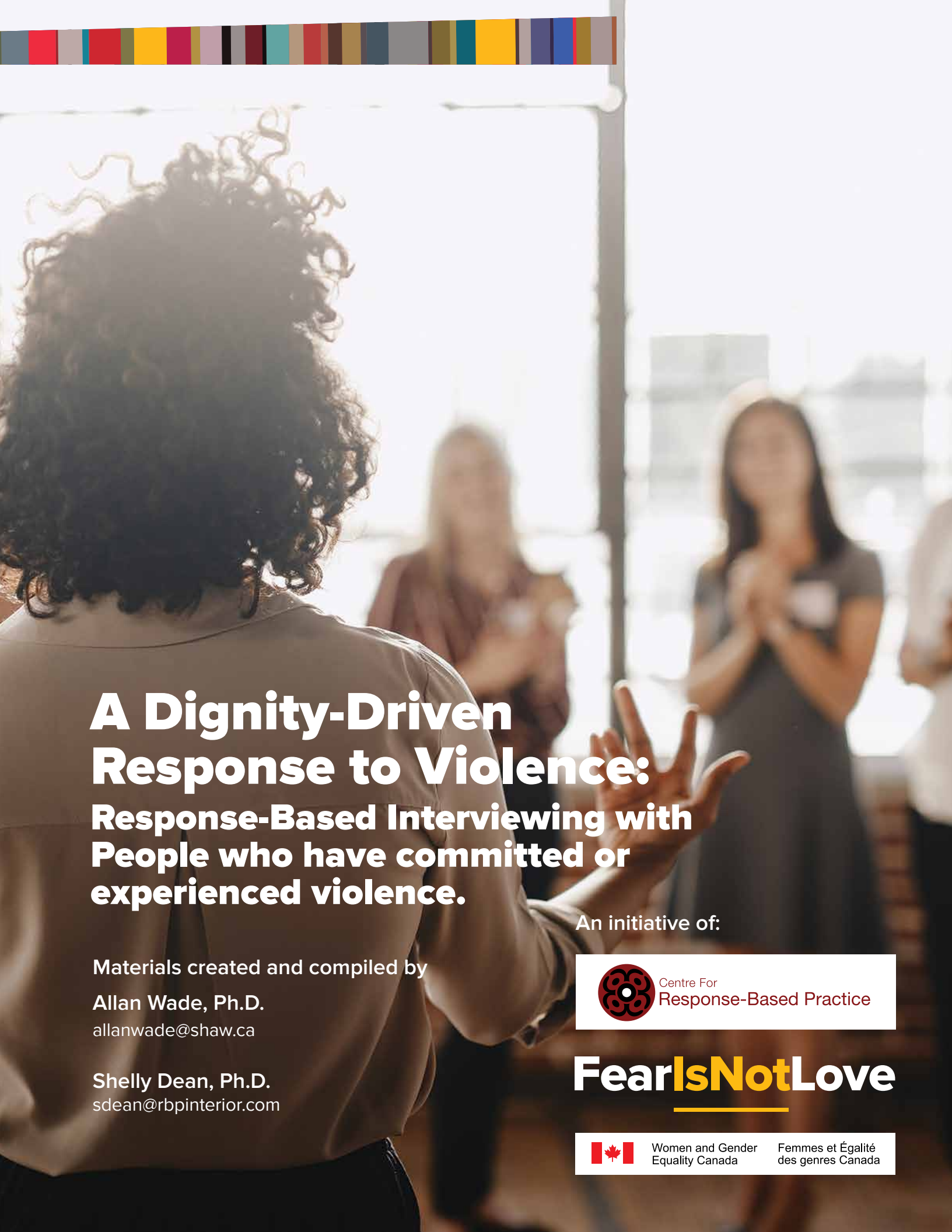


A Dignity-Driven Response to Violence: Response-Based Interviewing with People who have committed or experienced violence.

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Centre For
Response-Based Practice

FearIsNotLove



Women and Gender
Equality Canada

Femmes et Égalité
des genres Canada

RESPONSE-BASED INTERVIEWING GUIDE

Acknowledgment

This guide is meant to be read as an introduction to a set of “conversational” methods and ideas developed by the Response-Based Practice group and colleagues, including staff at FearIsNotLove, over a thirty-year period. We have always combined practice and research/scholarship, using one to benefit the other, and borrowed on related work from too many colleagues to mention. We are primarily indebted to the many people who have consulted us for help in responding to, or desisting from, many forms of violence. It is an immense privilege to experience the dignity of the human spirit, visible even in the most abject circumstances, on a daily basis.

This guide is not meant to be read as a “stand-alone” document. It reflects our experience of working for and with, and our efforts to learn from, individuals and families who are part of diverse communities. All aspects of this guide reflect the joint work of the Response-Based Practice group – Linda Coates, Cathy Richardson, Shelly Dean, Allan Wade – and the many communities to which we belong.

We are especially indebted to Ann Maje Raider and the many Indigenous Women Elders who have generously shared their cultural knowledge and personal experience and helped us to see the close relationship between past and present colonial violence, domestic and family violence, racism, administrative domination, sexualized violence and exploitation, colonial mental health and forensic practices, and violence against Mother Earth. As Kaska Dena elders Dorothy Smith and Mary Maje put it, “You treat the women as you treat the land”.

For many years, we have worked closely with feminist activists and organizations, including staff at women’s shelters and connected services in several countries, who continue to press for a gender-equal society free from violence. Our larger goal is to improve the quality of institutional responses in cases of violence at all points of contact, across all institutional settings. Accordingly, we are now working with allies in corrections, law enforcement, criminal justice, family law, child protection, mental health, victim services, restorative justice and offender treatment. The methods and ideas presented in this guide are intended specifically for the shelter context but can be adapted and applied in other institutional settings. We view the ideas and methods presented in this guide as applicable – with modifications – across institutional settings.

This guide is also derived from work in many literary genres; political essays, memoir and autobiography, journalism, social realist fiction, literary criticism, feminist theory and practice, ethnography, micro-sociology, conversation analysis, critical discourse analysis, social psychology, philosophy, law, psychiatry, and so on. Information that is largely lacking in the literatures of the helping professions (i.e., that people tend to resist violence of all kinds and work to preserve their basic human dignity and that of others) – is represented directly in these diverse literatures. The main tenets of Response-Based Practice are supported by many authors whose texts were written independently of one another and of our work. We have referred

directly to, and cited, many of these sources. Admittedly, though, these literatures are so extensive and diverse that any short summary is impossible.

Many parts of this guide appear elsewhere in our previous writing, conference presentations, policy and practice guides, on-line materials such as recorded talks and the accounts of survivors, and texts for service-users developed in a number of organizations. Key among these are, “Honouring Resistance” and “Choosing to Change”, developed by FearIsNotLove staff Nick Todd, Gillian Weaver-Dunlop, and Cindy Ogden. We refer to several other examples where relevant and in the list of resources in the back of this guide.

Finally, this guide is meant to be part of a conversation. In referring to this document, we deliberately use the word “guide” instead of, for example, “manual”. No single “manual”, created by us or anyone else, can encompass the enormous diversity of social life or the complexity of concrete “cases”. We assume that service-providers will take up and modify the ideas and methods that “fit” their practice in their context, and disregard others. This is as it should be. We hope the guide will be shared with service-users as well as staff members and that every reader will feel free to send comments, ideas, criticisms, questions, and so on.

Parts of this guide will be revised on the basis of this conversation and parts will be appear in subsequent documents, as appropriate. We are grateful to Fear Is Not Love and Gender Equality Canada for the opportunity of developing and presenting this set of methods and ideas and look forward to what comes next.

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CHAPTER 1 – NOTES ON LANGUAGE

Using Socially Just and Accurate Language

We take a “plain language” approach to direct service work, with a minimum of professional jargon. Terms that are routine for mental health and related professionals can be used in a manner that excludes service users and treats professionals’ opinions as more valid and beyond question. This can create a class system that requires service users to accept opinions that may not be in their best interests or those of their children. In such circumstances, service users may pretend to agree with unsolicited advice and opinions, to overtly comply with the service provider and the expectations of the organization so as to avoid negative consequences.

Language and Violence

Language can be used as a tool of violence and domination or as a tool of dignity and justice. In cases of violence, the role of language is always at issue because spoken and written deception is so often part of the crime.

Research shows that language is widely used to (a) conceal violence, (b) obscure offender responsibility, (c) conceal victim responses and resistance, and (d) blame and pathologize victims (Coates & Wade, 2007). Alternatively, language can be used to (a) reveal violence, (b) clarify offender responsibility, (c) acknowledge victim responses and resistance, and (d) contest the blaming and pathologizing of victims.

Linda Coates developed the distinction between terms that denote mutual actions and terms that denote unilateral actions. Mutual actions are those we do together, jointly and consensually. Kissing is mutual in that it involves the consensual actions of both people. But one person forcing their mouth on to the mouth or body of another is unilateral, in that it is an action by one person against the will and well-being of another.

FearIsNotLove staff maintain the distinction between “mutual” and “unilateral” terms to portray “who did what to whom” and “in what context”, as accurately as possible. We do not discuss the distinction between mutual and unilateral actions in detail in this document but encourage readers to go to our publications, cited in the references, for more information.

Active Voice

People are social actors who respond (mentally, physically, socially, spiritually) to the actions of others, including violence.

People cannot be understood outside of the natural-material-social-cultural worlds in which they live and act. Moment by moment, humans respond to others and to the complex events that make up their lives, positive and negative. In social interaction, including cases of violence, humans respond to one another as social actors with the ability to choose.

Consequently, in exploring social interaction, we focus on how people respond to one another physically, mentally, socially and spiritually. We tend to avoid the language of “effects” and “impacts” when tracking social interactions, as these terms can inadvertently frame people as objects and conceal the situated and contextual nature of complex mental, spiritual, social, and physical responses. This said, much of the time the language of effects and impacts is unproblematic: Choosing to use either is ultimately a matter of judgment. For us, it is simply important to understand when the distinction matters and how it works in practice. More on this distinction is available in our publications.

Pronouns

The policy of FearIsNotLove is to use female (her, she), male (he, him), and neutral or non-binary (they, their) pronouns in the most affirmative and accurate manner possible, based on how service users wish to identify.

Most FearIsNotLove service users are women or boys or girls. Most people who attend offender treatment services identify as men. We use gendered pronouns to reflect this reality. At the same time, we use neutral non-binary pronouns throughout the document.

Description of Terms

We use the terms victim or survivor and perpetrator or offender, as situated action terms, not as identity or characterological terms.

A perpetrator or offender is a person who acted aggressively or violently to another person or persons in a specific interaction in a specific context. That the person has perpetrated or offended against another person tells us nothing about their identity or personality.

A victim or survivor is a person who was subjected to violence or other forms of aggression or oppression by another person or persons, the perpetrator(s) or offender(s). That the person has been victimized tells us nothing about their identity or personality.

Often we join the terms victim and survivor (i.e. victim/ survivor) to stress both terms are useful. The term victim is somewhat contested. The advantage of the term is that it conveys that the person has been subjected to a wrongful and criminal act by another person. The term survivor, though useful in some respects and preferred by many people, does not explicitly denote that a violent crime has been committed. A person can “survive” a car crash or natural disaster or a violent attack. The term survivor does not by itself suggest resistance.

The same person can be a victim/survivor in one situation and a perpetrator or offender in another situation. This is not uncommon and is not a contradiction. This said, we believe that service-users should be supported in using the terms they prefer.

See APPENDIX 1: Language: Tell it like it is writing guide



HONOURING RESISTANCE IN NATURAL-MATERIAL-SOCIAL-CULTURAL CONTEXT

“A Kick in the Belly”

In her recent book, “A Kick in the Belly: Women, Slavery and Resistance”, Stella Dadzie (2020) documents the resistance of enslaved West Indian women and their crucial role in ending slavery.

“ [T]he evidence points to a distinctly female role in the development of a culture of slave resistance – a role that was not just central, but downright dynamic. Enslaved women found ways of fighting back that beggar belief. Whether responding to the horrendous conditions of plantation life, the sadistic vagaries of their captors or the ‘peculiar burdens of their sex’, their collective sanity relied on a highly subversive adaptation of the values and cultures they smuggled with them naked from different parts of Africa. By sustaining or adapting remembered cultural practices – be it music, storytelling, preparing food, administering medicines, fixing hair, birthing and naming rites or rituals for burying their dead – they ensured that the lives of chattel slaves retained both meaning and purpose. This sense of self gave rise to a sense of agency so that over time, both their subtle acts of insubordination and their conscious acts of rebellion came to undermine the very fabric and survival of West Indian slavery. (p. 13) ”

Dadzie argues that enslaved women’s ever-present resistance deserves recognition.

“ Stories of how Africans and their descendants survived the experience of enslavement with their dignity and humanity intact provide a vast, untapped source of national pride. ” (p. 12)

“Little Ways”

Ann Maje Raider was awarded the Polar Prize in 2016, for inspired leadership in the Canadian north. A Kaska Dena elder and leader, Ann is Executive Director of the Liard Aboriginal Women’s Society (LAWS). Ann’s leadership and the work of Ann’s Kaska sisters is essential to Response-Based Practice: Their cultural knowledge and social justice work has inspired and informed our work for more than 20 years. At a recent gathering with Carcross-Tagish First Nation, Ann shared the following account during a conversation about how children who were put in the prison camps worked to resist isolation and preserve their dignity.

“ In the Lower Post residential school, when one of the girls would wet their bed, the nuns would make them stand with the urine-soaked sheet over their head in front of long row of sinks. And they would parade the rest of us past them. It was a threat to us – ‘See what will happen to you if you wet your bed!’ – and it was their way of trying to make us join in humiliating those kids. But none of us did that. We would not look at them. To preserve their dignity, we would all just look away. We all knew instinctively

that we did not want to add to their humiliation. Sometimes we did this all day, until they were ready. Then, maybe at dinner, sitting across the table, they would start to talk. And then we would answer and talk together and get back to 'normal' and not talk about what happened. ”

In the circle, Ann talked about how important it is to remember how children tried to protect each other and stand together.

“ It is so powerful and important to remember this because the whole purpose of the prison camps was to humiliate us and destroy our humanity. They took us from our families. They tried to isolate us from one another, to stop brothers and sisters from being together, to turn children against one another. But we did many things to preserve our dignity. We always found ways to disobey, to get together, to break through the isolation. We did not let them destroy our humanity. We took care of one another. ”

The children could not have explained their innate knowledge of dignity and humiliation, but none the less knew instinctively to defend one another.

I asked Ann, “Where does that awareness come from?” She said, “It’s from our culture – what we learned before we were taken away – and from being on the land. Its Dena Au’ Nazen. Dena Au’ Nazen is the Kaska Dena code that most closely approximates the meaning of the English term “Dignity”, but is much more comprehensive. Ann and Art Stephenson define Dena Au’Nazen as follows:

“ We are held in the arms of our land and taught about our place in Creation. We call this Dena Au’Nazen, the law of our land. We are taught to honour all of Creation, from the Sky above to the Earth below, to all that lies between, to all things large and small, and to all things seen and unseen. The land speaks to us today as it has to our ancestors of long ago. It is the source of Dena Au’Nazen, teaching us about who we are, and about our place in Creation. It holds the memory of our people and shows us the way to live in harmony with all of Creation. Dena Au’Nazen opposes violence against the land and against each other, calling on us to be mindful of our words and actions, to uphold fairness, care and harmony in our relationships with all of Creation, and to know our place. ”

Dena Au’Nazen applies to all of creation and sets out “right relations” between people, the land and the animals.

At the same gathering, Shirley Lord, a Vuntut Gwich’in (People of the Lakes) elder from Old Crow, Yukon, shared the inspiration she drew from Ann’s account of dignity and resistance and how, for the first time, she articulated some of her own responses as forms of resistance.

“ In the prison camp, they used to put us in separate dorms and close the doors between them so we could not be with our sisters. But there was a small gap under one of the doors. Sometimes at night, me and my sister would lie on the floor and reach under the door and hold hands, without saying a word. It really was beautiful when I think back on how much comfort that brought each of us.

After the prison camps I lived with my aunt. When she would go on binges, we would be apprehended and put into foster homes. I lived in fifteen foster homes before I was of the age to leave. I realize now the tremendous strength, courage and bravery it took to live this life up to now.

I tried to protect myself from the predators in these foster homes... 'the little ways' as Charlene (1) called them. I love that term because I suddenly became aware of my own strength and courage in the midst of tragic circumstances. Charlene opened my eyes to my bravery, courage, strength, determination that I never knew existed before [these] teachings.

One of my first foster homes, a minister and his family; this was the worst. Repeated rape. Not just the minister but his oldest son as well would take turns and be laughing about it. Up until now, I put it out of my thoughts as to why I never tried to get away. Now, I find out 50 years later, I did get away... in my mind as I laid there. It was so painful, because I was only a child who just came out of the prison camp, and my "wholeness" was robbed from me.

I remember something else that's really important. There was another First Nation girl, who was adopted into their family. She was from my hometown. She was younger than me. She got the same treatment. Many times, I tried to protect her from experiencing further rapes. I would offer to stay home and milk the cows, or bring in the sheep, or feed the chickens. I didn't realize I was protecting her until I listened to Ann's story and other stories of "resistance". I did protect her so she wouldn't get hurt as much. ”

Ann knew that in the safety of the circle, one account of dignity and resistance would inspire similar accounts from others. These accounts of resistance draw attention to mental, physical, social, spiritual responses that might otherwise go unnoticed and be left unacknowledged for a life-time.

Others in the circle reflected on what Shirley Lord had shared, some by describing their own resistance to sexualized violence. We then took a break. Over coffee and snacks, we sat quietly and visited. Some folks had a smoke outside at the fire pit by the lake, where we smudged every day. After break we watched a clip of Tantoo Cardinal doing "Crooked Braid". We discussed how the woman in the story resisted the violence by her partner and worked to preserve the safety and dignity of her son.

Shirley Lord then said she would like to add to what she had shared earlier and went on to describe her response to the pathologizing of her grand daughter.

“After we talked in the circle the first time, about dignity and resistance, I got a call about my grand daughter. She was having trouble eating. She stopped eating some things. I told them at the school and they sent her to see a doctor. The doctor said she had an eating disorder. I said, ‘No, she doesn’t. She’s stopped eating foods that her father used to cook her, like grilled cheese, that they enjoyed so much together. It was really special to them. Now, he’s gone, he’s left, and she’s not eating the things they shared. She’s missing him. She doesn’t have an eating disorder.’”

Everyone in the circle felt Shirley Lord’s love for her grand-daughter – especially the grand-mothers, of course – and admired her direct and clear-minded resistance to the colonial mental health diagnosis.

Shirley Lord went on to share some further reflections on her responses to the many forms of violence she had endured.

“Everyone here thinks I’m pretty strong. And I guess that’s true... to a point. But there are some things they don’t know. A week ago, my little grand-daughter came to spend the night with me. When I snuggled her into bed, I was about to climb in myself when she pointed at the bedroom door and said, “Grandma, you forgot to put the suitcase in front of the door.”

Since then, I started thinking about why I did this. Not only do I always put something in front of the bedroom door, like chairs, but I also put something that makes noise. It’s been my big suitcase and jingle bells as well as heavy items hanging off the door. All of which would make a big noise if someone were to come into my room while I was sleeping. I did this sometimes in foster homes. And sometimes the predator, the abuser, would be afraid to come in because of the noise waking up others in the house.

Since we were talking about the “little ways” we protect ourselves or others from predators, I thought more about me blocking my door. I have done this since I have left the prison camp! So, this has gone on for 50 years! Now, I have decided to break free from this fear. I’m going to leave the door open.”

Shirley Lord sang a beautiful prayer song to close the circle that day. We cannot do justice to the feeling in the circle in that moment. It is a lasting feeling that returns whenever we recall this gathering. As we left, Shirley Lord and I agreed we would stay in touch by email. We talked by phone a couple of days later and then Shirley Lord sent me an email with a document attached. Here is an excerpt.

“ This is what happened. I had picked up my grand-daughter and she wanted to spend the night. I said, “Yes, just spend the night.” I left the hall light on, took away the suitcase and jingle bells off my door. I managed to leave the door open about 4 inches. The funny thing is my grand-daughter never asked me this night about forgetting to put the suitcase and other noisy things on the door. I did have a peaceful sleep. “This is a start”, I thought this morning as I awoke. I have come to some profound awakenings.

Two days later, I have now opened my bedroom door a little more. I smudge before going to bed, smudge my doorway and welcome peaceful dreams and good feelings and I do know I have nothing to fear. One day, I will open the door as wide as I can, but for now, the noise-makers are gone, and it is open halfway!!! A big step towards wholeness. ”

Circles and other group arrangements provide an ideal opportunity to share accounts of dignity and resistance. Questions about the origins of particular forms of resistance open the way for the person to connect with the wisdom of their culture and elders and the support of others. In turn, these accounts tend to inspire a sense of pride and belonging, of common purpose in a cultural community, while also acknowledging the pain and grief. Ann Maje-Raider was able uphold Kaska ancestors and families, as carriers of intergenerational dignity and resistance. Each account of dignity and resistance is also an account of solidarity in community and culture.

“Something Rose in My Chest”

Svetlana Alexievich is Belarusian writer who devised a new literary form, documenting oral history, to bring readers “the closest possible approximation to real life”. People are able to speak for themselves about the main events of their times. Alexievich was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2015, for creating “a monument to suffering and courage in our time.”

The passages below are from Chapter 9 of the book, *Last Witnesses* (Alexievitch, 1985), titled, “But, Like Rubber Balls, They Didn’t Sink”. The chapter contains the first-person testimony of Valya Yurkevich, then in her 70’s, concerning events in her life at age 7, when she and her family were abducted and sent to the Nazi death camp at Alytus, Lithuania.

In the first part of the chapter, Yukevich describes how the Nazis murdered parents and children by overturning their boats in the river. The bodies of the parents would sink quickly but the bodies of the drowned children would continue to rise to the surface, “like rubber balls”. Yukevich recalled the Nazis joking and laughing while using boat paddles to knock the children’s bodies back under water.

The passages are in the order in which they appear in the text.

“ In the barrack next to ours lived women from Orel. They wore fur coats, bell-shaped fur coats; each of them had many children. They drove them out of the barracks, lined them up by six, and forced them to march with their children. The children clung to

them. They even played some music... If one woman didn't keep pace with the rest, they beat her with a whip. They beat her, and yet she went on, because she knew if she fell, she would be shot and her children would be shot. Something rose in my chest when I saw how they got up and walked. In their heavy fur coats... (p. 229)

The adults were sent off to labour. They had to take logs from the Neman River and drag them to the bank. Many died there in the water. Once the commandant grabbed me and put me in the group that was supposed to go to labour. Then an old man ran out of the crowd, pushed me away, and took my place. In the evening, when my mother and I wanted to thank him, we didn't find him. They told us he died in the river.

My mother was a teacher. She said repeatedly, 'We must remain human.' Even in hell she was trying to keep some habits from home. I don't know where or when she washed them, but we always wore clean, laundered clothes. In winter she washed them with snow. She would take all my clothes off, and I would sit on the bunk under a blanket while she did the laundry. We only had what we were wearing. ” (p. 229)

The "something" that Valya Yurkevich speaks of in the phrase, "[something rose in my chest]", may be the visceral sense of identification we experience on witnessing the dignity of the human spirit, in this case, in the endurance of women protecting their children from certain death. Valya Yurkevich was saved by an elderly man who put her life ahead of his own and died, or was killed, in her place. For that man, we can imagine, protecting a child was a personal statement to the Nazis and his community, a final expression of his human worth. Finally, Valya Yurkevich recalls how hard her mother worked to maintain their sense of humanity by enacting the simple "habits from home".

“Triumphant Indifference”

In the 1926 short story, "Sweat", Zora Neale Hurston eloquently described Delia's overt and covert, practical and spiritual, resistance to violence by her husband, Sykes. A black woman living in the 1920's southern United States, Delia had virtually no external supports, no possibility of positive social network or institutional responses. Sykes would have killed Delia if she tried to escape and took every opportunity to assert his male dominance. But Sykes could not control how Delia felt and thought or stop Delia from creating a rich spiritual world attached to her surroundings.

Zora Neale Hurston gives the reader of view of Delia's resistance over the long term, including the practical-spiritual wholeness Delia kept to herself as a means of carrying on.

“ She lay awake, gazing upon the debris that cluttered their matrimonial trail. Not an image left standing along the way. Anything like flowers had long ago been drowned in the salty stream that had been pressed from her heart. Her tears, her sweat, her blood... Too late now to hope for love... Too late for everything except her little home.

She had built it for her old days, and planted one by one the trees and flowers there. It was lovely to her, lovely... Somehow, before sleep came, she found herself saying aloud: "Oh well, whatever goes over the Devil's back, is got to come under his belly. Sometime or ruther, Sykes, like everybody else, is gointer reap his sowing." After that she was able to build a spiritual earthworks against her husband. His shells could no longer reach her. Amen. 🍌 (p. 76)

Delia created meaning and beauty in her home and the earth, found comfort in prayer, and developed "a triumphant indifference to all that he (Sykes) was or did".

"The Secret of Joy"

In the novel, "Possessing the Secret of Joy" (1992), Alice Walker described the resistance of a young African woman, Tashi, who adopted the name Evelyn when she came to the United States. As a child, Tashi-Evelyn witnessed the genital mutilation and resulting death of her sister. Tashi-Evelyn was then subjected to the same torture, and survived. Ultimately, she found support from others. While she was being tried for a crime that would mean extradition, Tashi-Evelyn said:

🍌 They would take America from me if they could. But I won't let them. If I have to, I'll stop them in their tracks... Do you know how to stop someone in their tracks? By not believing them. 🍌 (p. 168)

The mental-spiritual act of knowing the violence was wrong and "not believing them" was for Tashi-Evelyn a powerful form of resistance. Only she could control what she chose to believe. In the final page of the book, Alice Walker wrote, "Resistance is the secret of joy".

"Will not take it"

Canadian radical feminist social work professor and anti-psychiatry activist, Bonnie Burstow, explored women's resistance to men's violence and to male-dominated, patriarchal, psychiatry. Burstow argued that violence and other forms of oppression are utterly integral to the experience of all girls and women. One important contribution, in our view, is that Burstow acknowledged the presence of women's resistance in its most subtle and desperate forms, as in the following:

🍌 Some women's acts are limited, individual and border on resignation, but even here is a core of resistance that is poignant and meaningful. In this category we find the housewife who stops cleaning and just sits there, unhappy and 'unable' to do anything. Psychiatry would have said she is having a 'nervous breakdown'... that she is 'chronically depressed'...

These diagnoses are not so much wrong as horrendously limited. She is clearly 'sick to death' of the endless chores that befall her as woman. She 'cannot take it anymore'... and... 'her being is rebelling... [S]he 'will not take it any more... and... 'is on strike'... 🍌 (p. 16).

Burstow raised the possibility that this form of despair – at being exploited as a domestic worker in the context of other forms of oppression – can be understood as a form of resistance and rebellion because it shows that the woman is refusing to accept or be content with the oppression, while any avenues for open defiance are closed.

“I think I like myself a lot more”

The English feminist sociologist Liz Kelly explored women’s and girls’ resistance to sexualized violence and harassment in her Ph.D. dissertation, *Surviving Sexual Violence* (1988). Through interviews with sixty women who had experienced rape, incest or domestic violence, Kelly found that more overt and defiant resistance often begins with small acts. For instance, in the words of one woman, who was subjected to sexualized violence by her father:

“ I remember the first time I made this momentous decision. The decision itself frightened me almost as much as being near him. I remember standing behind him after I’d made this decision and sticking my tongue out and he caught me (laughs). But he didn’t do anything much about it, and I thought, ‘Oh, good’, and that’s how I started. ” (p. 174-175)

Though such small acts may appear to be ineffective in a practical sense, it is often through such small acts that victims first express their dissent and begin to more openly re-assert their basic human dignity.

Kelly’s approach to the interviews was inductive – “from the ground up” – in that she tried to avoid pre-set categories and stock theories about women survivors. She spent considerable time with the women outside of the formal interviews, answering questions and discussing issues. By creating relationships with the women and asking good questions in the interviews (e.g., about how the women had “responded” to the violence), Kelly gave the women an opportunity to talk about their multifaceted resistance. We encourage readers to go directly to Kelly’s book for more information.

One of the most important outcomes of Kelly’s work, in our view, is that almost all of the women who participated in Kelly’s study commented on the experience “in very positive terms” (p. 12) and none commented negatively. As one woman put it:

“ Actually, I’m quite surprised, I’ve found it really helpful. I can’t think about it so talking is the only way of admitting it ever happened... I have never talked in that... way before... I think I like myself a lot more, I feel quite brave really. ” (p. 13)

Kelly provided the women with the opportunity to talk about their resistance to the violence they endured, many for the first time, not only the violence and its presumed “effects” or “impacts”. Many of the women described how the interviews had helped them make positive changes in their lives. This has obvious implications for working with all victims of violence, including women and children.

Resistance to Violence is an Ordinary Fact

There is nothing new in the fact that adults and children resist violence and other forms of oppression. Resistance is as real and factual as violence. The literatures, personal accounts, and poetic testimonies that attest to this fact are beyond measure and beyond dispute. This means that detailed accounts of victims' resistance should be obtained and seen as relevant in all institutional settings particularly those that respond to cases of violence and to the people involved. Effective intervention begins with accurate analysis of the facts on the ground, with a minimum of theory. The facts on the ground include victims' resistance, offenders' efforts to suppress that resistance, and the responses of social network and institutional actors.

Stella Dadzie argued that to deny enslaved women's resistance its rightful place in history "adds insult" to 400 years of injury. We agree and would extend this argument to all victimized and oppressed people. To deny the resistance of any person or group, no matter how open and direct or subtle and disguised, is to promote a false view of history, of social relations, of child and adult victims/survivors, of offenders – of virtually all forms of violence.

(1) Charlene is a Ditidhat elder from the Nitihahat region, who spoke about "the little ways" she and her sister created to be together when separated in Port Alberni prison camp.

DIGNITY

Dignity as an Organizing Principle and Practical Activity

FearIsNotLove is an intentional community created to protect and support women and children who have been subjected to violence, broadly defined, to work with men to desist violence and restore safety to their family members, to prevent and address violence by direct engagement with all family members and relevant others. As such, the community is dedicated to upholding the dignity of all service users and staff members and maintaining a purposeful environment where complex events and personal information can be shared with a focus on safety and justice. Dignity is both method, the principle guiding practice at all levels, and outcome, the hoped-for experience of service-users and staff members.

The meaning of dignity varies across cultures, between people within cultures, and across situations. For those whose first language is English, "dignity" means "worth". To experience "dignity" is to experience one's self as worthy in one's own eyes and the eyes of others. Dignity encompasses the notion of safety in its full sense (respect for one's social, physical, spiritual, psychological integrity), autonomy (freedom to choose and to put one's choices into effect), equality (to be no less than and no more than others), inclusion (across diversities), and the capacity to care for loved ones, such as children and parents.

In human rights documents "dignity" is an "inherent" property of the person: Every person is said to possess dignity and is entitled to be treated with dignity by others and in public institutions. Still, in this context, dignity is quite loosely defined. Exactly what dignity requires

of us in terms of legal and other institutional actions, in child protection or police practice or shelter work, is not always obvious or clearly stated. The notion of dignity needs clarification: What does it mean to enact dignity or induce humiliation in daily life and in the most challenging circumstances?

Dignity is a Social Achievement

More than an abstract principle, dignity is a constant concern in the endless social interactions that make up daily life. In this respect, dignity is a social achievement, created in the small nuances that make up the most ordinary social interactions. We return sincere greetings, avoid publicly embarrassing others, respect others' physical and social space, acknowledge the meaning of suffering and loss, care for the aged and infirm, laugh heroically at failed jokes, respect diverse identities, ignore accidental farts, defer to elders, cherish children, refuse to laugh at others' misfortunes, treat others as competent, show interest in others' lives, resist unwanted advice, demand fairness, and so on.

What it means to enact dignity with any person or family depends on the immediate situation and the cultural context. Dignity means worth but it can refer to the right relations between people, the land and the animals. In some cultural settings, children bring food to elders to honour elders' wisdom and contributions. In others, it is proper to have tea or bring gifts to acknowledge the worth of the other person before "getting down to business". In still others, it is important to "get to the point" with a minimum of ceremony: Straight talk with "no nonsense" can convey respect and reduce status differences.

Violence and Humiliation

Like oxygen, the importance of dignity is most obvious when it is absent. Even relatively "minor" affronts can incite a powerful sense of humiliation and distress (Fuller, 2003; Goffman, 1963; Scheff, 2010, 2000) and motivate intense responses. Recent research using the electro-encephalogram found that physiological responses to humiliation, including cortical activation, were stronger than responses to happiness or anger (Otten, M. & Jonas, K.J., 2014). The authors conclude that "humiliation is a particularly intense experience that is likely to have far-reaching consequences" (p. 23).

Virtually all forms of violence are an affront, or offense, to the dignity of the person and their loved ones. Many people who perpetrate violence (e.g., sexualized assault, gang beatings, sexualized harassment, armed robberies, domestic and family violence) take specific steps to maximize the humiliation of their victims. As one woman put it, "The bruises go away, but you never forget what he said to you". As well, research shows that many victims of violence face negative and humiliating responses from social network and institutional actors. Even well-intentioned professionals can become a threat to the dignity of people who have already endured violence and other forms of humiliation.

To uphold the dignity of service users, including victims and offenders, is therefore a first concern; one that is directly tied to our ability to obtain crucial information, form productive working relationships, and establish safety. Research on forensic interviewing shows that the people directly involved in cases of violence tend to provide more extensive and accurate information to interviewers who work to establish a sense of “harmony” and a strong “working alliance” – in our terms, a relationship or style of interaction that upholds dignity (Vanderhallen, M., Vervaeke, G., & Holmberg, U. (2011).

Drive-By Dignity

The endless practical and social tasks that make up work in the organization provide many opportunities to uphold the dignity of others. Actions that tend to uphold dignity are typically small, ordinary, quiet, understated, casual. They include the minor courtesies at work in daily life, the things people do to make social life warm and pleasant, and the more pointed network of actions (i.e., “skills”) used to console grieving friends and enact simple decency. A small acknowledgment or especially warm greeting when none is required can provide much needed encouragement and lead to more effective collaboration later.

Human services literature often refers to the quality of the “therapeutic alliance” or “relationship”. It is assumed that workers will all be able to form a relationship with the service user. But in a fast-paced environment like a shelter or a hospital, with ongoing staffing changes and the need for casual and practical conversations, this may be an unrealistic goal. Thankfully, it is quite possible to uphold the dignity of service users without establishing a “therapeutic alliance” or “relationship” per se. This is a key skill in front-line work in residential and other close settings. How do you do your job well, uphold dignity and promote positive difference for the service user with a quick “hello” or brief conversation as you pass each other in the hallway?

Dignity and Asymmetry in Institutional Settings

For all the focus on safety and gender-equal analysis, shelters and transition houses are also public institutions – state-funded and monitored, tied to government policy and professional practice frameworks, linked to social and cultural norms, subject to mandatory changes with changes in governments and regulatory bodies – and can be oriented to as such, as part of the network of public institutions designed to exert social control and support for the public good. In Canada, as elsewhere, shelters and related services are funded in part or wholly by public (i.e., “ministries”) that make up the colonial state and influence programs and practices. This means the organization must have policies and practices for the dignity and safety of all service users and staff members, as a foundation for responding to violence of all kinds.

As in other public institutions, the relationship between staff members and service users at FearsNotLove is “asymmetrical”. Staff members “have” power in relation to residents, laid down responsibilities as part of their various roles, and the authority to make certain decisions. One key part of this asymmetry is that staff members are generally the people who get to ask the questions, for example, in the “Intake” process. In the Intake interview, service users must obtain and provide certain information required by staff members to make the case that they – the service users – “meet the mandate” and qualify for service.

This may not be how most staff members want to view the organization and their roles or selves, in part because FearIsNotLove and similar organizations have played such an important part in challenging traditional “power-over” practices in patriarchal and colonial institutions. Nonetheless, it is reasonable to expect that many service users will orient to FearIsNotLove from this point of view, as a public institution that functions not unlike other public institutions.

Many women have received powerfully negative and even harmful responses from other institutional actors in policing, child protection, education, medicine, psychiatry, psychology, and so on. Naturally, then, some will monitor the actions of staff members for signs of social control or unnecessary use of power/authority, such as assertive advice-giving, negative labelling, psycho-education, standardized assessment and monitoring procedures, exaggerated certainty, behaviour management, overt and covert expressions of strongly held opinions (e.g., that the woman ought to have left the abusive man), thinly veiled criticisms, less than enthusiastic greetings, and so on.

Hoffman, L. & Coffey B. (2008) studied service users’ views of service providers’ actions in the context of homeless shelters – admittedly, not a perfect comparison with women’s shelters and transition houses, but possibly close enough to consider some common concerns. They conducted in-depth interviews with more than 500 service users attending homeless shelters in the pacific northwest of the United States. “Nearly all” service users interviewed described their interactions with staff “in sharply negative terms” (p. 2017). In response, “[m]any simply opted out of the social service delivery system in order to maintain a sense of dignity and self-respect” (p. 2017).

On the basis of these results, Hoffman and Coffey (2008) argued that homelessness “should not simply be analyzed as an individual psychological or cognitive” problem, but “as a result of the power relations and social inequities in the provider-client relationship” (p. 2017). We suggest these findings are important to consider for FearIsNotLove staff because of the high rates of homelessness among women victims of domestic violence.

We cannot and do not assume that women who attend FearIsNotLove services or similar organizations report the same experiences of humiliation and judgement. None the less, it would be unwise to ignore that such is the case for some women, given the numbers of women who report negative institutional responses, and prudent to ensure staff routinely practice in a manner that upholds the dignity of all service-users.

This means working collectively to contest the network of concepts and discourses that are used to humiliate people who have been victimized, across social and cultural contexts. It also means orienting to women as competent social actors and working to understand the meaning of their complex social, mental, physical and spiritual responses in context. We suggest that this orientation be embedded across the formal and informal practices of all employees, at all points of contact.

Conversational Dignity

From the first moment of contact with FearIsNotLove staff, service users become involved in many conversations with very different kinds of purposes. As Kristine Sorensen put it, in the context of the Danish Women's Shelter in Copenhagen: "[A]t our shelter, we have many table-talks; serious talks at square tables, soft talks at round tables, passing by talks without a table, community talks at big tables, spontaneous talks at kitchen tables, etc." (Sorensen, 2020; personal communication)

Some conversations are casual and friendly while others are also carefully structured for specific purposes. It is important for staff to be clear on what kind of conversation they are wanting to encourage at any point in time because this information can help ensure a sense of safety for the women. Every conversation, no matter how brief or casual, provides the opportunity to uphold dignity and promote safety.

The intake or "welcome" interview is closer to an "assessment and forensic" interview in that it is not fully voluntary and is designed to determine if a woman does or does not meet the pre-set criteria to enter the shelter. A woman cannot refuse to join the interview if she hopes to enter the shelter and find safety. Some women, if not most, are desperate and living in danger and so may have no other place to turn. Further, she will be expected to provide certain key information. Therefore, there is a clear element of "social control" to the intake interview. It can be challenging for staff to consider their role in exercising power, even benign power, when many forms of power are rightly criticized for supporting violence against women and negative social responses.

Staff who conduct the welcome interview may be confident in their own abilities and see the interview in positive terms as a good opportunity for the woman to obtain support and for shelter staff to convey concern and provide information about the services on offer. However, some women will expect to be blamed or judged or told what to do. For instance, we often meet with women who, on coming into the first meeting, expect we will tell them to leave their abusive partner or imply they should have left sooner. There can be a considerable gap between what the woman expects and what the shelter actually offers, even if the mandate of the shelter is unequivocally supportive of women.

This means that simple fact-finding questions can be received as intrusive and threatening, particularly if asked too early in the interview, or too bluntly. Experienced staff members will have developed methods of leading interviews in a manner that upholds the dignity of the service users, obtains the needed information, and provides the service users with information about the program, its services, and expectations.

FearIsNotLove staff use a "dignity-driven" practice in all services. Following are some practices for use in all settings.

Where possible, do:

- Use every-day straight-forward language that everyone can understand
- Focus on distress (e.g., grief, trauma, fear) as healthy and normal responses in context, even if painful and unwanted
- Openly acknowledge service users' competencies, activities, responses, aspirations
- Listen to service users' interpretations and assessments of events
- Ask about social network and institutional responses over time
- Use language that reveals violence, clarifies offender responsibility, reveals responses and resistance, and contests blaming and pathologizing
- Acknowledge the deliberate, chosen actions of the offender
- Ask for feedback about the social responses in the organization
- Ask about what is working well
- Ask about the service user's 'best hopes'
- Make fun of yourself: You deserve it

Where possible, avoid:

- Clinical, mental health jargon and inaccessible terminology
- Attributing personality traits to service users
- The language of effects and impacts
- Offering unsolicited advice
- Suggesting "diagnoses"
- Language that conceals violence, obscures offender responsibility, conceals responses and resistance, and blames and pathologizes victims
- Critical comments about the offender
- Certainty about your own views
- Taking yourself too seriously
- Imposing your own religious beliefs
- Personal judgements

In general, try to:

- Orient to suffering as an informed/ethical/embodied/dignified response and form of resistance
- Shift between physical/physiological, social, mental, spiritual responses
- Orient to bodily responses as forms of resistance (i.e., "freezing")
- Orient to violence in childhood as the origin of resistance and response-capacities

“Work-up” and “Framing” in Interviews with Survivors

FearIsNotLove service users can participate in several types of interviews in the various FearIsNotLove services; at “intake”, for “safety-planning”, for “counselling”, and in “therapy”. Some information can be gained by analysis of comparable interviews in different settings. At the request of the Government of the North West Territories (GNWT), Linda Coates and Allan Wade (2010) examined recorded telephone conversations between Justices of the Peace and women phoning in to apply for emergency protection orders (EPO), due to concerns over their safety. (The complete citation is in the references section at the back of this guide.)

The applicants, all women, were instructed to phone the women's shelter in Yellowknife, to talk with an advocate who would explain the EPO application process. The woman would then phone a Justice of the Peace while the advocate remained on the line. The phone calls were recorded. Coates and Wade randomly selected and transcribed 18 phone calls and completed a line-by-line microanalysis of practices used by Justices of the Peace and responses of the women (i.e., "applicants") during the phone interviews. All of the women in the randomly selected cases were Indigenous.

These interviews are more similar to welcome interviews at FearsNotLove than it might at first appear. They are a first meeting/conversation. The woman is applying for meaningful help – a service from an institution. The interaction is asymmetrical. The institution has pre-set criteria. The staff member asks the questions and, in so doing, conveys what is relevant and what is not, from an institutional point of view. The service user is expected to answer questions and talk plainly about extremely painful events, the violence and related circumstances. Much hinges on the outcome.

Coates and Wade found that Justices of the Peace were more likely to obtain clear and specific information from the applicants when they:

- Explained the purpose and format of the conversation up front
- Provided a "road map" so that applicants knew what to expect next
- Asked for permission to change the topic or ask for more detailed information
- Showed awareness that some information was sensitive and painful
- Used "generic listener responses", to show that they were listening and keeping up (e.g., "mmhmm", "ok", "I see", "right", "yeah")
- Used "specific listener responses", to show that they were grasping the meaning and importance of what the applicant was saying (e.g., "yelled at you", "you were scared, sure", "of course")
- Used simple and accurate language that echoed the applicant's language and conveyed the unilateral nature of the reported violence/aggression.

Sometimes Justices of the Peace did not use these methods, or "skills". In one case, the applicant was asked to describe what happened in a particular assault. They said:

“ About two years ago he threw me onto the floor and started punching my head into the floor three times, to the point where there was blood all over the place. And then my friend said, ‘The cops are coming. You’d better get out of here’, you know. And he just took off. ”

This is a quite clear and descriptive account. The language is direct and conveys the unilateral nature of the violence. We are told who did what to whom. The Justice of the Peace could have conveyed their understanding of the serious nature of the assault and asked for more information about the nature of the applicant's injuries. Instead, presumably in the interest of obtaining more information about the risks facing the applicant, the Justice of Peace asked:

“ Okay. So, there was another incident of violence between you two years ago. Any other instances of that nature? ”

Here, the Justice of the Peace powerfully changes the nature of the violence, recasts it as mutual (“between you”) and in so doing frames the victim-applicant as partly responsible. The terms “incidents” and “instances” are euphemisms. Used along with mutualizing terms, they work to minimize the severity of the violence.

The Applicant responded to this “reframe” by minimizing the severity of the violence, presumably to “please the court”.

“ Not of that nature, just slapping, hits to the head, like, you know, just... verbal abuse. ”

When the Justices of the Peace minimized or mutualized the violence, the Applicants did the same, as if to avoid disagreeing with the court. Understandably, Applicants would be concerned that disagreeing with the court might work against their interest in obtaining an EPO.

The methods – or “skills” – used by most Justices of the Peace, listed above, are transferable to virtually any formal interview and arguably essential in cases of violence, where authorities can play a decisive role in creating more or less safety, more or less risk.

CHAPTER 2 – CONTEXTUALIZING

The Deepening of Particulars in Response-Based Practice

Effective interventions in cases of violence depend on accurate and detailed information. Violence and resistance are not enacted in the abstract but in second-by-second detail in actual social interactions. The social-cultural context, the immediate social-physical setting, and the actual or possible responses of others are crucially important to understanding perpetrators' actions and victims' responses, including children. Further, how service users make sense of these realities varies tremendously across cases.

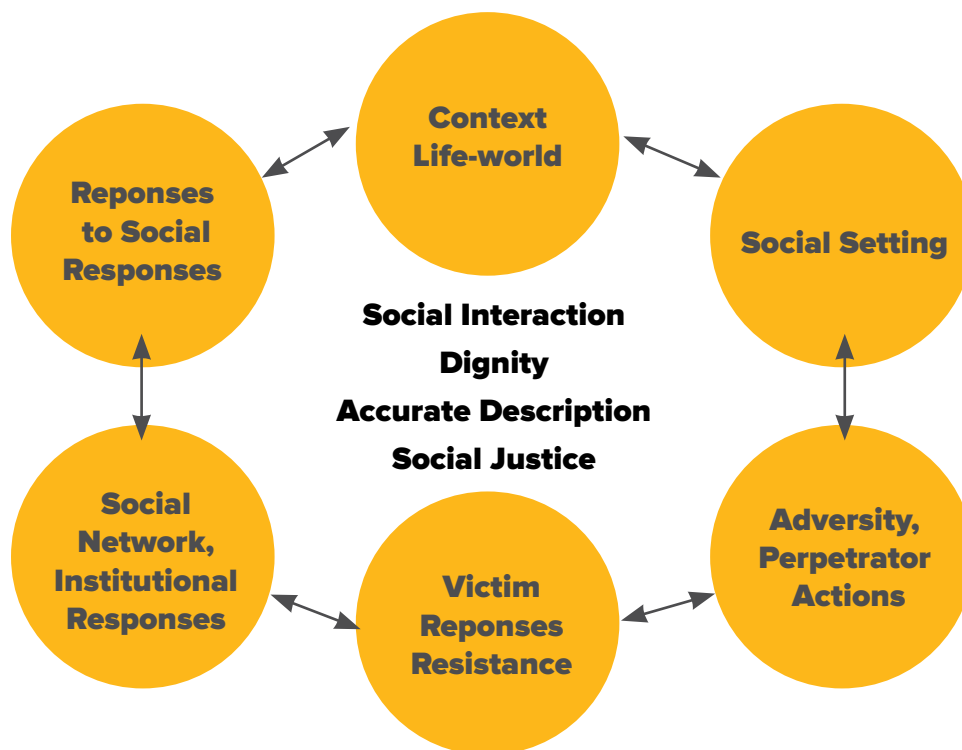
Conversations at FearIsNotLove provide an opportunity to explore these factors in a manner that upholds dignity and promotes safety. We refer to this process as “contextualizing”. It is a process of moving past abstractions and generalizations into the exploration of “particulars”. As Aime Cesaire (1950) put it in “Discourse on Colonialism”, detailed analysis involves the consideration of “all the particulars... the deepening of each particular, the coexistence of them all”.

The opposite of “contextualizing” is “abstraction”, the process of moving away from particulars into category terms, generalizations, psychological and biomedical theories of causation, and so on. The process of abstraction is widely used in psychology and psychiatry to conceal “particulars” – including the resistance of victims/survivors and the efforts of offenders to overcome and suppress that resistance. Instead, victims/survivors are given certain personality traits or disorders said to pre-dispose them to being abused.

Below is a simple map of the inter-connected factors – the “particulars” – that practice and research show are immediately relevant and, arguably, indispensable to any specific and grounded analysis in cases of violence. This map can be used as a guide for interviewing and for critical analysis (e.g., of expert reports in family law).

Response-Based Contextual Analysis

(Wade, Coates, Richardson, & Dean, 2014)



Key “Particulars” in Contextual Analysis

Social and Material Context

What are the natural-material-social-cultural conditions in which people live? What is the developmental history and current status of social and family relationships? Consider income, occupation, culture, ethnicity, immigration/refugee status, social isolation/connection, spirituality, age, abilities, health, interests, sexual preference, immigration status, gender identity, “social class”, power, and so on. Also consider access to medical and other health care services, police protection, education, clean water, high quality food, healthy housing, and so on.

Immediate Social-Physical Situation

What is/was the immediate social situation in which the violence was committed? Was the person in public or in isolation, i.e., in private? What was the location? Who was present? What dangers and opportunities did the victimized person perceive as present or not present in the situation? How did the immediate social-physical situation influence (i.e., limit, compel, constrain) how they responded at the time? What forms of resistance were possible or impossible?

Actions of Offender, Events in Detail

What specific actions did the offending person commit, taking into account the immediate natural-material-social-cultural situation and larger context? Develop clear descriptions of the actions or events of concern to the person. Clarify vague and mentalistic terms by asking for more information (e.g., “When you say ‘he started getting angry’... can I just ask, in what way? What was he doing?”). In cases of violence, describe the actions of the (alleged or known) offender(s), and use accurate language to convey the unilateral nature of the actions.

Responses and Resistance of the Person to the Violence

Explore the social, mental, physical, spiritual responses of the victimized person from the moment they felt unsafe, from the beginning of the assault(s). Try to grasp the “situational logic”: What dangers and opportunities did the situation present? Some women are/feel unsafe virtually all of the time and have developed intricate means of “walking on eggshells”. Try to grasp the “private logic” of the victimized person: How did the person make sense of the events at the time, given their knowledge of the offending person, their personal history, the presence or absence of social responses, and so on.

Explore both overt (i.e., actions) and covert responses (i.e., thoughts, feelings, ‘knowings’). Physical defiance and other overt defensive actions can be easily understood as forms of resistance or protection of self and others (i.e., children). Try to grasp the ways in which more subtle or private responses may be understandable as forms of resistance. For example, “keeping calm” or “taking the blame” or “looking away” can each be understood as prudent tactics in especially dangerous moments. Might despair and unhappiness be understood as “refusing to be content with the violence and bullshit”, and as forms of resistance?

Social Network and Institutional Responses to the Person/Family

Were others present during assaults? What did those present do or say? Did they help? Did they look away? What did those present know of the person or their circumstances? How did those present respond later? What did those responses mean to the person? The presence or absence of others during violence and aggression is a key factor for both victims and offenders.

How do, or did, members of the person’s social network, strangers, or authorities respond to the person during and after the adverse event? Your own enquiry is a social response: How is the person responding to the manner in which you relate to them, to the conversation at hand, to others with whom they have met in similar positions?

The Person’s Responses to Social Network and Institutional Responses

What did the presence or absence of social network and institutional responses mean to the person? What did it mean to the victimized person that their neighbour intervened and protected the children? How did the offending person respond to the neighbour?

What is the history of social network and institutional responses? To what extent has the victimized person felt heard and respected? To what extent does their personal experience of previous institutional responses influence your own interview with the person in the moment. For example, how open or cautious they are with you, how they describe their offending partner, how they talk about the experience of the children, and so on.

Example 1: From the Danish Women's Society Shelter in Copenhagen

To illustrate the practice of contextualizing, we present the following excerpt from a first conversation between a counselor on staff and a service-user at the Danish Women's Society Shelter in Copenhagen, reprinted with permission. The service user is a woman refugee from Iraq who is new to the shelter.

We have provided this example because it shows how quite simple questions about the factors discussed above, combined with clear and active language, can be used to build up a contextual understanding of the service user's circumstances in a manner that upholds dignity and provides a basis for future conversations across services.

C: Before we talk about what happened would it be ok for you to tell me a bit about yourself? Where you live, who you live with, etc.?

V: Yes. I came to Denmark four years ago as a refugee from Iraq.

C: Oh, what made you flee your country?

V: Well, I changed my religion and people were after me threatening to kill me for converting to Christianity from Islam. My ex-husband is also a Christian and he was politically active.

C: It does not sound like an easy decision and yet you decided to convert despite the threats. How did you decide about changing your religion, if I may ask?

V: I think it's important to respect women's rights.

C: Sounds like a brave and important choice. Are all people in your family as brave as you?

V: They are brave but the system over-powers people, it lies to them and strips them of their rights.

C: Can you tell me more about that?

V: My Dad has driven a car for forty years and paid his pension for forty years. When he retired, the record of his payments “could not be found” and the whole family of five must survive on 300dkk every month. That’s why the woman I work with supports them financially despite not having much herself.

C: Do you know many people in Denmark?

V: No, not really. All my family is in Iraq and neither I can travel, nor they can visit. I am a quiet person I have only one friend from school. I know some people from Iraq through my ex-husband. I am a very quiet person.

C: Where do you live?

V: I live in a little town in North Zealand.

C: Have you lived there since you came to Denmark?

V: No, I have spent two years in two different asylum centres before coming to Zealand.

C: Wow, sounds like life has not been easy. You speak very well for being in Denmark for 3 years, you are in school, working. You seem to be a person who knows what they want.

V: Yes. I think so.

C: You said that you and your ex-husband have known each other for many years, since you were 16. Can you remember the first time where he did something that made you think, “Oh, no, this isn’t good”?

V: Yes, he hit me ten days after our wedding.

C: What did you do when that happened?

V: I packed my things and left for my dad’s place. He came and got me after ten days.

C: How did your dad respond?

V: He was angry at my husband and said I should stay home with him (my dad)?

C: What were you thinking when he said that?

V: I was relieved. I wanted to be at my dad’s.

C: How about your mom?

V: Mom thought I should give my husband a chance. The marriage was young, and everyone had their problems, she said.

C: Oh, I see. I am wondering what she means by problems. Other women being hit by their husbands?

V: Yes, this is common, most women I know were hit or disrespected.

C: Sounds like you have done many things to protect yourself and stay safe. You said you went to your dad and your ex-husband apologized to you. What other things you have done to keep yourself safe?

V: I always put my hands over my head when he hit me.

C: How so?

V: My hands used to have blue bruises all over from wrists to the elbow.

C: You have done many things to protect your head not to get hurt.

V: You know what is the worst though?

C: You tell me.

V: The beating is painful, but the worst is when he disrespects me when he wants to start the fight.

C: What does he do?

V: He calls me names, accuses me of being lazy and cheating on him.

C: What do you do then?

V: At first, I was not looking at him. I did not want to provoke him.

C: What do you mean by provoke?

V: Well, I thought that he will stop and will not be violent when I am nice to him or show respect by not looking at him.

C: Oh, I see. Sounds like you have done everything you could to stop violence.

V: Yes, but it did not work.

C: Of course... your husband needs to make a choice to stop being violent you can't do it for him. I am wondering what the next thing was you did?

V: I started to look at him.

C: Can you tell me more about the way you look at him?

V: I know he wants my reaction; he loves when I talk back or argue. He uses it as an excuse to continue hitting me. But then I started to say nothing and just looked at him.

C: How exactly did you look at him? Like, from the side with your head turned? Or straight in the eye? What was going through your mind?

V: Oh, I looked him straight in the eye.

C: What would your look say if it could speak?

V: I am not fucking afraid of you.

C: Wow, I think I can see it more clearly now. It sounds like you have done many things: you ask him to respect you, you tried to deescalate violence by not looking at him and trying to switch topic, you tried to please him. You have also tried to confront him, show him that you are not afraid and even though he hits you stand proud looking at him with that "I am not fucking afraid of you" look. You have also done everything you could to keep yourself safe. Despite your efforts your ex-husband has continued assaulting you and disrespecting you. I am so sorry you had to go through this.

V: Thank you. I just feel soooo stupid for going back to him.

C: Well, I am sure you had good reasons.

(Conversation continues)

The process of exploring key particulars is nuanced, not linear: It is not a question of moving from one topic to another but of remaining curious about, for example, the service user's orientation to the violence and related circumstance and how, if at all, this orientation might inform their overt and covert responses across situations and over time.

In the opening sequence, the counsellor tries to learn "who the woman is" culturally and socially and then learn about the events leading to her present circumstances. The counsellor then shifts to ask about the abuse by her husband, with the question, "Can you remember the first time where he did something that made you think, 'oh, no, this isn't good'?" This gives the women the opportunity to describe the abuse from the beginning and gently contests the notion that she may have missed early warning signs or "red flags" or the like.

The woman replies, “Yes, he hit me ten days after our wedding”. The counsellor immediately asks the woman how she responded, “What did you do when that happened?”. This question positions the woman as an active social subject who would have responded to being “hit” in some way. Later, the question, “What other things have you done to keep yourself safe?”, asks the woman to add to the list of things she had been doing to resist the violence and create safety.

Toward the end of the segment, the counsellor asks a series of questions focused on micro-level interaction – “How did you look at him?”, “What was going through your mind?”, and “What would your look say if it could speak?”. These questions provide an opportunity for the woman to detail the “private logic” behind her overt actions and further articulate her desire for safety and dignity. In a summary, the counsellor acknowledges the woman’s ongoing resistance to the ongoing violence by her partner. The account that emerges contests the blaming and pathologizing that might well have been used to portray the woman.

SAFETY PLANNING

This “Welcome” excerpt, generously provided by the Danish Women’s Society Shelter in Copenhagen, illustrates the beginning of the safety and danger assessment and safety planning process, which will continue with other staff members in other parts of the shelter service system. It is apparent that the woman has been doing a great deal to resist the violence and work for safety, even if she has not been able to escape, and that her partner has continued to use violence. Her already existing awareness and safety-work will form the basis for what comes next. Staff are then able to align with her already existing capacities rather than adopt a one-up, psycho-educational stance.

No children are mentioned in this example. But if the woman had children who were to attend a women’s shelter, it would be helpful to provide children with the opportunity to talk with a counsellor together with their mother and share their own responses and forms of resistance. These, too, would become part of the safety and danger assessment and planning process. One way of beginning such a safety planning process is to ask: “Well, you have all been trying to stop the violence and protect one another as best you can. Now, you’re here with us. What ideas do you have about what might be helpful in creating safety at this time?”

Example 2: From the Pedagogical Theatre Project, Norbotten, Sweden

There are several useful and readily available tools for safety and risk assessment (e.g., the SARA), the ODARA or Danger Assessment (e.g., Alberta Council of Women’s Shelters Danger Assessment; 2019), based on the work of Jacqueline Campbell and colleagues. The SARA is widely used in Canada. These tools focus primarily on the severity of perpetrators’ actions as the key predictive factor.

Death reviews show that domestic violence killings are more likely when there have been a series of failed institutional responses. Perpetrators are able to exploit lax institutional responses to commit further violence. The opposite also seems to be true. Treatment programs for perpetrators seem to be more effective when they are supported by swift and decisive legal and other institutional responses (e.g., when a perpetrator who violated a no-contact order is arrested and jailed immediately) (Gondolf, 2004).

Further, women who receive solid social network and institutional responses generally have more options to escape the violence and find safety than do women who receive negative social network and institutional responses. Women who have received a series of negative social responses in the past are more likely to remain quiet and avoid authorities, as a means of maintaining as much safety as possible: Reaching out to authorities may be far too dangerous for victims/survivors – and for many perpetrators, too, at least initially.

The tools currently in many settings provide important information and are moderately predictive (Helmus & Bourgon, 2011). However, many pay scant attention to social network and institutional responses and how these influence safety and danger. Nor do they explore in any detailed way the victim's already existing responses and forms of resistance to the violence. We view this information as crucial for assessment and planning.

INTERVIEWING FOR SOCIAL RESPONSES

Actual and Possible Social Responses are a Constant Concern

As mentioned, actual and possible social responses are a key part of the fact-pattern in cases of violence and a constant concern for offenders and victims/survivors, including children. Research and practice experience show that the quality of responses by social network and institutional actors is strongly correlated with the level of victim distress in the short and long term, the likelihood of future disclosures, and the level of “cooperation” with authorities. In many cases, what is most “traumatic” for the victim is the negative social response they received from a family member or professional.

As well, the manner in which the victim responds to the offender in specific instances of violence hinges in part on the victim's view of actual and possible social responses. For example, if the victim is isolated and knows no one will step in to help, open defiance may be the least viable form of resistance. Rather, they may resist covertly to “get through” the assault and work for safety and autonomy “behind the scenes”, secretly, to avoid even more extreme violence.

Covert resistance can be the most viable (e.g., least life-threatening, safest for children) form of resistance over long periods of time, depending on social responses, structural conditions (e.g., poverty, racism, immigration status), and the strategies used by the offender. Ongoing covert resistance is less an indication of the victim's “personality” or “awareness”, or “readiness”, than it is a recognition of the realities at work in the situation.

Some Useful Questions for Contextualizing Social Responses

- Who knows about the situation?
- Who knows about your partner's violence?
- Who knows about your partner's yelling and such?

Phrase the questions tactfully to avoid terms that may be uncomfortable, but “name” the facts.

- How do they know?
- Did you decide to tell them?
- How did you decide?
- How did you decide to tell your sister and not your brother?
- How much information did you give them?

Phrase the question to acknowledge the decision by your client to tell or not tell, or to tell partly.

- Were you at all worried about how they would respond, what they might do or say?
- How did you know you should be worried?
- Had you tried to say something before?
- Had you seen them respond to someone else, like your brother or sister?

Phrase the question to acknowledge their legitimate concern over negative social responses.

- Do the authorities know?
- How did they find out?
- Were the police involved?

Phrase the question to ensure you are not suggesting the authorities should know.

- So, when you told your sister, how did she respond?
- Like, what did she say?
- What did the police have to say?
- Did they attend your house?
- Who interviewed you?

Phrase the question to learn how social network and institutional actors responded to your client and family. Get details about the social situation in which social responses were provided.

- How did that go?
- Did they listen to you?
- Did they believe you?
- Did anyone talk with your kids?
- How did your kids find that experience?

Try to learn which social responses the person found helpful or unhelpful. Try to learn exactly what it was about the social responses that was helpful or unhelpful.

With positive social responses, ask:

- Okay, so, what was that like for you, to feel really heard?
- What difference has it made to you, to be listened to and supported?
- What difference has it made to your kids?

Positive responses can be a “difference that makes a difference” and be of great help.

With negative social responses, ask:

- Okay, so when you could see that the (type of professional) was not really believing you, how did you respond, like right then, what did you do?
- What about later on, how did this experience influence you later on, in terms of who you would talk to and who not?
- So, you’ve been facing not only the violence by your partner, but blame – even from some of your friends and family: What has this been like for you?
- So, your friends have been great, but the counselor seemed to think you make bad decisions – that sucks: How do you deal with the counsellor now?

Phrase the questions to learn how the person managed the negative social response, expressed or concealed their thoughts/feelings, etc.

FearIsNotLove Staff Responses to Negative Social Network and Institutional Responses

Social network and institutional responses can be a source of immense suffering for service users and heart-breaking for FearIsNotLove staff to hear about, day in and day out.

Jimmie

Jimmie was “pimped out” (i.e., a euphemism meaning violently exploited) by their partner on-line and was taking high doses of anti-anxiety medication and using other drugs. They disclosed that they had been molested by their paternal grandfather. The therapist asked, “Did you tell anyone?”. Jimmie said, “Yeah, my dad”. The therapist asked, “What did your dad say?”. Jimmie said, “He said, ‘Shut the fuck up! Your grampa would never do that!’ The therapist asked, “What did you learn in that moment?”. Jimmie replied, “That I didn’t matter”.

Jimmie and the therapist went on to explore how this heart-breaking negative social response figured into their life at different points. Jimmie was sexually assaulted several times as a teen and ridiculed for their sexuality. Jimmie did not disclose to adults, especially family, because they were sure they would be disbelieved and further humiliated. This led further into a conversation about how Jimmie responded when threatened by their partner – “I’ll fuck you up so bad!” – when they tried to escape.

Jimmie did not have “anxiety”, “learned helplessness”, “co-dependency” or “attachment issues” but had learned first-hand that when you need others most, especially those who claim to love you, they will – or may very well – turn their backs. The best term to describe Jimmie’s experience of these painful negative social responses may be “alienation”.

Public Discourse and Negative Social Responses

Sometimes victims are blamed and pathologized by loving friends and family who are sincerely trying to help.

- “I would never let a man do that to me!”
- “Haven’t you had enough?”
- “How can you put up with that?”
- “Don’t you see what this is doing to your kids?”
- “Why haven’t you left him?”

Many women respond to this kind of criticism from loved ones by withdrawing and no longer telling their family and friends about what is really happening. This can create isolation, cut off needed support, and enable the offender to commit further violence.

Sometimes blaming and pathologizing comes in the form of well-known concepts that have filtered into popular discourse from the theories used by professionals to explain why women fail to respond in the way that those professionals think women should respond.

Examples include:

- Learned helplessness
- Cognitive distortions
- Codependence
- Childhood abuse issues
- Unconscious attraction to abusers
- Attachment issues
- A tendency to pick ‘bad boys’
- Lacking boundaries
- Ignored the early warning signs
- Low self-esteem
- Personality disorder
- Needing to be more assertive

Victims of domestic and sexualized violence often use these and similar terms to characterize themselves and explain their (presumed) deficiencies.

Sometimes this comes in the form of concepts that lack validity but have none the less been taken up in certain practice settings, such as child protection and family law, because they justify in more official-sounding jargon practices that continue to blame women and absolve men who perpetrator violence.

- Failure to protect – instead of “failure to respect”
- Parental alienation or alienating mother – instead of “protective mother”
- High conflict family – instead of “high violence and aggression father”
- Anxious mother – instead of “fearful and wisely cautious mother”
- Mental illness – instead of “mental weariness and social alertness”

FearIsNotLove's Role in Responding to Negative Institutional Responses

While it is important to ask about social network and institutional responses as early as possible – in the Intake/Welcome interview, for example – more in-depth exploration of this sensitive information often takes time and is best taken up in therapy. FearIsNotLove staff who do the Intake/Welcome interview can simply acknowledge the challenges for the service user of facing certain negative social responses and express their respect and gratitude at being trusted enough to be given this information. And/or, if there is enough time and safety, staff can ask about how the service user responded to negative positive social responses.

In the process of exploring social responses, FearIsNotLove's service users will sometimes tell FearIsNotLove staff members about negative responses they have received from staff members in other institutions in the Calgary area, or by FearIsNotLove staff members. This information can be upsetting for FearIsNotLove staff to hear and must be handled carefully within the organization.

FearIsNotLove is part of a large system of institutions working to collaborate in preventing and addressing violence. These institutions operate on quite different mandates and with different practice frameworks. What seems like a reasonable framework for staff in one institution might seem like a form of blaming or pathologizing for staff in another institution.

By taking up these concerns in supervision and with team leaders, rather than with members of other institutions, FearIsNotLove staff members can empower managers to work strategically on the larger community level, to promote positive developments in practice AND maintain the best and most collaborative relationships possible.

Supervision as an Institutional Response

FearIsNotLove is an ideal place for open and supportive discussion of the many concepts used to frame violence, victims/survivors, and offenders. Service users should expect that they will be protected from blaming and pathologizing. To ensure this is the case, all staff members should understand that their views and "favourite" theories/ideas can be valuable AND must be open for discussion. Individual and group supervision is a good place for such discussions.

FearIsNotLove staff members arrive with many different forms of training, each with its own set of assumptions and procedures. This is a strong point of the organization. However, FearIsNotLove staff members can inadvertently use concepts and practices that blame and pathologize women. This is probably inevitable since such concepts and practices are often presented as part of professional training. This, too, is best taken up in supervision, in a supportive and constructive manner.

An Example from Supervision: Video-Taping the Offender

Following is a reconstructed transcript of a conversation between a supervisor and front-line staff member about a woman's responses. The staff member wanted some support after a conversation with a woman who was recently admitted to the shelter with her 6 and 8-year-old children.

Staff Member (SM): So, she started to open up about the violence and what was happening before she finally left. She was saying, you know, 'He used to lay around drunk and stoned and just do... nothing, you know, and watch a lot of porn'... and if she said anything about it he would just like, go nuts, blow up and go after her, get really violent sometimes. And the worst part is, she said the kids would be just, you know, playing around and crawling all over him and once he was using a needle and they were, like, on the table where the syringe was. So obviously those kids were not safe, and she knew that and she stayed, you know. How could she stay there?

Supervisor (Sup): Right, it's a really troubling scenario.

SM: Yeah, and she told me she started secretly videotaping him when he was wasted and even sometimes when he started getting aggressive, which was pretty risky.

Sup: Wow, what was that about, do you know?

SM: Well, that's what I wondered, and I asked her, you know, 'Well, if you felt it was so dangerous, why did it take you so long to, you know, call someone?'

Sup: So, you're thinking she should have left sooner to protect the kids.

SM: Yeah, sure, I mean, isn't that... ?

Sup: No, I get it. What do you think was behind her decision to videotape him in the middle of the squalor and violence? Do you know why she took the step of doing that? Is that something you asked her about?

A few days later the staff member met again with the woman and asked some questions about the history of social responses she had received and could anticipate. Here is a reconstructed version of the conversation based on the staff member's description given in the next supervision meeting.

SM: Well, I asked her, 'Who else knew about the abuse and the dangers he presented to you and the kids?' She said his mother knew because she heard the kids say some things and she would come over sometimes unexpectedly and sort of see him going off. And apparently, he, like, he didn't even care and would just carry on. And his Mom would just sort of pretend it wasn't happening and would blame her for not taking care of him properly.

Sup: Wow, that's so dangerous.

SM: I know... yeah, for sure. And so, I asked, you know, 'How did you respond to this... him being like this and his mother sort of letting it all happen?' And she said, 'Well, it's kind of, it sounds crazy now. . . but I started videotaping him with my phone. No one would believe me if I didn't have evidence. His mom would just lie. And no one believes me anyway'.

Sup: How did you respond to her... when she said that?

SM: Well, it's like she was trying to protect the kids and make sure they could get help when they left. She had to prove that he was like that. So, I just sort of said, 'Oh, I see that makes sense. I mean the whole situation was risky, but it makes sense what you did'.

Sup: What did she say to that?

SM: I think she was relieved that I understood. She opened up a bit and we had a good talk. And she had a lot to say about how shitty it was in the past when she first started trying to tell people what was happening.

Sup: Yeah, sure, she was dealing with really troubling social responses all the way along, as well as her partner's violence.

SM: I know, she's pretty amazing, really. And she just doesn't really explain unless you ask.

It would be difficult to over-state the importance of actual and possible social responses. However, this topic is often neglected – in standard risk assessment conversations, for example. FearIsNotLove staff members can form a collective response to this issue, by bringing forward the close connection between women's responses, minute-by-minute and year-by-year, and the complex social responses they receive.

PROTECTING THE PARENT-CHILD BOND

“Where we begin to break the so-called 'cycle of violence' is where we help children see their mother as a good mother, as a mother who protected them.”

Renee-Claude Carriere, Kaushee's Place (Yukon Women's Emergency Shelter)

Failure to Protect or Failure to Respect?

Domestic violence is an attack on the mother-child bond and, as such, a powerful form of “parental alienation”. Many offending parents use violence to invalidate the woman as a person

and a mother, attack the woman in front of the children, undermine the woman's ability to make crucial decisions, prevent the children and mother from overtly protecting one another, and attack the children if they insist on listening to their mother.

Consequently, it is especially important for professionals to respect and work to support the relationship between mothers and children. As Renee-Claude Carriere observed in her work at Kaushees Place:

“ Many women, especially First Nations women, have had their children apprehended, or were themselves apprehended as children. In this context, separating the women and children can create fear and doubt. The transition house worker can begin to look like a child protection worker. This is not productive. As well, in transition houses we have only 30 days to work with mothers and children. It's usually more beneficial to spend time with women and children together, work with the conversations that come up naturally, and use the opportunity to support the women as mothers.

I found that when I hung out with moms and kids on shopping trips and car rides, they would open up and talk a lot about important concerns. I saw that helping children see their moms as good and strong individuals, as someone who protected them, not as someone who failed to protect them, was an important way to break the cycle of violence. ” (Renee-Claude Carriere)

Transition house workers can create opportunities to convey respect for a woman's autonomy and decision-making in the presence of the children, promote positive interactions between mothers and children, and help women navigate a system in which they are too often blamed for the violence and treated as poor mothers.

Women as Mothers: Working Together with Children

Children whose mothers are blamed by their father – and perhaps by others – can grow up thinking their mother did not do enough to protect them. Because their mother did not stop the violence, they may conclude she did not protect them. One reason for this is that, as children, they could know all of the ways their mother responded to and resisted the violence behind the scenes. Many women conceal their resistance from the children as a form of protection or do not resist the offender openly in front of the children because he will respond with further violence. As a result, children can feel more distant from, and come to blame, their mother. This can be painful for everyone.

The practice of acknowledging responses and resistance collectively, in joint conversations, can pre-empt this dynamic, by allowing children to develop a deeper appreciation of their mother's efforts on their behalf and allow mothers to gain a deeper appreciation of their children's responses. Many of the conversations had with mothers in FearsNotLove services can include one or more of the children, depending on age and readiness. In many cases, mothers and children have experienced the violence together and can experience relief from speaking about it together.

Here are some questions that can be useful in these conversations:

- What did you do to protect yourself, and your children, under the circumstances?
- In what other ways did you protect your children?
- How did these responses to the violence work to protect each other?
- What kinds of things have you (the children) been doing to help each other and your mom?
- What do you do when you think something bad is about to happen?
- Does your mom know how hard you work to protect each other?

These conversations provide an opportunity to contest the blaming and pathologizing of mothers, in the presence of their children.

- So, when you first felt uncomfortable with Bill's actions, how did you respond? What did you do?
- Okay, so, you actually saw the "red flags" and "early warning signs" right away and did what you could.
- It's not that you didn't have boundaries, it's that he didn't respect them.
- Just because you couldn't make it stop doesn't mean you let it happen. You were abused because he chose to abuse you, not because:
 - You were vulnerable
 - You choose abusive guys
 - You don't have boundaries
 - You missed the early warning signs
 - Your dad abused your mom
 - He was drunk
 - You were abused in your past
 - He was abused in his past and acting out his past 'trauma'
 - You 'pushed his buttons'

Working with mothers and their children together is an intentional decision to support the mother/child bond, expose the violence they have endured, and uphold their dignity as a unit.

Institutional responses can inadvertently perpetuate the isolation that was part of the violence. FearIsNotLove staff can uphold the mother/child bond by whenever possible providing the option of meeting with women and children together and removing the barriers that exist between programs, often under the guise of 'confidentiality'. This can be done in a manner that preserves confidentiality for the family system. Working with mothers and children separately, while necessary some of the time, can also tend to reinforce the idea that mothers are not capable of caring for, or managing, their child.

It is natural, in context, for children to yearn for closeness to their mother rather than to be removed (by a stranger) to talk in another room.

FearIsNotLove staff can:

- Ensure counselling brings mothers and children together, even if mothers are seen alone for specific purposes.

- If possible, not separate mothers and children when a ‘crisis’ occurs. It is important for children to understand their mother as competent, even in adverse conditions.
- Create and honour time for mothers and children to talk about what happened, and how they each responded and resisted.
- Honour how they work as a team and keep each other safe.

Teaching (“Psychoeducation”) Too Easily Suggests She Doesn’t Already Know

Seeing a counsellor after experiencing violence/abuse or staying at a women’s shelter may be one of the worst times of a woman’s life. She may be at risk of losing her children, facing legal issues around separation, possibly facing homelessness, dealing with health issues, feeling intense grief and fear at the same time, and many other problems. Her children may view her as a ‘bad mother’ because that is what they were taught by the offender.

This is not the time to teach her, to provide “tools”, to impose unsolicited advice, or to “assess” her abilities. An accurate assessment of a person’s parenting ability/capacity cannot be obtained when they and their children are living with violence, or in the complex and precarious process of seeking safety, when the threat of violence may be even more extreme.

When mothers and children are interviewed with a focus on their responses in context, the safety-knowledge and mother-child bond can be revealed in the accounts they provide, and directly acknowledged by the service provider. This is a primary goal. These accounts tend to reveal the nature and extent of the violence and how family members were/are already responding to address the violence, create safety, and preserve dignity. In order to obtain and honour such accounts, staff members must assume that family members were/are responding as best they can in the context. If staff presume the opposite, that family members were not responding as best they could, and need professional advice and instructions about how to act, they are unlikely to obtain such accounts.

Nathan’s Story: (Age: 10 yrs)

An example of the connection between a mother’s and child’s responses can be found in this short example, Nathan’s story.

Nathan: Mom, dad, Sarah and me lived in a house all together for 3 years...

Shelly: What was that like?

N: I used to hide in my room a lot. Sarah would come running in and hide under my bed.

S: What did you do when she would come running into your room?

N: After the first 10 times I got used to it, so it was nothing new. I also hid under the bed sometimes.

S: Why do you think she came into your room?

N: Sarah did have her own room, but she didn't like hiding in it. If she wanted me to when she was under my bed, then I triple sealed my door...

S: Triple-sealed your door... How did you do that?

N: I got pillows and duct tape. I put duct tape on the top and bottom so no one could open the door...to keep dad out. Then I put 3 pillows on all the sides of the door to keep out the noise. The door, the pillows, and the tape. That's 3 seals. The only time we could hear was when they were really yelling...Those times I would play my video games really, really loud...

S: I don't know if I've ever heard of anything so smart before to keep out noise and protect a sister...

N: Ya... no one could get in unless they had a knife.

S: Hmmm.

N: I play video games. It makes me content so I don't ...so I don't go out there and separate them.

S: How did you learn that it's a better idea to keep yourself as content as possible, rather than go out there and separate them?

N: I've tried to separate them. To defend mom would be suicide. Every time I tried I got red marks. Sometimes he wears his boots...he would kick me or slap me. Once he smacked me so hard the red marks didn't go away for a week. I didn't do anything for that...I didn't deserve it.

S: Sounds like you have tried to defend your mom, yourself and Sarah. Sometimes it works but sometimes it really doesn't. What else do you do?

N: One time me, mom and Sarah all hid in mom's room and locked the door. We watched Mario brothers. We were going to have a Christmas party, but he phoned everybody so that they didn't come to our party. I showed mom how to barricade the door. Sarah cries and hides when she is scared. I usually be quiet to George [dad] because he would slap me if I said something to him.

Nathan's account reveals the response-abilities of Nathan and Sarah and their mother. They are experiencing violence, the constant risk of violence, and ongoing distress. They have a clear bond. They anticipate the violence and protect themselves and each other proactively. In this respect, they demonstrate pre-existing ability (Wade, 2000). As professionals, we can see that they already know a great deal about how to keep themselves safe – even if not completely

safe – because they have been doing so together for a long time. The fact that the perpetrator continues to commit violence does not mean that Nathan and his mother do not know how to work for safety.

a) What they are already doing:

- Nathan knew when it was time to hide in his room
- Sarah knew when it was time to run to Nathan's room
- Nathan knew that he should hide Sarah under the bed
- Nathan and Sarah had a lot of experience with this (at least 10 – 12 times)
- Nathan knew to hide under the bed, for his own safety or to comfort Sarah.
- Nathan made a lot of noise [video games], to create a distraction

b) Staff can acknowledge that family members acted proactively:

- Sarah and Nathan's mom knew about the 'triple-seal' on the door
- Nathan tried to physically help his mom at first, but learned it was too dangerous. She helped him create a new plan [protective parenting]
- Mom, Sarah and Nathan operated as a team.

c) Staff can further support the mother-child bond.

- The teamwork of Nathan and Sarah, and between Nathan and Sarah and their mother, is clear in this account. By helping to develop this account, listening carefully, and repeating key words and phrases, their teamwork can be made visible and acknowledged.

Our work, with evidence gathered over 30 years, and the work of many others, such as Carolina Overlien (2016) and Margareta Hyden (2016), points out that Nathan and his mother are similar to so many others who live in violence. Overlien described one young child who described her fear and her action in responding to, and resisting, violence:

“ I remember him being so mean and saying so many ugly words that I had never heard him say to my mom before. I remember crying a lot. My sister says that I crawled under the table and tried to make myself throw up, so that they would see me, so that they would stop. ” (2016, p. 5)

Nathan and his mother also lived in fear and danger. Nathan's stepfather targeted their bond. Nathan and his mother did not lack attachment nor re-enacted a problematic “attachment style”. And Nathan was not “parentified”. Rather, Nathan and his mother were often prevented from enacting their attachment by the violence of Nathan's stepfather. The process of contextualizing – the deepening of each particular – often exposes popular clinical cliches as irrelevant or worse, profoundly harmful and humiliating.

Lars

The following excerpt is taken from the Swedish animated documentary, “I said I had a bad dream” (2008). Lars (8) is talking with the therapist Lotta Molander.

Therapist: Do you remember him hitting Mummy?

L: Definitely!

T: Did that happen a lot?

L: Yes. It was always in the evening.

T: Where would you be?

L: [Drawing] This is the living room, and this is my bedroom. My bed is here, and they'd be fighting right here! They didn't think about the fact that I'd wake up.

T: You never went to your sister's rooms?

L: No, I couldn't, they were on the second floor. They would have heard me from the living room. I'd hear them and go and say, “Mummy, someone has thrown eggs at the window”.

T: So, you interrupted them?

L: Yes. Other times I said I had a bad dream. That was the best trick to make them stop. Mummy would come into my room and sleep in my bed. I liked that.

T: And where would your stepdad be?

L: He'd stay outside.

T: So, you helped solve the problem.

L: Yes.

T: That was very clever of you.

L: Thanks!

T: I think you'll become an inventor.

L: Yes, that's what I want to be.

Lars knew the pattern of the violence (“it was always in the evening”), understood the adults were not necessarily aware of his presence (“they didn’t think about the fact”), and knew what the adults would notice (“they would have heard me from the living room”). Prudent and thoughtful, Lars would listen for the right moment to intervene (“I’d hear them and go say”). He would tell the adults something he thought they would not ignore (“Mommy, someone has thrown eggs”). Or, perhaps, Lars knew this tactic would at least give his mother a reason to leave the room safely.

With the brief statement, “So, you interrupted them”, the therapist keeps the focus on the social interaction of concern to Lars. She introduces the verb “interrupted” to acknowledge the purposeful nature of Lars’ actions, and the result. The therapist uses active grammar (subject-verb-object; “you interrupted them”), which invites Lars to speak from the subject position, as the agent of the verb “interrupted”. Lars accepts the invitation and enlarges the frame with another example (“Other times I said I had a bad dream”). He then meta-comments, revealing the “private logic” of his actions (“that was the best trick”) and the sense of satisfaction he obtained (“I liked that”) from “[making] “them stop” and being close to his mother.

Before Lars ‘interrupted’ his violent stepdad, he had a belief that his mother would respond to him in a positive way. That may be because they had worked out ‘the interruption’ beforehand, or it may be due simply to the strength of their bond. His belief, along with his choice to interrupt, and her response to his interruption, matters. This is the information that reveals his faith in his mother, his connection to her, his desire to ‘do’ something (and the wisdom to make it believable), and her immediate responsiveness to him. It leaves the reader to wonder how she managed her husband, in that moment, to effectively end the violence and ‘comfort’ her son from his ‘bad dream’.

Safety-Planning Conversations

In the aftermath of violence – during and after which many victims experience negative social network and institutional responses – virtually every conversation should enhance safety. Safety means safety from abusive behaviour from their partner and others and safety from negative institutional responses, which can include but are not limited to blame, child removal, family law, or psychiatric evaluations.

Some simple questions – used here after a short summary and with a question seeking permission – can help to ensure that safety planning takes into account the person’s already existing responses and forms of resistance. For instance: “So, you’ve not only had to respond to your partner, who’s been pretty abusive and unpredictable, but to his family as well... and with no real support from others... okay. Can you tell me... in what other ways have you been protecting your children... ?”

Implications of Children's Ever-Present Resistance

Children are often portrayed as receptacles that are filled with adult teaching and parenting, as sponges that absorb everything, as pieces of clay that are moulded by others and the events they encounter. Children who experience violence are often seen as more likely to commit violence as adults. And adults who commit violence are seen as more likely to have experienced violence as children. Violence and related forms of power and aggression are seen as powerful socializing forces that condition children to become violent as adults.

There is some truth to these notions of course, which is why they persist. But they also leave out a great deal. Adults who commit violence and who experienced violence as children did not passively accept or receive that violence. Rather, like Nathan and Lars, they too responded to and resisted the violence they endured and saw committed against others. This is confirmed again and again in our work with men who have been violence, individually and in groups. The same men who have committed violence as adults have also resisted violence, often by their own parents, as children.

The same men who report experiencing violence as children also report – if asked – a complex series of negative social network and institutional responses. No one intervened to make it stop. When someone did intervene, the violence continued anyway. They were ignored. No one asked what they knew about what was happening. They had no voice. They learned not only the horrors of ongoing violence but that such violence is a viable form of conduct and is, in effect, sanctioned by ineffective and victim-blaming institutional responses.

Finding and acknowledging such responses, and considering the role of the social network and institutional responses those men received as children, brings forth more complex and hopeful information and raises another and more useful set of questions that are not answered in typical theories of social conditioning. It can be quite useful to ask a person who has used violence against their partner, at the right time in the treatment process: “How is it that you resisted your own parent’s violence, protected your sister and brother, and tried your best to make it stop? How will knowing this about you help us move forward? How might things have been different if, when you ran away, someone had asked you the right questions?”

CHAPTER 3 – WORKING WITH PEOPLE WHO HAVE COMMITTED VIOLENCE & ABUSE

FearIsNotLove has been a leader in working with men who have been abusive for more than 30 years. This work has evolved through the relationship between FearIsNotLove and the Response-Based Practice team and has involved the constant interplay of practice and research. It has always been our view that the work with women and children who have been subjected to violence should be informed by the work with the men who have committed that violence, and the reverse. For instance, the observation that women and children resist violence is linked inextricably to the observation that men who commit violence work to overcome and suppress that resistance.

The handbooks, *Honouring Resistance & Choosing Change*, were produced by FearIsNotLove and are widely accessed as guides for victims, perpetrators and professionals. The publications of current and former FearIsNotLove staff members – Nick Todd, Gillian Weaver-Dunlop, Cindy Ogden – discuss the key ideas and methods that have been developed in the Men's Counselling Service to form the conceptual basis for interventions. Earlier FearIsNotLove staff members, such as Frank McGrath, helped to set up the FearIsNotLove men's program and provided valuable ideas in the development of the work.

In this section, we discuss some of the core observations and tenets of Response-Based Practice and some of the key practices used with men who attend the FearIsNotLove men's counselling service. This is a brief overview of the FearIsNotLove work with men, not a complete account. We recommend the series of publications by Nick Todd and colleagues, which are cited in this section and in the references. That work, in turn, draws on many additional influences.

In this document, we do not discuss ideas about the various patterns or forms of violence, per se. Much has been written recently about “coercive control”, for instance, which is well described and considered a separate offense in some jurisdictions. This approach may better position criminal justice institutions to respond to the realities of such violence but may also require a commitment to a depth of analysis that is not yet evident in such institutions – sadly. As well, there is the risk that “coercive control” becomes a standard for assessing the harms of domestic violence against which other forms of violence are seen as less severe.

While this discussion is important and on-going, here we focus on interviewing practices that are applicable with people who have committed violence using a wide range of strategies. We encourage readers to examine the research and practice literatures that deal with the functional links between different forms of violence and the natural-material-social-contexts in which they are committed.

For instance, it appears that rates of gender-based violence by men against women increased during the social isolation created in response to the Covid pandemic. The strategies adopted by people who perpetrate violence are socially located and tied to complex institutional responses. The strategies of violence, including “coercive control”, are directly enabled by –

and promoted by – particular institutional responses. Therefore, in all cases, regardless of the forms of violence, careful attention to the immediate and larger context is essential.

We do not discuss how the practices described here can be adapted to the diverse cultural contexts to work with children and youth. Examples can be obtained from publications listed in the references.

The Importance of Social Interaction

Throughout this document, we have stressed the importance of close and inductive analysis of social interaction in context as a first and indispensable step in forming socially just interventions for all concerned. Violence and abuse are committed on the level of social interaction; by one person or group against another, in specific social interactions, in specific natural-material-social-cultural contexts. A focus on social interaction in context permits close analysis of violent actions, responses and resistance to those actions, and the closely connected role of social network and institutional responses.

Following is a set of observations about the actions and capacities of people who have perpetrated violence, developed from direct service over time with individuals and families in diverse social-cultural contexts.

People who commit violence and abuse:

- Act peacefully and respectfully much of the time as they participate in many types of social interactions. For example, they may demonstrate the ability to handle “stress” very effectively in the workplace.
- Demonstrate skilled, pro-social, intimate, and respectful behaviour in the early stages of intimate relationships.
- Anticipate and work to suppress victim resistance, deliberately using a range of strategies that vary with the quality of social responses and tactics of victim resistance. For instance, one man destroyed his partner’s cell phone at the beginning of an assault because she had phoned the police when he assaulted her the last time.
- Demonstrate planning and conscious control of their actions by using threats, presented in various guises, such as threatening to become “upset” – a euphemism for abuse – if she does not do what he tells her to do.
- Change their actions/strategies in response to actual and possible social network and institutional responses; for instance, after assaults that come to the attention of their social networks or authorities.
- Work to control public appearances to avoid detection or, if detected, to shift responsibility to the victim. A man described screaming at his wife when the doorbell rang. He stopped screaming, was pleasant to the person at the door, then resumed screaming at his partner when they left.

- Exploit lax and ineffective institutional responses, including those that blame and pathologize victims.
- Use language strategically and inadvertently to (a) conceal their violent and abusive actions, (b) conceal and obscure their responsibilities, (c) conceal and misrepresent victim responses and resistance, and (d) blame and pathologize victims. For instance, a man who berated and humiliated his partner for over an hour, while she sat and wept quietly, referred to the event as an “argument”, the “normal bickering” that happens in a marriage.
- Engage in reflecting on the meaning and consequences of their violent and abusive actions and their own responsibilities.
- Can articulate (a) their desire for truly respectful and loving relationships, (b) actions they can take in pursuit of such relationships, (c) occasions when they have engaged in those actions, with positive outcomes, and (d) how others experience their respectful and loving actions.
- Can articulate how, in particular moments, they chose one course of action over another; for instance, how they choose to commit, modify, or desist from their violent and aggressive actions.
- Strategically use the language of effects to portray themselves as driven and compelled by internal or external forces to use violence and abuse, and/or the language of responses to portray themselves as responsible and competent social “subjects”, who choose particular courses of action.
- Exercise control over their actions in the midst of violent physical and verbal assaults.
- Are acutely aware of how they are seen by others and respond skillfully to others, including professionals, to preserve and reassert their dignity, as they perceive this to be necessary.
- Are able to participate fully in conversations about the details of their violent and abusive actions and demonstrate judgements/evaluations and emotions appropriate to the meaning and harms caused by their own actions.
- Already possess the skill and sensitivity necessary to re-establish safe and loving relationships with others.

These observations, along with our work on language, forced us to question many of the taken-for-granted theories and explanations for men’s violence that populate the practice and research literatures; in particular, those “effects-based” and deterministic models that portray men as hapless people who are driven to commit violence by forces they do not understand and cannot control. Ultimately, we formalized these observations in a series of core tenets that are stated briefly at the end of this section. First, we turn to how these observations “live” in practice.

“Self-correction is preferable to correction by others.” (Todd, 2000).

There is little dignity in adopting a one-up position and taking on the role of correcting and “responsibilizing” a client and little need to do so when we are able to identify and align with small acts of self-correction that are already present (Todd, 2000). The goal of counselling is to maximize the likelihood that the man will choose to change when treated as a competent person who is in control of his own actions. This requires a closely connected set of practices; including upholding the dignity of the men, creating enough safety to talk about the violence and abuse in detail, and using conversations about the violence and abuse to identify already existing deliberation and pro-social actions.

Wade Belt and Landon Henkelman, two counsellors currently working with the men’s program at FearIsNotLove, refer to the work as a process of “disruption and co-creation”. Conversations that reveal “the small acts of self-correction that are already present” (Todd, 2000) tend to disrupt the discourses and theories that frame men as “out-of-control”, lacking skill and awareness, driven by mental illnesses (e.g., narcissistic personality disorder), and so on. They also tend to “co-create” with the men, alternate accounts that highlight pre-existing ability in the exercise of control and deliberation in choosing to commit, or desist from, violent and abusive acts.

Men often show their engagement in “self-correction”, or willingness to engage, quite subtly in the small nuances of social interaction. For instance, Landon Henkelman provided the following example:

C: So, I don’t know what I was thinking... I just called her a bitch (saying the word “bitch” slowly and rising intonation, with raised eyebrows and shrugged shoulders).

T: Okay... um... I notice you winced when you told me about choosing to call her a bitch. What part of you is uncomfortable with that?

Here, in describing his own abusive actions, the client also indicated through his intonation and non-vocal actions that he absolutely knew and accepted that his actions were wrong and abusive and would be viewed as same by the therapist. The next natural step is to notice that the client took this position spontaneously, to treat that position as his own, and to ask a question that provides an opportunity for him to expand on that position.

Dignity and Social Control: Beginning by Listening for Men’s Accounts of Context

Counselling with men who have committed violence necessarily involves an element of social control. So-called “neutrality” can amount to collusion and is dangerous. Counsellors are ethically bound to work to prevent and eliminate violence to the best of their abilities and to report ongoing violence or the reasonable threat of same to the appropriate authorities. Violence is sometimes shrouded in secrecy that is enforced by perpetrator’s threats and intimidation, distorted by language that recasts unilateral actions as mutual actions, or obscured in a fog of euphemisms and vague terms that conceal who did what to whom.

In this context, it is important for counsellors to carefully assess the nature and extent of the violence and abuse over time and to attend to the possibility of the violence and abuse continuing secretly or even escalating while counselling is taking place. Ideally, counsellors will talk in detail with men about their violent actions, obtain third-party information where possible (e.g., from child protection, police reports, family members), and check in with the partner who has been subjected to the violence. It is not enough to talk only about best hopes and solutions, occasions when the man was non-violent, or the factors and experiences thought to “cause” the violence.

The Men’s Counselling Service manual states that “partner checks for the partner of the primary client are an essential element of the services offered”; they “inform the therapeutic interventions utilized”, “checks and balances” to ensure the perspectives of victims inform the work with the men, and “provide information about the primary client’s attendance and any safety concerns that arise”, so that the partner can make informed decisions for their safety and the safety of the children. Privacy and confidentiality for the men is maintained, however, staff may reserve the right to check-in with the current or former partner as needed, to assess for safety and risk. We encourage all staff to read the guidelines for partner checks in the Men’s Counselling Service manual.

There are several reasons for talking in detail about the violence.

- Women are often put in the position of talking about their partner’s violent and abusive behaviour while the partner himself is not required to do so. In this process, women are held to account for their partner’s behaviour as though it is their role to manage, address, limit, avoid “playing a part in it”, “tolerating it”, “failing to leave”, or “putting up with it”. This practice is fundamentally dangerous and unjust.
- Accurate assessment of risk and safety requires on-going conversations about the violence and abuse itself. All notions of causality or contributing factors are secondary to this analysis. We cannot ask what causes or fosters a particular course of action without first obtaining an accurate view of that action, using accurate language. This involves careful attention to cultural practices, notions about gender and sexuality, poverty and power, and so on.
- Paradoxically, such conversations provide the man with the opportunity to “step up”, as it were, not through the process of humiliation, but by engaging in a conversation that reveals his competence and deliberation as a social subject in choosing to commit violence and abuse, to exercise control before, during, and after violent and abusive actions, and to desist from violent and abusive actions in specific interactions over time.
- These conversations provide an opportunity to “disrupt” the attributions of deficiency and the elaborate network of notions and discourses that (a) conceal the violence, (b) obscure offender responsibility, (c) conceal victim responses and resistance, and (d) blame and pathologize victims.

However, talking directly and in detail about their own violent actions is initially a daunting prospect for most men, understandably, and requires careful attention to safety and dignity. We generally begin the counselling process by getting to know the man, discussing the context of the referral, exploring how and why he decided to come along to counselling, and providing information about the service he can expect, ourselves and our backgrounds, and other practical information that may need discussion.

At this time, many men want to describe the context of their actions, as if to say, “Okay, you know that I have used violence and abuse. I know that you know that. And you know that I know that you know that. But I am not an evil person. There is a context here and there are reasons that I used violence and abuse. I want to explain those reasons and have you listen and take my account seriously”. This is a legitimate request. We have found that once men feel safe enough and no longer feel they need to defend themselves as moral agents, they become more willing to speak about their own choices and actions (Todd, 2007).

We take the time necessary to hear the man’s accounts of the context of his actions, not to validate or agree with the explanations he may provide, but to acknowledge the difficulties (e.g., fear, shame, pain, confusion) of talking to a stranger about choosing to violate his loved ones. As well, this conversation gives the counsellor the opportunity to build a genogram, learn about cultural and social realities, listen to the language and explanatory frames the man uses to represent himself, his actions, and others, and so on. It also begins the process of identifying pre-existing abilities.

At some point in the first interview, we generally ask a question along the following lines: “I wonder... can I ask... what are your main concerns at this point in time?” With this question, we hope to convey to the man that we see him as a person who has legitimate concerns and that those concerns are worthy of discussion and relevant to the task at hand. We then tailor follow-up questions to the nature of the concerns the man presents. Often, the man’s concerns are for his children, for the future of the relationship, or for its end. We can then ask, “Can you tell me a bit about your kids? How are they doing at this point?” This leads easily into, “What kinds of things have you been doing to support them at this point?” And so on.

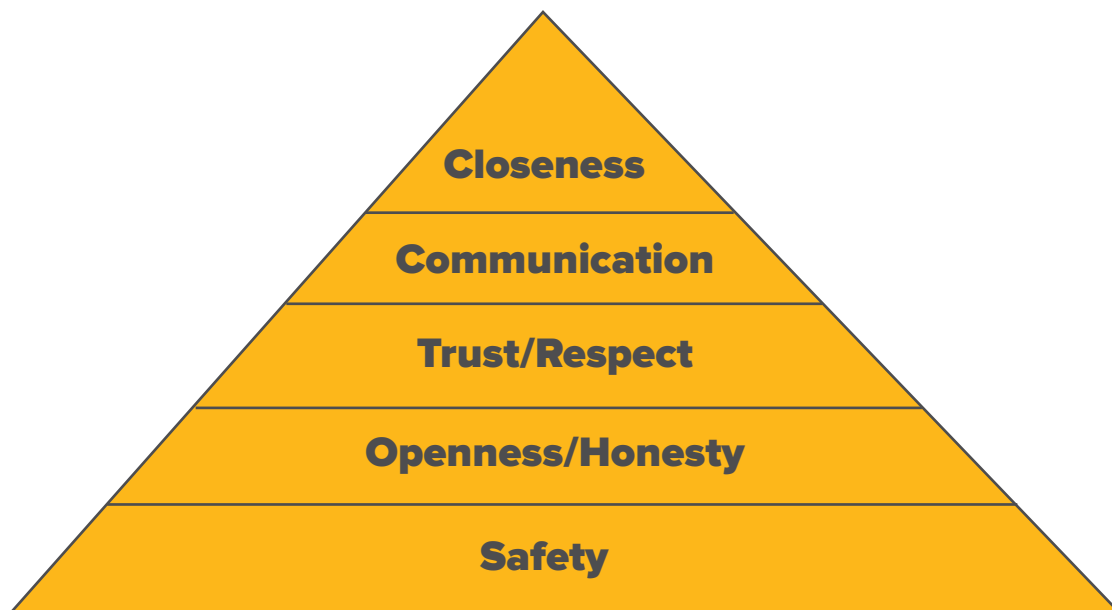
This line leads into an initial conversation about the reasons for the referral, the specific events and actions at issue, the expectations of the referring actor/agency (e.g., child protection team), and a discussion about how “prepared” and “ready” the man might be to talk about his violent and abusive actions directly. As the conversation about the man’s violent and abusive actions proceeds, the counsellor identifies examples of control and deliberation, the pro-social alignment entailed in excuses and justifications, decisions to reduce or desist from violence and abuse, and the self-reflection found in “reflexive frame breaks” (O’Connor, 2000).

As Gillian Weaver-Dunlop (2022, personal communication) points out, counsellors in the men’s program do not “tell” the men that their violent and abusive behaviour is controlled and deliberate. There is little benefit in lecturing men on this or any other issue. Rather, by asking questions about the choices men make in the course of social interactions, including those in which they act violently, we work to create a conversation in which the men provide their

own examples of control and deliberation. The role of counsellors is, first, to ask the kinds of questions that elicit accurate and detailed accounts and then, to pick up and build on the information the men provide.

Mapping Safety in Intimate Relationships

Frank McGrath, an early leader of the men's program at FEARLSNotLove, created the diagram below to depict "safety" as the foundation of successful family and intimate relationships. "Safety" in the full sense of the word, opens the way for "openness and honesty", which in turn fosters "trust and respect", and so on. Many men express a desire for more closeness and intimacy: This diagram suggests that safety and honesty must come first.

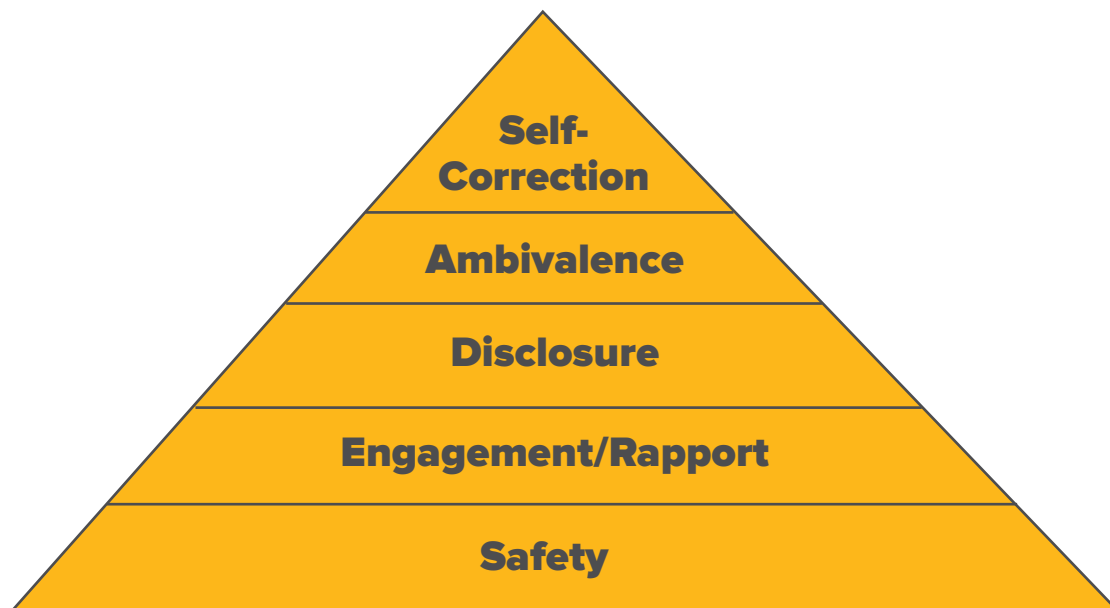


We find this diagram a useful guide for discussion with men in individual or group counselling. It's typically quite helpful to spend time talking in detail about how the men work to create safety for their loved ones, what they believe safety means for everyone involved, how consistently they are able to foster a sense of safety, what the violence and abuse means for the process of re-building safety, what they do that has their loved ones begin to feel less safe or more safe, and so on.

Some men find that the more consistently they work to create safety with their partners, the more likely their partners are to become angry with them and bring up "old hurts". This can be a challenging time in counselling and in the relationship. The men anticipated things would become better as they worked on themselves and took responsibility: Instead, the opposite seems to happen. Partners who were violated and abused often have a great deal to say to the person who hurt them and will be more likely to speak up honestly when they feel safe. Safety permits honesty and honesty is not always comfortable.

Mapping Safety in Counselling

Nick Todd created a parallel diagram showing the role of safety in the counselling relationship with men who have used violence. In the early phases of the counselling relationship, the counsellor works to create a sense of safety with the men, so that a working relationship can develop. The concept of safety in the counselling relationship is different than the concept of safety in the intimate relationship. Safety in counselling is created when men understand the parameters and limits of confidentiality and when they experience the counselling relationship as one in which they are seen not as unidimensional (i.e., as an “abuser”) but as complex people who have the capacity to change, have pre-existing abilities/knowledge, and the ability to act with intention and agency. It then becomes possible to “disclose” the details of the violence and abuse and related contextual factors and have conversations that illustrate choice and decision-making during violent and abusive interactions and in the course of safe and successful interactions.



These conversations, in turn, create an opportunity for men to consider the implications of noticing their own control and deliberation and their own pre-existing ability to act respectfully. Through this process, the men become more engaged in “self-correction”, in “Choosing to Change”, as the FearsNotLove handbook states.

Talking About the Violence and Abuse

The process of talking about the violence provides an opportunity to identify and explore the deliberation and control evident in men’s actions as they choose to commit violence and abuse.

Example 1: Finding Control and Deliberation

In Approaching the Subject of Violence: A Response-Based Approach to Working with Men Who Have Abused Others, (2014), Todd, Weaver-Dunlop & Ogden provide an example from a session with a man who presented his violent actions as an effect of ‘seeing red’ and being ‘out of control’.

Client: I just black out when I’m angry – I see red and I have no control over what I do. This anger just takes over me.

Therapist: Can you tell me about the last time you felt like you blacked out?

C: Well, probably the time I threw a chair at my wife – I blacked out then – I don’t even remember it.

T: Can you talk about what you do remember?

C: I was just so mad at her – she really knows how to push my buttons. My wife is a petite little thing. I could really hurt her.

T: Did you hurt her?

C: No, no. I threw the chair at her, but it didn’t connect with her.

T: Can you tell me more about that? How was it that you didn’t hit her with it?

C: Oh, I threw the chair beside her – at the wall. I didn’t want to hit her with it ‘cause I know that would have really hurt her.

T: So, it was important to you not to hurt her? What was important about that?

C: I’m twice her size and I work out you know, so I know I could probably really hurt her. That scares me. I don’t want to hurt her.

In this short example, the client shifts from describing himself as an object that is acted upon and compelled by forces beyond his control (i.e., “I have no control over what I do”, “this anger just takes me over”) to a responsive social subject, making complex decisions while assaulting his partner (i.e., “I threw the chair beside her”, “I didn’t want to hit her with it”, “I don’t want to hurt her”).

Example 2: Finding Control and Deliberation

Following is a short example from Dr. Brenda Adams about her work with a man who gave a long and agitated description of how his wife “pushed his buttons” and how he “lost it”. The couple had been at a party when the man began acting aggressively and accusing the woman

of flirting with other men. In response, the woman left the party on her own to find safety at her brother's cabin. The man realized this and left for the cabin shortly after, "just really pissed off". At the cabin, he found the door locked. So, he said, he broke through the patio door with an axe and "headed for her bedroom... just seeing red". (The axe was resting in the woodshed beside the door.)

Therapist: So, just a second, can I just ask you... after you broke the window, what did you do with the axe?

Client: Oh, I put it down. You don't think I'm going into her bedroom with an axe in my hand. I'm not frikkin' stupid.

T: Okay... well... that was very deliberate of you... to put down the axe. How did you manage that?

C: I don't know... I mean... right... I mean, I still knew what I was doing.

Brenda was carefully tracking the man's actions and picked up on an important decision. The statement, "that was very deliberate of you... to put down the axe", points out that the man was quite in control of his actions, despite his previous statements that he was "really pissed off" and "just seeing red". Confronted with this simple fact – a fact provided despite presenting himself as out of control – the man ultimately took the position that he was in control, not out of control. The notion that he was violent and aggressive because he was "pissed off" or "seeing red" was no longer tenable, given his own account. Rather, he had made a decision to act in that manner.

Example 3: Finding Control and Deliberation

Shelly Dean met with a man who described throwing things around the room as he yelled at and berated his female partner.

Client: I just lost it for a bit.

Therapist: Okay, what happened? I mean what did you do?

C: I just started throwing shit... anything I could get my hands on... all over the room.

T: Where did you throw the stuff?

C: Anywhere... at the wall.

T: Not the window?

C: Well, no, that would be stupid.

T: Not at her?

C: No, I'm not that fucking stupid.

T: Wow... okay... how did you manage to make such clear decisions when you had "lost it"?

By focusing on the details of the man's actions in the moment, in the interaction with his partner ("I mean, what did you do?"), Shelly was able to ask a question that "disrupted" the notion that the man had "lost it". The man was then willing to give the reasons he chose not to throw anything at the window or his partner and, in so doing, tacitly accept that he was making clear decisions while acting in a controlled and deliberate fashion and had not, in fact, "lost it".

Example 4: Finding Control and Deliberation

Wade Belt, former member of the Men's Counselling Service at FearsNotLove and now in the role of Practice Advisor, often asks men if they would have acted differently if the social situation was different.

Client: When we were sitting in the car, I just got so mad, grabbed her phone and went through it, she just made me so mad...

Therapist: Okay... sometimes I ask strange questions... and I am wondering now, if all of this would have taken place at the food court in the mall, at Christmas... you know? Would this have changed what happened?

C: (long pause) Yeah... I would have done everything differently. Whenever we're in public I never yell at her.

After this exchange, the client went on to describe how he "pouts" in public spaces when he is angry at his partner. Wade and the client continued to explore how the client changed his actions from one social situation to another. Wade recalls how surprised the client was at this conversation, as he had never spoken about, or realized, how dramatically he changed from one situation to another. The client found this information helped him to see how much control he had over his own behaviour.

Example 5: Finding Control and Deliberation

Here is another example of changing the social situation to develop an account of control and deliberation, from Landon Henkelman.

Therapist: So I've noticed something about our conversations and wondered what your take was.

Client: Okay.

T: Well – you’ve told me about different situations at home where you’ve been yelling and saying mean things to your wife. I wondered how you still have a job. What do your colleagues think when you yell and swear at them?

C: That’s easy...I don’t do this stuff at work. Something is different there.

T: What is different at work?

C: Well, I’d lose my job. I have to be nice to people there.

T: Same here – my colleagues wouldn’t have it. So how do you control yourself at work?

C: I guess I’m aware of what will happen if I act out there. I must be telling myself that.

T: Okay – what do you think will happen if you continue to yell and swear at home?

C: I know my wife is already checked out. We’ll divorce for sure if I continue. My kids might not want to be in my life in the future.

C: So, what do you think I should do to stop yelling at home?

T: I imagine doing what you do so well at work might be a place to start.

Sometimes, switching the social situation provides the client with the opportunity to speak out loud what they already know, already know they know, and already know the counsellor knows. Even if this process can be difficult and confronting, it can ultimately uphold the client’s dignity as a person who will step up to tell the truth plainly and act accordingly.

Using Three-Part Exchange to Identify Control and Deliberation

Counselling is a conversational activity full of nuance and novelty, yet patterned and structured along the lines of ordinary conversation. Participants – therapists and clients – use verbal and non-verbal means to convey messages, furnish gist and significance, convey hesitation and agreement, express and acknowledge mental and emotional experience, initiate topic changes, and so on. The process is mutual and collaborative, ideally, but the counsellor is there to use their training and position in the agency to do a job at the request of the client, to exercise influence prudently and sensitively. The interaction is asymmetrical.

Counselling conversations can take many forms. Often they involve sequences of questions posed by the counsellor and responses to those questions from the client. These sequences tend to follow a particular pattern, known as “three-part exchange structure” (Stubbs, 1983; Wade, 1994), as follows:

- | | |
|---|-----|
| • Question/Initiation by the counsellor. | Q/I |
| • Response by the client. | R |
| • Follow-Up & Question/Initiation by the counsellor | F/I |

This structure is widely used across different types of “service encounters” with professionals; doctor-patient, teacher-student, counsellor-client, and so on, and in police and related forensic interviews.

Essentially, three-part exchange structure sets out conversational openings for the participants. The counsellor uses a question to initiate a line of enquiry and, in so doing, asks the client to respond to the question, as asked, and as relevant to that line of enquiry. The client is more or less obliged, or “constrained”, to supplying a relevant response, a response that deals with the line of enquiry initiated by the counsellor. The client can comment on the question or the interaction, or ask their own question, instead of replying to the question posed by the counsellor, but this shift generally requires some discussion and can be seen rightly or wrongly as non-cooperation.

Conventionally, after the client responds to the question, the turn returns as-if automatically to the counsellor, who then has the opportunity to “follow-up”, to select certain parts of the client’s response to comment upon as significant in this way or that, to pick up on the tone and tenor of the client’s response, to ignore certain parts of the client’s response. After supplying this follow-up, the counsellor is able to proceed directly to another question without the client receiving another turn at talk.

Counsellors differ considerably in how they posit questions and then use the follow-up slot. When working with people who have used violence, the follow-up slot provides opportunities for the counsellor to formulate the nature of the actions (e.g., as unilateral vs. mutual) and formulate those actions as showing control and deliberation.

To illustrate the use of this practice from a response-based perspective, we return to an example presented earlier in this section, “Example 2: Finding Control and Deliberation” (p. 53), from Dr. Brenda Adams.

Example 1: Using Three-Part Exchange Structure

Question/Initiation

Therapist: So, just a second, can I just ask you... after you broke the window, what did you do with the axe?

Response

Client: Oh, I put it down. You don’t think I’m going into her bedroom with an axe in my hand. I’m not frikkin’ stupid.

Follow-up & Question/Initiation

T: Okay... well... that was very deliberate of you... to put down the axe. How did you manage that?

In this, example, Dr. Adams used the question to initiate a focus on the man’s actions in the moment, in particular, what he did with the axe – a vital question in the case of an assault.

The man stressed that he put the axe down as he is “not frikkin’ stupid”. Dr. Adams was then able to use the follow-up slot to re-formulate the client’s actions in putting down the axe as “very deliberate of you”.

Because of the conventional nature of question-initiated three-part exchange, the client was not given an opportunity to agree or disagree with Dr. Adams’ formulation of his actions as “deliberate” or the implications of such a view. Instead, Dr. Adams was able to move straight into initiating a next question – “How did you manage that?”. This question pre-supposes competence and control – the ability to “manage” – on the part of the client. Dr. Adams made good use of two adjacent “slots” – follow-up and question-initiation – to gently but significantly reformulate the nature of the client’s actions and the level of their competence and control.

Following are several more examples from Landon Henkelman, showing how the counsellor can use three-part exchange structure to formulate the client’s actions as deliberate and chosen and the client as active and competent. In each case, the initial question asks the client to describe their actions in the moment.

Example 2: Using Three-Part Exchange Structure

T: What did you do then?

C: I had thought of a plan to respond – it was pretty good too, but then I lost it and started yelling.

T: So... you had this great plan, but then chose an alternative – yelling.

Example 3: Using Three-Part Exchange Structure

T: What did you do then?

C: I kept telling myself to stay calm ... don’t yell ... but then I couldn’t take it anymore.

T: Right... okay... so you worked to calm for a while, but it got harder and then you decided to yell.

Example 4: Using Three-Part Exchange Structure

T: What did you do then?

C: I couldn’t stop myself from pushing her.

T: Mhm... sure... it was difficult to walk away in that moment, so you decided to push her.

Example 5: Using Three-Part Exchange Structure

T: What did you do then?

C: I just got so angry... I don't know why I get like this when I am angry...

T: Mhm... sure... it feels confusing when you choose these actions.

Example 6: Using Three-Part Exchange Structure

Many men prefer “straight talk” to talk that is “touchy-feely” and “counsellorish”. In this example, Landon Henkelman uses the follow-up and question/initiation slots to matter-of-factly challenge the client's effects-based account of his abuse being caused by anger.

T: I noticed you used the phrase ‘lost control’ today when talking about your fathering. Can you tell me what this means, to lose control?

C: I guess I am talking about when it's really hard to be nice – like the anger gets really strong and I respond out of anger.

T: Okay – what you really mean is allowing anger to guide your response. What's the difference between ‘losing control’ and ‘allowing anger to guide your response’?

C: Well – I guess the second one allows me to make some choices...I have some control.

T: Oh yeah – that makes sense. Which one do you think your daughter hopes you believe?

C: The second... for sure.

The direct reformulation, “what you really mean is allowing anger to guide your response” is used as a lead in to the bluntly worded question, beginning with “What's the difference?” This sets the stage for another bluntly worded question that raises the issue of the daughter's experience of her father.

Supporting Disclosure, Ambivalence, Self-Correction

The top three levels of the pyramid diagram by Nick Todd are “Disclosure”, talking directly and accurately about abusive actions, “Ambivalence”, discussing discomfort and mixed feelings over one's actions, and “Self-Correction”, describing the intention to self-correct or instances of self-correction. In counselling, as men begin to feel safer and more engaged, they often move freely in and out of these positions. The task of the counsellor is to facilitate this movement.

T: Should we spend some time talking about this interaction with your daughter?

C: Yeah – I thought things were getting better, but I lost it again.

T: Okay. Maybe you can start at the beginning and tell me what happened?

C: Well, I was working downstairs while our daughters played upstairs. I heard one scream a couple of times – they were fighting a little.

T: How did you respond to that?

C: I was instantly pissed off, like I'm busy trying to get things done and the kids are being crazy.

T: What did you do then?

C: Well, I went up to their room and freaked out – it was not my best moment.

T: What do you mean when you say it wasn't your best moment?

C: Well, I kept calm going up the stairs, I knocked on her door and when she said come in, I went straight to yelling.

T: Wait, how'd you know to knock on the door? What kind of knock did you decide on?

C: It's about respecting their space, my wife and I make a habit of knocking before we come in. It was a pretty calm knock.

T: Wow – despite feeling 'pissed' you still knew to slow down and knock. And the knock was pretty gentle you say...

Here, thanks to the counsellor's focus on the details of the social interactions in question, the client presents a combination of abusive actions, self-corrective reflections, and respectful and pro-social actions. So-called "ambivalence", like its cousin-emotion, "shame", can point to strong motivation for change.

“Men Choose Respect”

Finding Competency and Deliberation in Respectful Actions

Theresa Gerritsen, a therapist working on unceded Khowutzun First Nation territory on southern Vancouver Island, developed the “Men Choose Respect” program based largely on FearIsNotLove and Response-Based Practice models. “Men Choose Respect” is now provincially recognized for innovative work with men who have used violence.

At the beginning of each group meeting, Theresa asks the men to describe one interaction since the previous meeting that they feel good about. This is called “The Skills I Use” exercise. Men ask for the opportunity to participate in this exercise and look for opportunities to “act well” during the week. As the men describe their respective examples, Theresa asks questions about how they made certain decisions in the moment, what they were noticing at the time that helped them make the right decisions, how they remained calm and mindful even in tense moments, what they noticed about others’ experiences at the time, and so on. The exercise also invites men to show positive support for one another by acknowledging one another’s efforts.

In effect, these questions ask the men to provide evidence of their own already existing skills and awareness – evidence of “deliberation” and their “pre-existing ability” to engage skillfully and thoughtfully in safe and respectful social interactions with their partners and children. Rather than “psycho-educating” the men by teaching them good communication skills, or simply stating that they already know how to act pro-socially, Theresa uses this simple exercise to foster the language of responses and provide the men with the opportunity to find evidence of their competent actions as social subjects in the context of their own lives. More subtly, this exercise “disrupts” the notion that the men are not fully responsible because they lack necessary skills.

The program consists of 12 meetings: One individual meeting at the beginning, middle and end, with 9 group meetings in all. In the first of the 9 group meetings the men attend, Theresa puts the following statement up on the wall: “My use of violence is a deliberate choice”. She then gives each of the men a slip of paper and asks them to privately write a number between 1 and 4 to indicate their level of agreement with that statement, where 4 is “strongly agree” and 1 is “strongly disagree”. At the beginning of the group, the average response from the men is between 1 and 2: The men disagree with the statement and take the position that their use of violence was not deliberate.

Then, in the last meeting of the group, Theresa repeats the exercise. This time, the average is between 3 and 4. Theresa and colleagues discuss the man’s responses to this question in the final interview. As the men acknowledge the deliberate nature of their pro-social behaviour, in describing interactions they feel good about, they become more willing to acknowledge the deliberate nature of their violent and abusive behaviour and engage in the process of “self-correction”.

Making Use of “Reflexive Frame Breaks”

Men are generally far more involved in sorting out their responsibility for their aggressive and violent actions than is generally presumed. Patricia O’Connor (1994) examined how men convicted of violent crimes and held in U.S. prisons actually talked about their crimes. O’Connor asked one simple question: “How did you get here?” The men provided detailed explanations and descriptions of their crimes and did so, O’Connor noticed, in quite a patterned manner.

They would begin by talking about the context around the crime and the immediate social situation and then describe their actions. They would then pause for a moment and begin

again by using small pieces of talk called “discourse shift markers”, such as “um”, “I mean...”, “you know”, and so on. They would then reflect on what they had just said and the level of their own responsibility for their actions. Finally, they would return to the main account and finish describing the crime.

For instance, one man who was imprisoned for murder in the course of an armed robbery described how he and another man decided to “hold up” a small grocery store, with guns in hand. He described the two men in the store and himself pointing a gun at the clerk, when the clerk appeared to press the alarm button behind the counter. At this point, he said, “So I shot him”. He then paused and reflected on his actions, “So... I dunno... if instincts had me shoot him?”, intoned as a question. He then completed his account, “But anyway, here I am”.

Men who have been violent and abusive to their partners also use “reflexive frame breaks” to raise the issue of their own responsibility. Nick Todd has found that picking up on these moments and engaging men in a conversation about their own reflections can be very helpful in the process of counselling. Following are some examples.

Example 1: Reflexive Frame Breaks

In the following example, Nick Todd picked up on the “reflexive frame break” the man provided in his account of getting “really pissed off” and having “a very hard time trusting women”.

C: She accepted this guy’s phone number and I got really pissed off. Like, that’s wrong, it’s just really wrong. And she never told me about kissing this guy until we moved out here. And it was like, you know, I have a very hard time trusting women. I have yet to have a woman that’s... and... it’s my own fault, maybe it’s because of me... But, you know, I’ve yet to have a woman remain loyal.

T: What’s got you thinking, maybe I had a hand in this, maybe it’s my own fault?

C: Because... I feel I push them away. I force them away.

T: How?

C: By being angry, being jealous. I’m a very jealous person.

T: So you’ve been thinking over this problem, where the trust doesn’t seem to be there, like, “I’m wondering if my anger...”.

C: Yeah, I think it’s got a lot to do with it. I push them away. I pushed Sue away because I can’t just let them just go and do what they want. I have a hard time. I want... you know, I don’t want to be a push-over... but I don’t want to be... as aggressive as I have been.

The question beginning with, “What’s got you thinking...”, acknowledges the man’s thoughtfulness, while the second part of the question, “maybe I had a hand in this, maybe it’s

my own fault”, acknowledges that the man was already reflecting on his own responsibility. The practice of picking up on and exploring such reflections, while framing the questions in a manner that position him as agentic – as a responsive social subject – opens space for self-correction.

Example 2: Reflexive Frame Breaks.

Here is another example of a “reflexive frame break”, provided by Nick Todd (2022).

Client: My wife is so messy. I’d come through the house at the end of the day kicking everything out of the way. Like, why couldn’t she just put things away?
I like a really clean floor, clean lines, everything tidy. When I came home, there’s the kids boots and snow pants in front of the door, backpacks on the floor, dishes from the day on the kitchen table. I’ve worked hard all day and I’m tired, and I don’t want to come home to a big mess and clutter everywhere. She knew this really bugged me, so why couldn’t she just put stuff away, you know? It would drive me crazy. But I probably shouldn’t have reacted the way I did, I shouldn’t have got so mad.

In the final sentence, in italics, the man breaks from telling the story of being “bugged” by the mess he blames his wife for leaving, to reflect on his own responsibilities. This reflection, provided spontaneously by the man, opens the way for many useful questions. For example: “What concerns you about the way that you reacted?”, “How would you rather have reacted?”, “Instead of getting so mad, what would you rather have done?”. These questions further the conversation about the need for “self-correction” that the man already opened.

Example 3: Reflexive Frame Breaks

These naturally occurring “frame breaks” provide a ready opening to engage the man in more detailed accounts of his own hopes and responsibilities. Here is another example (Todd, 2022).

Therapist: What did you do that you weren’t comfortable with?

Client: Oh, when I came through the house kicking everything out of the way and yelling, I think I scared everybody. I don’t want that.

T: What don’t you like about scaring everybody?

C: I don’t want my family to be scared of me. That’s just not right. They should feel comfortable with me.

A next logical question might be, “Okay, how will they know it’s okay to be really, really comfortable with you?” Or, “Can you tell me more about that? What is it that appeals to you about them feeling comfortable with you?”

Exploring the Pro-Social Side of Excuses and Justifications

Maruna and Mann (2006) note that all of us, when confronted for having done something wrong, tend to resort to excuses and justifications, blaming some combination of internal or external factors for our wrongful actions. In ordinary use, such excuses can be thought of as “aligning actions” (Maruna & Mann, 2006, p. 158), a means by which we show that we are “aligned with the social order” (p. 158), despite contravening that order. For instance, we often mumble an excuse when showing up late for a meeting, even if the excuse is bogus. On one level, we are offering up a small lie, but on another we are saying, in effect, “I know I am late and I would not be so rude to be late without a good reason”. This kind of excuse is also a kind of acknowledgment.

However, men who have used violence are often condemned for using the same aligning techniques. According to Maruna and Mann (2006):

“Pathologizing such aligning techniques when used by criminal justice clients places them in a no-win situation: If they make excuses for what they did, they are deemed to be criminal types who engage in criminal thinking. If, however, they were to take full responsibility for their offences – claiming they committed some awful offence purely ‘because they wanted to’ and because that is the ‘type of person’ they are — then they are, by definition, criminal types as well. ” (p. 158)

Nick Todd’s work on the pro-social element of denials and excuses is central to response-based work with those who perpetrate violence. Simple questions picking up on the position inside the denial or excuse open space and accord dignity to a person who is concerned about humiliation. For example, if a person says, “I was just so drunk, I just lost it at that point”, we can offer, “So, what you’re saying is that you believe it would be wrong to hit your partner if you were sober. Can you say a bit more about that?” Or, “It seems important to you that I understand that you would not commit violence under ordinary circumstances: Can you tell me more about why that is important to you?”

Our experience is that men are more likely to take the position that they need to correct their own behaviour, and treat their partners and others with respect, when excuses and justifications are explored in this manner.

Avoiding Effects-Based Accounts and a Hierarchical “Counselling” Relationship

Linda Coates (2012) observed that “the theory of cause is a theoretical (ideological) choice” with immediate practical implications: How we interpret the problem is a response that sets in motion how we intervene to address the problem.

Richard Lewontin (1991) used the example of tuberculosis to show how the theory of cause translates into the choice of intervention. If you believe that tuberculosis is caused by the

tubercle bacillus, a view that is stated on many medical websites, then the logical intervention is inoculation. The intervention is to activate the body against the bacillus to prevent tuberculosis. But if you take into account that most people who have the tubercle bacillus in their body do not develop tuberculosis, more information is required: What determines who gets tuberculosis, if it is not solely caused by the bacillus?

It turns out that tuberculosis is much more common among people living in poverty, lacking clean drinking water and sanitation, surviving on comparatively poor diets, working or living in crowded and poorly ventilated buildings, lacking accessible and high-quality medical care, and so on. If you know this is the case, inoculation is not enough. The task of preventing tuberculosis overlaps considerably with the task of addressing poverty: What is required is new housing, improved water and sanitation, accessible medical care, healthy diet, and so on. The first approach is to change or “correct” the virus. The second approach is to change the social-material context to render the virus ineffective.

The same logic applies to counselling interventions in cases of violence. If your theory is that violence is an effect of various internal and external forces acting upon the offender – anger, tension, stress, toxic masculinities, patriarchy, unemployment, jealousy, trauma in childhood, social learning in the family of origin, poor communication skills, etc. – the obvious intervention is to address and “correct” those causes; teach communication, unravel the conditioning of toxic masculinities, practice stress reduction, and so on.

Such “causal” and “effects-based” theories tend to set up a hierarchical counselling relationship (Todd, Weaver-Dunlop, Ogden; 2014):

“Traditional effects-based approaches to therapeutic work with men who have abused others often attempt to intervene by correcting personal deficits assumed to be causing the violence. This not only creates a hierarchical counselling relationship but also can inadvertently excuse aggressive actions.” (p. 1117)

We draw a distinction between correlation and causation. Abuse in childhood and training in so-called toxic masculinities are profoundly important **AND** non-determinative or non-causal. They are part of the person’s life in natural-material-social-cultural context and therefore meaningful and influential. Such influences (e.g., toxic masculinities) tend to promote and even enable violence and should be carefully examined. But they do not cause people to commit violence. With rare exceptions – as when people have lost touch with reality for various reasons – violence is committed because one person or group chooses to commit violence.

Similarly, the characteristics of people who are victimized does not cause another person to use violence. For instance, children removed from their families or women refugees are not subjected to violence because they are “vulnerable”: An offending person chooses to exploit their circumstances, including the lack of protection by the state and community. Children who are sexually abused do not “attract” perpetrators. Rather, the perpetrator chooses to see the child as “attractive” and justify their violent actions on that basis.

“Islands of Safety”

Family Therapy and the Role of Social Network and Institutional Responses

Throughout this document, we have stressed the importance of social network and institutional responses. Social responses to men who have been abusive can profoundly influence the lives of the women and children who have been victimized. In responding to and resisting the violence, women must take into account the quality of institutional responses to their partners. Swift and decisive institutional responses to men who have been abusive can create safety for women and children and provide a greater range of options. Similarly, lax and victim-blaming institutional responses can enable the perpetrator to continue and increase the violence.

Family and couples therapy interventions are becoming more widely used in the anti-violence arena. Once there is enough safety, working together with couples and, when the time is right, their children, can foster mutual understanding, planning around emotional and physical safety, more honest and intimate conversations that create a healthier home environment, and so on. The quality of social network and institutional responses can be an important focus in couples' conversations, as the couple work to support one another in the community and among extended family. Some staff at FearIsNotLove have chosen to study Response-Based Family Therapy to aid in expanding their work with individuals and couples from a contextual and systemic point of view.

Many men who have committed violence are, or have been, extensively involved with professionals in mental health, law enforcement, child protection, criminal justice, medicine, and so on. It is not unusual to meet men who went to counselling at an early age, participated in various “treatment” or “psycho-educational” programs at the behest of authorities, had numerous encounters with police, had been charged or convicted of crimes, were assigned various psychiatric diagnoses, and so on. For some men, some of these encounters were profoundly negative and humiliating. For other men, some of these encounters were profoundly helpful.

At the request of child protection authorities in B.C. (Ministry for Children and Family Development), Cathy Richardson, Allan Wade and Cheryle Henry worked with Indigenous families whose children were removed and taken into “care”, due to domestic violence by the male partners (Richardson & Wade, 2013). In each case, they worked to engage with the men who had committed the violence as quickly as possible, providing the women agreed it was safe to do so. It has been the practice in many child protection settings to engage heavily with women, as mothers, and too often to engage only minimally, if at all, with men, as fathers. This practice absolves fathers of responsibility, shifts responsibility and blame to mothers and, paradoxically, alienates men from meaningful participation in creating safety for their children and partners.

In several cases, the women asked that Richardson and Wade not contact their partners immediately but, instead, work with them, the women, to better appreciate the social and cultural context of the family. Richardson and Wade agreed and made a point of asking about the history of social network and institutional responses to the family in the light of the violence,

over time. In each of these cases, the women described how their partners, the fathers of their children, had been mistreated in various institutional contexts, often through racist assumptions and practices. Each of the women said they wanted the violence to stop but did not want their partners treated disrespectfully.

Once we had established safety with the women, they asked that we work with their partners, first as a couple and then, as the counselling relationships evolved, individually. In each of these cases, the women chose to remain with their male partners AND clearly worked to ensure the institutional responses, by ourselves and the child protection authorities, were socially just and effective. In the meantime, Cheryle Henry worked with the children. Once the women felt there was enough safety and consistency at home, we organized a “family group conference”, with the child protection workers, to arrange the return of the children to their families and follow-up plans for their safety.

Our experience is that exploring the experiences of family members with current and past social network and institutional responses provides valuable information about how best to engage family members in therapy. For example, by asking how family members have responded to various positive and negative social network and institutional responses, we learn more about what is helpful and unhelpful and more about how to create safety for all concerned. Once family members see that we are not simply defending other professionals or simply buying into previous diagnoses or judgments, they often become willing to provide more in-depth information and actively seek services rather than avoiding same.

Public Appearances and Assessments of Safety and Risk

Earlier in this section, we stressed that ongoing assessment for safety and risk is a key part of working with people who have committed violence, including the men who attend FearsNotLove services. In cases of violence, public appearances can be highly misleading. And, the truth is, we can all be fooled into thinking the perpetrator is “working the program” when the polar opposite may be the case. Indeed, this is precisely the fear many women express: “he’s so charming”, “he fools everyone”, “he had the counsellor eating out of his hand”, “nobody believes me”.

One common mistake is to rely too heavily on your own impressions of the perpetrator without obtaining additional information. So-called “collaterals”, people who know the perpetrator socially, may be especially vulnerable to this error. But seasoned professionals are not above the same mistake. This is why partner checks, safety and risk assessments, and third-party information from referring agencies and other colleagues is necessary, where available. As is direct discussion with the perpetrator about signs of safety and risk.

Unfortunately, we have seen many examples when men who have perpetrated violence were seen as safe and accountable while they were continuing to use violence against their partners and children. In the following examples, the respective professionals generalized from their own interaction with the perpetrator to falsely conclude he was safe with family members. In each case, the perpetrator was given a “pass”.

Examples of Faulty Attributions

“He was crying so hard he couldn’t get through the interview. He’s devastated about what he has done.”

Pass: Crying is interpreted as remorse.

“He really felt bad, a lot, for what he did”.

Pass: Admitting to committing the violence is seen as taking responsibility

“He didn’t understand how to discipline his children, but the counselling and parenting classes have taught him that “choking the ADHD out of him and spanking him until his bum bleeds” is inappropriate. His lack of understanding and difficulty focusing are being addressed. He has a desire to find opportunities to make personal improvements during this difficult transitional time”.

Pass: Agreeing that choking and beating are “inappropriate” is seen as growth.

“He was one of the strongest members of the group... a positive influence on the others members. He was always on time or early and attended all of the sessions. He participated fully in all discussions.”

Pass: Positive participation in the group is seen as taking responsibility.

“He used to drink and drug and abuse women. But he gave that all up in jail. Now he puts all of his energy into the Church. The Minister is his life-coach.”

Pass: Going to church is interpreted as desisting from violence.

We do not wish to disparage actions that can be seen as signs of progress, but such conclusions can be misleading and harmful in the absence of information about the perpetrator’s actions with those he has harmed.

Example:

The following excerpt from an interview provided by Shelly Dean, and shared with permission, demonstrates the importance of treating perpetrators of violence with dignity and understanding that “they are more than the worst thing that they have ever done”, as the expression goes. There is dignity in direct accountability. The act of “not remembering”, “what I did”, may be a placeholder for shame. Everybody deserves to be thought of as a redeemable human being.

S: So, would it be ok if I asked you what happened? What you did to be here with me today?

T: Sure... ya. I’d love to tell you. But, the thing is, back then... I was drinking so much... I’d forget where I left my car half the time. I just don’t know. I don’t have anything to say. Other than... if the kids said I did it, I probably did it. I don’t think they would lie. That’s why I plead guilty and did my time.

S: The kids... you mean your grandchildren?

T: Ya

S: How many of them are saying this stuff?

T: Five.

S: Five. Ok.

S: So, you worked as a longshoreman all your life?

T: [chuckled] Ya... forty years.

S: Can you tell me about that? What was it like?

[10-minute conversation]

S: So... is it ok if I change the subject here?

T: Sure.

S: I want to circle back to you and your grandchildren, if that's ok?

T: Ya, that's ok.

S: Ok. Thanks. Can I ask you again... like, what happened there?

T: Ya, geez, I'd love to tell ya, but back then, I was drinking so much, I'd forget where I left my car half the time. I just don't remember anything. But if the kids said I did it, I probably did it... but I've done my time, so now I just want to put it behind me...

S: Ya, you mentioned that. Here's the thing I'm wondering, and you're gonna have to help me out, because I'm not a big drinker, so I don't actually know the answer here. I do know that your car... it wouldn't care at all how long it took you to show up, or what kind of shape you're in when you did. But those kids... what I guess I'm wondering... is if there's any amount of alcohol in the world that could have you forgetting the look in their eyes or the sound of their voices, I don't know... them crying... when you did whatever it is that you did?

T: (silence)

S: (silence)

T: I think I'm gonna be sick...

S: Ya, I get it. That makes sense. The bathroom's just out there.

T: [leaves the room and throws up in the bathroom, then returns]. I'd like to tell you what happened...

S: Ok... I think that's a good idea.

This man attended counselling voluntarily. He wore an ankle bracelet as a result of living in the proximity of a playground, which was against his parole order. He was 65 years old and loved to swim every morning with a seniors' group. However, he found it embarrassing to go swimming now that he had an ankle bracelet. He hoped that by voluntarily attending counselling for his original offence, as well as his recent breach of parole, he would be viewed favourably by the parole board and the bracelet would be removed.

S: Thank you for telling me what you did. I know that couldn't have been easy.

T: I've never said it before. The psychologist in the jail just said I needed to quit drinking...

S: It doesn't sound like drinking was the problem there...

T: I know...

S: I'm going to suggest something. It might sound a little crazy...

T: Ok.

S: Well, given what you've told me, regardless of what anyone else thinks, I don't have any idea what you were doing around that playground? But do you think, like... honestly, given what you just told me, that you trust yourself, beyond a shadow of a doubt, to never hurt another child?

T: (silence) No.

S: Here's the crazy part. I know you've been hounding your parole officer to take your ankle bracelet off. I know you want to get back to the pool. And I also know that it's the bracelet that helps you...and others...trust that you are, actually, safe. What do you think it would be like if you went to your parole officer, and actually request that she keeps it on? If you tell her that you need it, at least for now?

T: I do need it. I can't let myself do anything like that again. I'll go.

From this point forward, the counselling relationship continued for many months. His ankle bracelet stayed on at his request. Although he indicated his clear understanding of

institutional responses when he came seeking service, and his motivation was to demonstrate 'responsibility-taking' so as to have his ankle bracelet removed, his motivation changed after the second session. From that point forward, there was no external benefit for him to attend, other than the discussions themselves. Based on mutual agreement, there was no contact between the counsellor and any other professionals involved. If this was to continue, it would be entirely for his private benefit.

Core Tenets in Working with People who Have Committed Violence

These tenets overlap with, and are intended to be read with, the core tenets of Response-Based Practice (Coates & Wade).

- Abusive behaviour is a deliberate and chosen course of action in a context (Coates, Todd, & Wade, 2003; Coates & Wade, 2004, 2007). None the less, violence is often represented as an effect of various internal and external forces that cause a man to lose control.
- Violence and abuse are committed in specific natural-material-social-cultural contexts and responsive to relevant features of those contexts, including social network and institutional responses. Negative social network and institutional responses can enable or promote violence by suppressing victim responses and resistance, obscuring the responsibilities of perpetrators, shifting blame to victims, and concealing the violence partly or fully. Conversely, effective social network and institutional responses can support victim resistance by acknowledging the dignity and already existing resistance of victims, stopping and preventing ongoing violence, and creating enough safety to develop meaningful working relationships with people who have committed violence.
- Virtually all forms of violence entail strategies to suppress victim resistance (Wade, 1997). Men are aware that women resist violence, directly and indirectly, and work to protect their children and others. The strategies men use to commit violence are evince awareness of women's ever-present and determined resistance. The question of how individual men work to suppress actual and anticipated resistance is a key focus in of individual and group work and a key part of any comprehensive analysis of violence.
- The assumption of pre-existing ability (Wade, 1997). With rare exceptions, men who have been abusive already possess the ability to act consistently respectfully before they seek counselling or other forms of help/support.
- Violent actions can be represented in a language of effects or in a language of responses (Wade, 1999; Todd & Wade, 2003). Men who have acted abusively often use the language of effects to portray their behaviour as caused by internal or external forces they cannot control. The same view appears widely in professional literature. Men also use the language of responses to acknowledge the chosen and deliberate nature of their violent (and respectful) actions.

- Men are more involved in reflecting on their own responsibilities as moral agents than is generally presumed (Todd, 2000). In “reflexive frame-breaks”, men spontaneously describe their actions and raise the question of their own responsibilities (O’Connor, 2000; Todd, 2000). These and similar moments provide naturally occurring opportunities to explore men’s self-reflections and decision-making.
- Excuses and justifications for abusive conduct are valuable sources of therapeutic material (Maruna, 2004; Todd, Weaver-Dunlop & Ogden, 2014): The micro-practices use in making excuses and proffering denials often embed pro-social values and skills that may provide the beginnings of a commitment to change. For instance, a person would not offer an excuse if they did not already know their actions were harmful and wrong.
- Self-correction is preferable to correction by others: There is little dignity in adopting a one-up position and taking on the role of correcting and “responsibilizing” a client and little need to do so when we are able to identify and align with small acts of self-correction that are already present. The goal is to maximize the likelihood that the man will choose to change when treated as a competent person who is in control of his own actions.

Conclusion

Counselling with men – and others – who have violated and abused others necessarily involves an element of social control and requires a primary focus on safety for partners and children. It also requires that counsellors uphold the dignity of the men who come to the service, as a social and moral priority, and as a means of creating enough safety in the counselling relationship to have detailed conversations about the men’s use of violence. In these conversations, the men tend to reveal that they deliberately harmed their loved ones and, at the same time, show that they were far more engaged in small acts of self-correction and in reflecting on their responsibility than is conventionally presumed.

The materials produced at FearIsNotLove – “Honouring Resistance” and “Choosing to Change” – and the publications of FearIsNotLove staff members (Nick Todd, Gillian Weaver-Dunlop, Cindy Ogden) describe the both the ethics of the Men’s Counselling Service and the micro-practices used by the counsellors in considerable detail. We strongly suggest anyone interested in this work access those materials.

PART 3 – RESPONSE-BASED INTERVIEWING EXAMPLES

Conversations between staff and service-users take many forms in a wide range of social and physical situations, as Kristine Sorensen from the Danish Women’s Society described (p. 20). Some conversations are “one-offs”, brief and functional, while others are planned and arranged in a sequence over time with specific term goals.

The welcome interview is in effect an “assessment” interview. Typically, the woman is trying to escape dangerous living conditions and has few options. She will be expected to provide certain key information to shelter staff, who must decide if she is a good fit for the shelter – or, put another way, if the shelter can provide the services the woman and her children will need. The interview is not fully voluntary. A woman cannot decline the interview or refuse to answer key questions if she hopes to find safety in the shelter.

The interview is “asymmetrical” in this sense. There is an element of “social control” to the welcome interview even if it is conducted with utmost sensitivity. This is necessary as the safety of other residents and staff must be paramount. Still, it can be challenging for staff to consider their role in exercising power and influence, even benign power, when many forms of power are rightly criticized for supporting violence against women and negative social responses.

Staff who conduct the welcome interview may be confident in their own abilities and see the interview in positive terms as a good opportunity for the woman to obtain support and for shelter staff to convey concern and provide information about the services on offer. Ideally, it is part of the process of building safety and developing positive relationships – in part, by exploring social responses and the woman’s resistance to violence.

As mentioned, some women will have had highly negative responses from members of their social networks or institutional actors: They may expect to be blamed or judged or told what to do. For instance, in counselling, we often meet with women who anticipate that we will tell them to leave their abusive partner or imply they should have left sooner. There can be a considerable gap between what the woman anticipates and what the shelter actually offers, even if the mandate of the shelter is unequivocally supportive of women.

This means that simple fact-finding questions can be received as intrusive and threatening, particularly if asked too early in the interview, or too bluntly. Experienced staff members will have developed methods of leading interviews in a manner that upholds the dignity of the service users, obtains the needed information, and provides the service users with information about the program, its services, and expectations.

It is generally wise to reduce distance and hierarchy by “being a person”, to use the cliché. Ask the person if they have any questions about you. Feel free to share a bit of information about yourself. Use plain language, not clinical jargon. Thank the person for putting up with your questions. Ask permission to ask sensitive questions. Let the person know what to expect. As if you are missing anything important. Apologize for the formal feel to the conversation.

In training and supervision, we find it helpful to build on the already existing expertise of staff members by asking them to describe in detail what they find to be most effective in terms of interviewing practices. In what follows, we describe practices that we and others have found helpful in interviewing individuals and families, to supplement already existing staff practices.

Contextualizing: First Steps

Response-based interviewing is more like a quiet conversation that is both structured and flexible than it is a process of completing procedures in a linear manner. We hope to develop:

- a. a genuine and effective working relationship,
- b. clear and accurate and contextual accounts of the violence and related circumstances,
- c. an understanding of how this person has responded to, and resisted violence, and of how they have already acted to keep themselves and others safe,
- d. awareness of the social responses they have received and how they have responded to those social responses, and
- e. a sense of their “best hopes” for the future.

The many models of helping that have been produced in recent years vary considerably in how much importance they place on context. Many of the more psychological or psychiatric models assume that an adequate understanding and intervention can be developed without knowing much at all about the “intimate particulars” lived by the person and their loved ones. The poster-children for this kind of view is the DSM system of classification and the psychological testing enterprise.

However, many more social and interactional and contextual approaches have also been developed. Feminist and feminist-informed approaches tend to emphasize the close and reciprocal relationships between the macro-level, the large scale social and structural forces connected to power (e.g., gender-based power), and the micro-level, the “small” ways in which that power is enacted and responded to in specific interactions, relationships, families, work-places, and so on.

Some systemic family therapy models and their kin (e.g., solution-focused, narrative) also pay a great deal of attention to the relationship of the micro to the macro and presume, to different extents, that people are competent social actors who communicate more or less continuously. These kinds of models, supplemented with social justice informed critical analysis, provide a vast storehouse of practices and ideas that can of value in addressing violence with individuals, whole families, and groups.

Contextual and response-based interviewing can be thought of as the “deepening of particulars” (p. 23). The bubble diagram provides some ideas about which particulars in particular we might want to deepen. This is of course at the discretion of the service-user and provider. Our role is to do our best to understand the concerns and aspirations of the service user and work for safety and justice. This requires a focus on context.

Make the most of introductions.

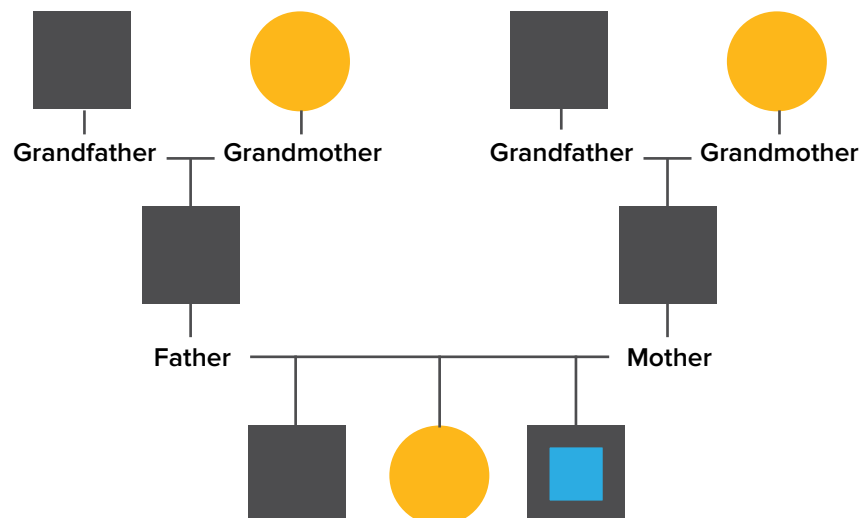
- Ask the individual or family members to tell you about themselves,
- Ask for the correct spelling of their names, their choice of names, ages, things they like to do for fun, and any information they wish to share with you,
- Share your name, and any information that connects you to them, as a regular person (i.e., I also grew up on a farm, or I have 3 children as well). They deserve to have some idea who they are speaking with.
- Identify their reasons for deciding to reach out for support. What is their immediate situation?
- What made them decide on now?
- What made them decide on this form of help?
- How has this 'problem' been defined, by whom, and for how long?
- Does everyone attending counselling (this program) agree on the reason for being there? If anyone has a different understanding of 'the problem', or why they are there, has it been spoken about?
- By the end of the first conversation, can a mutually acceptable description of the purpose for counselling or coming to the shelter be established?

Develop A Genogram

Genograms create an opportunity to learn who the person is and who is most important to them. The process of creating genograms can involve “directed note-taking”, used by Michael White, for example, where the interviewer repeats and writes information verbatim, as a means of showing that the notes are primarily only what the person is saying, not evaluative comments.

- Who is in the life of this person/family?
- Who lives with who?
- Which are the most supportive relationships? Least supportive?
- Ask about key relationships and changes in relationships as responses to the violence. (e.g., “How does your little sister respond when she gets afraid? What does your son do when he sees his sister is getting worried and upset?)

Example of A Genogram



Obtain Clear Descriptions of Social Interactions and Real Events

Focus on social interactions.

- Who is connected to whom and what is the nature of their connection?
- How do they interact? Who notices?
- Who stands up for whom? Who notices?
- Does anyone use silence as a response to fear?
- Who is most likely to talk openly?

Translate mental (psychological) abstractions into descriptions of actions in interactions.

- What do you mean by “angry”? What kind of “angry”?
- How did he get angry?
- What are you sad about?
- If I was a fly on the wall, how would I know that you’re worried?
- Who notices?
- What do they see?
- How do they respond to that?

Explore the person’s aspirations/hopes/reasons/goals for the conversation

- “What are your best hopes?”
- “How will you know we’re addressing things in the right way?”
- “If this is useful, who will be the first to notice, other than you? How will they notice?”

Ask for more detail about aspirations/hopes/goals/reasons.

- “I want to have better relationships.”
- “I want to get my kids back.”
- “I want to feel like myself again”
- “I want to get his ugly words out of my head”
- “I want to live my life in peace”

Explore the implications and consequences of achieving hopes and aspirations.

- What will happen if your relationships get better? Who will benefit.
- What will it mean to your kids... to be back with you? Do they know how much you want them back? How do they know that?
- Can you tell me a bit more about the “myself” you’re referring to?
- What words would you rather have in your head?
- Don’t you think peace is over-rated... what kind of peace?

Note problem statements. Often, such statements contain or imply blame of the victim/survivor.

- “I’m bringing ‘old stuff’ into my new relationship.”
- “I’m depressed.”
- “Why don’t I just leave?”
- “I just let it happen.”
- “I took on his view.”
- “I lack boundaries with men”
- “Why do I pick these guys?”

Clarify and, if appropriate, contest personal deficit statements.

- “What do you mean ‘let it happen’? Can you give me an example?” This changes the abstraction into a behavioural description which allows you to explore the situation on its own terms. “Sounds like you couldn’t make it stop... not that you let it happen”.
- “When you say ‘bringing old stuff’ into this relationship, do you mean ‘old stuff’ like wanting to be treated more respectfully?”
- “Can I ask you more about being ‘depressed’? Is this different than being sad about the abuse that you’ve been fighting against and trying to protect your children from?”
- “You mentioned that you lack boundaries with men? I thought I heard you describe telling him he had to leave and that he refused? In fact, he started tearing the place apart and terrified you and the kids. Is that a situation of you clearly stating a boundary and him refusing to respect it?” Or, “Seems like you have pretty good boundaries... the problem is that he doesn’t respect them”.

Explore the Social/Physical Setting of Key Social Interactions

“Why” the person responded one way rather than another can become apparent by exploring their sense of the social and physical setting during key interactions, including assaults. Many victims/survivors have been encouraged to feel they did nothing or the wrong thing. Exploring key social and physical settings can help reveal why response X was more prudent or more important than response Y.

So, you were doing dishes at the sink? Where was he? Where were the kids?

- “Was anyone else in ear-shot?”
- “Who was noticing this going on?”
- “Would anyone have heard you if you yelled?”
- “How did you manage to move him out to the sundeck, where the kids wouldn’t be able to hear him?”
- “So, where were you in the room? Where was he? Did you expect anyone else to show up?”
- “So, you were in the parking lot... how far away was your car?”
- “What time of day was it?”
- “Did you see anyone else between you and your car?”
- “Did they see you?”
- “Could they hear him yelling at you?”
- “What did they do?”

Try to discern the situational/personal logic. How did the person make sense of the situation? What options were apparent? What options did they perceive?

- “Seeing him block the door, how did you respond, what did you do?”
- “Knowing the child protection worker would blame you, what did you say?”
- “What would have happened if you hadn’t laid still?”
- “How did you know to avoid eye-contact?”
- “How would I know, if I was somehow able to see you in that room, that you were doing everything possible to keep yourself and your kids safe?”

Explore Macro-Micro Context with a Focus on Interaction and Responses

- Build a picture of the social context surrounding the violence (e.g., power, gender, class, race, sexuality) and the setting in which the violence took place (e.g., relationship with the offender, home, school, who was present).
- Keeping a focus on the client's comfort and safety, ask about the details of the perpetrator's actions and the victim's responses.
- To avoid re-traumatizing, focus on the victim's responses rather than the perpetrator's actions.
- Clarify abstract terms (e.g., "What do you mean 'he got angry'? How did he get angry?").
- Repeat and more clearly state relevant aspects of the context when asking questions about responses. For example: "Okay, so you're standing there alone. He's pointing a gun at your head. He's looking really nuts. Okay, how did you respond? What did you do?"

Identify Responses & Resistance

Recognize resistance in a quiet and thoughtful tone, not in a celebratory or triumphant tone. This is important because even the most prudent and courageous resistance does not dim the pain or achieve safety and justice. It is important to both acknowledge both how the person has responded to and resisted the violence and the reality of the profound suffering they have endured – also, as a response. Sometimes, suffering can be honoured as a form of resistance: What a person despairs against points to what they hope for.

Many people do not wish to be called "strong" or "resilient" because they feel like hell, might begin to feel the weight of unwanted expectations, and pressure to live up to being "strong" and "resilient". When they are called "strong" and "resilient", some people will wonder if the staff member is only interested in hearing about "strengths" and not interested in hearing about the pain and fear.

The statements, "Okay, I can see you've been doing everything you can to look out for yourself and your kids", or, "So, you pretty clearly let him know you would not pretend to be happy with his abusive behaviour?", work to acknowledge responses as resistance without using grandiose character attributions. For instance, the comment, "So, you clearly were not going to put up with any more bullshit" acknowledges the victim/survivor as active and purposeful in their efforts to stop the abuse. In contrast, the question, "What does it say about you that you were not going to put up with any more bullshit?", directs the person to supply a positive character trait or identity term. In general, in response-based practice, we tend to focus on the quality and meaning of social interactions in context, so as to keep a focus on social and material realities, rather than developing identity or character attributions,

The interviewing process is quiet and understated, a process of gradually learning what the person has faced and is facing, how the person orients to and responds to key events, the precise and often highly subtle means by which the person has been pursuing dignity and safety for themselves and their children.

Elucidate the prudent nature of subtle, private responses and shift levels of detail depending on the assault:

- “What was going through your mind? How did that thought help you...plan...escape...go somewhere else in your mind? “
- “When he gets cruel, how do you respond to that?”
- “What did you do with your eyes?”
- “How were you holding your body?”
- “What was happening in your mind?”
- “How were you feeling?”

Ask questions that expose the dangers of open defiance or open disclosure of the violence.

- “What would have happened if you had screamed?”
- “What would your Mom have done if you had told her at the time?”
- “What would he do if you just up and left him, with the kids?”

Introduce the Language of Resistance Tentatively

Most victims/survivors have never had the opportunity to talk about their responses as forms of resistance to the violence – and to negative social responses. Consequently, introducing this language should be done carefully and tentatively. For example:

- “You know, all these things you did – telling them ‘no’ in front of your kids, distracting them, hiding the booze, getting your kids to the neighbour, quickly texting your friend – I mean, you’ve been resisting this violence in so many ways – do you know what I mean?”
- “So, right from the get go, right from the first time they raised their hand, you have refused to be happy and content, refused to pretend its all okay, refused to carry on some sort of pretense. What else have you been refusing to do?”

Working With Children

Possible questions could include:

- “Who else knows how much attention you pay to keeping yourself, and your brother safe?”
- “How did you know to be sad?”
- “So, you go to your room, shut the door, and start counting your money as soon as you hear the word “Fuck” because that’s how you know things are going to get dangerous. What a smart way to keep yourself as safe as possible.”
- “Does your mum/dad know about all the ways that you’ve been trying to take care of yourself and your dogs?”

Reformulate “Pathology” as Resistance

- Depression. “Is that the same as refusing to be happy with mistreatment, racism, and abuse?”
- Anxiety: “I’m wondering if it would seem odd to you if you weren’t worried, even on the edge of your seat, considering how much danger you’ve lived in?”
- “You mentioned that you’re the ‘shit disturber sister’. Is it that you’re disturbing the shit for the fun of it, or because you refuse to do nothing when you notice injustice?”
- “Somehow, while he was attacking you, you managed to track not only his movements so that you could try and anticipate what he was going to do, but you were also tracking where the kids were in the house. Is that right? Are you at all surprised that you can do all of this at the same time? I mean, how does your brain give the ability to remain so calm and thoughtful while dealing with such a terrifying situation?”
- “Conduct disorder, or refusal to obey under these circumstances disorder?”
- “Looks like your very careful controlled eating, anorexia, started as a way of you creating some order out of the chaos in your family.”

Interrupt to Revisit Language (From Mutualizing to Unilateral Language)

- “Can I interrupt and go back to what you said a minute ago? You mentioned that there was a ‘fight’ last weekend. Can I ask what happened?”
- “Yes, I have heard that ‘it takes two to tango’. Do you suppose that ever meant one person would have his hands around the throat of another?”
- “Would it be okay to pause here for a minute, and talk about what you mean by an ‘abusive relationship’? I mean, who’s been abusive?”
- “Right, sure, I can see why you referred to this situation as an argument... but what you’ve actually described is them attacking you and you defending yourself. That’s assault and self-defense, not an argument.”

Revealing the Controlled and Deliberateness of Violence:

- “What was he like in the beginning, when you first decided to enter this relationship?”
- “Why was he so careful to be respectful in the beginning?”
- “How did he know you would not accept the abuse? What would have been a sign to him that you would not accept the abuse?”
- “If he really thought you liked “bad boys” and were attracted to abusive guys, then when you first met, he would have said something like, “Hey bitch, fuck you, let’s go to my place and I’ll smack you around a little bit, okay?” Why didn’t he do that?”

Talking About Violence and Resistance with Couples

Ideally the woman feels safe enough to say whatever she wants to say, in front of the counsellor. She will now have a witness, and hopefully a positive social response. She knows that he can control himself, and she knows that he may choose not to control himself as soon as they get in the car, which she predicts out loud in the session by saying, “I hope I don’t pay for this later, but I really want her (the counsellor) to know the truth about what is going on.”

- “What would you typically call what’s happening right now? More of a conflict, a fight, or violence?”

Social Responses and Responses to Social Responses

- Ask about social responses to the client both before and after disclosure.
 - “Well, if people didn’t know what was going on, how did they make sense of your behaviour?”
 - “Who else have you spoken with about these events?”
 - “How helpful has that been?”
 - “Have you always felt respected in this process?”
 - “What do your friends say?”
- With positive responses, ask for further details about what’s been helpful and what difference it’s made.
- With negative responses, ask for further details about the client’s responses to those negative responses. For example:
 - “So, when your counsellor suggested you tend to pick abusive guys, how did you respond? You know, what did you do?”
- Learn how the client has “handled” professionals, friends and family who have responded negatively. For example:
 - “Oh, so you fired the counsellor! Have you always taken care of yourself in this way?”
 - “So, you agreed to her face, and thought to yourself, “No way!” Is that an effective way to get along with people, and also follow your instincts?”
 - “Given how your neighbor responded last time, how did that help you decide to avoid going to her for help this time?”
 - “How did you know not to tell? What did you think would happen to your dad if he knew that you were raped?”
 - “When did you decide to tell someone about this?”
 - “Who did you tell? How did you decide on that person?”
 - “Who else knows about this now? How did the information get to them? What have they done with the information?”

Examples of Social Responses Question for Interviewing

- “Who knows about the situation?”
- “Who knows about your partner’s violence?”
- “Who knows about your partner’s yelling and such?”

Phrase the questions tactfully to avoid terms that may be uncomfortable, but “name” the facts.

- “How do they know?”
- “Did you decide to tell them?”
- “How did you decide?”
- “How did you decide to tell your sister and not your brother?”
- “How much information did you give them?”

Phrase the question to acknowledge the decision by your client to tell or not tell, or to tell partly.

- “Were you at all worried about how they would respond, what they might do or say?”
- “How did you know you should be worried?”
- “Had you tried to say something before?”
- “Had you seen them respond to someone else, like your brother or sister?”

Phrase the question to acknowledge their legitimate concern over negative social responses.

- “Do the authorities know?”
- “How did they find out?”
- “Were the police involved?”

Phrase the question to ensure you are not suggesting the authorities should know.

- “So, when you told your sister, how did she respond?”
- “Like, what did she say?”
- “What did the police have to say?”
- “Did they attend your house?”
- “Who interviewed you?”

Phrase the question to learn how social network and institutional actors responded to your client and family. Get details about the social situation in which social responses were provided.

- “How did that go?”
- “Did they listen to you?”
- “Did they believe you?”
- “Did anyone talk with your kids?”
- “How did your kids find that experience?”

Try to learn which social responses the person found helpful or unhelpful. Try to learn exactly what it was about the social responses that was helpful or unhelpful.

With positive social responses, ask:

- “Okay, so, what was that like for you, to feel really heard?”
- “What difference has it made to you, to be listened to and supported?”
- “What difference has it made to your kids?”

With negative social responses, ask:

- “Okay, so when you could see that the (type of professional) was not really believing you, how did you respond, like right then, what did you do?”
- “What about later on, how did this experience influence you later on, in terms of who you would talk to and who not?”
- “So, you’ve been facing not only the violence by your partner, but blame – even from some of your friends and family: What has this been like for you?”
- “So, your friends have been great, but the counselor seemed to think you make bad decisions – that sucks: How do you deal with the counsellor now?”

Phrase the questions to learn how the person managed the negative social response, expressed or concealed their thoughts/feelings, etc.

The point is to understand and acknowledge the role of social responses in the responses of the service user to the events in question, including the violence; their decision-making, how they view their situation, how they relate to authorities and family members, how they resist the violence, how this may figure into their aspirations and particular forms of distress.

Expose Violence and Clarify Perpetrator's Responsibility:

- Use language that highlights the social and unilateral nature of violence. Query terms that mutualize violence (e.g., “What do you mean ‘abusive relationship’? Do you mean living with a man who has been abusive to you?”).
- Clarify power differences and perpetrator's misuse of power.
- Using specific examples, note how the perpetrator anticipated and suppressed the victim's resistance (e.g., blocking the doorway to stop her from leaving the room, driving away friends, isolating them, using threats and intimidation to maintain secrecy).
- “Why do you suppose he took the trouble to treat you really well in the beginning?”

Formulate Responses as Resistance: Recast Effects as Responses

- Using specific examples from the interview, and using the client's language, propose that some of her/his responses could be considered forms of resistance.
- Openly contest initial deficiency statements: For example: “You're right, you are a ‘cling-on’. But you don't cling to abusive guys. You seem to cling to your dignity at all costs.”
- Openly contest faulty diagnoses.
- Recast effects as responses.
- “You know, I know that you've been told this is depression. And, with all respect to your doctor, I just don't see this. I mean, certainly you've been ‘oppressed’, and that has been really painful. But, you know, wouldn't it be strange if you weren't very, very upset about this violence?”
- Ask if this reformulation “fits” or “makes sense”.

Ask Connective Questions:

- Explore the origins of certain responses/forms of resistance.
 - “You really had to be very careful with this guy.
 - “How did you learn to be careful in this way?”, “I notice that you did everything you could to protect your colleague, even though you were being treated like shit.”
 - “How did you become so mindful of others?”

- Explore the use of certain responses over time and across settings.
 - “Have there been other times when you’ve had ‘stand up for yourself’ when you knew it wasn’t safe?”,
 - “Since these assaults, have you still found it necessary to ‘keep your own counsel’ in this way?”
- Where appropriate, use humour to reformulate responses:
 - “Where did you get the idea that professionals should listen to you and that you could fire them if they didn’t?”
 - “Isn’t this going to get you into a lot of trouble?”

Contest Attributions of Passivity/Deficiency

- Using specific examples from the interview, reformulate attributions of passivity/deficiency as prudent responses/resistance given the circumstances.
 - “Just because you could not make it stop does not mean you let it happen”. “The fact that they did not respect your ‘boundaries’ does not mean that you don’t have any”.
- Using questions, stories, and analogies, contest the blaming and pathologizing of the person.
 - “Suppose you and I were watching a young couple down there, on the street. He hauls off and punches her in the face. Would it be right to call that a ‘fight’ or an ‘argument’?”
- Highlight symptoms of chronic and flagrant mental wellness (e.g., refusing to be happy with abuse).
 - “You know, you just have this crazy habit of being unhappy when you’re badly treated. I admit, I suffer from the same problem, though I haven’t been through what you have. Do you think this condition might be chronic, incurable? Will there ever be a time that you will be happy when you’re treated disrespectfully?”

Build on Difference:

- “Who else knows about your resistance to this violence?”
- “When you leave here today with this knowledge close to your heart, what differences might you notice?”
- “Who else might notice these changes?”
- Acknowledge the newness of the new account. “So... how is it for you to acknowledge – maybe for the first time – that you have always tried to stop the violence, even from a very young age?”
- Acknowledge that the newness of the new account might be arresting and challenging to grasp/accept: “I hope I haven’t thrown you a curve. I know this is quite a different way of looking at things and might not fit for you at all.”

- Consider the following question: If a person has been thinking they're mentally ill for the past 8 years, and others around them have treated them as such, what kind of difference does it make to think that they were in touch with reality rather than breaking from reality, oppressed rather than depressed, highly alert rather than highly anxious? How might "coming to terms" with such possibilities be challenging – even risky – and imply the need for change in the person's social responses systems?

Humour

Humour is an important part of social interactions and can be very helpful in creating safety, for instance, by adjusting the intensity of the interaction and reaffirming that we are all just people at the end of the day. Humour can be a mutual exchange of 'common ground' and serves the function of 'coming up for air' in conversations that bring up suffering and involve accurate descriptions of violence. Too much or too little humour – or just not humorous humour – is likely problematic for a service user who is carefully deciding if a person, program or organization is trustworthy. Therefore, humor can be understood as an intuitively negotiated, social skill.

- Humour is play, play is safety
- Humour indicates connection

APPENDIX 1 – LANGUAGE: TELL IT LIKE IT IS WRITING GUIDE

This section is meant to be read with Coates & Wade (2007).

Check Your Language

Avoid:

- Vague terms that conceal the specific nature and severity of violence. Words such as "incident" tell us nothing about the violence.
- Vocabulary that mutualizes violence. "Mutualizing" occurs when we use words or descriptions that shift responsibility or blame from the perpetrator to the victim. Violence is unilateral – done against another person – and should be described this way. For example, avoid saying "they fought" or "ongoing conflict", when one person hit or beat another person.

Do:

- Use clear language that accurately describes violence and assigns responsibility to the perpetrator.
- Respect gender identity and gender expression and write clearly, consistently and respectfully about lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans issues.

Have You Avoided Unnecessary Descriptions?

Avoid:

- Inflammatory statements and descriptions with irrelevant information – such as lifestyle choices, clothing, sexual history, citizenship or profession – that can be used to perpetuate victim blaming.
- Statements that suggest a positive bias towards the perpetrator based on details of their community standing, ethnicity, race, religion, or profession.

Do:

- Ensure the victim's voice is present but leave out unnecessary information. Use the appropriate level of detail to show their resistance to violence. Ask yourself if you have been balanced in the accounts you have helped to produce: Have You Concealed the Violence? Have you pursued accurate accounts AND supported those who have been harmed?

Avoid:

- Passive voice and vocabulary that shift the responsibility for the violence from the perpetrator to the victim. For example, statements in passive voice such as “the victim alleged she was raped” fail to imply that the perpetrator was responsible for the rape. A statement such as “the victim reported the man raped her” is more powerful and clear. Violence is committed against the victim; therefore, a victim does not, for example, “engage in” or “perform” sexualized acts. “Sex” and “sexual” are terms that should only be used to describe truly sexual acts; that is, acts that are consensual (mutually agreed upon).

Do:

- Use active voice and language that focus attention on the person committing the crime. Make the perpetrator the subject of the sentence and assign verbs to them. For example, “the man kicked her in the head” is clearer than “the victim was kicked.”

Have You Implied Cultural or Racial Reasons for Violence?

Avoid:

- Statements implying that members of particular groups all behave the same way. It is important to use similar terms for similar actions regardless of a perpetrator's ethnicity or “race”. For example, avoid describing perpetrators from the visible majority as “shooters” or “mentally ill” while calling people from visible minorities “killers,” “terrorists,” or “thugs.”

Do:

- Ensure that your writing does not perpetuate racist or ethnocentric stereotypes or imply violence is normal or expected in certain communities.
- Too much detail can be gratuitous; too little can weaken the victim's position.

Problematic Terms	Alternatives	Why?
Sexual Assault	Sexualized Assault Sexualized Violence Violence using Sexualized Actions Violent Sexualized Acts Rape	“Sexual” is consensual and mutualizing. It imparts responsibility to both the perpetrator and victim. While the term “sexual assault” is often used, “sexualized assault” more accurately describes unilateral (one-sided), non-consensual actions by a perpetrator. It is not possible to consent to sexualized assault or violence.
Intercourse Sex	Rape	The terms “intercourse” and “sex” describe consensual sexual activity. They imply mutual consent, which suggests the victim was a participant in the activity – that something was done “with” them rather than “against” them. Using these terms normalizes and reconstructs criminal behaviours and equates rape to everyday activity.
Kiss	Forced Oral Contact Forced mouth on the victim’s mouth (or other body part)	Kissing is a consensual act between two people; it is an act of intimacy or affection. The word “kiss” mutualizes the action and conceals the assault.
Alleged Admitted Confessed	Reports Reported	“Alleged” reinforces the belief that a crime may not have actually occurred. Terms “admitted” and “confessed” imply victim is responsible for the violence. “Reports” is more neutral and appropriate, especially if a case is in the justice system. Be specific and indicate who said what: “Police say... ”

Problematic Terms	Alternatives	Why?
Unharmd	Witnessed Traumatized Harmed	Those who experience violence are never “unharmd.” Physical injuries may not be present; however, violence causes varying levels of traumatic harm. Descriptions should accurately convey physical, mental, emotional and spiritual harm. Avoid statements such as “children were upstairs and unharmd” because all children are harmed when they hear or see violence.
Domestic Dispute	Intimate Partner Violence Domestic Violence	A “dispute” is a disagreement or argument between two equal parties. “Domestic dispute” minimizes the seriousness of the violence and implies mutual responsibility. It also suggests an isolated incident and may hide patterns of abuse.
Incident	Attack Sexualized Assault Rape	“Incident” is a vague term and does not allow for appropriate social responses. Use clear and accurate language to describe the criminal act.
Sex with a minor Child sex tourism Child sex trade Child Pornography Child Prostitution	Rape of a child International child rape Sexualized violation of a child Rape for profit	Children cannot consent to “sex”; therefore, “rape” more accurately describes the violence. Using the term “rape” is critically important in cases involving children. Children lack the legal capacity to provide consent and therefore no blame or responsibility should be placed with the child.
Sexual Touching	Grabbing body parts Forced touching Forcibly touched	“Sexual” makes the acts seem sensual or pleasurable rather than criminal, harmful and forced upon the victim. Name the body parts to make statement more clear.

Problematic Terms	Alternatives	Why?
Engage Engaging in Bullying	Forced Coerced Trapped Tricked	“Engage” implies that the participant was involved in making the crime happen. Words that imply active responsibility on the part of the victim obscure the criminal nature of the violence. It’s important to recognize that no one can consent to a violent or assaultive use of force, whether physical or social.
Cyberbullying	Racism Sexism Homophobia Transphobia Online sexual exploitation	Be careful using the term “bullying” because it is vague and often associated with the actions of children and youth. The term can minimize the severity and criminality of abuse, force, threat, intimidation or aggression. Be specific about the nature of the violent behaviour if you can.

APPENDIX 2 – ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Domestic Violence Services Management (DVSM) New South Wales, Australia

The Response-Based Practice group have been working closely with Sal Dennis and the team at Domestic Violence Services Management for several years. Sal and colleagues have produced a set of excellent resources that can be viewed or obtained from Insight Exchange (<https://www.insightexchange.net>).

“Insight Exchange centres on the expertise of people with lived experience of domestic and family violence and gives voice to these experiences. Insight Exchange is designed to inform and strengthen social, service and systemic responses to domestic and family violence.” We highly recommend these and other resources for survivors and other professionals, especially anyone wanting to learn more about Response-Based Practice.

The resources contain several presentations by members of the Response-Based Practice group and texts/links for survivors and workers in the various sectors addressing domestic and family violence. For instance, “Follow My Lead” is written from the point of view of survivors who are working to obtain the best possible responses from the various institutions that respond to cases of violence. “Voices of Resistance” is a collection of first-person accounts from survivors, obtained through close collaboration with DVSM staff, that highlights their ever-present resistance to domestic and family violence.

DVSM just published a series of women’s first-person accounts of their experiences of police responses. Here is the link: <https://www.insightexchange.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Insight-Exchange-Police-Responses-Examples-for-reflection.pdf>

Pedagogical Theatre Project. County Norbotten, Sweden

For several years, we have worked closely with County of Norbotten, in northern Sweden, on the development of a pedagogical theatre project. Pedagogical theatre is a time-honoured vehicle for discussion of important social issues and an important tradition in Sweden. With the leadership of Lisa Lindstrom, the county has produced three professionally acted scenarios that contrast Response-Based interviewing with standard methods. The three scenarios depict two versions of each of three interviews: a woman with children in an interview with a child protection worker; a woman victim of sexualized assault in an interview with a police officer; and a young man who was horribly bullied and assaulted in an interview with a psychologist.

There is a manual explaining some of the fundamentals of Response-Based Practice and comments from Allan Wade on each of the three interviews, highlighting key ideas and interviewing methods. The scenarios are in Swedish with English subtitles.

Here’s the link to the website:

<https://www.samverkanmotvald.se/una-norrbottnen/responded-based-practise/>

Here’s the link to the tutorial in English:

<https://www.samverkanmotvald.se/wp-content/uploads/Where-there-is-violence.pdf>

FearIsNotLove

FearIsNotLove has been involved in the development of Response-Based Practice for many years. For at least the past 25 years, FearIsNotLove has provided refuge and suite of services to women and children escaping violence and a men's counselling service, for men who have committed domestic violence. As a result, for FearIsNotLove, the work for survivors, adults and children, has informed the work with the men's counselling program. The staff members who initially developed this work were Nick Todd, Gillian Weaver-Dunlop and Cindy Ogden.

FearIsNotLove also developed key publications for service-users, professionals, and the public. "Honouring Resistance" is a detailed example of one woman's responses and multi-form resistance to violence by her male partner. "Choosing to Change" is a booklet for men concerned about their violent behaviour toward their partners and children.

Here is the link to FearIsNotLove: <https://www.calgarywomensshelter.com/index.php/about/newsletters-publications-and-videos>

Insight Exchange, Australia

The Response-Based Practice group have been working closely with Sal Dennis and "and the Insight Exchange Team for several years. (Insight Exchange has been established, developed and is governed by Domestic Violence Service Management (DVSM) a registered charity (ABN 26 165 400 635)). Sal and colleagues have produced a set of excellent resources that can be viewed or obtained from Insight Exchange (<https://www.insightexchange.net>).

"Insight Exchange centres on the expertise of people with lived experience of domestic and family violence and gives voice to these experiences. Insight Exchange is designed to inform and strengthen social, service and systemic responses to domestic and family violence." We highly recommend these and other resources for survivors and other professionals, especially anyone wanting to learn more about Response-Based Practice.

The resources contain several presentations by members of the Response-Based Practice group and texts/links for survivors and workers in the various sectors addressing domestic and family violence. For instance, "Follow My Lead" is written from the point of view of survivors who are working to obtain the best possible responses from the various institutions that respond to cases of violence. "Voices of Insight" is a collection of first-person accounts from survivors, obtained through close collaboration with Insight Exchange staff, that highlights their ever-present resistance to domestic and family violence.

Insight Exchange published a series of women's first-person accounts of their experiences of police responses. Here is the link: <https://www.insightexchange.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Insight-Exchange-Police-Responses-Examples-for-reflection.pdf>

Liard Aboriginal Women's Society (LAWS)

The Liard Aboriginal Women's Society (LAWS) is an independent society located on Kaska Dena homeland on the land now known as southeastern Yukon, southwestern Northwest Territories, and northeastern British Columbia. The LAWS office is in Watson Lake, Yukon, but the organization serves all Kaska Dena communities. Founded by Ann Maje Raider and her Kaska sisters in 2000, LAWS has become a leader in working to end violence and uphold the inherent human rights of Kaska Dena and all Indigenous women. LAWS has been instrumental in the development of response-based practice for more than 20 years, thanks to the teaching and support of Kaska Dena women and, especially, elders.

In 2018, LAWS launched two new initiatives to further their culturally-based and community focused work in violence prevention, funded by Women and Gender Equality (WAGE) and Yukon Government Women's Directorate. The "Kaska Advocates Training Program" brings together Kaska elders with younger women training as Advocates to prevent and address violence on a number of levels. "Youth for Dignity" brings together elders and youth to work together to prevent sexualized violence, drawing on Kaska cultural knowledge and practices. Some of the core ideas of Response-Based Practice form part of the 'curriculum' for both initiatives.

The booklet, "Upholding Dignity & Justice: Kaska Advocates Training 2019 – 2020", produced for LAWS by Beringia Consulting, illustrates the bringing together of Response-Based Practice and Kaska cultural teachings. It is titled in Kaska, "Gūdené' K'éh Gūs'ānī: Dene 'A Nezen Gedi' G ūtīe Sū'aj dege". In English, "Following Our Peoples' Way: Building a Circle of Dignity and Justice". The booklet and much more information about the work of LAWS can be obtained from the LAWS website: <http://www.liardaboriginalwomen.ca>

Unizon: "I said I had a bad dream."

Unizon (see below) produced an excellent short DVD featuring excerpts of interviews between Lotta Molander and several children who came to women's shelters with their mothers after violence by their fathers. Lotta Molander is highly respected for her direct and friendly interviewing style that brings forward children's responses and resistance to violence and related challenges. We highly recommend the DVD as a tool for training professionals who interview children. It is in Swedish with English subtitles and can be obtained directly from Unizon.

"Unizon is an umbrella organization representing over 130 Swedish women's shelters, young women's empowerment centres and other support services that work together for a gender equal society free from violence. [M]ember organizations provide help and support for women, young people and children subjected to different forms of violence, and actively work with violence prevention. [M]embers also provide treatment for perpetrators of violence."
https://www.work-with-perpetrators.eu/fileadmin/WWP_Network/redakteure/National_Reports_2016/Sweden-Report-2016.pdf

“Reality Check”: Talita and Meghan Donovan

“Reality Check” is a Swedish initiative from the organization, Talita, promoting young people’s sexual health and preventing men’s violence against women and children. The document “10 Myths About Porn”, produced as part of the initiative, “aims to increase young people’s knowledge about the harms of pornography”. Lesson plans and practical tools are also available to accompany the document. These include short documentary films, written materials, and digital tools. It is intended for youth and professionals working with youth but is written in plain language and can be a valuable resource for anyone, including parents and all professionals working to address violence. More information can be obtained at realitycheck@talita.se

PRACTICE-BASED EVIDENCE AND THE REALITY OF RESISTANCE: SELECTED PROJECTS AND APPLICATIONS

Together for Justice

Together for Justice (T4J): We worked with RCMP Yukon and Indigenous women’s groups over a 2-year period, including command in all meetings, to improve RCMP responses to Indigenous people in cases of violence. This resulted in improved relations, better practice on the ground, a joint protocol between groups, better supervisions of RCMP members by RCMP members. Formal Evaluations showed these and other very positive outcomes. This project was selected by the United Nations as a model project for improving state responses to Indigenous peoples in cases of violence. Reports/publications are available on request.

Youth for Safety and Justice

Youth for Safety and Justice (Y4SJ). Building on the success of T4J, we lead the development of a sexual assault prevention program, which included RCMP participation, among Indigenous and non-Indigenous adolescents in Watson Lake, Yukon. Formal evaluations show highly positive outcomes. The project received a prestigious North American award for Innovative Engagement of Indigenous Youth. Reports/publications are available on request.

Women’s Advocates Program

With federal government funding for a 5 year period and based on the success of the “Together for Justice” and “Youth for Safety and Justice” projects, the Liard Aboriginal Women’s Society (LAWS) is providing a Kaska community development initiative to train Indigenous women to act as advocates in cases of interpersonal violence. The program combines Dena A’Nazen (Kaska ethics and worldview) with Response-Based Practice.

Youth for Dignity

With federal government funding for a 5 year period and based on the success of “Youth for Safety and Justice” project, the Liard Aboriginal Women’s Society (LAWS) is providing a program for youth on sexualized assault prevention, cultural safety, community development, and safety education on a community-wide basis.

Dignity-Driven Practice

The child protection authority in New South Wales (NSW) Australia has adopted the core tenets and methods of Response-Based Practice for its reformed child protection practice framework, under the leadership of the Senior Practitioner, Kate Alexander, whose doctoral research shows the effectiveness of Response-Based Practice in child protection contexts.

Ombudsman of WA

The Ombudsman of West Australia incorporate response-based analysis of interpersonal violence into 2015) review of family and domestic violence fatalities. The study shows how a more comprehensive and contextual analysis can better identify the need for key institutional reforms.

Ombudsman of West Australia. (2015). Investigation into issues associated with violence restraining orders and their relationship with family and domestic violence fatalities, Ombudsman Western Australia. <http://www.ombudsman.wa.gov.au/Publications/Documents/reports/FDVROs/FDVRO-Investigation-Report-191115.pdf>

Islands of Safety

Cathy Richardson and Allan Wade received funding from the Law Foundation of B.C. to work with urban (“off reserve”) Indigenous families who were involved with child protective authorities due to DFV. The project was independently evaluated and received an award from the Ministry of Children and Family Development for “Innovative Practice”.

Richardson, C., & Wade, A. (2010). Islands of safety: Restoring dignity in violence- Prevention work with indigenous families. *First Peoples Child & Family Review*, 5(1), 137-145. Retrieved from <http://journals.sfu.ca.ezproxy.massey.ac.nz/fpcfrr/index.php/FPCFR/article/view/182>

Richardson, C. & Wade, A. (2013). Creating islands of safety: Contesting failure to protect and mother-blaming in cases of paternal violence against children and mothers. In S. Strega, J. Krane, S. Lapierre, & C. Richardson (Eds.), *Failure to Protect; Moving Beyond Gendered Responses* (pp. 146-186): Nova Scotia, Canada: Fernwood.

Sarah Knight (2012))

Sarah Knight (2012) explored the use of the “language of responses” in Response-Based Practice in women’s experience in supportive therapy groups. Titled, “Affirming Love: Co-authoring Empowering Stories of Healthy Intimacy after Childhood Sexual Abuse”, the thesis can be obtained from the University of Calgary. Knight found that “the Response-Based discourse can be offered as a supplementary alternative to the discourse of effects through purposeful questions that recognize participants’ pre- existing abilities”.

Jenn Ronald (2012)

Jenn Ronald interviewed 8 women who had the experience of Response-Based Practice for the first time, after attending therapy conducted in other frameworks. Ronald concluded, “Participants had only positive things to say about this approach regardless of their counselling experience”. One participant said, “My biggest ah-ha moment was the importance of focusing on actions and strengths, on the positive. It’s not about all the negative, or repeating the story, what matters is looking at the how – how have I coped, how have I healed, how can I keep healing”. Ronald said, “It was exciting for me to hear from the participants how they felt this approach positively contributed to their wellbeing”.

Kristen Sheridan (2013)

In Ballarat, Australia, Kristen Sheridan (2013) designed and implemented a group support and counselling program with women who had lived with and separated from violent male partners. Prior to introducing Response-Based Practice, the groups had been run on a psychoeducational model. The women were given information about the effects and impacts of violence, the cycle theory of violence, the importance of boundaries and decision-making, and so on. In the Response-Based group, the women were engaged in conversation about their responses and forms of ever-present resistance, the strategies used by the respective perpetrators in suppressing those forms of resistance, and the means by which their children also responded to, and resisted, the violence.

All women evaluated the group highly positively and reported three main outcomes. First, they had not previously noticed or discussed their own resistance to the violence and felt much stronger for doing so. Second, they came to see that their partner’s violence behaviour was not aimless or out of control, but aimed deliberately at suppressing their resistance and, at times, maximizing the humiliation. Finally, they saw that their children too had been resisting the violence. This provided a new way to understand their children’s behaviour and helped improve their relationships with their children.

Jess Reedy (2018)

Jess Reedy (2018) conducted an in-depth study of women’s discourses and positioning “before and after” the introduction of Response-Based Practice, in a women’s shelter in Aotearoa, New Zealand. It is titled: “Women’s Refuge Clients’ Experiences of Social Responses to Domestic

Violence Including Interventions Informed by Response-Based Practice” and is available from Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand.

Reedy wrote:

“The current research involved developing, delivering, and evaluating a RBP group intervention at Women’s Refuge. Evaluation privileged women’s accounts of the intervention and entailed comparing discourses clients utilised to inform their understandings of violence and position themselves before and after Group participation. Implications of clients’ positioning for enabling or constraining their safety and dignity are also considered.

“The project’s design used feminist collaborative action research principles, and thematic analysis in the first study to develop the intervention. Five advocates were engaged in meetings, semi-structured interviews, document reviews, and focus groups. The second study used discourse analysis of women’s pre- and post- intervention accounts of their domestic violence experiences and social responses to them. Four clients engaged in semi-structured interviews. Before Group participation, discourses that minimised and mutualised violence predominated, positioning victims as instrumental in provoking and preventing violence, and victims and perpetrators as pathological. Language often represented perpetrators’ violence as accidental/uncontrollable and concealed victim resistance. Narratives engaged traditional gender discourses of men’s dominance, encompassing coercive control and violence, and women’s submission and self-sacrifice, as normative. Women’s entrapment by victim-blaming discourses alongside threats of poverty and condemnation from perpetrators, families, church and social agencies was evident.

Following Group participation, resistance discourses prevailed. Clients challenged their positioning as pathological or blameworthy and re-positioned themselves as sensible, competent women. Group content and processes were constituted as privileging and legitimating women’s unarticulated knowledge of how concealing violence, perpetrator responsibility and gendered social power relations diminish victims’ safety. Narratives of domestic violence evinced increased recognition of patterns of coercive control, entrapment and other non-assaultive violence intersecting with harmful social responses and structural violence. Thus, the Group provided a safe and dignifying social and physical space for clients to collectively reconsider their responses to violence; and discover, discuss, and critique discursive practices that reveal violence, perpetrator responsibility, and victim resistances.” (p. xi)

Earlier Research

These studies stand on their own. They also align with a number of earlier studies that have been influential in the development of Response-Based Practice. One of the most important examples, in our view, is *Surviving Sexual Violence* (1988), by Liz Kelly. This established research shows that there is a long line of high-quality work on resistance to violence that has been effectively side-lined in favour of pathology-oriented frameworks that portray women as passive and dysfunctional.

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

Following is a short list of publications that comprise part of the “evidence-base” for the core tenets of Response-Based Practice, also known sometimes as dignity-driven practice. The core tenets of RBP are supported by practice-based evidence and in diverse and “independent” literary forms (e.g., memoir and autobiography, biography, social realist fiction, poetry, sociology and micro-sociology, anthropology, history, psychiatry, psychology, social work, women’s studies, political essays, journalism, museum displays, reports and assessments).

These sources are “independent” in the sense that they pre-exist (in many cases) and were written with no knowledge of, or connection to, the sets of methods and ideas we now call “Response-Based Practice”. In all forms of practice, our goal is to understand the “facts on the ground”, actions and events given meaning in context, as much as possible “on their own terms”, with a minimum of abstraction and theory.

From this point of view, the core tenets of Response-Based Practice (i.e., people are best understood as social actors, dignity is central to human life, resistance is an ever-present response to violence, violence is deliberate, language is used deliberately and inadvertently to conceal or reveal violence, violence is unilateral) should be evident “independently” in diverse literary forms AND in the first person accounts developed in conversations with people who have been victimized or experienced violence as well as people who have committed violence. The publications cited below related directly to one or more of the core tenets of Response-Based Practice and form an important part of the “theory” or “backdrop of ideas” that we draw on daily.

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Ballarat Women’s Programme. (2013). *Women for Safety and Justice: A facilitated support group for women who have been victims of violence*. Ballarat, Australia: Ballarat Community Health/ WRISC Family Support.

Bratt, W. (2015, January 14). Your emotions aren’t a problem [Blog]. Retrieved from <http://www.willbrattcounselling.com/blog-creating-difference/2015/1/12/your-emotions-aren’t-a-problem>

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Donovan, A., Dubrasky, D., Sorensen, S., Corser, G. (2019). Poetic License to Write Resistance: Women Resisting IPV Through Poetry. *Journal of Critical and Radical Social Work*. Forthcoming.

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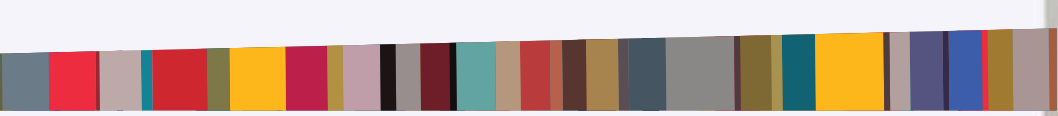
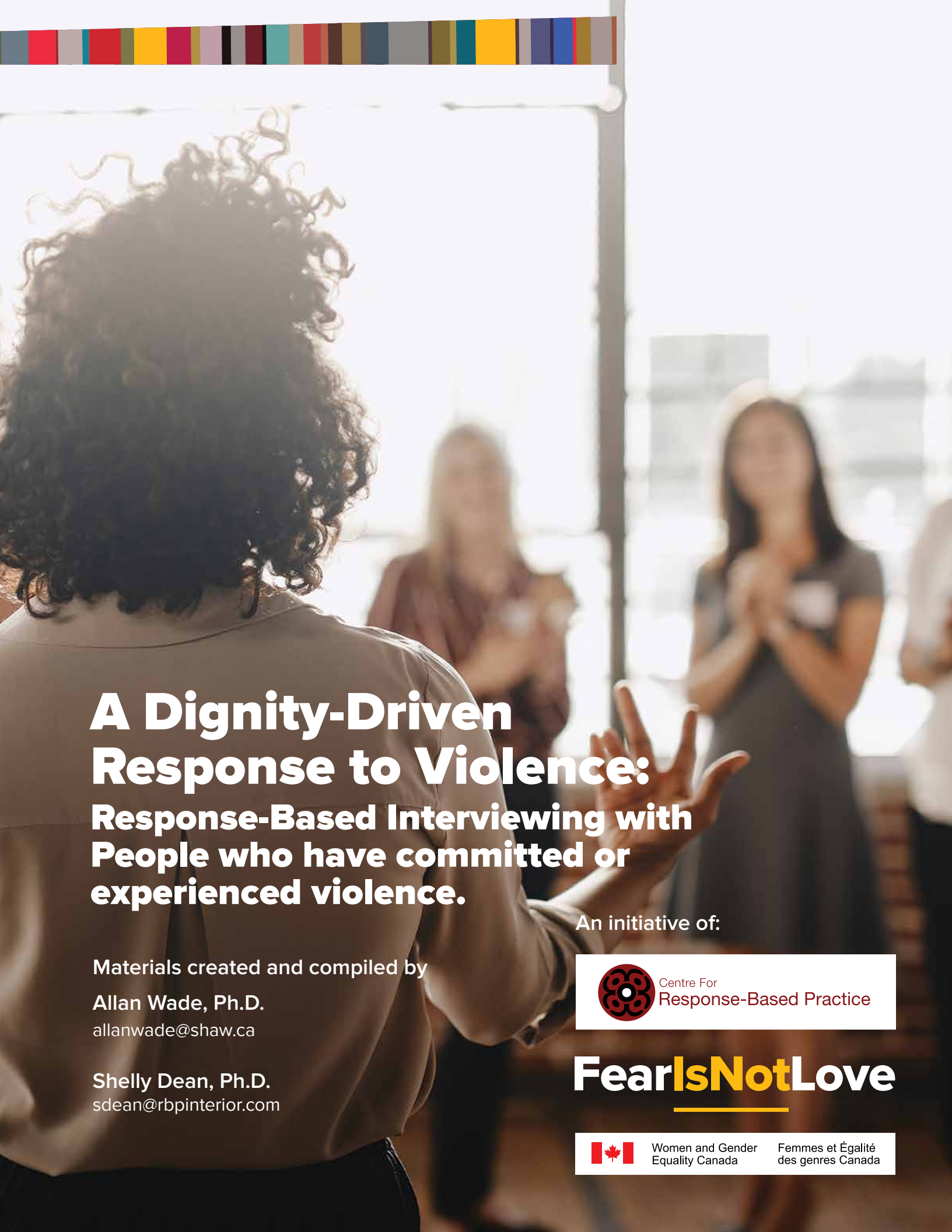
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For information on Response Based Practice visit

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A Dignity-Driven Response to Violence: Response-Based Interviewing with People who have committed or experienced violence.

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