

Feminism and therapy: Mo(ve)ments in practice

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Abstract

This article has as its focus a practice of feminism shaped by an ethic of care, and concern for the politics of knowledge production. The context of this practice is a Women against Violence group programme. The article shows how particular moments of reflection by group members offer possibilities for therapist responses and movements for women's lives. To show these mo(ve)ments, the authors take a number of statements made by group participants in the context of a research evaluation of the programme. The statements are used to illustrate positionings offered the women by discourses of gender and feminism. Using these statements, the authors explore the possibilities for practices of feminism that work for collaborative, socially-just, knowledge making. The authors argue that this orientation might be understood as a dis-integrative feminism.

Prologue as dialogue

An imagined dialogue illustrates the stretch of available speaking positions that shape our counselling (and research and teaching) practices. Speakers of the dialogue are Kirsty, Jilly, and Moana, three women from Hamilton, New Zealand, who were participants in a Women against Violence programme and subsequent evaluation research; and Patti (Lather, 2007), a woman with an international reputation for poststructuralist feminist scholarship.

Patti: Whatever postmodern and poststructural mean these days, they are pervasive, elusive, and marked by a proliferation of conflicting definitions that refuse to settle into meaning. (Lather, 2007, p. 5)

Kirsty: I'm not a feminist in any way, shape or form. (Research participant, 2007)

Patti: ...the turn that matters in this moment of the post is away from abstract philosophising and toward concrete efforts to put the theory to work. (Lather, 2007, p. 157)

Jilly: It's their choice. Each individual woman's choice. 'Do I want to be a lesbian or do I want to go to another [male] partner and see how that goes [in terms of violence towards me]?' It's their own choice. (Research participant, 2007)

Patti: ...categories and norms both constrain AND enable. "We must follow a double path in politics," Butler (2001, p.23) urges, using familiar terms and categories but also "yielding our most fundamental categories" to what they rend unknown. This is the doubled(d) science I am calling for, a double task that works the necessary tensions that structure feminist methodology as fertile ground for the production of new practices. (Lather, 2007, p. 76)

Moana: They [Rachel and Jenny, the group leaders] don't say 'men'; they don't say 'women'. They'll say 'partners'. They don't make any subjective comments about gender. (Research participant, 2007)

Introduction

Our practice, as family workers (Jenny and Rachel) and as academics (Elmarie and Kathie) invites and requires us to find our ways on shifting grounds that offer multiple possibilities for feminist action. Moving between multiple accounts of feminism, we hold the possibility

that we will experience moments of “getting lost” (Lather, 2007). In this article we situate our preference for a therapeutic posture that navigates the tensions between socially just practice, regulatory requirements of anti-violence education, and a willingness to step away from certitude. Whilst we hold to the value that violence is not OK, we do not hold certitude about how other women should find their ways towards safety. Lather described the possibilities for research of “a scientific posture of getting lost as a way of knowing” (p.161): this article demonstrates a therapeutic practice, based in post structuralist theory and narrative therapy, that works alongside clients to co-construct knowledge. In narrative therapy terms this is co-research, a shared exploration of the “possibilities, limitations and possible dangers” of how things are in people’s lives (White, 2000, p.113).

Like Wright (2009), who discussed contemporary feminism and counselling, we have experiences of post-structuralist feminist theory stretching us, disconcerting us, speaking beyond the boundaries of our current understandings. At the same time we have experiences of encounters with women in our practices – perhaps women like Moana, Jilly, and Kirsty – that also stretch us, disconcert us, and speak beyond the boundaries of our current understandings. Positioned as not-understanding the particularities out of which other women speak, we are gifted possibilities of movement towards non-colonising encounters: “our inability to comprehend makes ethics possible” (Lather, 2007, p. 160). Not understanding, we are called to focus on how we respond to “encounter with difference” (Lather, p.160): “to use that encounter toward not being so sure of ourselves is ethics in postmodernism” (Lather, p.160).

Writing of being with others in “indeterminacy and response-ability” (p.160), Lather asks, “What kind of science is this?” The account we offer in this article explores the kind of group work practice that might emerge from an intention to be with others in a practice of “indeterminacy and response-ability”, in encounters that take us toward “not being so sure of ourselves”. Telling of some of our “concrete efforts to put theory to work” (Lather, 2007, p. 157), we demonstrate aspects of narrative therapy (White, 2007) as we engage in feminist practices.

The practice at the centre of this article is Rachel and Jenny’s leadership of groups for women who have experienced violence in partner relationships. Some participants are protected under the Domestic Violence Act (1995), some have been unsuccessful in getting protection, and others are still under way with application. Some have been required to attend by Child Youth and Family Services, and others refer themselves. Thus when Jenny and Rachel meet women for the first time, in individual assessment meetings, there are already a number of subject positions available to them: those whom the Act calls “protected persons”; or mothers who are seen to have failed to keep themselves and their children safe; or women with anger problems. Women in the group have in various ways been subject to discourses of women-blaming (Hydén, 2005).

From the outset, Jenny and Rachel’s engagements with each woman are intended to enact the idea that such encounters are rich with possibilities for living out an ethics in postmodernism, an ethics in feminism that might construct the encounter as an opportunity for therapists to be not so sure of ourselves.

Rachel and Jenny:

From our first meeting with individual women we are interested in the knowledges about violence already available to them. Thus, when we meet each woman we hold in mind both safety concerns and possibilities that might arise for noticing moves women have already made towards safety. In respect of the latter, we ask a woman what we think is a significant question about “turning points” in how she positions herself in relation

to violence. We ask with the assumption that, even if there by mandate, women have already taken actions – either in thinking or physical action – in relation to violence. In asking about turning points we are looking for the possibility of even the smallest movement towards safety – perhaps on behalf of children. This turning-point-question invites a woman to identify and revisit a moment when she brought about movement towards safety.

Rachel: Aroha, in wanting to join this group and take action against the violence, are there any moments or turning points towards safety that stand out for you?¹

Aroha: There was this time when I was talking to my friend and she said that what he was doing to me was not OK.

Rachel: What was it about her saying that it is not ok that supported you?

Aroha: I just thought, “I have to get out”.

Rachel: What difference did it make to have this new thought in your head? Was there something you ended up doing after that?

Aroha: I knew that if I told him that he had to go he would beat me up.

Rachel: Did that mean you had to go about doing things differently?

Aroha: I had to plan and pretend that nothing had changed.

Rachel: How did you do that?

Aroha: I made a list and kept it in my head. I did one thing every day from the list in my head.

A moment in time is established, and the movement is storied. Our experience is that small moments of resistance can be re-searched. These researched moments, and the steps and skills involved, might begin to weave a story of what some women call “taking back my life” from violence.

This storying approach to inquiry (White, 2007) is in contrast to processes we encountered in other versions of anti-violence work. For example, some approaches employ a questionnaire that catalogues the Duluth project’s power and control wheel: the assessment then follows the deficit terms of a pre-determined, problem-focussed list as the basis for the initial meeting and inquiry. The power and control wheel was produced out of women’s experience as part of the Duluth project (Domestic Abuse Intervention Programmes, 2008), and we consider it a valuable resource. It often provides women with words to name what has happened to them. However, difficulties arise when it is used in a normative rather than dialogic way. When the power and control wheel is used as a pre-determined deficit check list, only the dominant story of trauma is engaged with. We witnessed this approach having objectifying effects on women, assuming their lives fitted the check list, and requiring them to engage in a one-way assessment that did not invite new knowledge forward. When we used these check lists, we experienced them as separating women from the local knowledges about safety that they already had access to, and employed, in their lives. As group leaders we did not get to learn of the possibilities of the skills and steps of turning points, as we do through re-orienting our inquiry to co-research and story a woman’s lived experience.

A further feature of this first interview is that as leaders we both take part, using what narrative therapy calls “outsider witness practices” (White, 2007). At first, one of us interviews a woman about turning points, and one of us listens. If Rachel has had the

¹ All dialogues draw on our various experiences of working with women. Dialogues are also abbreviated: in practice the conversational steps may be smaller.

conversation with a woman, she then interviews Jenny in the presence of the woman, before inviting the woman to comment on what she found surprising or interesting as she listened to Jenny and Rachel's conversation. This outsider witness process offers the opportunity to make space for the woman to speak about very difficult things, in ways that leave room for hope. These stories offer different accounts than we might hear – for example, from the statutory agency – that a woman is taking no action on her own or her children's behalf. With us both present, employing processes of researching and witnessing, the possibility of richer alternative stories is heightened.

Repeatedly, we find that stories of action, stories of turning points, stories of hope held over time, do come forward – often to the surprise of women themselves. The smallest actions can have significance once they are storied. What was given no accord is taken out of obscurity, and in small ways practices of safety become visible through telling and storying. The steps of outsider witnessing follow White (2007):

Rachel: Jenny, what was one thing that stood out for you listening to Aroha, today?

Jenny: The idea of a list in her head. I was really taken by the idea of a list in her head. I was wondering about how she did that? What skills did it take to do that? What sort of guts did it take for Aroha to do something from the list every day?

Rachel: What do you think Aroha was valuing, that she did something every day from the list in her head?

Jenny: Well, Aroha did something from her list every day while pretending that nothing was changing. When I heard that I was thinking that Aroha was taking safety pretty seriously.

Rachel: Are there perhaps moments in your own life that you are connecting with as you listen to Aroha?

Jenny: I was thinking about how Aroha used the list to honour herself and her children and she is keeping that list so safe in her head. That had me thinking about safeguarding, and things in my life that I want to keep safe.

Rachel: Something about Aroha's story touched you about the importance of safeguarding? What difference will thinking about safeguarding make to you in the future?

Jenny: I had previously undervalued the list I kept in my head – I will remember to safeguard the list in my head and take care not to let it get undervalued.

Rachel then turns to Aroha, and asks her about her experience of this re-telling of her story, in the next phase of outsider witness practices.

Rachel: Was there anything that you noticed in particular or that surprised you when Jenny was speaking?

Aroha: The thing that surprised me was when Jenny said, "I was really taken by the idea of having a list in her head. I was wondering about how she did that." I had not ever thought of that as guts.

Rachel: What did you think when you heard Jenny use the word guts?

Aroha: I hadn't thought about it that way, but I can see it was guts that got me here, I just didn't think about it like that.

Rachel: How is it to think about it like that?

This is a very different practice than a check list with pre-determined categories. It takes us into uncertainties: we do not know where the conversational inquiry will lead. As we show above, it also takes us into the personal-professional landscapes of our own lives. We weave between acknowledging personal connections with our own lives in a

caring solidarity (Sevenhuijsen, 1998) with women, and the professional responsibilities we carry for responsible caring. We thus engage in professional-political-personal practice, while maintaining de-centred and influential positions as therapists (White, 2007).

Research for practice

Intersecting with Rachel and Jenny's group work, which is at the centre of this article, is Elmarie and Kathie's research practice. Rachel and Jenny and their agency invited Elmarie and Kathie to evaluate the programme Rachel and Jenny were currently using: they held concerns about some aspects of the approved programme and the effects for the positioning of women. In order to further develop the programme for Ministry of Justice approval they sought a formal, structured, external evaluation that would sit alongside their own evaluations – both those that were regular and followed the approved format, and those that were ongoing and informal, arising from their reflections and women's responses².

In the dialogue that begins this article we have set some of the resonant utterances³ the women spoke to us, in the context of a group evaluation research interview, alongside some resonant utterances from Patti Lather (2007), a significant contributor to a feminist and emancipatory agenda in research practice. In this article, we pay attention to these utterances as discursive positions, exploring "stuck places and difficult issues of truth, interpretation and responsibility" (Lather, p.149). Stuck places may occur in particular moments during a group meeting, in Rachel and Jenny's overall engagements as counsellors with the programmes available for working with women against violence, or for Kathie and Elmarie in creating research practices that meet organisational constraints and our own feminist interests. Our way forward is to join each other, as practitioners and researchers, in noticing, struggling and grappling with stuck places: "as soon as people begin to have trouble thinking things the way they have been thought, transformation becomes at the same time very urgent, very difficult, and entirely possible" (Foucault, 2000, in Davies et al., 2006, p.89).

The ongoing focus of this article is an exploration of ways in which Jenny and Rachel negotiate difficult issues of truth, interpretation and responsibility as group workers leading a Women Against Violence programme. We show how utterances of both group members, speaking in evaluation, and feminist-identified theorists contribute to the shaping of Jenny and Rachel's practices, including in the apparently dissonant speaking positions in the dialogue that opens this article.

Kirsty: I'm not a feminist in any way, shape or form

These words were spoken during a research interview⁴ with women from the group, part of the evaluation research. The interview followed the last programme meeting for the women.

It is possible to hear the surface of Kirsty's utterance as a statement arguing the irrelevance of feminism in her life. This refusal might be read as produced by the patriarchal backlash against feminism. It might be read as a "postfeminism ... constructed as a thinly veiled form of antifeminism" (Budgeon, 2001, p. 12). But Kirsty's refusal of identification with feminism might be more complex than that:

2 This evaluation report is forthcoming. Details of the research practice, including ethical considerations, are discussed in the report.

3 The theory of utterance comes from Mikhail Bakhtin: "Utterances are not indifferent to one another, and are not self-sufficient; they are aware of and mutually reflect one another" (1986, p.91). We use this term here to emphasise the discursive positions out of which, and into which, these words were spoken.

4 We acknowledge the contribution of Ireni Esler as research interviewer with Kathie.

Within the interview process that I had with Jenny and Rachel [before the group began], because of my experiences with [another organisation that runs non-violence programmes for women], I made it quite clear I'm not a feminist in any way, shape or form.

Kirsty's objection to identifying as feminist can be also read as a productive postfeminism, as offering "critical interrogation" of foundational feminism (Budgeon, 2001, p. 14). On these terms we read Kirsty's words as protest: at non-consideration of her experience and the knowledges she has put together; at the imposition of particular or foundationalist feminist politics, including those that have contributed to maintaining essentialised gender categories.

Kirsty: I will not sit in a room and listen to men being subjected to being told that they are violent and they are monsters, because women are just as violent as men, they just do it in different ways. You don't have to hit somebody to be violent.

I don't want to hear statistics. I'm here for a reason that was to join in with a group of other women who had similar experiences so that I could learn for myself and get myself built up so that I wouldn't go back into that kind of relationship again. I don't want to sit there and listen to how many men beat up women and how many men beat up children. I mean, anybody can pull statistics out of a hat but the stories that we all sit here and share can't be pulled out of a hat.

Kirsty's speaking is textured with the contributions of a range of feminisms, current and past. In her valuing the group sharing and learning – "the stories that we all sit here and share"; "I'm here for a reason that was to join in with a group of other women who had similar experiences so that I could learn for myself and get myself built up" – we hear echoes of the consciousness-raising groups of the 1960s and 1970s, described by Enns (1993) as "decreasing isolation and increasing interaction between women, sharing personal problems and common concerns" (p.5). Her utterances about statistics and male violence speak in contradiction of the identity politics of radical feminist grass roots activism and scholarship: we think of the critical work of Dworkin (1981), Gavey (1991, 1992), MacKinnon (1989), Russell and Howell (1983), for example, along with countless un-named activists who have exposed male violence produced in a patriarchal culture. At the same time her claim, "I don't want to hear statistics", offers some resonance with post-colonial feminist critique of the naturalised legitimacy of foundationalist Western feminism (Ang, 1997; Macleod, 2006). Her objection to essentialising males as violent also finds resonance in the feminist scholars whose work informs our counselling and research practice:

post structuralist feminism envisaged a radical deconstruction of the male-female binary and of essentialising practices that locked individuals into particular subject positions or characterisations. (Davies et al., 2006, p. 88)

While Kirsty spoke these utterances in the evaluation interview, they speak out of and into discursive positions available in women's everyday lives: these positions are produced by stories that circulate in our culture, and thus in the Women Against Violence groups. In group practice, Rachel and Jenny's preference is to negotiate towards responses that enact response-ability, by considering what they might learn from Kirsty's refusal to identify as feminist, and the feminisms that have shaped her speaking. This, too, is a doubled task, as we, following Patti Lather, yield categories to the yet-to-be-known.

The doubled task here involves the negotiating of possibilities of knowing. Our interest is in a further significant interpretive strand in Kirsty's utterances, above. We understand that people speak within the terms of the discourses to which they have access (Davies, 1991): thus, for example, discourses of perfect love limit the positions available to women to name

violence (Towns & Adams, 2000). In our shared interest in Kirsty's utterances we do not naively set aside our knowledge about the statistics about family violence or what is known about how poorly discourses of male dominance and entitlement, or perfect love, position women to speak action against violence; nor do we think of these utterances as innocently giving voice. Rather, we understand that subjectivities are multiple, contradictory and unstable. Thus, as narrative therapists our purpose is to open a response-able space for Kirsty's speaking. In this response-able space, we would not ignore or argue with aspects of Kirsty's speaking that do not resonate with the politics of our own feminist preferences. Rather, we hold in the background professional knowledge of the limiting effects of discourses of male entitlement. We hold our knowledge, including about gender discourse, tentatively, and we invite participation in gently scaffolded⁵ conversations that begin with women's lived experience. Our preference is to carefully scaffold inquiry, beginning with what is "known and familiar" (White, 2007, pp.263-290) to women. From this beginning, we intend to offer inquiries that co-construct knowledge and begin to inquire about and thus "trouble" (Davies, 2000, p. 14) patriarchal discourse and the insidious, disguised and underhanded ways in which it constitutes women's subjectivities. This doubled path weaves between co-researching women's local knowledge and collaborative troubling of the reproduction of those discourses that limit women's speaking positions. In these ways, we intend group work with women to offer opportunities to speak hopes, intentions, dreams and purposes (White, 2007). Thus, in collaboration with women we explore the subjectivities available to us.

Jenny and Rachel:

We show here how the smallest story has significance when we pay attention to it. In week 4 of the programme, we show a video, *She'll be Sweet*,⁶ depicting practices of male privilege. There are many micro-actions women recognise as they watch this video, the small and insidious ways in which their lives are constrained on a daily basis.

After watching the video, Jo said:

You know sometimes I just get so angry and I end up doing stupid things. I know he likes his dinner ready by 6 o'clock and I didn't make it until 6.30 even though I could have made it on time.

Rachel: What were you thinking when decided to delay making dinner?

Jo: I was just really angry that he expects dinner at 6 every night.

Rachel: In not putting it on the table until 6.30, would you say that is a kind of protest of some kind against the expectations?

Rachel's questions are intended to stay close to a woman's local knowledge at the same time as troubling the discourse of male privilege. By focusing on the actions Jo has taken, in deciding to delay making dinner, Rachel offers Jo a speaking position as an agentic subject. Rachel's subsequent tentatively worded question offers Jo a reflective space to make meaning of her actions. Her question is political and works to access the politics of Jo's knowledge. We might call this experience-near political knowledge.

However, the path is always doubled, as we pay attention to the shaping of knowledges. Our hope is that for women, this "deconstructive work may eventually lead to the production of a different way of talking, of making sense of who we are or what we are doing" (Davies, 1998, p. 139). Rachel engages in this conversation knowing that,

5 This term is generally ascribed to Vygotsky (see Bruner, 1985; Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976) and is used in narrative therapy by White (2007).

6 See <http://www.nzfvc.org.nz/PublicationDetails.aspx?publication=14502>

when women take the kinds of actions of which Jo is speaking, violence can escalate. This knowledge will guide her follow-up questions, to contribute to storying appropriate safety.

Jilly: It's[e]ach individual woman's choice. 'Do I want to be a lesbian or do I want to go to another [male] partner?'

Jilly's words, too, resonate with a number of possible feminisms. We might read them as produced by the individualism of a liberal feminist concern for the right of the individual to choose, to make her own way, including resisting heteronormativity. Jilly's statement also carries traces of what became a stereotypical radical feminist proposition that a democratic heterosexuality is impossible since all men are potentially rapists. Echoing in this proposition are two other claims to knowledge. Firstly, there is the contribution of radical feminism, in, for example, the grass roots activist work of rape crisis workers and scholarly investigators of the prevalence of rape (Gavey, 1991; Russell & Howell, 1983). And uncomfortably alongside is the caricaturing to which this proposition has been subject (Robinson, 2003), through various forms of mis-reading, including those that re-assert heterosexuality and male entitlement.

Jilly's utterance during the research conversation was in response to her earlier experience that anti-violence education required her to take up an anti-men stance. We read her utterance as refusing the offer to take up a position as anti-men. In her refusal she takes up a right to choose stance. Calling on the available liberal feminist discourse, she refuses the idea that she give up sexual relationships with men.

While Robinson (2003) disagreed with criticism that radical feminism is foundationalist, Jilly has experienced the effects of its knowledges being used in such ways. We are reminded of the value of holding tentativeness about emancipatory agendas lest others experience them as carrying "coercion, rationalism and universalism" (Lather, 2007, p. 108). Jilly's speaking reminds us of the value of a doubled path, "a deconstructive problematic [that] tries to trouble, to look for dangers, normalising tendencies, tendencies toward dominance in spite of liberatory intentions [Sawicki, 1988, p.166]" (Lather, p. 108). We all prefer to work to trouble assumptions and knowledges, understanding the possible effects for how we engage with women's experience – including experiences of sex and sexuality.

One of the more difficult areas of the Women against Violence group practice is to create contexts to talk about sex, sex and violence, sexual preferences, and sexual relationships. "There is little in the therapeutic literature that guides practitioners in the process of collaboratively deconstructing women's lived experiences of sexual desire" (Cook, 2003). The Domestic Violence (Programmes) Regulations (1996) refer to "raising the protected person's awareness of the social, cultural, and historical context in which domestic violence occurs" (28, 2, [c]): without being named, sexuality is implicit in these descriptions. And as Jilly went on to say:

I honestly believe that as women, it [sex] is something that we do whisper and giggle about but it's not something that we express and I think that for women who have been abused that it is something they should be able to talk about because sexuality and your sexual identity is greatly diminished within an abusive relationship.

Although many second wave feminists welcomed the sexual liberation of the 1960s, and went on to trouble privacy about, disconnection from, and limited knowledge about bodies and sex (Kitzinger, 1985), the spaces to speak sex with seriousness are still limited: sex talk may still be most familiar to many women through jokes, whispers, and giggles.

Rachel and Jenny shape practice to widen the spaces in which to speak women's experi-

ences of sex with seriousness. They take up a version of a doubled task, traversing the political landscape at the same time as traversing the landscapes of individual stories. They take up positions of “not being so sure of ourselves”, positions Lather (2007, p.160) called ethics in postmodernism, for although they have knowledges of the wider political landscapes in which women live their sexual lives, they do not know the particularities of an individual woman’s experience. The doubled task is to both know the politics, and hold knowing tentatively, so that counsellors are positioned as participants in the co-construction of women’s knowledge for living their lives. From narrative therapy, Jenny and Rachel take the term “experience-near” (White, 2007, p.40), for it reminds them to shape their practice closer to what the client wants rather than privileging a particular feminism. Perhaps we find here a fresh meaning to the feminist adage, the personal is the political.

Jenny and Rachel take it as their responsibility to raise the topic of sex, if by week six there has been no overt speaking about sex in the group. They thus take opportunities to make sex talk available for serious conversation. In taking the first step, they draw on political, feminist, knowledges. But the doubled path involves the creating of a receiving context, so that the statement that they offer is likely to be resonant with the experiences of individual women. For example, Jenny or Rachel may offer a statement, “I don’t want to have sex with him any more”, as part of a writing activity. Large sheets of paper are on the walls around the room. On these pages, Jenny and Rachel invite the women to write about the effects of expressions of anger on children, work, their bodies, their relationships, their selves: the intention here is that women re-search their own experiences to co-produce knowledge. Jenny and Rachel join in this writing. Their writing, “I don’t want to have sex with him any more”, is a contribution to a shared knowledge-making process, a micro-political action that invites response and serious discussion. This is the first step, then, the opening of speaking spaces for talk about sex.

How those speaking spaces are shaped depends upon the kind of listening that is offered. For us listening is political action (Leseho & Block, 2005). This idea is not new; the grass roots consciousness-raising groups of second wave feminism (Enns, 1993) were founded on ideas of communal knowledge production as women spoke and listened together. Situating themselves in a poststructuralist feminism, Jenny and Rachel build on this tradition, working towards the production of knowledge specific to each participant’s life. They attend to the conditions that make knowledge production possible. For example, if some women begin to speak of the connection between violence and sex, Rachel or Jenny continues, saying to the group: “If you have not spoken yet and your experience is connecting with what you are hearing, you may wish to break the silence now or may decide this is not the time for that speaking.” Rachel and Jenny’s purpose here is to provide an opportunity for a turning point, in breaking silence; or a marker of a decision not to speak on this occasion. They intend the invitation to contribute to a receiving context, where the act of breaking silence, or a decision not to speak, is given significance.

If a woman chooses a breaking-silence conversation, Rachel and Jenny will carefully scaffold the process. For example, if she begins speaking her experience and indicates that it is painful to speak, they may indicate that a pause is acceptable, that stories of pain may be told in small steps, by asking: “What does it mean to you to have spoken these words today?” In this question, they intend to offer the opportunity to give significance to the speaking, to story with a woman the meanings she prefers to give her actions. In this meaning-making Jenny and Rachel focus on the meaning of the woman’s telling, rather than on telling as catharsis. By moving between telling of experience and making meaning of this speaking of the experience, a woman is invited to take a position and evaluate the action she has taken in breaking the silence. The breaking of silence becomes meaningful in terms relevant to her, not imposed or

defined by the group or facilitators. This careful scaffolding illustrates an intention of opening space for a woman to take up an agentic position. An experience-near politics then emerges out of the woman's action as she ascribes meaning to her speaking. This scaffolding raises the political in ways that do not require performance of particular discursive practices. One woman's disclosure does also not require all women to disclose – but it will have effects for every other woman in the group.

This is where we believe that co-facilitation practices are critical. The first value of co-facilitation is the performance of a respectful relationship between Jenny and Rachel. The second value means that Jenny or Rachel will engage in conversation with the woman who has just broken the silence, and the other is positioned as a witness to the process (Weingarten, 2003), taking responsibility to lead the next phase of the group process. This next phase involves weaving between the individual story and other group members' responses to the story, when Jenny and Rachel draw on practices of compassionate witnessing (Weingarten, 2003).

Compassionate witnessing practices support women to manage the pain they may have experienced as witnesses to the story they have heard. This step depends upon the group guidelines, discussed and agreed to at the first meeting. These guidelines might be expressed in terms such as "no hogging; no advice giving". If Rachel has facilitated the conversation with a woman, Jenny will invite others in the group into compassionate witnessing of Suzy's story. She will begin the invitation to witness by reminding group members of these guidelines.

Jenny: When you listen to what has just been said by Suzy, do any of you connect with these stories because you have had similar stories?

Alice: Well, yeah, I had the same thing happen to me. I went to the doctor and I found out I had an STD and that's when I realised then he was cheating on me (crying).

There is silence, as the group sits and honours Alice's tears, and Suzy's speaking. Hearing the pain Alice has spoken, Jenny asks her if she wants to add anything more or if she would like to hear from someone else. Alice indicates that she has finished speaking for now. Jenny thanks her for her connecting, and turns to Sonia, whom she has also noticed crying.

Jenny: Sonia, you have also been touched by these stories?

Sonia: I was abused when I was a child, and then I thought I'd got past that because sex was really good with my partner even though the rest of the relationship was crap. Well, you know, he hit me and shouted at me and told me I was ugly. Then I found out he was having sex with another woman. But I don't really want to talk about this

Toni: Thank you for saying that because I also don't want to give up sex either, but it is all the rest of the stuff...

[Respectful silence]

Jenny: Yes, it's hard, isn't it, for us as women to find our way with sex and relationships. It seems to me from what I have come to know that it becomes even harder when abuse and violence are in the partner relationship.

Judy: That's why I think it was good that Suzy talked today. It was when she talked about him raping her that I started to see what's not OK in my relationship.

Jenny: What would that be that you are seeing that's not OK, Judy?

Judy: I should have some say over my own body.

Fiona: Yes, me too, it was when I realised that what was happening was like rape, that I decided I wasn't going to stay with my last partner.

To talk about sexuality is to negotiate complex territories of women's lives and relationships. In this witnessing conversation, the women speak of a range of differences, as well as similarities. In any group there are many ideas and expressions of sexuality available to all the participants, including Jenny and Rachel. We suggest that the women here are holding the many expressions of sexuality in response to the receiving context Rachel and Jenny have worked to create: "feminist political practice becomes a matter of alliances rather than one of unity around a universally shared interest" (Macleod, 2006, p. 378).

Here again, we return to the importance of negotiating paths between discursive listening and our political preferences. For example, alongside the idea that all heterosexual sex is rape, Jenny and Rachel might hear the male sex drive discourse (Hare-Mustin, 1994) spoken as a truth: we know how guys are. As well, competing feminist positions on pornography also shape women's ideas and options for action. In the context of economic hardship after separation, prostitution may offer the means to provide for a family; other women have been forced into prostitution by male partners. For many the freedoms offered by the sexual revolution are double-edged: "You can get sex anywhere but you can't get companionship," Jenny and Rachel have been told. For other women, any couple-type relationship is seen as better than no relationship. Patriarchy is woven through the available ways of living, and speaking about, sex.

The move Jenny and Rachel make in this group work is away from approaches that prescribe what sexuality women should perform, and towards making meaning of particular mo(ve)ments individual women make in their lives.

Moana: They [Rachel and Jenny] don't say men, they don't say 'women'. They'll say 'partners'. They don't make any subjective comments about gender.

Moana's observations draw attention to the fine detail of language, demonstrating that words are not innocent. Second wave feminists, who exposed the effects of sexist language that obscured the presence of women, taught us this lesson. The lesson here adds further nuance. It is possible to claim that to use gender neutral language in the group context is to engage in gender-neutralising (Ronkainen, 2001, in Pedersen, 2008) practices that render male violence invisible. On these terms apparently gender-neutral language would be seen to serve patriarchy. But as Jenny and Rachel select whether to use the gendered or gender-neutral language they are practising from a feminist position, with a scaffolding purpose in their language use. This scaffolding is important because patriarchy, as well as producing apparently gender neutral language, also produces essentialised gender categories – and Moana's preference for the use of the word partners comes out of the effects of constructing "men" as the problem rather than "male violence" or "violence perpetrated by male partners" as the problem. When "men" are constructed as the problem, it is likely that Moana and others are positioned to defend men, rather than expose the violence. In particular, the phrase "violence perpetrated by male partners" invites a focus on the problem of violence by naming violence first rather than men first. It takes the conversation beyond totalising descriptions that essentialise gender.

Jenny and Rachel use the word partner, because it is inclusive of all kinds of relationship. Thus if they are initiating a conversation they will use the non-specific word, partner. For example, they might say, "We have heard you speak right from the first intake meeting, about when you have a new relationship with a new partner in the future, there are parts of that relationship that you would want very different from what it has been like in the past." Their purpose is to use inclusive language. However, if Jenny and Rachel are responding to what a woman says, they will most usually use the word she uses: girlfriend, husband, for example.

The work of negotiating how we speak is complex. Potter (1996, p. 98) described the sig-

nificance of language in this way:

Reality enters into human practices by way of the categories and descriptions that are part of those practices. ... It (the world) is *constituted* in one way or another as people talk it, write it, and argue it.

Thus the language Jenny and Rachel employ, and how they engage with the language women use has constitutive effects. For example, they might hear a woman say, "All men are bastards. They just want one thing. I don't know if I ever want to go there again." They hear this utterance as making some claims about the types of experiences she had in a relationship that she doesn't want. Absent but implicit (White, 2000) in these claims are some knowledges about the kind of relationship that she would like. These are the stories that Rachel and Jenny are likely to respond to, by asking her to tell them some more about what she knows she does not want, and/or what she might want.

At times, however, Rachel and Jenny might wish to locate themselves more strongly as standing for practices of respect, including respectful speaking. In doing this they call on the group agreement. Thus, there might be occasions when they might respond, "We don't necessarily agree that all men are bastards but we do agree that it's never ok for violence and abuse to be in relationships." Rachel and Jenny take positions against violence. Moana's words suggest that she values that Jenny and Rachel do not take men-blaming positions. At the same time the "all-men-are-bastards" way of talking often comes up in the session where Jenny and Rachel introduce and explore with the women ideas about, and experiences of, what we name as male privilege. As leaders, they do not shy away from naming how male privilege works, but they bring nuance and sensitivity to how and when they speak this knowledge.

Kiri: In my partner relationship, I never had a say. He made all the decisions. Now, I have worked out that when I am in the pub and a man buys me a drink I will buy him one straight back, so that I don't owe him anything.

Kiri's speaking directly troubles the taken for granted male privilege that buying her a drink opens the way for the man to expect a woman to offer sex in return. Rachel's first response, as facilitator, acknowledges the stand Kiri took and the practices she is advocating. Rachel and Jenny are always interested in the small moves women make that make a difference.

Rachel: How did you know to do this?

Kiri: I had had enough of that bastard just deciding that he could decide for me what I want. I am not going to let any other guy just decide for me.

Rachel: What's important for you now in how decisions get made in any partner relationship?

This sequence begins with Kiri making a gender-specific claim, in response to which Rachel offers a gender neutral inquiry. Rachel's purpose here is to centralise the knowledge claims about decision-making that Kiri speaks. Rachel's focus is on the subject positions available for women to take up, as agents in knowledge production in the mo(ve)ments of their lives.

Holly: I think it's because they [Rachel and Jenny] honour our knowledge and our experience...

We conclude with another brief imagined dialogue between a woman from the group and a feminist scholar.

Chris: ...we should think in terms of transforming the social relations of knowledge production and the type of knowledge produced. (Weedon, 1987, p. 87)

Holly: ...they [Rachel and Jenny] honour our knowledge and our experience... (Research participant, 2007)

Davies et al. (2006) write of the feminist subject in poststructuralist discourse as “in process, vulnerable to inscriptions that may be opaque to her and yet developing the power to make the discourse and their inscriptive powers both visible and revisable” (p. 101). The practices demonstrated and discussed in this article make visible the inscriptive powers of discourse on women’s lives. In the group meetings Jenny and Rachel begin with what is known and familiar to the women, and invite them to join in co-research of their lived experiences. Carefully scaffolded conversations provide a reflecting surface for all of us to see refractions of that which is known and familiar. A refracted view offers different light on inscriptions that were previously opaque or obscured. The mo(ve)ments from visible to re-visible comes through co-researching, at the site of the particularities of women’s lives, always in acknowledgment that our lives are discursively shaped.

Whether in group work, counselling, research or teaching, we do not know where conversation will take us: getting lost is a way of knowing, as Lather suggested. When we hold our knowledges lightly, willing to get lost as we (sometimes temporarily) let go of particular feminisms, it becomes possible for us to engage with the experience-near politics and preferences that arise out of women’s lives.

Our professional and personal lives are lived at the intersections of multiple and competing feminisms. As the above illustrations from practice show, any speaking can be read through the lens of a range of feminisms. While Wright (2009) took some comfort in an integrative feminism, we find no such comfort. Rather, we struggle with a dis-integrative feminism. This dis-integrative feminism turns back on itself, interrogating its own production, inviting us beyond the boundaries of our current understandings. And thus, in dis-integrative mo(ve)ment, we might get lost amidst deconstructive feminist tasks. At the same time we hold the position that lives are always revisable: subjects shape discourse as well as being shaped by discourse. This position provides us with the possibility of taking up the therapeutic purpose of inviting women to story their lives in terms of hopes, dreams, intentions, and purposes (White, 2007), in mo(ve)ments towards what it is possible to know.

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