g. Burstow 1992; Epston, Murray & White 1992; Gillian, Rogers & Tolman 1991; Kelly 1987; McCarthy & Byrne 2001). What does it mean for our field when the majority of theorists ignore the fact of resistance to violence and that victims are already engaged in dignity preservation and safety planning throughout their experience, not just at the coaching of professionals. The article "Taking Resistance Seriously" (Richardson & Wade 2008) provides examples of psychological theories of abuse survivors which could be described at least as women-unfriendly and victim-blaming. Today, theories such as the Johnson Typology (2008) construct women who resist violence as aggressors thus further confounding self-preservation with violent aggression and potentially criminalising self-defence. These types of ideas also negate the reality that resistance is much more than merely fighting back physicality but involves a multitude of spiritual, emotional and intellectual processes (Richardson & Wade 2008). These blurring of lines is avoided by adher-

ing to a definition of violence as being unilateral, deliberate, and social (e.g. it takes place in the social world, not in the mind of the victim). "For years psychologists have been trying to address men's violence by tampering in the minds of women" (Wade personal communication, Mind the Gap 2015). It hasn't worked.

Twenty years later, response-based practice was developed partially to address this crucial absence relating to how victims of violence are construed and treated in society, "stigmatized" as James C. Scott (1990) and Erving Goffman (1963) would state. Coates and Wade (2004) knew that until this stigmatisation of violence victims was addressed, there would neither be peace in family life for many women and children, NOR gender equality.

Concluding by embracing the sacred in Islands of Safety

The Islands of Safety process was developed in consultation with Indigenous women, men, elders, cultural teachers as well as child protection social workers. It has been informed by many therapists, practitioners and individuals/families who embrace the sacred in their daily lives. Inspired by processes of ceremony, medicine wheels, the sweat lodge, the Fifth Province, as well as studies of interpersonal dignity. One of the things we learned from Indigenous women is that they want their men to heal too. They acknowledge a brutal history of colonial/state violence and that both men and women were targets of this harm; as such, both men and women deserve support for living lives free of violence. There are still areas of Canada that are rampant with multiple forms of violence due to ongoing state neglect. At the same time, Indigenous people everywhere are active through protest, through ceremony, through identity-strengthening for the victims of state child welfare and child internment. Their work includes prayers, sharing teachings, travel to ceremonies and blessings for Earth. It is my view that dignity is the path to restoration and social harmony. Dignity involves autonomy, sovereignty, mutual aid and a full-on effort to address structural violence and racism. The official count of murdered and disappeared Indigenous women in Canada today is 1186, a figure dating back 30 years (CBC 2014). Many Canadians are waiting for an end to the impunity experienced by many perpetrators and a whole-hearted commitment to address such forms of racist, sexist and class-based violence.

It is possible to work with families who suffer violence, serve as allies, support victims and hold perpetrators accountable whilst treating them

with dignity. We can work as advocates and activists, within our role as therapists, to help create societies that are more just for marginalised and First Peoples. If fifty years of therapeutic knowledge and evolving family practice cannot be used to help create safety for families, then what is the point of the work, after all. For me, it is about creating these islands of safety and care... not about exploring what is wrong with people.

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