

Performing respect: Using enactments in group work with men who have abused\*.

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## Abstract

This article describes an approach to working with groups of men who have abused which uses dramatic enactments of conversational exchanges to approximate the conflictive interactions with partners that precipitated the referrals to the group. The approach is informed by the Domestic Abuse Intervention Program in Duluth Minnesota, but differs in significant ways. Rather than placing a primary emphasis on the men as having an intent to wield power and control, the group facilitators assume *multiple* intentions. Drawing on Bateson's notion of restraints, intentions to interact in nonviolent ways are actively sought out, but are understood as restrained by various factors regarded as separate from the men in the narrative therapy tradition of externalizing. After establishing the theoretical context of the discussion, the article depicts the various uses of the dramatic enactments that help to provide a bridge between talking in abstract terms about violence and actively changing interactional patterns in situ with their partners.

*“Let us, we and they, create it first in the theatre, in fiction, to be better prepared to create it outside afterward, to extrapolate into our real life.”*

(Augusta Boal, 2002, p. 17)

This article grew out of our<sup>1</sup> attempts to devise creative ways to support men to carry the changes they *speak about* in group out into their intimate relationships. We facilitate groups of up to 30 men involved in “domestic abuse”. Our work with improvised enactments<sup>2</sup> of conversational exchanges between men and their partners has been very helpful in promoting engagement in such large gatherings. But we have also found the enactments to be useful links between talk and action.

Enactments, the recruitment of family members in session to engage in guided dialogue with each other around problem issues, have a long history in family therapy starting with Minuchin’s seminal work (1974). More recent work suggests their utility for generating meaningful moments and changes in problematic patterns in families (Fellenberg, 2004). Nichols and Fellenberg (2002) demonstrate the complexity of enactments, as well as the diversity of ways in which they are used by experienced practitioners. While we use the term “enactments” here, they differ from those we have cited here in that we do not work with families present in the room, but instead invite the group participants to witness and engage in *roleplays* of exchanges between the men and their partners. Rehearsals for “real life” have been used for a long time in a variety of therapeutic contexts. They are common to assertiveness training, of course (Fodor & Collier, 2001), but also utilized in a wide range of practice contexts (cf. Blumer & McNamara, 1987). In effect, the work we are describing here involves the use of roleplays both as a vehicle for group engagement and as a tool for identifying and performing alternate responses in emotionally volatile encounters.

As we shall discuss in detail here, our work with this variety of enactments has highlighted in a dramatic manner the difference between having a respectful intention and the actual *practice* of respectful interactions with one's partner. In our groups, respectful intentions are often abstractly stated--with apparent sincerity, but far from the infinitely complex, mine-strewn realm of face-to-face dialogue. Those conversations with their partners are places where the men too frequently encounter failure, despite honorable intentions. The contrite male partner sets out to take responsibility for a word or action but discovers to his bafflement that the conversation takes an unexpected turn, and he ends up re-perpetrating the abuse for which he is attempting to apologize. Trust and confidence erode further, and the quest for respect and nonviolence becomes ever more remote.

Our work has led us to some useful practices for moving from expressions of intentions in discussion about inter-partner conflict, to the performance of those intentions in face to face encounters with partners. Among those ideas are some distinctions between varieties of meaning-making as performance. It has become commonplace to refer to speech as the "performance of meaning" (cf. Fuller & Strong, 2001; Wade, 1996; White & Epston, 1990). We believe the phrase helps to emphasize that talk is itself action, that we do things with words, as Austin (1965) put it. But the "thing" a man does when he talks about acting differently with his partner is not the same "thing" as the acting itself. The *expression of non-violent intent* and the *practice of a non-violent exchange with one's partner* are two different performances of meaning. In this article we will share some practices we have been developing which help men to build a bridge between pro-respect statements and the actual performance of respect in

intimate relationships. We will begin by identifying the context of our work, and then laying out some theoretical ideas that inform us. Primary among these are the separation of person from problem, and the distinction between different modes of performing meaning—some of which are closer approximations of the conversations the men have with their partners. This will be followed by some examples of practice and some concluding remarks.

### Context of the Work

Our work with men who have used violence against their partners is based out of the New Directions program in Ottawa, Ontario. The overall goal of the program is to promote the safety of women by enabling men to eliminate their abusive and controlling behaviour in a manner that is accountable to the abused women (cf. Holmes & Lundy , 1990). New Directions is a 16-week program that follows the standards established by the Ontario Ministry of the Attorney General and is contracted to provide education and counselling to individuals referred to the program as a result of their involvement with the criminal justice system. The program also provides support and assistance to their partners. In addition, we offer a 12 week program for voluntary clients and provide services for men involved in same-sex relationships and women who have used abusive behaviour in a relationship with a spouse or partner. All work is conducted in groups and the court mandated component can start with a many as 30-35 men.

The majority of the men are white and of European descent; however there is a mixed demographic and cultural differences in meaning making around what we identify as “abuse” become the subject of discussion when we encounter these in our group conversations. Of the contributors to this article, David Paré and Jeff Bondy identify

themselves as white Canadians of European descent while Charu Malhotra self-identifies as bi-cultural in that her family is of East Indian origin but she was born and raised in Canada.

### A Multi-Storied View

Our approach to group work with men is multi-storied. It is significantly informed by the Domestic Abuse Intervention Program (DAIP) in Duluth, Minnesota (Paymar, 1999; Pence & Paymar, 1993; Pence and Sheppard, 2000), whose feminist analysis situates violence within the politics of power. We see the men's groups not as a context for "treatment" of individual psychological deficits, but rather as a forum where men can reclaim responsibility for their violent actions amongst a community of witnesses. However we also see some significant divergences from DAIP theory and practice in our work. We have adopted a more invitational facilitation stance over time under the influence of narrative ideas and practices (White & Epston, 1990), and the work of Alan Jenkins (1990).

Like the DAIP, a narrative approach frames violence as occurring in the context of particular discourses—gender discourse related to power and entitlement, for example (cf. Freedman and Combs, 2002). However, we deliberately modify our speaking and thinking practices--both how we talk *to and about* the men regarding abuse, and also how we *conceptualize* the relationship between the men and abuse. In this we are informed by the conversational practice of externalizing (Tomm, 1989; Freedman & Combs, 1996; White, 1984; White & Epston, 1990). Externalizing is the linguistic practice of separating persons from problems, sometimes viewed as the hallmark of narrative practice. The mechanics of this separation will become evident as this article unfolds. In

our view, externalization is an ethical stance (Paré & Lysack, 2004) in that it involves the deliberate choice to avoid the widespread professional practice of “totalizing” persons—that is, of defining persons in terms of the problems with which they are dealing. It is a way of viewing persons and problems that manifests in our interactional styles regardless of whether we use the formal linguistic practice of externalizing or not. By speaking and thinking in this manner, we see ourselves as accountable to the other’s non-abusive self, as it were. We also find externalizing has great pragmatic benefits: by counteracting the tendency to collapse problem with identity, we avoid regarding the men as “abusers”—a depiction we feel is unhelpful because it fails to promote hope, and can structure relationships around confrontation rather than collaboration.

Instead, an externalizing mindset allows us to render visible intentions and actions which stand outside the dominant story of violence and abuse that is the *raison d’être* of the men’s groups. This is accomplished through the focus of our curiosity and questions, about which we will say more later. Externalizing makes room for noticing what Weingarten (1998) calls the “small and ordinary moments” that stand outside the abuse story. This opens space for hearing the full breadth of “the multiple, complex, and often contradictory stories men tell about their abusive behavior” (Augusta-Scott, 2003, p. 204).

We experience the men as having multiple intentions. In some cases, they may indicate intentions to wield power and control—issues identified by the DAIP model<sup>2</sup>. But we avoid an either/or stance and also keep our ears alert for contrasting purposes such as the intention for respect or at least non-conflictive relationships. These intentions can easily be overlooked by group facilitators and the men themselves. We view these latter

intentions as key in the movement towards nonviolent relationships. However, we also agree with Augusta-Scott (2003) that “just because a man *says* he wants love, respect, and equality in a relationship [does not mean] that he has an immediate and profound understanding of these ideas and practices” (p. 206). This brings us back to the distinction between the *expression* and the *enactment* of respect. But before exploring that distinction, we would like to share one more useful concept—the notion of restraints versus causes in making sense of abusive actions.

#### Obstacles to respect and nonviolence

Borrowing from Gregory Bateson (1972/1987) White (1986) and Jenkins (1990) have written about how the notion of restraints offers an alternative to causality in the depiction of human action. A restraint is a deterrent to action, but not a *cause* of action. Dominant cultural discourses can be seen as restraints: for example the notion that a “real man” need never apologize restrains a man from taking responsibility, but is not seen as the cause of hurtful behavior.

Jenkins (1990) has developed a fine-grained analysis of these ideas in his work with men and boys who abuse. Rather than asking “what caused a man to abuse?”, he asks what is stopping him “from taking responsibility to relate respectfully, sensitively, and equitably with his wife?” (p. 32). The former question risks positioning the man as an abuser whose personality has been fashioned by compelling circumstances (childhood abuse is a frequent culprit). We find the latter question no less valid but more useful: it positions the man as a personal agent hindered in the effort to be cooperative, collaborative, respectful, etc. The previously cited notion of multiple intentions leads us to reject the dichotomous (Augusta-Scott, 2004) question “But did he mean to abuse or



*not?*”. Instead, we assume that intentions for nonviolence exist *alongside* those for violence<sup>3</sup>. This orients us to expressions of nonviolent intent, without needing to challenge their “truth”. We are aware that the men in the groups are all at different places in regard to revising their relational patterns; however, as Jenkins (1990) points out, the “man can gradually discover and develop his own integrity and responsibility, if invited to engage in this process” (p. 72).

We therefore prefer to watch and listen for restraints, and to understand them as obstacles along the path to a respectful, nonviolent relationship. The obstacles are what Wirtz and Schweitzer (2003) call “enemies of responsibility” (p. 194) and may include any of a variety of behaviors related to power and control described by Pence & Paymar (1993). The men are often stymied by feelings (rage or jealousy), thoughts (about being right, about being treated unfairly), ideas (a man should never let his woman talk to him that way, anger is the expression of romantic passion), external stressors (poverty, unemployment, racism), and so on. Viewed this way, the desire for power and/or control itself is understood as another significant *obstacle* to relational harmony, rather than the *cause* of the men’s behaviour. Instead of trying to convince the men that this is their “real motive”, we invite them, when it appears relevant, to become curious about how that desire sabotages their respectful intentions.

In conversations with students and practitioners new to externalizing, we often encounter the observation that the separating out of what we call obstacles threatens to deny responsibility to the men. On the contrary, we believe it consolidates it in a couple of important ways. For one, it allows us to collaborate with them in exploring alternative paths to nonviolence, whereas a confrontational stance would duplicate a relational

pattern in which we (like their partners) carry the burden of ensuring their accountability (Fisher, 2004; Jenkins, 1990). Secondly, the focus on external obstacles helps us make sense of the men's behavior as constrained rather than caused, so that the group does not have to take on the daunting task of collective personality restructuring. It is a tall order to change one's essential being, but a much more do-able task to overcome or circumvent obstacles to respectful interaction.

#### The performance of nonviolence

The men's groups have a clear mandate—to support men in revising their relationship practices with their partners beyond the group setting. It is important to remind ourselves that, as Strong and Tomm (2004) put it, “it is one thing to talk new understandings and ways of going on into being in the therapeutic context, but for them to be used and of value beyond that context is another matter” (p. 11). While the group conversations promote movement in that direction, the changes ultimately being sought can never be manifest in the room, because the men's partners are not present. In the absence of their partners, we our enacted exchanges may not have the emotional intensity that arises *in situ*, and in this respect, a key obstacle (intense anger or fear etc.) is missing in the roleplay. Nevertheless, we join with the men to use the group to approximate the lived experiences in which abusive actions arise. In that respect, some approximations are closer than others. Consider the variety of performances of meaning around respect by the men during the group sessions—some which are “about” the topic of exchanges with partners, while others are closer to approximations of those exchanges themselves:

- Talking about respect in abstract terms
- Talking about respect in relation to the specifics of one's own relationship
- Coaching group facilitators in the enactment of a respectful conversational exchange
- Coaching the same exchange based on one's own relationship

- Participating in an enacted conversation based on one's own relationship

All these variations of performed meaning have a role in the group process. However, we encourage a movement towards performances that are, to borrow from Geertz (1976), more experience-near—closer in content and mode to the specifics of the men's lives. By content we mean the details of the situations being reflected upon. We use the word "mode" here to distinguish between, for example, *talking about* respect to *doing respect* in an enactment. Getting involved in an enactment most resembles participating in a conversation with one's partner outside of the group context. It contributes to a movement from respect as an abstract aspiration to respect as a relational practice.

To stay true to one's intentions, reading cues from and coordinating talk with one's partner in a context that is frequently emotionally charged, is a highly subtle and complex practice. A glance or a shift in tone of voice often say far more than the words uttered, and demand a near-instantaneous response. As Bavelas and Coates (1992) point out, "there is no time to stop and think in conversation. To be socially skilful, it is both essential and usual to respond appropriately in micro time" (p. 304). This rich complexity that constitutes face-to-face dialogue is easy to overlook in conversations *about* conversations. As a result, we regularly hear accounts from the men about initiating exchanges with their partners (apologies are a common example) that are unexpectedly derailed early in the process. Having set out with honorable intentions, the men often conclude that the fault for the communication breakdown must lie with their partners. As a consequence, an attempt by the man at reconciliation becomes additional

cause for discouragement and bitterness, which in turn constrains him in consolidating his respectful intentions.

As Polkinghorne (1993) has pointed out, there is a difference between “knowing how” and “knowing that”, between “understanding *how* to, for example, ride a bicycle, [and] knowing *what* laws of nature allow the bicycle to remain upright.” (p. 151). This is like the distinction between knowing that respect reduces conflict in relationships and knowing how to practice it in relationship. In our experience, the former does not imply the latter: when they venture beyond the group room the men encounter real-life obstacles (a partner’s criticism, a feeling of defensiveness, a misunderstood gesture, etc.) not anticipated in advance.

By enacting exchanges with the men, we attempt to bring an approximation of those obstacles into the room, where the group can collectively reflect on them and pool suggestions about preventing them from sabotaging well intentioned conversations. The enactments are helpful for duplicating the verbal exchanges with partners that frequently evolve into abusive exchanges; however they are less effective at generating the volatile emotionality that accompanies them. Following the language we have adopted, this implies that it is more difficult to invite some of the obstacles (eg. intense triggering emotion) into the group room than others. In the next section we will describe the process we use in introducing and working with the enactments.

#### Bringing forth nonviolence

*The men have filed into the room, signed in for the evening, and taken their places in a circle of plastic chairs. In the middle of the circle there are two chairs, one of them occupied by a woman who, unannounced, begins to talk on a portable phone she is holding.*

*“I don’t know what I’m going to do. It was just like the last time. It started as a discussion about who would pick up the kids, but before long he was yelling and swearing and he pushed me against the wall.”*

*The audience to this enactment is absolutely still, drawn in by the unfolding drama. The room is dead silent. At this point, a man enters the circle and stands over the woman, who quickly signs off from her call and puts the phone down.*

*“Who were you talking to, Charu?”*

*“The babysitter.”*

*“Don’t give me that BS. Who the hell was it?”*

*“Jeff, I don’t want to talk about it. I have a right to talk on the phone...”*

*The man accuses his wife of telling family secrets to her sister and the conversation escalates until he grabs the phone and throws it to the floor. The man and woman are silent for a moment as all sit with the intensity of the drama. They then turn to the audience and check in on their experience of what they have just witnessed.*

Improvised enactments like this one are pre-planned, but not scripted, by the facilitators. The content derives from anecdotal accounts supplied by the men’s partners in a partner support group, as well as the men themselves in their descriptions of their own experience. When playing the parts of men and their partners, we gravitate towards duplicating the sort of emotional escalation that characterizes these exchanges so that the men can witness and participate in enactments that are close to their experience.

Different “scenes” are used to illustrate particular topics that arise in the groups such as jealousy and apologies. Others are designed to enact patterns of relating outlined by Pence & Paymar (1993): intimidation; emotional abuse; isolation; minimizing, denying and blaming; using children; male privilege; economic abuse; and coercion and threats.

The choice of which themes to explore on which weeks, and which scenes to enact during a session, is partly influenced by the flow of the group process. Each group is unique and we find that imposing a pre-determined template constrains us in exploiting many useful opportunities that arise spontaneously from the group process. Some groups (as in the example above) start with a scene which tends to quickly focus the group

energy and provides a concrete reference point for the evening's work. Other scenes are introduced part way through the meeting—sometimes in response to particular issues which arise in the course of discussions.

The intent of the enactments is to demonstrate relational challenges without providing “solutions” to those challenges. Our concern is that when we privilege the facilitators’ knowledges over those of the men, “our depth becomes their shallowness” (Nichterlein and Morss, 1999). If the groups serve a pedagogical function, they are rarely didactic in mode of presentation, not primarily founded on what Sfard (1998) describes as an acquisition metaphor for knowledge (individual minds as vessels to be filled). Instead, we lean towards a participatory (Sfard, 1998) form of learning, aiming both to uncover pre-existing knowledges and to construct new ones in concert with the men.

Rather than seeking to emphasize the ways in which the enactments demonstrate a man’s intentions to seize power and control, we are curious about identifying the obstacles to respectful interaction that may be present in the exchanges. And rather than to primarily educate the men by pointing to those obstacles, we invite forward their own reflections on them. In other words, along with the assumption of multiple intentions, we hold the assumption of *multiple knowledges*. We assume that while the men may know how to be abusive, they also know how to be respectful. However we acknowledge that those knowledges may be obscured by (for example) dominant stories of abuse and dominant ideas about entitlement. The facilitator’s role is to mine the men’s collective experience, with the expectation that the men have a wide range of insights to contribute to the quest for nonviolent relationships. In debriefing enactments, these come forward

and become the basis for critiquing enacted exchanges or making suggestions for achieving some relational goal such as the taking of responsibility for a wrongdoing.

Vygotsky (1986) wrote about how developmental leaps are made by constructing new thoughts or actions with the help of “scaffolding” afforded by another. White (2001) has applied this metaphor to therapeutic conversations: meanings which may be difficult to perceive or actualize in isolation emerge through dialogue. In capturing this bridging to new understandings, Vygotsky (1986) said that which “is absolutely impossible for one person....becomes a [doable] reality for two” (p. 256). We find the metaphor of scaffolding helpful in explaining the collective movement towards nonviolence that occurs in groups. The linguistic scaffolding we supply is primarily in the form of questions which help, for example, to lay bare the connection between certain ideas and relationship practices, both abusive and respectful. We will say more about the use of questions below.

As we have been emphasizing here, the movement towards nonviolence in the groups can be actualized in more than *talk about talk*. When the men join in suggesting and enacting alternative approaches to the scenarios played out in the room, they are collectively constructing a scaffold for new *action*. Although it never unfolds in a linear manner, the processing of enacted scenarios therefore moves in the direction below:

The men comment on and critique an enactment performed by the facilitators *after* the enactment is over → The men “coach” the facilitator by suggesting alternate responses to him *while* he is playing the man in an enactment → One of the men replaces the facilitator during an enactment (ie. assumes the role of the man and resumes the enactment).

This is the movement of mode we described towards performing respect (versus speaking about it in more general terms). When the men are receptive to the idea, we also refashion these discussions and enactments around the specifics of their own lives. The process bears some interesting similarities to Boal's (1992) Forum Theatre format, a variety of what he calls Theatre of the Oppressed (1979). In Forum Theatre, audience members witness the unfolding of a scene in which someone playing one of their members is faced with oppressive practices (eg. by a public official, employer, patriarchal family member, etc.). Audience members are invited to call "stop!" at any time and to take the stage in place of the oppressed character, performing alternate responses in defiance of the oppression.

Boal draws a clear distinction between what happens when the actors who are not members of the audience community play out the scene and when audience members, who he calls "spect-actors", take up the role. He says when people watch someone not of the community represent their lives, they experience a sort of catharsis—a recognition of the familiar with an accompanying emotional response. But when the actor is *one of them*, it gives rise to a far more compelling process because it is a sort of self-liberatory act initiated by the oppressed people themselves: "We should depart from the theatre galvanized with our desire and our decision to bring about change for that which is unfair and oppressive" (p.25).

When the men in effect announce "stop" during an enactment and occupy the seat of a facilitator faring poorly in his efforts to relate respectfully to his partner, they assume the role of spect-actors. In externalizing terms, they are challenging violence by attempting to devise a new response to the obstacle to respect which they are witnessing.



Other men can actively participate in this process not only by coaching, but by taking on additional roles. For instance, one man may assume the voice of jealousy, whispering “she’s cheating on you”, while a third might find words for a responding voice (“she has a right to have male friends, just as you have a right to have female friends”). This involvement of the men galvanizes the group, who become actively involved in the drama unfolding before them.

The facilitation process unfolds almost exclusively through asking the men for their ideas and suggestions. As Karl Tomm (1987) iii has said, statements set forth, while questions bring forth. Of course our questions are carefully considered and we have a role in what emerges; but we find that the men are more invested in the process when we invite their input rather than filling our time with didactic presentation. Despite some early reservations about loosening our grip on the pedagogical structure, we have been struck by the men’s earnest efforts to seek solutions to violence in their relationships. The thoughtfulness and nuance of their reflections supports us in relinquishing “teacher mode” in favour of a more invitational stance. In the next section we will provide examples of some of the questions we use to invite the men’s input in response to enactments.

#### Curiosity and questions

Questions are of course an important feature of any group process: our intention here is to provide a few illustrative examples of the way they can be used to engage the men in relation to the specifics of enactments. We will therefore omit discussion of many other possible lines of inquiry, including for example those which branch out into wider discussions of gender discourses in relation to parenting and intimate relationships. A

non-expert stance featuring an orientation of curiosity (Anderson, 1997), not-knowing (Anderson & Goolishian, 1990; Griffith & Griffith, 1992; Hoffman, 1991) or beginner's mind (Epston, 1993), is promoted in a variety of therapeutic approaches which inform our work. Many of the following question forms derive from narrative therapy, which has been highly generative of ideas for systematic therapeutic engagement from a position of curiosity (cf. Freedman & Combs, 1993; Jenkins, 1990; White & Epston, 1990).

### Identifying Obstacles

These questions deliberate seek out language that can be used to externalize beliefs/actions/feelings etc. that are hindering attempts at nonviolent behavior. The obstacles named can be far reaching—from “traits” like “stubbornness” to ideas like “entitlement” to emotions like “anger” or “fear”.

*What’s getting in his way here? What’s tripping him up? What’s standing between him and a respectful exchange? Can you think of a word you could put to the wall he seems to be running into?*

### Deconstructing Beliefs

Questions which explore the assumptions and beliefs underlying actions help to put cracks in the foundation of abusive interactions.

*What ideas about who’s responsible for what in this house are hovering behind this conversation? What kid of a man says “I’m sorry?”—what are some of the traditions in male culture about saying that you made a mistake or that you did wrong?*

### Voice of the Problem

Attributing a voice to the obstacle provides additional possibilities for enactments, as mentioned above, and also surfaces the discourses that promote violence.

*What's Jealousy (Fear, Anger, Control, etc.) saying to him here? What is Suspicion whispering in his ear? What idea seems to have a grip on him? What belief is directing him in this conversation?*

### Effects questions

Asking about the effects of abusive practices on the men's partners, children, relationship, and on themselves can help to clarify the stakes at hand. It also promotes accountability by inviting the men to anticipate the experience of others. The same questions forms can later be used to identify the effect of more successful approaches to the conversations.

*What do you think she's experiencing when he's talking to her like this? What tells you that—what do you notice in her voice, body language etc? Is this increasing or decreasing trust in this relationship? If the kids were witnessing this exchange, what lesson do you think they'd walk away with? Where does this conversation leave him once it's done? Where do you figure this relationship is headed, based on what you're seeing here?*

### Seeking Alternatives

When invited to do so, the men typically generate a wide range of ideas about alternate approaches to the exchanges they have witnessed. Once a familiarity has been established with the process, we invite those willing to take the seat and try them out.

*What could he have said here instead? What did he need to do differently? How would you avoid what just happened?*

### Naming Successes

When suggestions are taken up successfully by the facilitator or one of the men, it is helpful to identify them by name. This extends the group's vocabulary for speaking about respectful exchanges.

*What would you call what just happened? What quality did he bring to this exchange that was lacking before? What words would you use to describe that particular way of relating?*

### Themes and variations

We continue to explore these practices and find there are many possible variations, some of which we are working with and others yet to be tried. While we have described encapsulated enactments here that have distinct beginning and endings, we sometimes slide into role with the men in an impromptu fashion, taking the part of their partners in direct exchanges with them in response to their description of their specific situations. Hanec (2004) describes how the unannounced movement into a dramatic territory induces a sort of trance where judgment and defensiveness are suspended. We find that when the men take up these spontaneous exchanges, they often seem to lose their self-consciousness and become more engaged with the problem at hand. For many of the men, the enacted exchanges with facilitators from their seats in the circle are a less threatening alternative to assuming the chair in front of the group.

Accountability to partners and to women and children in general is of course a critical part of this work and we have only spoken of it in passing here. We have found interviews with the female facilitator as partner have proven useful accountability practices. We often precede these with speculation about what is going on for her, so the

men actively seek to anticipate her experience. But following up with an interview provides the opportunity to hear a highly detailed account of her experience and is frequently enlightening in its uncovering of unanticipated reactions.

We have been focused on partners in the discussion here and in our recent work with enactments. In the future we would like to extend these practices to the children—including creating enactments that involve children, and also interviews with the facilitators playing the children. Asking the men to play the partners is another powerful variation. Especially when the partner being played is their own, the process is much like an “internalized other interview” (Epston, 1993) and powerfully invites an empathetic appreciation of the others’ experience.

#### Some Last Thoughts on Attending to the Wider Context

We have found the enactments described here to be excellent vehicles for launching discussions as well as rehearsing for future conversations. And as a tool of engagement alone, they have proven extremely useful in promoting high levels of participation in large groups sometimes prone to apathy. We would like to remind readers, however, that this discussion is focused on one aspect of the highly complex activity that is group work with men who have abused. Our emphasis in this article has been on the bridge to action that we believe helps to prepare the men for the real life obstacles they are likely to face in attempting to actualize the nonviolent intentions that emerge through the group process. But do not mean to suggest that the changes that must happen to restore relationships are merely behavioral shifts. Instead, we view the process as something more like a hermeneutic circle, a cycling between parts and whole, between reflection and action (Kvale, 1996). As Slattery (2003) says, addressing abusive actions

and addressing relations with masculinity are not identical processes. To converse respectfully is one thing and to examine the wider context of power relations, gender discourses, and so on that frame these conversations is another. Without the latter process, there is the risk that the group merely becomes a place where the men learn to “get their way” more effectively—a concern often voiced by partners (Holmes & Lundy, 1990). We agree with Wirtz and Schweitzer (2003), that “if you want to say no to violence, you have to say no to patriarchal thinking” (p. 193). Enactments provide the opportunity to hang the examination of wider discourses on the specifics of interpersonal exchanges, but they do not replace those wider explorations.

## Notes

1. For simplicity sake we will use a collective “we” throughout, though the authors have different roles in the work being described. Jeff Bondy and Charu Malhotra facilitate groups at New Directions. David Paré has sat in on these groups, however he is not a member of the clinical team and his involvement has been focused on working with Jeff Bondy and Charu Malhotra to develop and articulate the ideas and practices expressed here.
2. We do not assume that violent intentions accompany violent actions but are open to that possibility if the men describe their experience in that fashion. In any case, we orient ourselves to expressions of intention and purpose that are aligned with respect and non-violence.

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