REFLECTIONS

NARRATIVES of PROFESSIONAL HELPING

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Reflections from the Editorial Team:
Recognizing & Valuing Our Peer Reviewers

Darlyne Bailey, Monica Leisey, F. Ellen Netting, and Kelly McNally Koney

Abstract: *Reflections* Volume 27 number 2 includes an update from the Editorial Leadership Team and Editorial Board. We follow this update with our collective thoughts about how important it is to recognize the value of our incredible reviewers whose behind-the-scenes, time-consuming work is critical to the journal's success. We are excited to introduce seven engaging articles in which the authors evoke a wide range of emotions and three poetry submissions that illustrate how creatively diverse the concept of poetry can be. The interface of personal and professional selves is interwoven throughout this issue as authors share their insights about how to prepare the next generation of helping professionals to embrace alternative forms of meaning-making, often in the face of traumatic life events. We hope readers will be as delighted as we are with the creativity and imagery emerging within the pages of this issue!

Keywords: alternative methods, justice, peer review, trauma, violence

We begin by thanking so many people who continue to make the publication of *Reflections* possible, particularly recognizing the dedicated work of our committed reviewers who make a peer-reviewed journal possible. Finally, we provide a brief overview of the articles in this issue and their interconnected themes.

Appreciation to the Dedicated People Who Make *Reflections* Possible

We have so many people to thank, and we are grateful every day for their dedication to *Reflections*. Special appreciation goes to Sarah Valek, who has served as our Graduate Assistant and managed the publication process for two years. This summer she has taken over the copyediting function following the graduation of Jack A. Pincelli, our Copyeditor of two years. We offer our deepest appreciation to Jack, as well as Assistant Copyeditors, Madeleine Buhrow and Karla Seese.

We are excited to welcome Reinhild F. Boehme, newly appointed as Publisher for *Reflections*! Reinhild is Assistant College Lecturer in Social Work at Cleveland State University and a clinical fellow at OhioGuidestone's Institute of Family and Community Impact. Reinhild is an expert in trauma-informed care and community-based mental health and has substantial experience in clinical practice with diverse populations and the supervision of multi-disciplinary staff. A true "pracademic," Reinhild is skilled at negotiating and navigating two cultural identities and is passionate about amplifying the voices and lived experiences of migrant and immigrant people. She brings commitment to narrative writing and multi-disciplinary work to her new role, and we look forward to working with her.

A special thanks goes to our Section Editors who continue to volunteer their skills and time to facilitating the submission and review process. We are indebted to Arlene Reilly-Sandoval (Teaching and Learning), Beth Lewis (Field Education), and Jon Christopher Hall (Practice).

Many thanks to Associate Editor Monica Leisey who has been serving as interim Section Editor of Research until we were able to recruit a new editor for this Section.

We are pleased to introduce D. Crystal Coles, who has graciously agreed to join us as Section Editor for Research. Crystal is Assistant Professor, Morgan State University School of Social Work. Her research focuses on child welfare and the intersection of the African-American/Black diaspora through the lens of health disparities in rural and urban communities. Crystal worked for more than 15 years as a child welfare social worker, practicing predominantly in the areas of foster care and health. In addition to work in the foster care system, she has experience in medical social work; counseling and crisis services; as well as organizational and community intervention services. Indeed, she brings a wealth of research, practice, and academic experience to her new role. Welcome Crystal!

Guest Editors & Special Issues

As this issue goes to press, we look forward to two upcoming issues on "The Impact of COVID 19 on Preparing Future Helping Professionals and on Practicing with Individuals, Groups, and Communities" guest edited by Katherine Selber and Lynn Levy. Katherine and Lynn were pleased to receive multiple manuscripts in response to their call, and readers will find their Special Issues extremely helpful as authors convey their deepest concerns and creative approaches in facing professional and personal challenges during the pandemic.

As we noted in V27 number 1, there are several forthcoming Special Issues on racial injustice, systemic racism, and anti-racism practices. Priscilla Gibson is the lead Guest Editor for a Special Issue entitled "Black Racial Injustice: Personal Reflections to Change Strategies." Patricia Gray is lead Guest Editor on "Practicing While Black," and Tiffany Baffour and Shonda Lawrence are guest editing "A Call for Social Work Educators to Confront and Dismantle Systemic Racism *Within* Social Work Programs."

The Significance of Peer Review

The peer review process is a long-standing tradition of evaluating scientific, academic, and professional work by others in the same or related fields. The concept of peer review dates back to ancient Greece, and over the centuries reviewers have come to play an increasingly important role in determining the quality and credibility of scholarly writing. In their book on how to conduct effective peer reviews, Barczak and Griffin (2021) identify three functions of the peer review process: 1) improving the quality of manuscripts with potential for publication, 2) helping editors select manuscripts that will be most helpful/useful for the journal's readership, and 3) filtering out manuscripts that are not ready for publication. In the event of a submission that is not ready for publication, we firmly believe that this is a developmental opportunity for reviewers and editors to offer constructive feedback that may help authors reimagine their manuscripts.

When a reviewer is invited to assess a submission, it is important to read through the entire manuscript while keeping in mind the journal's criteria for evaluation. To facilitate this process, over the last three years we have revised the *Reflections* review criteria, streamlined our review

form, and placed those criteria in our instructions for authors so that reviewers and authors alike know what is expected in a *Reflections* submission. We believe that there must be transparency so that authors know what we are looking for, and we ask reviewers to rate each criterion as well as write comments to explicate the reasons for their ratings.

Refereed journals ask a lot of reviewers who are anonymous volunteers, working behind-the-scenes to evaluate manuscripts. Barczak and Griffin (2021) identify just how much we are asking when we invite someone to peer review. They present five R's that characterize the review process: roles, responsibilities, responses, reactions, and respect (p. 30); for authors, reviewers perform the *roles* of critics and coaches, providing feedback and suggesting ways to strengthen manuscripts. For us as the editorial team, reviewers serve as trusted advisors, and for readers, reviewers play the role of gatekeeper, providing expertise and offering advice. Reviewers' *responsibilities* to authors are to spend time and effort to make the manuscript the best it can be, to respond in a timely manner, and to maintain confidentiality. Reviewers help us as editors to craft a fair decision just as they help us assure that interesting, relevant knowledge is created for a professional readership. In regard to *responses*, reviewers demonstrate completeness of consideration, identity strengths and weaknesses, provide actionable advice, and ask for necessary changes. In terms of *reactions*, reviewers are asked to use a professional tone, to be constructive (never destructive), teach developmentally without being condescending, be kind, show empathy, and refrain from gratifying their own egos. Finally, reviewers are asked to be *respectful*, which is at the heart of being author-centric. To us, this means framing one's review with sensitivity, after reading—and re-reading, if necessary—to best understand the author's perspective, honoring the fact that this manuscript is a product of someone's intellectual and emotional hard work.

Several years ago, editors and former editors of a number of well-established journals wrote a collaborative editorial about what editors value and what authors find helpful about the peer review process. One editor noted that even though reviewers are anonymous, the journals for which they review are not (Robbins et al., 2015). Thus, a journal's reputation is only as strong its reviewers. If reviewers and editors treat authors with respect and encouragement, then *Reflections* will be seen as a journal that is respectful and encouraging.

The Importance of Recognizing Our Reviewers

In our previous editorial, we emphasized the importance of the peer review process and shared that several months ago we sent an "opt in" request to all our registered reviewers in order to update our reviewer list. Their responses led us to confer with our Section and then current Guest Editors (i.e., the Editorial Board) to solicit their thoughts about how to better recognize reviewers to ensure that *Reflections* acknowledges all who have contributed to the review process of each issue and recognizes them collectively once a year.

We agreed that having a listing of reviewers who are recognized in these ways is a public declaration of their valuable work. For reviewers who hold academic positions, as many of our reviewers do, their name in a list of reviewers provides documentation of professional service. Moving forward, these reviewers will be acknowledged as members of the Annual Narrative Review Board (ANRB). This membership recognizes reviewers who have contributed their

talents and time to providing high quality reviews for at least two manuscripts for each volume.

Highlights of This Issue

In this issue, the authors evoke a wide range of emotions through words and images in seven engaging narratives and in three poetry submissions that illustrate how creatively diverse the concept of poetry can be. In addition, two of the narrative articles have poetry embedded within them as well, and one narrative features an original painting.

The interface of personal and professional selves is interwoven throughout this issue, along with the importance of meaning-making in the face of traumatic life events. The first two reflections bring this interface to a crescendo as two authors reveal their innermost insights when grief over losing family members breaks through professional defenses. In "The Sister's Box," Wilson writes about working with women with early-stage breast cancer and unintentionally buying into "the medicalisation of emotion" (p. 12), in which deeply-held feelings are repressed. Having lost a sister at a young age, Wilson reflects about the bounded caring that can occur when being professional legitimately intersects with emotional work, leading to opening a box of painful memories about a beloved sibling. Next is Richard-Allerdyce's poem in which a trained poetry therapist strives "to access the livingness of each present moment" (p. 20) as a daughter caring for her mother with dementia. Using poetry as a means to "find peace in the regularities of language" (p. 22), Richard-Allerdyce compares a poem's linguistic flow to listening to music that lifts the "listener beyond the surface of events" (p. 22) and becomes a form of self-care in the face of anticipatory grief. Both Wilson and Richard-Allerdyce reveal insights into how the interface of personal and professional development is a continual process of becoming.

Immediately following are two contributions that address the trauma of having experienced violence. Sutton reflects on the "pedagogy of vulnerability" in which the intimacy of personal experience from "generations of familial trauma" (p. 23) is shared. The author comes face-to-face with memories like "old ghosts" and is repeatedly rebirthed into a "survivor-turned-thriver" (p. 24). Having designed a course on anti-violence, Sutton emphasizes the importance of the "lived curriculum" (p. 26) in which every student's experiences are valid sources of knowledge. Next is Oba's narrative which offers a unique opportunity to learn about the experiences of a female co-facilitator of a Canadian-based Partner Assault Response group composed of men who have perpetrated intimate violence. Embedded in patriarchal systems laced with the dynamics of power and gender, Oba offers insights into how facilitators and participants interact and learn from their intense interactions. Both Sutton and Oba teach about violence but in different arenas with different participants—Sutton in the classroom and Oba in groups of persons who have engaged in violent acts.

Continuing the theme of addressing the trauma of violence, Beech writes a poem that is inspired by those research activists seen as "weavers of truth" (p. 44). In the process, Beech honors those "foremothers of research and activism" (p. 44) who have come before and whose stories form a tapestry of insight into lived experiences that have long been subjugated. Beech's poem opens the doorway to two narratives designed to bring forth the voices of participants who have faced traumatizing experiences. Morton and seven colleagues collaborate in their narrative about using an action research approach with women in Ireland who have faced Adverse Childhood

Experiences (ACEs) including domestic violence, poverty, and substance use. These eight authors provide their own insights into how their research influenced their personal and professional growth and how they came to believe in using ACE routine enquiry which provided an opportunity to use a new tool for opening dialogue. Next is Dell's article that focuses on the use of Photovoice to explore safety and safe coping mechanisms for participants experiencing traumatic stress and substance use. As participants prepared to share their photos, COVID-19 interfered with original plans to bring everyone together and to engage the community in sharing what had been learned. In reimagining how to conduct a virtual event, Dell reflects on the value of using Photovoice to engage participants in every aspect of an alternative planning process.

The next three contributions continue the theme of trauma, systematized in the form of economic injustice and poverty, social injustice and racism, and dominant epistemologies. Wilfong and Cirino form a faculty-student team to write about how content on poverty and economic justice needs to be highlighted in social work curriculum, that "without an open discussion about the reality of income inequality, systemic racism, and cycle of poverty, change will not happen" (p. 75). The authors reflect on how their early lives influenced their perspectives and call social work professionals to take the dialogue and turn it into action, advocating for structural and political change. Smith, Aguilar, and Tomczak collaborate on a narrative in which social work faculty members pushed the boundaries of "comfort" in figuring out how to write a letter denouncing the murders of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor. Three faculty members reveal their innermost feelings and emotional responses to the process that ensued, leading one to be accused of committing microaggressions and another wanting to distance from the letter as much as possible. They conclude that "there is no end to anti-oppression work" (p. 85) and this insightful, candid narrative reveals how difficult it is to truly hear one another even when the same words are spoken. Finally, Irving's satirical poem concludes this trilogy of reflections. This poem pushes schools of social work to hear alternative voices and to question the meaning of what constitutes evidence and one-best-way thinking. Together, these three contributions reinforce the importance of continual dialogue and diverse perspectives in educational institutions that prepare professional social workers to advocate for change.

We trust that you will find this issue as you find all of *Reflections*—full of compelling narratives that offer insights that will be useful to educators, practitioners, students, and others alike. Once again, we look forward to hearing from you!!

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We deeply appreciate your commitment to this journal and its authors.

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Please visit: https://www.csuohio.edu/class/reflections/friends-reflections. Thank You!!

The Sister Box

Elaine Wilson

Abstract: This narrative explores the intersection of my work as a professional social worker in an oncology and palliative care setting and my previous experience of the loss of my sister. Despite being committed to reflective practice, I found that I was blindsided in the course of my work when my professional and personal worlds collided. In this paper, I detail my retrospective reflection on the emotional labour associated with working in oncology and palliative care, and how I had not recognised how the thread of loss running through my life was interwoven with my professional life. The discussion draws on narrative theory and meaning making as a way of making sense of the experience of when the professional and personal worlds overlap and asks if we, as professionals, can be truly authentic with our clients if we have not engaged fully with the self-reflective process.

Keywords: self-reflection, personal journey, grief and loss, meaning making, intersection of personal and professional

Introduction

Despite having worked in social work for over a decade and then moving into academia and writing a PhD which focused on the importance of meaning making for important and/or traumatic life events, I was taken aback by my own reactions when encountering life-changing illness and death. Although my PhD focused on the importance of meaning making, and I have always had a strong belief in the need to make sense of the world around us, I had not recognised that need in myself. As professionals, it is easy to talk about self-care and the need for self-reflection, but what I recognise in myself is that my self-reflection related to traumatic life events and loss only went as far as I was comfortable. Deep-seated memories of loss were acknowledged on a surface level; however, their deeper impact within a work setting and at a personal level were largely ignored. As professionals, we can often function and operate very well on this surface level, but I wonder about the disservice we are doing to clients and indeed ourselves. For me, there was an element of being blindsided by the impact of loss in my early life when confronted by death and dying in my professional life. Cognitively I was aware of the connections between my early experience of death and my work in oncology and palliative care, but at an emotional level I was surprised at my limitations. It was as though I had opened the door a little to peek inside but remained outside the door at all times. If I went through the door and fully into the room, I knew that there would be pain and a reliving of early loss.

The initial part of this article focuses on an interaction I had while working as a medical social worker in an oncology unit in a large teaching hospital. This encounter, which lasted no more than ten minutes, had a profound impact on me and led, albeit slowly, to an examination of the impact of previous life events and my relationship with death. This process of self-reflection is underpinned by a social constructivist perspective. Neimeyer (1995) explains it well, commenting that constructivists construe the self more as a process than a product, and that there can be many possible selves. Self-development is an ongoing dynamic process in response to the

discrepancies within the self-system. In doing this retrospective reflective, I know that I would describe myself very differently now than I did ten years ago. Yes, there have been many changes in my life; however, I am thinking specifically about myself and loss. I also believe that, should I sit down in another ten years' time, there will be another version of me. The essence is the same and, for want of a better phrase, the ingredients are all there from before, just more ingredients get added in every year. The second half of this article engages in sense making of my experiences and discusses the concept of *bounded caring*. Oncological work exists at the intersection between emotional labour and professionalism. For many, professionalism is associated with an absence of emotional expression in the work environment, and yet oncological work demands emotional involvement to co-exist alongside professional behaviour. Wong et al. (2020) use the term "bounded caring" (p. 352) to describe the intermingling of these co-existing realities. The discussion is underpinned with the belief that it is essential to recognise that the development of identity is a temporal process and is grounded in narrative theory and meaning making.

Blindsided

It began on a corridor, one humid afternoon in the middle of summer. I was not looking forward to going up onto the oncology ward because of the building work that had been going on in the hospital for several weeks at this stage. All the windows had been sealed shut to stop dust getting into the wards. The air in the ward was stagnant, and both staff and patients struggled to cope with the heat and oppressiveness. At least I knew I could escape to the relative freshness of my office, or take a walk at lunchtime around the grounds, so I felt guilty about my reluctance to go to the ward to walk, step by step, up into the stagnant air.

As I entered the ward, I saw her coming down the corridor towards me. I had met her almost six months previously, not long after she had been diagnosed with cancer, but had not seen her since. Again, the guilt surfaced—how had she been, I should have checked in with her. The other part of my brain was justifying my lack of contact with her, noting that she had early-stage breast cancer with a very good prognosis. She also had good support and assured me she would contact me if she needed to. As the only social worker covering all the oncology cases in the hospital and overseeing palliative care, it was not possible to do everything. Yet, I knew it was not good enough. I felt that I had failed her. I did not provide her with the support that she deserved.

It turned out that she had just completed her final treatment. She did not look excited or happy as I expected, but anxious and unhappy instead. I wondered why that was and found myself congratulating her on finishing and telling her that I was sure she was delighted, even though it was obvious from looking at her that she wasn't. She told me that everyone expected her to be happy and relieved, but she was not feeling happy. She was feeling anxious and confused and unhappy. She also said that because her friends and family expected her to be happy, she felt guilty for feeling unhappy. I realised that I had added to this pressure by placing the same expectations on her. I had never thought through what it must really be like to finish treatment, which was ridiculous considering the job I was doing.

I found myself thinking about her a lot over the following few weeks, and I began to realise the

assumptions that I was making daily in my work. I had seen her as "one of the lucky ones"—the cancer had been caught early and she had a really good chance of being cured. When it came to prioritising an ever-expanding workload, patients like her came somewhere near the bottom of the list. I knew that it was a fact of life that I had to prioritise, but I recognised that I had become complacent. Identifying these women with early-stage breast cancer as "the lucky ones" was not helpful or fair to them. The metaphor that came to mind was that we put these women on the conveyor belt of treatment, and for the majority, the conveyor belt moved smoothly towards the end of treatment. At the end of treatment, the women fell off the conveyor belt but no one, including me, checked to see where and how they had landed. This made me think further. Why did I not think it was necessary to check where they had landed? I realised that I had an expectation that they would pick up from where they had left off at diagnosis. As I looked at her face, I was looking at someone who was lost and afraid. She needed support—my support—and I had failed to notice that. She was so polite and gentle in her conversation with me when she had a right to be angry and demand my help. I was viewing the cancer as a hiatus in their lives, rather than a life-changing experience. Having reflected on it, I realised that that was how many of us working with these women viewed the experience. In a world where life was measured in survival percentages and stage of disease, we did prioritise cases based on that. At ward rounds there was a tendency to skip over people with excellent survival chances and focus on those with worse prognoses. There was no malice intended, and the sad reality of ever-increasing caseloads meant that choices had to be made; not everyone could be seen or attended to in the way they should have been. One colleague told the women that the cancer experience would be "a year out of their life" and to view it as such. Although it was said in an attempt to be helpful and comforting, I realised that it was neither helpful nor comforting for the majority of women in the long-term. More importantly than that, it was not true. How could being diagnosed with a life-threatening illness and facing your mortality be confined to just one year? I felt that I had unintentionally bought into the "medicalisation of emotion" (Manchester, 2015, p. 150). By this I mean that although emotions were acknowledged as a normal and expected part of life in the oncology and palliative care unit, a time limit was put on it. There was an implicit expectation of what a "normal" reaction was and how long it should last. With my social work background, I was disappointed that I bought into this measurement of what emotion should look like and how long it should last for.

I was shocked by the number of assumptions and preconceptions I had about working with women with early-stage cancer. I realised I was much more open to what a life-changing experience it was for people with other cancers, and I was confused why I felt like this. I think it was the fact that the women with early-stage breast cancer were curable and the survival rates were so good. In my mind I saw it as "the least bad option" and so didn't focus in depth on what a traumatic experience it was for each woman. I was really forced to explore what it might be like when I went to meet another woman for the first time who had been diagnosed with cancer. She and I were born on the same day, possibly in the same hospital in Dublin. We both had similar backgrounds and lives, and the thing that resonated most strongly with me was that we both had young children of similar ages. Immediately I could put myself in her shoes. It is not that I didn't feel empathy towards the other women, but in this situation, I reflected on two baby girls born on the same day, and how similar our lives were in so many ways except for cancer. It could have been me instead of her.

As she spoke about her fears and worries, her children, and the possibility that she might not see them grow up, I felt I got it. I thought of my own children, and what if I was the one, and not her, who was facing this possibility. I felt angry with myself for not truly understanding before that no cancer diagnosis can be considered lucky. Meeting her had an enormous impact on me that I only recognised later upon reflection. I began to worry about my own health, and whether I might have or get breast cancer. I would wake up in the night terrified about dying, trying to comprehend how I could stop existing, and trying to comprehend the nothingness of death.

I had met death before. My own sister died suddenly and very unexpectedly, and I was the one who found her. She appeared to be asleep, and yet the minute I opened her bedroom door I felt a stillness in the room. Even as a young girl I knew immediately she was dead, but I still tried to wake her. She looked the same as ever, her hair freshly washed and smelling of the shampoo she had used the night before. She was warm and peaceful, lying stretched out in her usual sleeping position. It was unbelievable that she was gone. That was the phrase that kept going through my head—she is gone. I wanted to follow her, catch her hand, and pull her back. How could she go? I was her person, I was her minder, and I had failed her. I was angry with her for going somewhere without me. "You know better than that!" my voice was shouting in my head. She was two and a half years older than me but had a mild intellectual disability, so I was the sister in charge. We were a team, she and I, and now she had gone off on her own without me. Who was going to mind her now? Who will protect her? How dare she go without me? How do I fill that piece of me that is missing?

Immediately following her death, a close relative wondered aloud if it was the best thing that she had died. I thought at the time that I could not have felt any more pain than what I was feeling at that moment, and yet I could. How could her worth as a person be so devalued because of her intellectual disability? I had no voice as a young girl to shout at this relative, "Your daughter is the same age! How can you say that? Is my sister's life that valueless? How would you feel if it were your daughter?" I know this relative is not a bad person and, with extensive time having passed, I like to think that perhaps she was trying to process the shock and her words were badly chosen. In my more charitable moments, I believe that my relative was imagining the disappointments my sister might face in the future and was expressing, very badly, that she was glad my sister would be spared the pain. Once the funeral was over, there was very little talk of my sister. I returned to school distressed and traumatised by the suddenness of her death and felt very alone in trying to process her death. Each immediate family member dealt with their own pain individually, and there was a sense of "you just have to get on with it," and that was what I did. To outsiders, I think I looked the same as ever, and the fact that I could hold it together in public was far more comfortable for them and me than outward distress would have been. There was evidence of distress though, but it was largely ignored by teachers and family. I failed a school exam for the first time in my life and went from being a highly academic student to a mediocre student. I remember being in an oral language exam and being asked to describe my family. I got stuck, not because I did not know the words in the other language, but because I did not know how to describe my family now. I managed to function and get through school, and I think that is what mattered to everyone around me at the time.

So, I thought I knew what death looked like, and I thought I didn't fear it. But I did, and my greatest fear was leaving my children without their person, their minder. My fear of flying rose

dramatically at this time, and it was not really of crashing, but rather of crashing and leaving the children. Leaving them wondering where I had gone to, and their realisation that they would not be able to find me. This I realised is my greatest fear. I wondered how much my own history affected this, and how much every other parent feels like this.

Walking Fully into the Room

I have read back about that encounter on the ward many times and how it led me to consider and really look at my thoughts and experiences about death. Every time I read the section about my sister and I ask, "Who is going to mind her now?" I cry. There is guilt still about not protecting my vulnerable sister, though the rational part of my brain knows that there was nothing I could have done. To deal with the trauma of losing her, I put her in the *sister box* and stored her in that box, on a high shelf, in a dark corner of my brain. I would take the box down every so often and take her out to remember what we had. Particular events triggered huge grief, such as the birth of my first child who is named after her. How they would have loved each other and how my sister would have cherished that relationship. For the most part, however, she remained in the box on the high shelf, not forgotten but put away. My guilt was triggered again when I met the patient on the ward. I had let her down during a very difficult time in her life. I had not been as available to her as I should have been. As with my sister and rationalising that I was a child and could not have changed anything, I could rationalise my guilt around the patient with the recognition that it is not possible for one person to see every oncology and palliative care patient and provide a comprehensive service. I saw the vulnerability in that woman's eyes, the fear of where she was going next and what would happen next. I felt my protective instincts kick in and the need to reassure her that all would be OK. I had failed to protect my sister but perhaps I could protect her.

There is a new guilt. I see the pattern of fearing death manifesting itself in one of my children. My child comes downstairs well after bedtime, inconsolable about the thought of Mum and Dad dying, or the thought of "spending all of eternity on their own." While knowing that some of this is a very normal stage of development, I am also aware this has gone on too long and that the worries are too intrusive for this child. I worry that my lack of reflection and meaning making somehow resulted in my fears being passed on to my child. There are so many layers to it; it is so complicated. This same child had an anaphylactic reaction to an unknown allergen at the age of three. I held my three-year-old child in my arms as he struggled to breathe and thought he would die. I remember the words in my head being, "Oh my God, not again. I can't lose him too." As he struggled to breathe, there was nothing I could do to help him. I could not change the course of what was happening. When I am up at night with him, trying to console him about his fear of death, I do wonder whether I have passed on my fear to him or whether he has a subconscious memory of how close he came to death and this is manifesting itself in the terror he is experiencing years later.

One of the most important things in trying to make sense of my feelings and why that encounter that day was a significant turning point for me has been to recognise that encounter not as the beginning, but as one of a series of events in my life. We cannot stop the personal and professional from colliding, as I realised when I met the client with whom I shared a birthday. The personal and professional can never be fully separated. The concept of time is central when

thinking about meaning making. To make sense of an event, humans need to understand, or try to make sense of, the sequence of events. Crossley (2000) elaborates on this: in order to portray human selves and behaviour in a valid way, there has to be an understanding of the inextricable link between time and identity. It is the connections or relationships between events that constitute their meaning.

> The construction of self is a temporal process through which we have dialogue with different images of the self taken from the past and the future and mediated by the anticipated responses of significant and generalised others. (Crossley, 2000, p. 13)

From my own standpoint it seems as though the various images of self did exist; however, they did not talk to each other. So, the bereaved sister definitely existed, the mother with an ill child existed, and the social work professional working in oncology and palliative care helping others to manage their grief and loss was also present, but the dialogue between these selves did not occur. This led to a disconnect which only began to come to the fore because of that chance encounter on the ward. Time and narrative are very strongly interlinked, with time being essential when organising the narrative experience. Martino and Freda (2016) contend that the narrative of traumatic experience assumes the function of reconstructing the story of the continuity of life, including the personal story context, consolidating the interruption in time, and creating a new connection between the continuity and the discontinuity of the experience. This results in there being a meaning that spans the past, present, and future. In my own case, time has allowed me to reflect and unite the different strands that have run through my life in terms of loss or threat of loss. The experience of losing my sister at a very young age has certainly made me very aware of the possibility of losing my own child, but recognition of how those two strands are linked has meant that I can contextualise my fears.

The concept of meaning making as a form of storying resonates strongly. Arciero and Guidano (2000) describe meaning making as being an ongoing form of storying. It is a way of composing and recomposing one's life through shareable meanings that then accumulate and become life stories or narratives. To have a fully developed sense of identity and sense of self, the stories need to have a dialogue between them. If there is no dialogue or a deficit in the amount of dialogue, then the self is not whole. Neimeyer (2000) discusses the human instinct to *story* or narrate the experiences of our everyday lives and believes that this human orientation towards telling our story can be viewed as having three dimensions: personal, interpersonal, and social or cultural. In terms of the personal dimension, people categorise their lives into specific episodes and organise them so that they can be understood in the context of other experiences. It is in the development of the self-narrative where this personal dimension is most obvious, with Neimeyer (2004) defining it as

> an overarching cognitive-affective-behavioural structure that organises the "micro-narratives" of everyday life into a "macro-narrative" that consolidates our self-understanding, establishes our characteristic range of emotions and goals, and guides our performance on the stage of the social world. (pp. 53-54)

I was unwilling to go on the journey to try to examine the strong, almost visceral reactions that I experienced, particularly when interviewing young women of my own age who had been

diagnosed with early-stage breast cancer for my PhD. It was easy to look at the surface and explain my own distress as being an expected result from witnessing the fears of these young women. To an extent this was true, and it would be concerning if one was not moved by the content of the interviews; however, I knew that it was deeper than just joining these women at an empathic level. White's (2007) work using the metaphors of journey and map in narrative therapy was useful to me as I tried to process my thoughts and feelings. His description of how people feel when first engaging in therapeutic conversations—described as a sense of departing from the familiar and embarking on journeys to new destinations without maps—really resonated with me. I drew comfort from his belief that as the reconstruction gathers pace it quickly becomes clear to clients that they are drawing from a stock of maps relevant to journeys already taken, and that they know a lot about mapmaking (White, 2007). When I finally allowed myself to stop and examine what was happening for me, I did feel map-less. I was not sure where this reflection would take me and worried what would happen if I took all of my stories out to look at them. Would I be able to put them back in again, and how would I be changed by doing this? When I did take the stories out, I could see the thread of loss that ran through. The visceral reactions were linked to fear of going through loss again and re-experiencing the loss associated with the death of my sister. I had a stock of maps related to the loss, and this stock provided not only a map of where I had been, but when put together, they provided my current location. The relief I felt related to the fact that my maps showed me a thread of loss—and fear of loss—that linked the experiences together.

The process of self-reflection has, I believe, made me a stronger practitioner, and I am sorry that it took so long to do. If I could go back in time, I would have urged myself to open the door and unpack the sister box much sooner. I would like to have talked about her more, but not just about her—about the pain that her death left us with. I remember the pain in my other sibling's face, and I wish that we had talked more. Like me, my sibling returned to education immediately after her death and progressed to graduation and beyond. We talked recently, as it would have been my sister's 50th birthday, and we really reminisced. We both reflected on how 31 years had passed and that she will always be 18 to us. For a moment it was like the three of us were there again as we spoke of her various exploits. Myself and my other sibling were far better behaved than my sister, or perhaps I mean boring. She lived her life to the fullest, doing things that I would never have dared to do, such as mitching (skipping) school, smoking, or stealing money from my mother's purse. I remember the kind of swagger she had as she returned from adventures with friends. I was always a little in awe of her daring nature, and it turned out that my sibling experienced the same feelings. It feels so wrong that she is in the sister box, when in her life nothing could have contained her.

There is a sense of guilt that I was not being truly authentic with the people that I worked with. I was asking them, particularly as participants in my PhD research, to open themselves up and talk to me about painful aspects of their lives, but I was not prepared to do that myself. As practitioners, we need to be aware of what we are asking clients to do and consider if it's something we have been prepared to do in our own lives. At the risk of sounding like I am excusing myself, I thought I was reflective at the time. I was not willfully setting out to be inauthentic. I thought I was being true at the time but, looking back to that time ten years ago, I can see now how compartmentalised I was. As Neimeyer (1995) says, self-reflection is an ongoing dynamic process and so this process of reflection is never done. There is never a point

at which we can truthfully say this is who I am and stay like that forever more. We are an evolving process, and our identities and self are changing and being modified.

As professionals, if we wish to be authentic not just to ourselves but also with the people we work with, we need to actively engage in this process of self-reflection and be receptive to the changes we encounter. The concept of emotional labour is a useful one, referring to the management of emotions during interactions to achieve a professional goal or maintain professional standards. When looking at grief and role identities, Theodosius (2012) notes that individuals become more aware of their emotions when they interpret them in relation to their identity. Emotions are central to the development of reflexivity and, given that emotions are a part of professionals' inner lives, these emotions are central for developing the skills of self-reflection and reflexivity (Archer, 2000). Burkitt (2012) uses the term "emotional reflexivity" noting that emotions are central in this reflexivity in the way that it "colours reflexivity and infuses our perception of others, the world around us and our own selves" (p. 458). In reflecting on the idea of emotional labour and emotional reflexivity, Wong et al. (2020) use the term "bounded caring" (p. 352), which I found particularly helpful. They discuss the idea that emotions are not clinical products that need to be managed or controlled but rather "experiences that connote human connections and understanding" (p. 360). Bounded caring refers to the situation where professionalism and emotional work intersect and can do so legitimately. Emotional work can enhance our patient encounters and our professional work, but to be truly effective it requires deep self-reflection. Wong et al. (2020) support this, noting that a key outcome of their study was the importance of professionalism and bounded caring as a site of expertise.

I had another encounter on a corridor a number of months ago, during the time I was reviewing and working on this article. The person was in distress because of some of the material that had arisen in the class earlier and had left the room to try to manage their emotions. As I approached the student, I thought about bounded caring and the intersection of professionalism and emotional labour. I sat with the student, and we talked and we shared. I have always shied away from sharing my past, but now I can see that there are times when limited, controlled sharing is appropriate. The student and I discussed loss and grief, and I told them that I had lost a sibling too. The look of recognition that passed across the student's face was incredible. It said, "You know this pain too." I will share more of my sister going forward and let that exuberant personality out of the box a bit more. I know that my experience of grief and loss is particular to me, but I recognise there are parts of that experience that might help someone else on their own journey of loss. This encounter has made me think further about how much we should reveal of ourselves and yet still work within the parameters of bounded caring, synthesising both professionalism and emotional labour.

Conclusions

I have been trying to write this article for the past decade or so and, when looking back on the experience, I cannot believe how unaware I was of the impact of loss in my personal life and the impact of my work in the oncology and palliative care setting. To be more truthful, I think I was aware but did not have the courage to stop, and think, and look at the patterns. The loss of my sister was too big, and I was afraid that if I opened the sister box it would overwhelm me. Guilt

is the recurring emotion running through these reflections; guilt that I did not protect my sister, guilt that I didn't look after that patient as well as she deserved, guilt that my child is experiencing anguish about death. After my sister died, there was the expectation that we, the remaining family, should just get on with it. Although it was not spoken out loud, it was the clear message, as we each struggled with our emotions individually. I did get on with it and ultimately chose to work in oncology and palliative care. Looking back, I wish that someone had sat the young girl down who had just lost her sister and explored what the experience was like for her. Of particular importance would have been to examine the role of guilt at an emotional level. At a rational level it was very clear that the death was not preventable but at an emotional level there was a huge burden of guilt. I studied grief and loss as part of my training and continuing professional education and yet did not fully acknowledge the impact of my unresolved grief. In fact, I think had I been asked, I would not have identified it as unresolved. I acknowledged what I had been through and reflected on it, but not in the depth that I have achieved now.

So, all I can think, all I can hope as I write this piece is that it might help someone else open their sister box and look at what that loss means for them. As Perlman (1989) says, "We look back to see ahead" (pp. 1-2). Unless we draw all of the strands together and ensure that the stories we tell have a dialogue between them, we are only creating a partial identity. The stories, good and bad, need to be joined together with the thread of our life to really tell who we are. As professionals, we need to be mindful of and reflect on the intersection of the personal and professional. Not only do we have a stock of maps relevant to other journeys taken, we also have a stock of tools to help us reflect and become better professionals. The onus is on us to open the door and walk fully into the room.

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Sitting with my Mother at the Lake at Sunset

Diane Richard-Allerdyce

This poem, "Sitting with my Mother at the Lake at Sunset," is for professional helpers about a former professional helper who is now living with dementia. As her daughter, as a poet, and as practitioner trained in poetry therapy, I am also speaking as a family caregiver. The poem is about the moments of insight that inform our relationships with those for whom we are caring, particularly the moments where a clear response to a request is not grantable. In this poem, I strive to reach beyond the surface of memory's narrative to access the livingness of each present moment that I am still able to share with my mother. I don't always understand the complex reality she is experiencing in each of those moments, but each is nevertheless a blessing, and wherever she is in her process, I'll try to meet her there.

It was after my father died of complications from cancer surgery at age 69 that my mother—a recently retired registered nurse, hospice administrator and end-of-life ethicist—faced living alone for the first time in her life. She was, in a way, an "expert" on grief, having taught about it as well as experienced it personally. No grief is easy, but she faced her widowhood with resolve and her usual grace, including through the loss of her second husband a decade and a half later. By that time she'd begun to exhibit dementia symptoms and could no longer live alone. My brother and I decided to move her to live with me in South Florida. Just before the move, she and I visited a beautiful park where my brother had mentioned spending time with her. She and I were in my car, gazing out over a quiet lake at the setting sun when the scene depicted in the poem took place.

SITTING WITH MY MOTHER AT THE LAKE AT SUNSET

She asks me if I spoke with him today,
her husband, gone two years. We watch the sun
setting over the lake, each fading ray
casting shadows through Spanish moss—what's gone
still palpable. A bench just ahead of us
beckons, but we decide to remain here
in the car, considering the fuss
of her walker over leaves and roots. We're
near enough. "I haven't spoken to him,"
I say, wanting to avoid what happened
last time—the panic, the recognition,
eventually, of the truth. "Have you?" *When
this moment has passed*, I think, *we'll be good*.
"Not since this morning," she answers at last.
"I'd like to give him a call if I could
 to let him know I'm here." It's a fair ask.
I'm a dancer among complications,
ducks flying out of sight. I hear their call.
"We'll call soon," I say. Her quiet patience
surrounds us. The last drops of sunlight fall
between us and the far horizon of
the lake. Pink and orange droplets. The park
now tucked in shadow. Unnamable love.
My hand on hers as we drive through the dark.

As a professor of literature as well as a writer, I offer this poem to the caregiving community as a reflection of how poetry can capture the nuances of life in simple but relatable language. I chose a formal structure for the poem, which means there are the same number of syllables in each line, and the last word of every other line rhymes, although that rhyme may be soft and subtle, rather than "sing-song-y." I've found that the rhyme schemes and regular meters of formal poetry offer boundaries within which strong and otherwise unwieldy feelings can be safely expressed; hence the iambic pentameter (five "heartbeats" per line) and every-other-line rhyme scheme of "Sitting with my Mother at the Lake at Sunset." The poem's formal structure thus becomes part of its meaning.

Throughout my career as a humanities professor, it is literature such as this that has inspired my understanding of human relationships, especially those portrayed in formal poetry—that of Robert Frost, Emily Dickinson, William Wordsworth, Gwendolyn Brooks, Edna St. Vincent Millay, W.B. Yeats, Elizabeth Bishop, and so many others. Teaching their works and writing my own sonnets, villanelles, and other formal poems have provided a place for expressing emotions from sorrow to joy. Poets and their readers can find in poetry a "safe harbor" for strong or confusing emotions.

Put another way, a poem can offer a kind of container for ideas and feelings that otherwise evade articulation. Whether reading aloud or reading to oneself silently, one can feel the rhythm of the poem replicating the inhalation and exhalation of physical breathing. Relaxing into a momentary respite from professional demands, the caregiver may find a kind of freedom in the very human reflection of a momentary insight that the poem conveys, and, by doing so, emerge from the reading refreshed. While the complexities of providing care to a person with dementia can be overwhelming, the poem's structure—its evenness and symmetry—represent a sense of order. Its rhyme scheme also functions to soothe and to smooth out edges of uncertainty, or rather to provide reassurance that even amidst the complications, one can find peace in the regularities of language, much as a selection of favorite music can carry a listener beyond the surface of events—another form of self-care.

Of particular use to the professional caregiver, in addition to its empathetic moment of insight into a human experience relevant to the caregiving role, is this poem's glimpse into the way formal poetry can provide a safety valve of sorts for expressing grief or doubt about the best course of action when caring for and responding to a person with dementia. The poem not only functions as a window into a mother's life through her daughter's eyes, heart, and words, but also provides a moment of respite for the professional caregiver taking time out of a busy schedule to read a poem, reinforcing the need for self-care and self-compassion among caregivers in addition to the compassion given to the recipient of that care. It reminds us that those we help, whether "patients" or caregivers, have a history, relationships, and their own ways of coping. It is wise of us to remain curious and creative in finding ways to connect with people whoever they appear to be and wherever they are on the trajectory of life's journey.

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Designing and Teaching an Anti-Violence Course in the Year 2020: Navigating the Pandemic, Protests, and Politics

Amber Sutton

Abstract: The year 2020 proved to be incredibly challenging for educators and students as we navigated a global pandemic, protests in response to police brutality and violence, and a presidential election. This narrative reflection shares an intimate glimpse into my role as an educator responsible for designing and teaching an anti-violence course to graduate-level social work students during unprecedented times. By utilizing elements of the pedagogy of vulnerability, such as not knowing and the co-creation of knowledge, the course became a place of healing and connection for both the teacher and students. I believe educators would benefit from exploring and conducting further research on how models such as the pedagogy of vulnerability can enhance students' learning experiences in anti-violence coursework. This *different kind of learning*—one not solely focused on outcomes—encourages us all to relax into the mystery of lifelong learning that often begins with a deep dive examination of ourselves.

Keywords: education, social work, technology, pedagogy

In the months leading up to the fall 2020 semester, I scribbled down these thoughts on a Post-It note:

> My dream to teach realized; my voice finally heard
> Long overdue.
> The student becomes the teacher, and the teacher the student
> Exposed.
> The forever healing of my own wounds
> Stakes are high.
> Growth is painful but so is stagnancy
> No more hiding. No going back.

It is August 24, 2020. The first night of class. Mint tea in hand. Generations of familial trauma in my bones. Son's laughter in the background. Fourteen students. Fourteen more weeks to go. No going back, indeed.

Lobbying to add a course exclusively focusing on the various forms and tenets of intimate partner violence (IPV) to a social work curriculum had been years in the making. I originally pitched and agreed to teach my graduate-level class "Violence Across the Lifecourse" pre-COVID-19, pre-protests, and pre-presidential election. Prior to returning to the academy as a doctoral student, I worked as an advocate in a multitude of settings for and with survivors of IPV. Anti-violence work was not sexy; in fact, it was risky and yet profoundly necessary.

During my time as an advocate, I was forced to confront my own personal experiences. I have been told that when I was born, I attempted to exit the birth canal feet-first, an instinctual move that I believe signaled my preparation for a world I would soon enter. I spent many years

running. Running from memories I thought I had buried but that came to visit me in quiet moments like old ghosts. I knew the landscape of IPV all too well, as my Alabama kin's roots in violence run deep. Kin who chose to inflict harm on others; kin who at different points in time were all harmed themselves. As a child, I acted as the protector of my mother and younger brother, often placing myself between them and men's rage. I was a natural advocate before the word found its way into my lexicon. Working in this field, I have died a thousand deaths only to be rebirthed again and again. I am a survivor-turned-thriver—a metamorphosis in its own right.

Growing weary and frustrated with the mass injustice of violence against women and the lack of training for social workers, I knew I had to go back to the beginning: education. As a newly graduated social worker, I was ill-equipped to work with survivors of IPV. Throughout my entire educational journey, I was offered only one class that focused on IPV, and it was during my MSW program after I had already been a practicing social worker. I judged my work with survivors in terms of outcomes and binary ways of thinking (those who leave abusive situations and those who don't) rather than processes (safety is a series of steps, not a single step), and I did not realize the magnitude of exploring my own history in relation to my work as an advocate. I have traveled quite the path to recognize and admit to how my own experiences, values, privileges, and biases inherently shape my work, and how my own trauma mastery—what Lipsky and Burk (2009) refer to as a coping mechanism in which "we seek to turn a traumatic situation in which we once felt powerless into a new situation where we feel competent and in charge" (p. 156)—showed up in my work with survivors.

We all arrive at this profession with our own histories and stories just waiting to tell themselves no matter how hard we try to silence them. This baggage makes us human. Our job is to unpack it, responsibly and ethically, by engaging in our own work so that we can do *the* work. There was a disconnect for me during my educational experiences, and I wanted to move away from fragmented learning or learning without the whole person, including the emotions, the body, the mind, and the spirit (Miller, 2019). I set out to create and facilitate a collaborative classroom environment that I, myself, had always craved.

Almost nine years after becoming a professional social worker, my time to teach was finally here. I had always envisioned teaching in a classroom and interacting with students in person, but COVID-19 had other ideas. Safety protocols led me to facilitating the class via Zoom, which felt like a nightmare at first, especially for a highly sensitive introvert. For a second, I considered running and hiding. Not only did I have to prepare course content, but I now had to adapt to a new teaching format in a matter of weeks, all while attempting to stay afloat in the crashing waves of imposter syndrome. I incessantly worried about my ability to be an effective communicator in the virtual world.

The year 2020 was one of the strangest and most challenging years that I can recall from my time here on earth. We found ourselves amid a global pandemic; a presidential election; protests of the killing of Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC); and increasing rates of femicide, particularly against women of color. The social and political climate provided plenty of subject matter to debate and discuss. There were also extraordinary moments of hope and uprising as a surge of advocates banded together to call out the injustices plaguing our world. It

was not lost on me that there was no better time to lead this class. I no longer had the privilege of flying under the radar. All eyes were on me. As a White woman in the academy, I held incredible amounts of privilege and power and wanted to be intentional about not making my ego, thoughts, feelings, and opinions the focal points. I garnered strength through humility. I remembered Glennon Doyle's (2020) words and forged ahead knowing that I would need to accept that one of my privileges I would burn was my own emotional comfort. My whole house was suddenly up in flames.

Teaching during these times was an interesting predicament to find myself in. I was a doctoral student finishing up my last semester of coursework. I was also preparing to take comprehensive exams while struggling to balance the duties of being a mother, a research assistant, an author, a program evaluator, a partner, and a friend. All that academia entails significantly intensified. What I would later come to discover is that the identities I brought into the Zoom room created power dynamics that I consistently worked to address. At the same time, my disclosure created connection and shared experiences with the students because I appealed to their humanity.

Before the course began, I emailed each student an introduction sheet with the following quote attached [block style for emphasis]:

> "As a classroom community, our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another's voice, in recognizing one another's presence." – bell hooks (1994, p. 8)

The purpose of this was twofold. For one thing, it was crucial that I know my audience. Questions asking about career interests, personal and professional experience with violence, and reasons for taking this course all served to inform me about who I was speaking to and how I could present information in safer and more intentional ways. Secondly, I wanted to convey interest in my students as people, to communicate that they mattered and were worth getting to know. I asked them to share with me information (that they were comfortable with and that remained within professional boundaries) that would help me to know them better. In my experience as a supervisor, I learned not to ask my employees to do something that I was not willing to do myself. The same principle applied to this class. I completed the exercise and shared my answers with them in an attempt to model feminist values, including collaboration and vulnerability, that the course would call for and encourage.

The actual course content utilized intersectionality as a critical lens to stretch our thinking of IPV beyond just individual acts and to open our minds to not only *what* is happening, but *why* it is happening. Given our country's longstanding complicity and tolerance of violence against women, it was imperative that IPV be viewed in the context of larger-level oppressions such as systemic racism, sexism, and classism. I credited Black women such as Patricia Hill Collins, Rosa Parks, Frances Beal, Anna Julia Cooper, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Sojourner Truth, Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde, and the women of the Combahee River Collective for how their advocacy and scholarship birthed out of Black feminist values shaped anti-violence work. I was also heavily influenced by the pedagogy of vulnerability (POV), a term developed by Brantmeier (2013) that includes the core components of mutual self-disclosure, not knowing, and

co-learning in the knowledge co-creation process as well as a melding of knowledge, abilities, skills, and experiences.

Borrowing from Brené Brown's explanation of how she chooses to begin her team meetings (Mikel, 2020), we began each class with a two-word check-in, or temperature checks as I liked to call them, describing how we were feeling that day. I aimed to share power by assigning weekly discussion facilitators that showed an appreciation for the *lived curriculum* and contributions of every single person in the class. The lived curriculum—studying our own experiences of the world as valid sources of knowledge—challenges dominant forms of knowledge presented in the formal curriculum of various levels of schooling and decenters the power of official school knowledge (Apple, 1993; Styles, 2014). POV is about bringing the lived curriculum of both teachers and students alike into the classroom as a source of knowledge (Brantmeier, 2013). Essentially, the course structure mirrored that of a psychoeducational group in which the group members or, in this case, the students, formed a sacred space. Pulling from my experience as a group facilitator, I knew the class needed to feel a sense of ownership over the material to be invested in the process. I also recognized what it meant to make space for both extroverted and introverted learners; that participation could be expressed in ways beyond just speaking. Actions such as listening, using the chat box, and affirming body language were ways to effectively communicate. Together we created a virtual circle, a ceremony. I paid homage to the Black and Indigenous women who for hundreds of years have understood the sovereignty of creating places to learn and heal in unison with others. The students posed questions about the material and shared opinions and experiences with one another. I contributed, challenged, and validated when necessary. I did not want to be the sole holder of knowledge.

At a time when so much felt out of control, I implemented tiny ways of restoring autonomy and decision-making ability, such as fielding questions and comments using the Zoom whiteboard, polling, offering evaluations and feedback opportunities throughout the semester, and using discussion posts. Additionally, scheduled workdays in which students could utilize class time to complete assignments and vote/participate in the presidential election were important to the process of honoring their time. It was a three-hour evening class on Tuesdays from 5:30 PM to 8:30 PM that landed directly in the middle of my students' lives and mine. They were also attempting to balance the demands of their lives and were carrying burdens of their own including personal and professional hardships. They were parents, professionals, and people navigating graduate-level education during a pandemic.

As a graduate student myself, I was well aware of Zoom fatigue. I worked consciously to address it by building in breaks, music, and meditation minutes; encouraging food and drink; and engaging in other self-care activities. Self-care was a verb, and it served as an accountability measure for all of us. Self-care was established as a necessary and integral part of this course as signaled by the completion of individualized plans by everyone in the class. I shared with the students [block style for emphasis]:

> "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare." – Audre Lorde (1988, p. 131)

We discussed burnout and how rest is productive. I was careful never to promise absolute emotional safety in my class but did promise I would strive to create a safer and braver space. Outside check-ins with students became a regular occurrence, and reminders for self-care and flexibility were all a part of a compassionate teaching practice. I must have said the word grace 50 times and asked for it a few times myself. The class needed to be supportive as well as practical and useful. I called upon other practicing social workers both locally in the community and nationally to serve as guest speakers and to share their contact information. Networking increased confidence and decreased isolation.

I had come to experience firsthand how paramount reflexivity as a practice is to social work. Demystifying and decolonializing implicit and explicit biases that inhibit relationships and creativity empowers whole-person learning (hooks, 1994). By answering reflexive practice questions such as "Who are you in relation to this work?" and "How have your past experiences, values, and your multiple identities (in the context of power, privilege, oppression) impacted your understanding and/or reactions to the topic?," the students began to grapple with the ethical practice of critical introspection into who they are and how this informs how they interact with clients. Their responses were nothing short of spectacular. They were authentic, raw, and courageous. Many revealed their own stories of survivorship, and throughout the semester I read evidence of tremendous personal and professional growth. I felt honored to be invited into their worlds. I encouraged them to view their experiences as assets that can strengthen their practice rather than impede it. The students also had the opportunity to reach audiences outside of the academy by writing blog posts and op-eds critiquing different media representations of violence. Even though at times it felt like a steep learning curve, each week the students showed up. There were nights when we were tired. Tired of being on camera, tired of life in a pandemic, tired of the brutality and violence, and tired of school. I echoed the words of Mariame Kaba: "Hope is a discipline" (Scahill, 2021, paras 61-62). We rumbled, we struggled, and, out of resiliency and a larger purpose, we rose. Turns out, self-discovery can be cathartic and a catalyst for recovery.

The topics and readings were by no means comfortable. In fact, the material was often excruciating. We were diving into the tragic parts of humanity from womb to tomb, experiences that almost all of us were familiar with on some front, whether it be personal or professional. We began the quest with reproductive coercion, abuse against children, and teen dating violence. We then ventured into how IPV affects individuals in underserved communities such as veterans, LGBTQIA+, incarcerated women, BIPOC, and aging adults. The content had a way of challenging our beliefs and perceptions about individuals experiencing violence and those who perpetrate it. Part of the challenge was having to inspect our own darkness more deeply than we imagined. As we became more informed and aware, we were slowly able to allow parts of our old narratives to fade, like embers from the past. We relied on research to inform our thinking and our practice skills. We read articles and poetry, we listened to podcasts, reviewed assessments and safety planning tools, watched videos, and pulled from multiple sources to enhance engagement and dialogue. Some of the most uncomfortable tasks, however, came from acknowledging this work as a calling and a craft that takes an understanding of the complexity and messiness of human nature. It takes the strength and sacred act of holding space without fixing, judging, pathologizing, or rescuing.

Addressing IPV and issues that exacerbate violence is a process, not an outcome. A realistic goal cannot be to end violence. We are not going to end all violence, but we can make progress. This can be grueling to accept and simultaneously freeing. It allows us to lean into the work in a more humble and empowered way. Just simply holding space—and, in our case, virtual space—is a gift, because what greater gift is there than to feel seen and heard? To feel a genuine connection? The unlearning is often harder than the actual learning because we have been conditioned to seek a single solution to dealing with multifaceted individuals and issues. I pushed the students to worry less about finding the right answer and focus more on honoring self-determination and autonomy—sometimes a difficult lesson for ambitious and eager social work students. I sought to shatter the misleading notion of mastery that only works to perpetuate paternalistic tendencies and false notions, assuring us that we are the experts. Instead, I encouraged them to use their voices and platforms to live out anti-oppressive values.

I remember when Kentucky Attorney General Daniel Cameron decided not to charge the police officers responsible for killing Breonna Taylor with murder. In a moment of rage and grief, I pinned a discussion post to the class sharing my guttural reactions to the injustice of how Black women are treated in this country. Concurrently, the femicide rates in our own state were increasing as women and women of color were being killed by current or former intimate partners at a rate of what seemed like one every other day. I had BIPOC in my class and had grown to care about all my students. I never could forget the weight and responsibility I felt as a White and highly educated course instructor. One of the difficult challenges in teaching this course was that violence was occurring in real time. That came with its own balancing act of leaning into/promoting the work and wanting to throw my hands up in surrender. This class was not just about case studies, anecdotal stories, or readings out of a textbook—it was about people's lives. The work always continued, and through the growing pains, we emerged as more compassionate social workers and human beings. I witnessed passions ignite that motivated students to want to tackle violence in their communities, in their workplaces, and in their lives. They found themselves in the work, and convictions were contagious. Lesson plans and agendas did not always take center stage as sometimes it was more important to pause, catch our breath, and decompress. We carved out moments to laugh and to celebrate one another. The students came to trust each other, evidenced by the comfort they displayed in communicating their thoughts, opinions, and experiences. Inward and onward, we pressed forward.

At different points in the semester, there were times where my son and dog made cameo appearances on the Zoom calls. I often scheduled a break around the time of my son's bedtime so that I could read him a story before rushing to admit a guest speaker from the waiting room. I consumed pouches of applesauce and fruit gummies on camera. I divulged my love of Taco Bell and students laughed and cheered. The $5 nacho box served as a staunch reminder of class fragility and economic insecurity in a world where graduate students are just trying to survive. It was real and relatable. Authenticity was our way through. It served as our guiding light and splashed an element of humanity onto our country's inhumane canvas.

Although it could be terrifying to be radically challenged in the way we viewed these topics and the systems in which we all operate, it was thrilling to acknowledge how we can use our gifts to enact change and the possibilities that surround us when those of us with power choose to step

aside and share it.

This class allowed us to reconnect as humans and to engage in the hard work, the heart work, and the soul work. I witnessed the power of vulnerability, and it was transformational. It's amazing what happens when we treat each other as humans first and students second. Healing can and does take place virtually if you are intentional about the space you create. My role as an instructor reflected my work as a group facilitator, in that the students were encouraged to own their collective and individual experiences. Along with a virtual wellness kit, evaluations, and a sharing of gratitude, we ended the final class with this Toni Morrison quote:

> I tell my students, "When you get these jobs that you have been so brilliantly trained for, just remember that your real job is that if you are free, you need to free somebody else. If you have some power, then your job is to empower somebody else." (Houston, 2003, p. 4)

Social work educators need to collect more research on how models such as the pedagogy of vulnerability can enhance students' learning experiences in anti-violence coursework as they emerge as professional social workers. How can we as teachers use POV in conjunction with skills, assessments, and competencies? How can we prioritize both and work to create a more culturally humble environment? There are opportunities to discover and illuminate incredibly powerful data—data that moves beyond just a survey and captures lived experiences of practicing social workers and advocates. This information can strengthen curricula and can serve as a guiding tool for fellow educators interested in providing their own anti-violence courses.

Ultimately, I ended up teaching what I needed to learn and writing what I needed to read. I hope that future research collects information about how the POV creates a collaborative atmosphere that welcomes a different kind of learning. One that is not solely focused on achieving outcomes but one that welcomes students to relax into the mystery, to answer their call as lifelong learners, and to acknowledge that this learning begins with a deeper dive into themselves. I look forward to the continued journey of speaking truth to power as I have humbly accepted the honor of teaching this course again.

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"The Lightning Rod":
Reflections of a Female Facilitator of Men's Groups

Olufunke Oba

Abstract: Framed by feminist theories, the Partner Assault Response (PAR) group offered by the John Howard Society (JHS) in Canada helps men understand the impacts of intimate partner violence and challenge underlying beliefs that perpetuate the cycle of violence toward women. This paper—drawing on my field journals and participant observation—narrates my unique experience as a female part of a facilitator duo and includes salient actions for supporting participants' journeys. However, facilitating men's groups is fraught with pitfalls for female facilitators. The paper also makes explicit the implications of my experiences for other social workers and helping professionals. The central implication rests on the usefulness of sociological, systemic, and structural lenses—including feminist theory, socialization theory, the developmental perspective, and social learning processes and group dynamics—to foster changes in the cognitive, emotional, motivational, and behavioral patterns of male perpetrators of violence and their interactions with women.

Keywords: group dynamics, female facilitator, men, partner assault, violence, patriarchy, growth

Oh, the Places I Will Go

I did not set out initially to work with men; as a foreign-trained professional seeking a job where I could use my degrees and skills to make a difference, I encountered employers demanding the elusive Canadian experience or education. My multi-pronged approach of volunteering, seeking employment, and applying to go back to school culminated simultaneously in admission to a Master of Social Work program for the next academic session and a job as a youth counselor. I accepted both, planning to quit the job once school resumed. My employers hated to see me leave but, upon realizing I was leaving for a graduate program that included full time practicum placements, reluctantly accepted my resignation—but not before persuading me to consider taking a part-time position that only involved working a few hours a week. Due to changing norms and increased reporting of domestic violence, the number of partner assault groups offered by my organization were growing and female facilitators who could engage men were needed. The limited hours of the group facilitator role aligned well with my schooling and this marked my foray into facilitating men's groups. Although I got other jobs upon graduating and never returned to my youth counselor job, I continued facilitating the men's groups for many years and gained tremendous insights from this unplanned, challenging, but fulfilling opportunity.

I was often asked by friends and family why I worked with men who had been violent toward women, as many wondered how I could bear to support men given societal views about men in these programs. Finally, after years outside the facilitator role, I am intrigued by my longevity in the Partner Assault Response (PAR) program. Now, as a social work professor, I reflect on what my fellow facilitators and I did to meet the men at their varied levels of motivation or resistance, using eclectic approaches as dictated by the transtheoretical approach (Begun et al., 2003). The

most common intervention for men who have been abusive is the group format (Saunders, 2008) because it has the potential to connect men, provide shared accountability using the power of the group, and motivate men collectively. The use of paired male and female facilitators is an added feature of this group and, in this paper, I narrate the opportunities, triggers, lessons, and emotions of a most unlikely facilitator of men's groups, while noting that this is not meant to be an evaluation of the group's effectiveness (a separate forthcoming paper will focus on this).

"What's a Woman Doing Here?"

Most of the men in our groups had committed offenses against women. Many individuals still refer to these men as "batterers attending batterers' groups" (Austin & Dankwort, 1999), which, not surprisingly, does not make men happy about having a woman lead their group. Labeled batterers by society and scholars, the men expected anger, revenge, and retribution from female facilitators, and they were quick to say things like "the pendulum has swung too far to the other side" and "women now have all the power." They detested being in the PAR group, resented seeing a woman in power, and questioned the rationale for the state "interfering in private family matters." The men fantasized about times past when "women knew their place and were to be seen and not heard," and they wondered aloud what a woman was doing in the group. We female facilitators soon realized we had unwittingly become "lightning rods" for the men to vent their negative emotions, albeit in the safety of the group which we could provide.

John Howard Society (JHS), the organization I worked for, began offering these groups because the founder, John Howard, an 18th-century Englishman, dedicated his life to prison reforms after his own firsthand experience of prison when his ship was captured by French privateers in 1751 (JHS, n.d.). The JHS, therefore, offers extrajudicial psychoeducational interventions, such as the PAR groups, rather than incarceration (Price & Rosenbaum, 2007). Although PAR groups offer potential rehabilitation, they do not minimize the grave impacts of intimate partner violence but instead recognize the need for alternatives to punitive responses rooted in the criminal justice system, including arrests, charges, and jail terms (Birnbaum et al., 2017), especially for first time offences. As facilitators, we adopted a humane approach to challenging societal normalization of violence toward women but, because of perceived gender dynamics and personal challenges, some group members focused their angst on the female facilitator, the lightning rod. My challenge was to not absorb the negative currents and signals; instead, I redirected them to lessen the possibility of destruction. I heard the men bemoan the power women supposedly held to just call the cops. Having police cruisers show up, being led out in handcuffs, squatting with friends, moving back home, or having to spend time at the "Maplehurst Hilton"—a nickname for the provincial prison—were all incidents fraught with shame for the men I encountered. I saw men desperately try to hide their emotions about their experiences. The impact of years of socialization into the "Act Like a Man Box" (Kivel, 1992) which instills and propagates patriarchy was all too evident. And as I watched, I, too, could not help but wonder what in the world I was doing at the PAR group.

To the Abyss I Must Not Go

The Act Like a Man Box puts unhealthy pressure on men through often unattainable prescriptions of what men can or cannot do, possess, and feel (or not feel), which invalidates

emotions other than anger and instills the necessity of stoicism and control (Kivel, 1992). This integral part of patriarchal male socialization is reinforced through physical, verbal, and emotional abuse, which shames men who do not conform (Jewkes et al., 2015; Posadas, 2017). The Act Like a Man Box condones violence, power, and control over women, children, and others. Men who do not conform are then shamed and pushed back into the box through feminine labels to perpetuate this cycle of violence. Men who are caring and sensitive are labeled "sissy," "girlie," "doll," "woman," "mama's boy," "cry baby," etc. Men consider being likened to women to be the ultimate insult, and thus they are shamed back into rigid definitions of masculinity. Inferioritization and vilification of women also put men under pressure and do not bode well for relationships, as males who are taught women are worth less than men find it hard to honor them, and females who internalize such messages struggle to value themselves.

The "Act Like a Lady Box" (Kivel, 1992) also exists, forcing women to smile, be nice, and never express anger, which leads to assertive women being construed as angry. In a men's group with a female facilitator, this could easily create unwanted tensions. To deal with their discomfort, some men justified their violent choices, saying, "She asked for it, she pushed my buttons; she made me lose it." I needed restraint to avoid taking the bait or throwing myself into the abyss. Our group followed an open group format with new members joining each week; it was helpful that newcomers joined others who had been in PAR for weeks or months. The veterans, as we called them, often spoke up, saying, "I also used to be very angry when I joined PAR, but these people are the ones helping us; they are not the police or the prosecutors." Interventions like these from fellow members resonated with newcomers to the group, and they listened, knowing their peers were in the group for similar reasons as themselves, which reduced defensiveness while promoting reflectivity. Promoting interactions among members, not just with the facilitators, calmed anxieties and contributed to everyone moving along the journey of change; it harnessed the power of the group to validate and empathize with each other, while correcting entrenched perceptions and ensuring growth in members and the facilitators.

Being female in a men's group can feel like being thrown over the abyss. To avoid this feeling, as well as other self-sabotaging behaviors I found that staying anchored in my purpose was integral. Female facilitators, naturally, wanted to hold male group members accountable, but many were brought to tears and faced a revolving door. A dear friend with whom I worked in my regular full time child welfare job lasted only one week before deciding it was not for her. She asked me how, as a child welfare worker, I could bear to listen to the men "whining about child welfare workers," but I believed the men's comments were not to be taken personally. Furthermore, I did not disagree that child protective services can be oppressive, and I was open to learning from the men. I also learned what does not work when seeking to engage men. The group was transformative, but not the space for a female facilitator's own unfinished business. Those who became conflated with the men's female partners become fair game for attacks, and the potential for retraumatization from men made many of my female coworkers opt out of a role so fraught with transference. My heart broke to see them go, but it opened my eyes to landmines I might face if I was insecure/fixated on proving my legitimacy/inadvertently reinforcing defensive and undesirable behaviors. In those moments, I remembered a wise mentor's warning that whenever I found myself working too hard to convince a client to change, I must interrogate my motives. Thinking we can fix anyone besides our own self is a slippery slope to misandry. I stayed the course by deciphering the places I would not go and, in lightning rod fashion, helped

men send their destructive energies out safely rather than into the bodies of significant others. I also had to ground myself to not take things personally or be damaged by the flow of negativity.

Awareness, Balance, and Connection (ABC): To the Basics We Go

My self-awareness and realism were balanced with the knowledge that, my gender notwithstanding, I was just as qualified as any male group facilitator. My degrees in sociology and social work enabled me to acknowledge the macro-systems and dysfunctional patriarchal myths within which the men were situated. Interrogating my own self-defeating thoughts enhanced my empathy for the men as they made feeble attempts to hide their self-loathing. Balance required that I connect with each of them as a human who also struggles, and to meet them where they were. Their offense did not have to define them, and, as a lightning rod, my raison d'être included helping men feel safe to explore feelings they were socialized to deny. Knowing that upholding relational accountability ultimately helps the women and children in male perpetrators' lives was important motivation for the work I did and how I did it, and I was connected to and anchored in the JHS mission: "Effective, just, and humane responses to crime and its causes" (JHS, n.d.).

This awareness and balance were instrumental to gaining the trust of the group. As the participants recognized that I wasn't judging them, they were free to own their actions, because I was not warring with them. Even in holding them accountable for statements such as, "It just happened. I just lost it. I had no choice," I used activities that communicated to the men that they were not puppets—they were capable adults with the ability to choose. This balance between promoting accountability for the harm the men had done—and could do again—and the need to engage them informed my refrain: If it "just happened," it will surely just happen again. This compelled men to consider how to break the cycle of violence by ensuring violent incidents became less frequent, and time between episodes became longer. Such attainable baby steps encouraged them to learn new skills—taking time out, listening to their cues, and using active listening and communication techniques. Gaining these skills and being validated by the success they achieved reinforced the men's idea that they had "response-ability" to choose their thoughts about, and responses to, negative stimuli. This was key to breaking the cycle of habituated reactions, but it took some men several rounds of the sixteen weekly sessions because of self-limiting internalized beliefs about power and gender. This process demanded patience, but it was fulfilling to hear men say, "I get it now; I hated you and what you stood for, but how I misjudged you." Each man was unique: I could not generalize based on education, status, or race. Relieved to be saved from incarceration by the "wake-up call," some members arrived ready to implement change, while others had never contemplated the need to change. I relied on the group dynamics and witnessed men navigate the complexities of change, individually and collectively.

Back to the Larger Society, We Must Go

We chose not to use the term "batterers' groups" or call the men "batterers," as that labels the men as one thing and one thing only, even though these men comprised academics, business owners, mechanics, teachers, police officers, firefighters, security guards, students, truck drivers, and even social workers. The men's actions upon entering the group—pulling their caps over their faces, adopting macho swagger, taking the back seat, and avoiding eye

contact—demonstrated their own inner wrestlings but we did not judge them. Denying or minimizing a violent incident can be a strong predictor of recidivism (Grann & Wedin, 2002), but I understood these face-saving strategies to be informed by patriarchal, religious, and cultural norms which had left the men ill-equipped to handle the fallout of not having power over others. Supporting men to feel safe in the group helped them connect with emotions they would be mortified to express on the shop floor or in locker rooms; this promoted vulnerability and authenticity. Group members shared what brought them to the group. Suddenly, what the men had assumed were auto-responses were exposed as learned behaviors resulting from flawed societal messages and family patterns. The liberation of sharing and revealing inner bruises increased their empathy for those they had hurt, and this fostered discussions about choosing what kind of men they wanted to be and what they wanted to be known for. Being part of the "locker room herd" was no longer satisfying for them, as they saw male facilitators modeling healthy masculinity despite also growing up in a patriarchal society. Some of the men who were the angriest and seemingly most hostile when they started in the group confessed, they stopped contributing to sexist jokes after attending; one business owner even recommended that his staff attend the group voluntarily, and he reimbursed the cost to those who completed the sessions.

[S]mother Danger is a No-Go

Intentionality in integrating men back into society also included recognizing that I was not their mother, and my role was not to coddle them; rather, I was to prioritize the safety of their partners and children (Vall et al., 2014, 2016, 2018). Remorse shown in the group would be tested in the larger ecosystem, so we followed up with the Partner Contact Worker who heard from their partners. Often what the men were reporting was corroborated by their partners but, at times, it was not. Men often cited good "make-up sex," gifts, flowers, nice meals their partner cooked, and smiles as evidence that she was "over" the abuse, but we incorporated these issues into our group discussions.

We also used activities to illustrate the pay-offs and consequences of abuse. Perceived pay-offs, which included being feared or respected, having one's way, gaining control, and experiencing a rush of adrenaline, were few in comparison to the costs. The men came up with jail time, legal fees, criminal records, and deportation, as well as the loss of their job, marriage, children, house, career, health, money, aspirations, reputation, and respect. They mentioned involvement with child welfare systems, loss of privacy, freedom, curfews, and restraining orders. The atmosphere became somber as they noted that the benefits were few and fleeting, while the costs were many, enduring, and sometimes fatal. The intentional trust-building and accountability paid off as the veil of conforming to rigid masculinity fell off.

The seriousness of the costs of domestic violence, such as murder-suicides, alerted me to the danger of smothering the men or minimizing the harm they had done. When a man could not appreciate the power dynamics that made children or partners recant their reports for fear of reprisals, he needed a facilitator that would hold him accountable, not one who would exacerbate the danger (George & Stith, 2014). I had to face my discomfort at seeing men cry, and I suppressed the urge I would often feel to rush and comfort them. I only saw my father cry a few times: when my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer and when he lost his two brothers. Growing up, I hardly saw other men cry either; therefore, my reaction to seeing grown men shed

tears was more about me than them. The myth that men don't cry can also affect facilitators, but these teachable moments when men released their repressed emotions or learned to sit with their pain were vital to the men's healing journeys. These moments were instructive for me, too, and I became adept at letting men cry, listening to them without theorizing their reasons, or smothering out the organic opportunities for far-reaching change.

Ego Tango: Together We Must Go

I was not the only one who had to pay attention to my own inner processes; there was a grave danger of collusion in male PAR groups facilitated by a man and woman, considering the potential for normalizing and legitimizing masculine supremacy and harmful behaviors (Roy et al., 2013). My male co-facilitators were, for the most part, self-aware and wary of misogyny. They upheld the group mandate and intentionally modeled healthy masculinity. For instance, a colleague shared how, taking his cue from his father and older brothers, he never shed a tear when his mother died. Years later, he had to address years of pent-up emotions as he mourned the loss of his mother for the first time in a therapist's office. This self-disclosure humanized him, helping the group gain appreciation of manhood beyond anger, stoicism, and violence.

We were intentional in participating in the weekly *check-in*—a process whereby we and members shared stories about events of the preceding week, followed by an invitation to reflect on what to change in terms of responses to stimuli. At the end of each night, a similar process of *checking out* was followed, whereby members and facilitators articulated our goals for the coming week. I was intentional in sharing areas I was working on in my parenting, setting goals for myself that I would report on the next week. The three male co-facilitators I worked with over the years also shared failings, successes, goals, and challenges. Male facilitators modeled respect for the organization's mandate and receptivity to feedback. Occasionally, a male facilitator condoned paternalistic, patronizing beliefs and behaviors—laughing at, or even initiating, derogatory jokes about women. They appeared innocuous enough initially, but became concerning and behooved me to use respectful, yet clear, communication to redirect our focus to our clients' best interests. We discussed these and other topics during our debriefing time after dismissing the group and brought some issues up for clarification at team meetings.

The respectful partnering of male and female facilitators is critical to modeling egalitarian gendered relationships (Roy et al., 2013). We shared administrative tasks, including writing probation attestation letters, confirming attendance, authorizing absence, and issuing completion reports and court appearance letters. Men tended to direct such requests to the male facilitator, who had the task of deciding not to subvert the group's principles by taming his ego. At team meetings, we discussed the importance of being attuned to the typical cis- and hetero-normative gender roles, whereby males assign tasks like taking attendance, putting on the coffee, photocopying handouts, or washing dishes to the female facilitator. New co-facilitators who had yet to imbibe the JHS philosophy had to be reminded to redirect the group members and to ensure that reports, case notes, and letters were collaboratively written during our debriefing time.

Interestingly, some men preferred to approach the female facilitator flirtatiously or manipulatively; some simply believed the women facilitators had magical powers to fix their

female partners and/or their relationships. Unwanted, invasive personal questions were red flags and, with experience, I could distinguish genuine curiosity from manipulation. We used communication skills of reframing, redirecting, assertiveness, and limit-setting to develop boundaries at the onset, and we used the group guidelines to ensure our own continued mutual growth.

Growth to Go

I helped men to be present in their own stories by consciously framing my work with feminist theory and recognizing power differentials in the relationships they described. For instance, to be yelled at by one's boss and displace the anger onto a partner behind closed doors underscored the element of choice in *where* and *when* abuse was used. Juxtaposing fear of repercussions at work with the absence of consequences in the home highlighted contradictions often pointed out by other men who had grown aware of the ways the cycle of abuse is perpetuated. Individual growth led to group progress, as men shared the ways in which their thoughts, actions, and outcomes shifted. A memorable example of this growth was when an older participant took a liking to a belligerent 24-year-old newcomer to the group. He told the young man that he had lived his entire life not questioning society's views about women, being a good but "emotionally amputated" breadwinner who abused his wife of many decades until, finally, his daughter called the police. Very emotional, he looked the young man in the eyes and said, "Don't be a fool. Do you want to be me at 82? Do you want to be sitting here learning how to treat the people you claim to love?" You could have heard a pin drop in the silence that followed, and I wondered how the young man would respond, only to see him kneel beside the older man and offer him Kleenex. He took a seat adjacent to the older man, and they both sat in silence almost oblivious to anyone. The young man latched onto him from that day and became more present and engaged in the group. Long before there was an after-care group for graduates from the PAR group, members had found ways to provide mutual support that extended to practical aid, which reduces isolation (Saunders, 2008). Group members who completed the program and came back for a refresher, or to ask questions in a safe space where they would not be judged, signaled to others that the group works, which corroborated our work and reinforced the importance of trusting the group process.

As the woman in the room, I learned through the years to be comfortable with silence and exercise restraint so members could find their voice, speak out, and grow. Often members expected a reaction from me and would look in my direction but, when I was not hasty, someone else in the group inevitably spoke up. If I was quick to confront, other members may never speak up, which would deprive us of their valuable perspectives. Instead, my restraint allowed members to challenge each other. They made asserting statements such as, "Initially, I was angry like you. These people did not put us here; our actions put us here, and they are the ones trying to help us."

It was gratifying to see growth in the men, and I'd watch in amazement at how small changes they made had an impact on the outcomes they encountered. In one example, a member who was frustrated by his child welfare worker received feedback and suggestions which he heeded, and this earned him more visitation privileges. He shared that he changed his self-talk from: "She is out to get me" to "She is judging me based on my past, but I am not defined by it. I am growing

in empathy for my children who witnessed the violence. My focus is on them. I am the parent." The group erupted in applause when he was allowed to go home after his court case was dismissed, and he brought in snacks and drinks for the group like so many did on their last day. Despite the serious issues we discussed, the group became a family.

I also used humor where possible to address the sensitive issues we discussed in the group. In this job, I could not take myself too seriously or take things personally. So we often had fun doing the job. My co-facilitator for most of my years with the JHS went by a nickname which, when combined with my name, produced a funny play on words. We began to write on the board in big bold letters: "Welcome to the Chip and Funky Show!" making the men smile in spite of themselves. We also joked that members who returned after they graduated could not get enough of our show. This humor set the tone for the group, helping everyone to relax as much as possible given the circumstances.

Men Can and Do Change

Talking about their daughters was one way of helping men humanize women and girls. Men concerned about their "princesses" driving or dating were helped to transfer their feelings for their daughters to relationships with women. When the men talked about family of origin, the statement "I have become that which I hated" was heartbreaking for me to hear, but their love for their children brought increased receptiveness to new ways of living, being, and parenting. We also urged men to say the names of their children and partners to humanize them. Society's unrealistic prescriptions deny the humanity of both men and women, leaving many broken and crushed inside, yet conforming to an acceptable exterior façade. Connecting with their sensitive side in the group, men lamented their losses and, for some, the opportunity to make things right was a great motivator.

Believing that men can and do change (Saunders, 2008), we provided handouts that men could share at home to explain the changes they were making without shifting the responsibility onto their family. Those who transitioned into individual or couples' therapy also found it useful to show their therapists what they had learned in our group. The group process worked, and its success reinforced the idea that men can change. The work that we did in these groups followed what is called the mutual aid model of group work (Gitterman, 2004; Schwartz, 2005; Shulman, 1986, 2005; Tropp, 1965). This approach to group work, fundamentally, involves a group of people in a space that provides opportunities to work for a common end in interdependent relationships (Schwartz, 1961, 1971). It involves breaking down traditional group work dynamics by encouraging "shared control, shared power, and shared agenda" (Schwartz, 2005, p. 85). This model reinforces the need to trust in the process and its capacity for transformational change (Middleman & Wood, 1990).

I saw men return voluntarily after completing the program to seek advice for a new or existing relationship, because they believed the group had worked and were determined not to reoffend, or because they needed a refresher in the safety of a group where they knew they would be understood and not judged. Seeking help is hardly a topic men speak about in other spaces, but here the sensitive side emerged out of the tough exterior cocoon. This gruff, yet heartwarming, poem from a former client is a great reminder of why I did the work, and a proof that men can,

and do, change:

> I had no use for this place, no, not me in a group of batterers
> And a woman counselor, well no woman is gonna run my life
> Me, forget the cruisers and handcuffs, in full glare of neighbours [sic]
> I swore, she would pay dearly, she doesn't know what she's done
> But, alas, what she did was right, gave me such a wake up call
> Mindless jerk that I was; she put up with me and so did you
> Sincerely, Miss, I can never thank you enough. (Anonymous, personal
> communication, 2006)

Moments such as these reinforced the importance of choosing my battles, embracing healthy norms, and building trust and connections while also trusting the group process to help men unlearn self-destructive beliefs. Many wished they had received this knowledge in high school before they internalized bullying and sexist jokes in the locker room as normal masculine traits. They discussed wanting the PAR group topics to be taught in high schools to avoid the next generation facing the repercussions of damaged relationships and harm to others and themselves. Members also gained appreciation for the role of female facilitators who bring nuanced perspectives to the men's groups, showing how patriarchal myths render women inferior to men and normalize violence toward them. Many men resolved to be ambassadors of healthy masculinity, rather than just letting society squeeze them into the Act Like a Man Box.

Men's resistance to female facilitators is not unconnected to underlying beliefs and messages that objectify women. Female facilitators bring unique perspectives (Blow et al., 2008; Päivinen & Holma, 2012); they also help to prevent collusion by holding both the male group members and the male facilitators accountable to the goals of the group (Boston, 2010; Tyagi, 2006). They also balance group discussions and can contribute a relational ability, using feminine insights to facilitate therapeutic alliances and broadened perspectives (Boston, 2010). Although a female facilitator—the perceived lightning rod—may evoke defensiveness from the group, if she succeeds in not joining the fray, her interjections can help men appreciate human complexities. I worked hard to gain men's trust and the credibility that made them listen intently to the perspectives I offered. I learned to ask the right questions, enhancing reflectivity in men not accustomed to connecting with emotions such as fear which they hid under the anger they felt allowed to show.

In the absence of specific services to help female facilitators with their unique needs, I maintained a network of supportive, balanced, critical thinking male and female friends inside and outside the organization who enriched my life and asked me pertinent questions. This served me well. I found the work exhilarating and I considered the men my teachers; it was an incredible privilege to learn from men who showed me things I never knew, but also gratifying to hear them state that they now realize they were not their true selves when they were conforming to gendered prescriptions. The greatest compliment and testimony was when the group members decided they wanted high school children to learn what we had taught them, because they believed it saved their lives and would help their children and grandchildren. Our approach to this group closely aligns with the model of mutual aid, as we held at the core of our work our commitment to strengths-driven, holistic, and anti-oppressive practice (Steinberg,

2010), and the benefits were reciprocal.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The JHS was started by a humanitarian reformer; its PAR program follows this legacy by helping people get back on track, mostly after coming to the attention of the police and/or child welfare authorities, but also voluntarily on the recommendation of friends, family, or coworkers. Restorative approaches lead to less or no jail time, promote rehabilitation, and foster new ways of thinking, living, and being in relationships and the larger society (JHS, n.d.).

Like any major shift, change cannot be one-dimensional; it occurs at the personal, interpersonal, group, and societal level. Learned ideologies are acted out in the family and reinforced by other agents of socialization and can therefore be unlearned in community. The group setting is a great opportunity for individuals to hear the perspectives of others, gain insights, and demystify normalized myths that inform social and cultural practices. Modeling new actions within a group setting illustrates what is possible, which is crucial to re-examining gendered patterns and assumptions along with building healthy communities.

As demonstrated in this paper, the strong sociological framing of the group disrupts notions of abuse as an individual phenomenon by implicating structures of patriarchy. If men believe that abuse is embedded in their genes or psyche, then they are helpless and cannot change. The group process, however, illuminates that abuse is not an individual problem, but a social, cultural, and political issue. Becoming self-aware and mirroring the group dynamics instills ownership of the change process; it was gratifying to see members advocating for the PAR group philosophy and pedagogy to be incorporated into the high school curriculum.

Upholding every person's dignity and value was at the core of my practice as a social worker/group facilitator seeking to break the cycle of violence; it continues in my teaching and community research as I see students and research participants as co-creators of knowledge. They infuse the shared space with valuable lived experiences keeping me grounded while growing in my capacity to address not only violence but also racism and other deeply engrained -isms with respect, sensitivity, and tenacity.

In conclusion, the gendered facilitator duo provides visual positive modeling and shows success with men who have perpetrated intimate partner violence, as it inherently challenges patriarchal notions of gender roles. Group work with men illuminates the power dynamics underlying intimate partner violence. As a result, years of patriarchal socialization evoked resistance from the men towards female facilitators. Collaborating with supportive male facilitators enabled us to create a transformative space where the men externalized their emotions. As the lightning rod, I had to resist passively absorbing negative energy from the men in group; rather, I actively challenged the men to replace negative emotions with new foundations for thinking, believing, and being—collectively and individually.

We witnessed many transformations, and believe this model—particularly the intentional use of a male-female facilitator pair—works and produces significant positive outcomes for men in PAR groups. However, we recommend further evaluation of this paired approach on recidivism

levels, the impact of partner contact evaluations of group work on men, as well as an examination of best practices to support women who work with men.

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* The University's board of directors has voted to change the school's name over concerns about Egerton Ryerson's role as a primary architect of the residential school system. We—the faculty, staff, and students—have called for the removal of his statue and name change so the board's decision is a welcome development for all critical thinkers as a demonstration of the university's commitment to transcend performative acknowledgements of racism and colonization to implement the 22 recommendations made by the university's Standing Strong (Mash Koh Wee Kah Pooh Win) Task Force.

Feminist Poetry

Haley H. Beech

This particular poem was inspired by the ways in which feminist researchers weave together thoughts and the concepts of others to create new and advancing ideas on research. As a feminist scholar and social work activist, I found these ideals to reach far beyond the paper, encompassing the greater movement of women's liberation. I find that writing is a form of liberation that—through the sharing of stories of other women, particularly those who have come before us—aims to set us all free.

THE RESEARCHER'S LOOM

As research activists, we are weavers of truth
Delicately forming an interlocking tapestry that tells the intimate stories of women's lives
We string together the sacred words and thoughts of those before us
To bring forth a new work of art that tells a burgeoning story
One that expands to reach new lengths, heights, and the greatest weight
That binds a vast array of narratives and journeys still unknown and untold

We honor our foremothers of research and activism in our efforts
Never forgetting those who have made a path for us, even if only a few feet wide
We remember that their struggle is now our struggle and we are honored to take up their cause
We strive to honor their memory, as many are unnamed, unclaimed, and known by few

And all the while we cry out on their behalf, on our own soul's need to see justice walk freely
To weave the greater story of forgotten lives and bleeding souls trapped in patriarchy
We cry and plead: NO MORE VIOLENCE! NO MORE DEATH!
For far too many have lost their lives and voices to the silencers who reign in fear of truth

Yet still...

We derive *strength* from the Indigenous Mothers
whose contributions are foundational, yet often a mere whisper
We derive *wisdom* from Black Feminists and Womanists
who were unafraid to set the world ablaze
We derive *power* from our sacred ancestral sisters
who put their lives on the line, many who were lost
Each delicate thread they have spun warp and weft into a new movement forward towards
Our time in history

For women: Our time is here, our time is now.

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Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) Routine Enquiry as a Way of Working with Women's Trauma: Narratives of Practitioner and Organisational Change

Sarah Morton, Mary Barry O'Gorman, Megan Curran, Breeda Bell, Lisa Dundon, Martina Killoran, Geraldine Mullane, and Erika Ward

Abstract: Long-term impacts of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are widely evidenced and attention has more recently focused on implementing ACEs routine enquiry within social service interventions. As a group of researchers and practitioners, we were all involved in a study to assess the level of ACEs for women accessing a domestic violence service and explore trauma-informed responses to women's childhood experiences and inter-generational patterns of trauma. Our narratives describe working with an ACEs routine enquiry questionnaire and we explore our practice concerns, practice interactions, and client responses. We emphasise the importance of feedback and transformation for women when embedding new practices, the intersection of the personal and professional when working with trauma, and reflective spaces for practitioners. Our narratives illustrate the depth of work necessary to introduce a new tool or practice, a critical consideration for incorporating ACEs routine enquiry into health and social service agencies.

Keywords: domestic violence, trauma, innovation, adverse childhood experiences, practice development

Introduction and Background

Practitioners, social service organisations, and researchers are increasingly interested in links between Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and domestic violence, poverty, and substance use which imply the need for appropriate health and social care responses (Bellis et al., 2013). The impacts of ACEs also stretch well beyond the individual who immediately experiences them. In addition to increasing the likelihood of significant personal struggle, ACEs are linked to intergenerational effects—as those who encounter ACEs are more likely to engage in behaviour that creates potential ACEs for their own children (Bellis et al., 2015; Renner & Slack, 2006). Drug and alcohol misuse, violence, and incarceration affect communities as a whole, not just individuals and families, which in turn has implications for both prevention and intervention (Burstow et al., 2018). For instance, Bellis et al. (2019) found that reducing the prevalence of ACEs by just 10 percent in the population—through the use of programmes to moderate the effects of ACEs or prevent them altogether for children—could produce an annual savings of 96 billion EUR in the area of healthcare alone.

How organisations can incorporate understanding and interventions in relation to ACEs has received some attention. Numerous blocks and challenges to implementation of ACEs routine enquiry have been identified (Quigg et al., 2018). This article provides a range of narratives from six practitioners within an Irish domestic violence agency that implemented a pilot of ACEs routine enquiry. The conclusion of the pilot saw a subsequent request from the research funding

agency for follow up ACEs training for 14 community and state agencies; a new project is also underway to implement trauma-informed interventions for women and children using the domestic violence service and follow up with women who completed the original ACEs routine enquiry. The narratives here focus on the practitioners involved in the pilot and their experiences of asking women about trauma experienced in childhood, and their own learning and practice development that occurred as a result. In this way we hope to contribute to the debates about considering and incorporating ACEs routine enquiry into social service responses, as well as share practice lessons and viewpoints.

ACEs Routine Enquiry and Domestic Violence

Felitti et al. (1998) found a strong interrelationship between ACEs and severe chronic disease and premature death in adulthood, effectively launching what is now a growing body of research and evidence-based practice. The current ACEs categories of focus include child maltreatment (sexual abuse, physical abuse, verbal abuse) and children's environment (domestic violence, parental separation, mental illness, alcohol abuse, drug abuse, incarceration) (Bellis et al., 2015). Although ideas about ACEs are at times contested (Kelly-Irving & Delpierre, 2019), a score of four issues or more is seen to significantly increase the likelihood of a person engaging in future risky behaviour, which may lead to a range of poor health outcomes in adulthood (Bellis et al., 2015; Felitti et al., 1998). ACEs also impact on wider society; for example, there may be intergenerational effects and pressures on health and social care agencies, particularly in terms of complex social problems such as substance use and domestic violence (Bellis et al., 2015; Gutierres & Van Puymbroeck, 2006; Ørke et al., 2018).

To date there has been limited focus on ACEs and gender implications, although experiencing childhood abuse increases the likelihood of experiencing intimate partner violence as an adult (Ørke et al., 2018) and substance use is often used to cope with the repeated trauma. Domestic violence and substance use are often intertwined, but ACEs can be a pivotal factor influencing later life experiences (Brown et al., 2015). It is important to note that there is a gender difference in how this plays out, with a resulting impact on the services operating at the intersection of these two areas. Women are significantly more likely to experience domestic violence as both children and as adults than are men (Bellis et al., 2015). Women are also more likely to use substances as a means of coping with this. Gutierres and Van Puymbroeck (2006) report that 90 percent of women in substance misuse treatment have a history of traumatic violence; there is also evidence of a "lifespan victimization among women who misuse substances" (p. 502), as the combination of ACEs and substance use puts these women at further risk for future domestic violence and sexual abuse.

Routine enquiry can be defined as the implementation of standard queries or questions to all service users within a health setting and is often considered in order to explore unexpressed needs such as those emanating from experiences of domestic violence, childhood abuse, and trauma (Brooker et al., 2019; Eustace et al., 2016). Routine enquiry for ACEs is in its relative infancy within social and health services, though it is claimed that it can assist practitioners in moving beyond spontaneous disclosure of historical abuse; instead, a pro-active and sensitive enquiry process can allow for adequate supports to be provided (Ford et al., 2019). There has

been some work to utilise ACEs routine enquiry within certain health and social service organisations, with a view to exploring the most appropriate interventions for individuals and to mitigate any intergenerational effects (McGee et al., 2015). ACEs routine enquiry tools and methods are usually conducted through either face-to-face meetings or self-completed questionnaires. Some organisations target only those individuals who present to specific parts of the service (e.g., in cases of domestic violence cases, those seeking refuge), while others adopt a universal approach, regardless of specialist or intensive need. The timing of routine enquiry can vary—sometimes it is at the point of first contact, others only after establishing a relationship with the service user (McGee et al., 2015). Within domestic violence organisations, McGee et al. (2015) found that crisis mitigation often takes precedence, with the result that ACEs routine enquiry is contingent on the skills of the practitioner at that moment. Despite, or perhaps because of, the volume of the literature on this topic, ACEs routine enquiry remains challenging. For instance, a review of pilot ACEs routine enquiry programmes across a range of sectors in the U.K. found limitations in delivery caused by lack of practitioner and organisational expertise, capacity, and commitment (Hardcastle et al., 2020; Quigg et al., 2018).

Trauma informed responses have been broadly identified as important to disclosures of childhood maltreatment, harm, and risk (Bellis et al., 2015), though again the consideration of trauma informed responses in the wake of ACEs routine enquiry is relatively new (Gilliver, 2018). While connections between trauma histories and presenting issues are being noted and responded to in the areas of domestic violence (Pill et al., 2017) and substance use (Fuller-Thomson et al., 2016; Scheidell et al., 2017), to date there has not been as much of a focus on the potential for incorporating an ACEs-informed approach into services in these areas, for both women and their children who present to them. It was within this context that the authors initially came together as part of a research project to pilot ACEs routine enquiry within an Irish domestic violence service.

The Research Project

Let us first describe the research study that led to us subsequently coming together to write the narratives that form the central part of this paper. The study took place in an organisation that delivers services to women and children who experience domestic violence. Established 25 years ago, it is located in a large town in Ireland with a range of staff involved in providing emergency accommodation, key worker support, counselling, helpline support, children's interventions, court accompaniment, and creative interventions such as art and play therapy. The study aimed to a) identify the level of ACEs for women accessing a domestic violence service and b) consider and explore trauma-informed responses to women's childhood experiences and the intergenerational transmission of trauma. To meet these aims, an action research approach (Hart & Bond, 1995), involving three phases, was taken over a nine-month period. The first phase involved the implementation of ACEs routine enquiry for women accessing all aspects of the organisation's services (n=60 service user participants) using a 10-question ACEs questionnaire adapted from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention short ACEs tool (Hardcastle & Bellis, 2019). The second phase, undertaken concurrently, was a series of co-operative inquiry groups facilitated with domestic violence service staff and designed to support their implementation of the ACEs routine enquiry with service users and their development of

responses to women who completed the routine enquiry.

The study found that high numbers of women who were subject to domestic violence had experienced ACEs earlier in their lives. Of the 60 women who completed the ACEs routine enquiry in the study, over one-half (58 percent) reported experiencing at least two ACEs in their childhood; one-third of all respondents reported experiencing four or more (Morton & Curran, 2019). Service users reported significant levels of overlap between direct child maltreatment and adverse home environments. These findings offered early indications of both ACEs' prevalence as well as the types of ACEs that most define the experiences of the women presenting to the domestic violence service and have been reported on elsewhere (see Morton & Curran, 2019). The study concluded that this form of ACEs routine enquiry, while not an end in itself, was a useful tool to engage women in conversations about trauma and intergenerational patterns and a basis for developing trauma-informed interventions. In the aftermath of this study, the lead researcher and lead practitioner reconvened a year later to discuss what we had learned from the pilot study and made the decision to write about the experiences of engaging in practice and organisational change.

Narrative Development

In line with the collaborative nature of the research and practice development project, we sought to undertake something similar for the writing of the narratives in this article. We invited all of the practitioners within the domestic violence service (n=14) to consider writing a narrative on their experience of enacting ACEs routine enquiry and of subsequently working with women. Five staff decided to proceed, as well as both researchers and the lead practitioner (n=8). Over a six-week period we met weekly via an online meeting platform to discuss and review all of the emerging narratives. The focus of the narratives—concerns, practice interactions, and client responses to explorations of childhood trauma—were agreed collaboratively. As writing commenced, mutual support and feedback were offered until everyone was satisfied with their narrative. Each narrative was initially drafted by an individual. As we progressed through a number of drafts and co-writing, each narrative began to feel like it was as much a group narrative as an individual one, though we have retained the first-person presentation in each. One practitioner, an art therapist, decided to also complete a visual piece that represented her experience of incorporating understandings of ACEs into her art therapy practice within the organisation. This art piece concludes the written narrative section. Her work drew on many conversations with colleagues and reflects many of the themes present in each practitioner reflection that precedes it and was felt to be an appropriate reflection of the value of presentational knowledge (Reason, 1999). The discussion and conclusion were written by the two researchers and lead practitioner, reviewed by all co-authors, and feature points agreed by all those participating. This collective writing process was important to all those involved. It embodied and reflected the collaborative and empathic way the organisation seeks to undertake client work, while also valuing the lived experience of the practitioners (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). The narratives are presented in a sequenced way, concluding with the visual art piece, followed by a discussion of implications for practice and policy.

Practitioner Narratives

The Third Generation: Geraldine

In recent years I found myself wondering whether I was really making a difference. Bearing witness to the intergenerational patterns of domestic violence presenting at our service weighed on me heavily, a constant leaden worry. Throughout my years in a leadership role, I have continued client work and have dwelled on the fact that many women experiencing abuse spend a long time (sometimes years) asking the question, "What did I do wrong?" Repeat admissions to the service were prevalent, sometimes with children and many times without. I often wondered what damage the children may experience by remaining with the perpetrator, as well as with other family members or friends or, at times, in temporary state care. It became a regular occurrence for second-generation daughters to come to the agency for support. I always felt guilt and disappointment when this happened, that we had failed this woman when she was a child. In recent years we have even supported a third-generation daughter; she was slipping through the cracks but thankfully this time maybe we had intervened before the implications of her childhood got too embedded in her life.

Understanding ACEs as traumatic events that occur in childhood and seeing the link between ACEs and long-term impacts, I became energised and felt that this fitted with my experiences of working with women through repeated generations. Thinking about these cases from an ACEs perspective made such sense. One of the key elements of the ACEs training for me was the profound statement of asking a service user, "What has happened to you?" as opposed to "What's wrong with you?" The other important element for me was hearing the impact that experiencing trauma can have on one's physical health and the emerging evidence of ACEs and future health implications. Many of the women I worked with over the years jumped back into my mind—those who had health scares or developed medical conditions, most especially cancer, but also high anxiety, depression and other trauma-related illnesses—women who stayed in abusive relationships for their children, coming to us in their 60s to begin to enjoy their later life, only to soon be diagnosed with life-threatening cancers that quickly stole their independence again.

Our methods were important; we gently asked women about the ACEs they ticked on the questionnaire and if they wanted to talk about them. I felt the energy change from initial practice concerns around the fear of re-traumatizing the woman to trusting the process for the betterment of the woman and her family. I gained a huge insight into how working with the ACEs tools can facilitate women who find themselves "stuck" in their recovery journey, opening up important conversations, and allowing the support worker to offer therapeutic intervention as a healing process.

One such experience has stayed with me. In chatting with one woman about her ACEs journey, she explained that, while she didn't experience any of the ACEs mentioned in the questionnaire, she had been bullied by a teacher in her primary school. She described the fear that permeated her daily life as an eight- and nine-year old girl: the dread of going into school, the stomach-churning fear, and the awful moments when her mind would blank and she couldn't

answer the teacher's question. The bullying and abuse affected her self-esteem, her self-confidence, and her whole life journey. She never believed in herself and her own abilities and this left her open to be taken advantage of in all aspects of her life, including her intimate relationships. I wonder often if she ever would have spoken about this or explored its impact had we not implemented ACEs routine enquiry. This approach to working with historical trauma was new to me, but I no longer feel the sense of helplessness and guilt when I think of second- or third-generation women accessing our service. We are now working hard to understand their trauma, to help them understand their experiences, and to respond in ways that will protect the next generation.

Leadership and Dealing with Doubt: Mary

Three years ago, my working life took an unexpected turn when I found myself having to temporarily step into the shoes of the Project Leader as the year came to a close. There is a lot of pressure on this leadership role at year-end, with funding and reporting deadlines to ensure all is in order financially. With these responsibilities looming, I was then approached by a colleague with an opportunity (ACEs research) that might further enhance our practice. I worried that if I struggled to manage this new initiative it would negatively impact the organisation and the women we support. Staff look to their manager for direction, and what if I didn't have the answers for them? Worry niggled at the edges of me each morning heading into work.

My niggly fear slowly turned to confidence. Over the next two years, I led the implementation of the research and subsequent practice changes internally. The initial training brought our organisational team and invited community and statutory partners together. The families we work with liaise with many local agencies, and so a collaborative approach is key. Unfortunately, not all staff from our own organisation could attend the initial training. I was concerned about this on two levels. Practice development is pivotal across the team; service users need to experience a similar level of support and expertise from anyone working in our organisation. Resistance to organisational change emerged as another dynamic. I understand and respect that practice changes can create ambivalence for people, and we provided a supportive space where staff who did not attend the initial training could discuss their concerns. This worked well, and subsequently nearly all staff members ultimately engaged in the training.

Holding the leading role carries accountability—to the service users, staff, and funders. Deadlines certainly guided me and kept me—and staff who kept pace with the momentum of the work and the research time frame—on track. But I valued the chances I had to put the new tools into practice. Shortly after the training, I carried out an ACEs routine enquiry with a shelter resident, and it really struck me how a tool that looks so simple could evoke such rich conversations. We had an in-depth conversation about her relationship with her mother growing up, and it enabled her to connect her childhood experiences to how she now relates to her own children. She didn't want a cycle of rejection to continue, and we had many more conversations on engaging meaningfully with her child. Her shift from acknowledging her lack of physical comforting with her child, to attempting to hug and touch, to welcoming the feel of her child's light body in her arms was so emotive for me as a practitioner. Would work have happened in the absence of this tool? Possibly, but maybe not for some time. The ACEs routine enquiry

definitely opened up doors for this woman, and for other women I worked with, much sooner. This became a theme in our staff reflections upon the ACEs routine enquiry and a motivator to continue enacting new work practices.

A key support was the process of the action research inquiry group which was facilitated by the researcher. This group provided me with a sense of emotional containment and direction throughout the process; it was an essential aspect to the success of the pilot. Staff reflections, reactions, and challenges were able to be raised in these group settings, which allowed the team to reflect and respond appropriately. The added structure has also been a positive development for the organisation as a whole and the direction of our future work. While our service always operated from a trauma-informed response, we had no framework that gave our work such incredible weight as the ACEs framework has done. As a manager, it allows us to approach funders and advocate for the added interventions and supports for service users as part of this evidence-informed approach, which thus far has been well received. We have since been successful in securing further funding to continue to provide the interventions of art therapy, play therapy, and psychotherapy which provide spaces for the varying needs of service users. We are also at the initial stages of planning and building a dedicated therapeutic space for the agency, which will be an integral part of the service in providing better outcomes for women, children, and families.

Trauma and Health Impacts: Breeda

After the initial meetings about the ACEs routine enquiry, I found myself despondent. The women using our services were being failed by systems that did not hold perpetrators of abuse to account. After 20 years working in the shelter, it is always the woman who has to do the running and the hard work—whether it is trying to move with her children to a safe place, applying for a court order to keep herself and children protected, or managing the overwhelming emotional and physical impacts of abuse. During this time period, the perpetrator is often snug at home, not a bother on him. And now we were discussing having the woman also reflect on her childhood experiences of abuse.

Surprisingly, I eventually became a little captured by the possibilities of ACEs routine enquiry—primarily because of the simplicity of the process for both our staff and our service users. What became most important to me though was that staff and service users would be both physically and psychologically safe if we introduced it. Why was I so concerned about safety? I was struck by the long-term health impacts of ACEs shown in the research. Yet, little did I know that I would, myself, live out an experience of trauma and abuse impacts on my health during the course of our ACEs project, providing me with a stark, visceral reminder of the importance of understanding these connections.

I became immersed in an extended family situation in my own life, the features of which included mental health issues, substance use, abusive behaviour, repeated adult suicide attempts, and two children whom I cared deeply about. Not only did I find myself bearing witness to the impact of abusive and manipulative behaviours on the children, I also felt compelled to try and sort the situation out by providing some level of care and mediation for them. The personal

result was the manifestation of a moderately serious health condition—a swift, immediate, and crushing reminder of physical vulnerability in times of extreme stress. I have thankfully taken time to reflect, heal, and recover, but the lesson has stayed firmly with me. Trauma can manifest its impacts in our bodies, and our health can be the price.

The irony of the situation I bore witness to was that—as can be common in situations where mental health and abuse co-exist—the abusive person was hospitalised and cared for, while those impacted by his behaviours were left with little or no support to deal with the vicious situation and its aftermath. During this period, I had severe daily headaches and a lack of sleep. My fear and anxiety levels were through the roof. Bursts of adrenaline left me with sweaty hands, rapid heartbeat, and increased blood pressure. I felt like an elastic band being pulled further and further apart as I tried to ensure the children were safe. I thought of the mothers who could often be at the centre of such experiences, with minimal support or no way out. While working in an organisation that was implementing ACEs routine enquiry, I was trying to protect children in my own life who, perhaps one day, would be able to tick so many boxes on an ACEs questionnaire.

So where did this leave me in regard to ACEs and its usefulness? I had a temporary leave of absence from the organisation for one year. When I left, I had many reservations about how we would implement it. When I returned, I was astounded by how absorbed and integrated the understanding and responses to ACEs had become. Asking direct questions to the women about previous experience of abuse through the medium of 10 set questions such as "What has happened to you?" was a game changer for me, and I realised that, as an organisation, we were now providing a safe space for the service users to break their silence on long-held traumas.

By the time I returned to work, 60 women had completed the ACEs routine enquiry. I observed that the normal fear that comes with change within our organisation was not present, and I wondered how this had been achieved. I think it was ultimately a result of the tedious, continuous, and honest collaboration between the staff and the researchers. Considering the evidence base of ACEs and my own experience, I have really started to consider more deeply the number of women that we work with who experience physical illness and health issues. It has become my ongoing query, my route perhaps, into asking about, and understanding, her trauma.

Dealing with Disclosure: Martina

How to deal with disclosures of traumatic experiences was something I was really worried about when we started working with ACEs routine enquiry, and, ironically, my most vivid experience was a situation responding to exactly that. I had been working with a woman over a number of support sessions and felt I had a good understanding of all she had experienced and was dealing with. There seemed to be a comfortable ease between us. It did not occur to me there could be anything else happening beyond what we had discussed already. She agreed to complete the ACEs questionnaire willingly, and I ensured that there was time to discuss anything that may have come up. When she finished, I asked if she was OK and if there was anything in the questionnaire she would like to talk about. I observed her slouching and condensing herself into the chair as she disclosed a childhood trauma she had never spoken about. I could see the

emotion flooding her face as if the memory became a raw reality again, and the pain in her voice was nearly unbearable to hear. I encouraged some deep breaths, and when she eventually spoke again, her voice seemed stronger and she said she felt somewhat relieved at this disclosure. Further work together revealed there was ongoing abuse and trauma in her current life we had not yet discussed; prior to us talking about her childhood experiences, she had felt it could not be named. My belief is that the day she completed the ACEs routine enquiry, she began her healing journey.

Over the course of the ACEs project, at times I found bearing witness to emotional vulnerability deeply saddening. Often, I found women had experienced multiple ACEs. The emotional pain expressed was very difficult to hear, and I would sometimes feel overwhelmed by the ongoing intensely traumatic lives some of the women revealed after their questionnaires. At the same time, I was gaining increased confidence in my own practice. I was shocked by the revelations of the woman described above, as I thought I knew her story prior to using the ACEs routine enquiry, but it was because I had no idea that this earlier, unnamed trauma was deeply embedded in her physical and emotional body. I felt a new sense of freedom in my work with the realisation I had an effective way of potentially positively impacting women's life patterns.

My feeling was that this was just the tip of the iceberg for some women—their journeys can be longer and more challenging—but the introduction of this simple tool gives them motivation to dig deep within. If the right supports are put in place, they can move from where there was no escape to a life of peace and freedom after ACEs routine enquiry. Each time I worked with women and the ACEs questionnaire, conversations opened up about experiences I did not know about, and I often gained a new understanding or deeper sense of the women and their lives. Some women found it easy to talk of their childhood, while others definitely did not, and I learned quickly to read when it was not the right time for some to engage with the process. I feel that the women who engaged in the ACEs routine enquiry gained and grew from the process and from the interventions that were offered subsequently, such as art therapy and counselling. For the woman described above, this was a life-changing experience.

One of the things I have learned in this process is that I have the skills to "hold" a woman during her journey of disclosure and healing. Allowing a woman to reflect in a safe environment has huge benefits in increasing her self-awareness and opening the possibility of developing a better understanding of herself and others, especially the behaviours of the person abusing or manipulating her. What I am left with as we reflect on this process is that keeping women connected in a trusting relationship is one of the most important things to do in helping them understand and process their childhood traumas.

From Ambivalence to Embedded Practice: Erika

As a mature woman, I have many years of lifelong learning, self-development, and personal experience of the often-challenging road of past trauma recovery to draw on in my one-to-one work with women experiencing domestic violence. I am privileged to work in an organisation progressive in both practice and policy development, with an ongoing focus on developing practitioner skills, and as part of a team willing to push the boundaries of client provision where

both growth and personal/professional development is encouraged. This does not mean I blindly adopt new practices without question, as my journey with ACEs proved.

My initial attraction to ACEs was two-fold. First, I was aware clients may repeat the abuse they themselves experienced or witnessed as children in their adult relationships; I often hear things like, "I hated what my father did to my mother and now I'm with X who does the same to me." I recognised ACEs routine enquiry could afford opportunities for positive change. Second, ACEs offered an established research base for reference, with accessible facts and figures to form the basis for further practice development, rather than relying on unsubstantiated or subjective individual beliefs in the influence and impact of past experiences on later life choices. My curiosity was engaged.

It was with a largely enthusiastic attitude and enquiring mind that I attended the initial training. I felt assured by the straightforward simplicity of the 10 ACEs questions that would not exclude clients with poor literacy skills or for whom English is not their first language. I also agreed with the idea that clients would only be asked to complete ACEs after at least three meetings so as to first allow for trust to be built. I was, however, also concerned about the impact on clients and if I would be skilled enough to manage any fall-out if, for example, clients who already feel excessively guilty about their children would feel even more so when connecting their past experiences to those of their children now. I felt ambivalent about the benefit of completing ACEs with older clients: How would they view their roles as older mothers whose adult children are now facing complex life problems? And I questioned if clients might become more sympathetic towards their abusers, many of whom also had ACEs and already trade on these to draw women back into relationships.

I worked with over 35 women as they completed ACEs routine enquiry. Though an initially shaky ACEs routine enquiry practitioner (the experience resulted in a few new grey hairs for me), my concerns were ultimately allayed by a combination of the clients themselves and an ongoing organisational supervision.

A number of clients spoke about their abusers' traumatic childhoods. While I had worried that sympathy for this trauma would result in some women getting reeled back into a relationship that had taken them years to end, quite the opposite proved true. Following the ACEs routine enquiry and support, clients—even those just recently out of an abusive relationship—found their resolve not to return to the abuser was copper-fastened. Clients often identified and explored the different responses of themselves and their abusers to these shared childhood experiences. We also explored their normalised view of minimising and accepting (at times almost expecting) violence in their adult relationships. Relationships often started in late teenage years when the client was particularly vulnerable and easily exploited—the abuser would, for example, express his hurt at his experiences and the client would aim to heal him. Asking the client now, "So who was hurting?" often proved a pivotal moment as this offered the opportunity to explore how their own hurt was disregarded by both the abuser and by the client themselves. Without the ACEs routine enquiry, this wonderful opportunity for insight, growth, and a focus on the client's own needs could easily have been missed.

With the group of older clients (aged 60+), whose own children were now adults, I questioned if ACEs would add to their existing insecurities and trauma while offering little positive growth. Once again, I was privileged to witness the opposite. A number of clients had "lightbulb" moments with insight that their ACEs were not their fault. Inviting clients to compare themselves to children they know at present, who are of a similar age to when they had their own adverse experiences, resulted in the inevitable conclusion that they themselves "were just children" at the time. This allowed some clients to connect their legacy to their later life choices, and there was healing for others when discussing anger towards their mothers (also in abusive relationships) for not protecting them or for having to parent younger siblings while they were still children themselves. In thinking through why their own mothers did not leave, we reflected upon the greater opportunities for women to leave abusive relationships in the current day, in light of improved opportunities for economic and societal advancement. For some, this insight then initiated conversations with their adult children about experiences growing up with abuse. Clients named that they had more compassion for their children/grandchildren who may have some behaviour difficulties and that they could, after ACEs routine enquiry, now connect current challenges to abuse witnessed or experienced in their formative years.

Follow-up sessions allowed for exploration of clients' resilience, strength, and courage to not only survive their abusive childhood, but also their abusive adult relationships; answers were often insightful for both the client—as they found it supportive to hear that a high ACEs score does not define who they are today—and myself as a practitioner, as I gained new appreciation for their strengths. Combining ACEs knowledge with the wisdom of their years gave this group of clients a framework to view themselves in a more positive light, with newfound energy and confidence. They could view their lives through clear, rather than smudged, windows.

Presentational Knowing: Lisa

As an art therapist working with women and their children in the shelter, I instinctively wanted to compose an image representing some aspect of what it was like for me to participate in the ACEs project. This image reflects how often my first impression of someone is how they present themselves to the world; it takes time to really understand what is going on underneath. The ACEs questionnaire became a tool to help carefully peel back that top layer and really acknowledge the journey, and often the trauma, that women have gone through. The image was inspired by an amazing woman whom I worked with throughout the ACEs project. She spent almost 40 years with a man who tormented her heart and soul every day. She stayed for the sake of her children but, after retiring from her job, she had to spend each day in a house where every glance, word, and move was scrutinized. After years of contemplating change, she left this life in search of freedom and independence. I was so struck by the courage and strength that lay within this woman's fragile body. Shortly after leaving the abusive relationship, she was diagnosed with a life-threatening illness and needed to be cared for by family. This woman has had such a profound effect on me, and I still think of her. When I first meet a woman, her face is drawn, pained, avoiding eye contact. The image here has a pale complexion and presents well enough to the world, but the ACEs routine inquiry has allowed us the opportunity to ask and bear witness to our clients' childhood journeys. The dark colours and the twists in her hair represent the childhood legacies ever-present for our women. But intertwined with these are leaves, foliage,

and flowers that mark our clients' growth, new awareness, and confidence. For me, ACEs routine enquiry has provided a mechanism to slip past the façade towards greater authenticity and understanding in our therapeutic work.

Figure 1: *The masks that people wear* (original piece by Lisa Dundon)

Discussion and Conclusions

Some important themes emerged for us as a result of writing the narratives, including the importance of feedback and transformation for women when considering and embedding new practices; the intersection of our personal and professional lives when working with the traumatic experiences of others; and the importance of creating spaces to reflect, write, or even produce art, especially in the context of high pressure and stress such as during the COVID-19 pandemic.

What became most apparent from the narratives is that the reactions and transformations experienced by women as a result of the ACEs routine enquiry were key in developing our practitioner responses, and in informing our ongoing practice development. While we wanted to avoid telling the stories of individual women in our narratives, and instead highlight our own

practice responses and challenges, we were all impacted by individual women we worked with. A common theme was that often we had worked with a woman extensively or thought we knew her story, only to discover that there were key experiences or elements she had never disclosed or that she had not viewed as relevant to her current life struggles. As practitioners that seek to build empathetic, collaborative, and trusting relationships with the women we work with, this was challenging. We had assumed our traditional approach was enough to ensure everything that needed to be named could be named. The ACEs questions, although they remain debated (Kelly-Irving & Delpierre, 2019), helped us open conversations about things that might not have been talked about otherwise, but that proved relevant to the women's journey and current challenges. It was humbling to realise that sometimes trust, empathy, and a good knowledge base are not enough—that sometimes you aren't asking the right questions or asking in the right way to allow all the relevant experiences to emerge. We do not assume that ACEs routine enquiry is the right tool for every setting or every organisation. Rather, we realise there is always a need to keep expanding our skills and approaches, especially when we see even a percentage of our service users having poor or mediocre outcomes despite our interventions and support.

This raises important questions about the long-term impact of ACEs on the trajectory of women's lives and the possibility that ACEs experiences may increase their risk or vulnerability to abusive relationships in later life (Pill et al., 2017). ACEs prevention strategies are in their relative infancy, and there has been little focus to date on the possible gendered implications of ACEs, particularly in regard to domestic violence (Bellis et al., 2019). As we develop this work within our organisation, we realise we will need to continually consider, implement, and evaluate trauma-informed responses, as well as advocate for prevention strategies (Burstow et al., 2018). We feel we need to be supported in this intervention work with research that further considers the links between ACEs and domestic violence experiences in later life, as well as further research on the effectiveness of interventions and provider responses.

Not surprisingly, working with ACEs routine enquiry highlighted tensions between our personal and professional lives, particularly in relation to the health impacts of ACEs. Realising and working with the health implications of childhood trauma for women brought a lens to our own health, our own experiences of trauma, and to how these are discussed, understood, or known amongst a group of colleagues. While the collaborative writing process was helpful in developing a shared understanding of these issues, it also raises questions about how such dynamics would be managed in other organisations working with ACEs or other trauma-informed approaches. As a group, we had over many years of practice, skills training, and knowledge that helped us develop a good understanding of the potential traumatic impact of our work (Morton & Hohman, 2016; Pearlman & Saakvitne, 1995), yet it was still a surprise to consider the health impacts in such sharp relief. We would suggest that any agency or practitioner team needs to consider specific structures to address or respond to the potential impacts on staff of adding or expanding their work on trauma.

For those of us writing the narratives, this became an important process and experience in and of itself. We came together during a time of tight restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, when we were not able to meet each other in person and our lives and interactions were heavily prescribed by public health guidelines. The writing process helped develop further understanding

and learning among the authors and led to a deepening of respect for each other's skills. It is hard to quantify the positive impact of working on something like this during one of the most challenging years the agency had ever experienced. Writing the narratives was generative for the organisation and resulted not only in important reflections on practice, but also a striking piece of art. We realised we had seen different aspects of each other. Although the process challenged us and brought us outside of our comfort zones, it solidified our practice and our commitment to innovative practices. In hindsight, it was interesting that during a time when public health advice recommended only the provision of essential services, we deemed this work important enough to concentrate on, even though not essential. Perhaps this is a vital learning point, that at times when it seems appropriate to pull back and retract interventions and innovation, it can be both sustaining and generative to seek connection and learning through writing and engaging in creative processes (Vass et al., 2008).

For us, this process of developing these narratives has been transformative, increasing our care and respect for each other and for the women we work with. Our narratives illustrate the depth of work that must go into introducing a new tool or practice—something that has perhaps been overlooked in the move to incorporate ACEs routine enquiry into health and social service agencies (Quigg et al., 2018) but is critical to future work in this area. We now also have a piece of art that we feel honours both our process and narratives and the experiences of the women we worked with.

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Photovoice, COVID-19, and the Possibility of Post-Traumatic Growth

Nathaniel A. Dell, Kyle Brandt-Lubart, and Brandy R. Maynard

Abstract: We describe the implementation of a photovoice exhibition on safe coping during the novel coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. We explore how the photovoice exhibition took on new meaning in the context of the large-scale disruption caused by the pandemic. The exhibition featured photographs about the experience of safety and safe coping among participants with co-occurring traumatic stress and substance use. We discuss our process for planning an exhibition during the pandemic and for applying study findings to the broader community during the crisis.

*Keywords***:** photovoice, COVID-19, hermeneutics, community-based participatory research

> The picture contains an indissoluble connection with its world.
> (Gadamer, 1960/2004, p.138)

Photovoice is a qualitative, community-based participatory research method that has been used to document life narratives, raise critical consciousness, and facilitate community change (Latz, 2017; Wang & Burris, 1997). Photovoice is congruent with an intellectual tradition that believes art "threatens the given form of existence" (Marcuse, 2007, p. 222). In this photovoice project, participants were asked to take photos of their daily lives in response to prompts using a borrowed camera. Often in photovoice research, photographs are discussed either with researchers or collectively with other participants in focus groups. Development of critical consciousness may be facilitated in participants through discussion of the photographic representations of participants' day-to-day experiences (Freire, 1968/2000). An assumption is that photovoice, by generating critical consciousness, may act as a catalyst for transforming social relationships. Although photovoice has been an established method of inquiry for a few decades, it has more recently been used with persons experiencing mental illness and found to be an acceptable and feasible method of inquiry (Han & Oliffe, 2016).

In August 2019, our research team undertook a photovoice study to understand the experience of coping safely with symptoms of traumatic stress and substance use (Dell et al., 2021). Saint Louis University's institutional review board approved all study procedures prior to data collection. Working with counselors at a community mental health center, Places for People, we recruited six mental health service recipients from the Seeking Safety program. Seeking Safety is a psychosocial intervention that promotes the use of skills to cope with co-occurring traumatic stress and substance use. The intervention may be delivered either individually or in groups (Najavits et al., 1998). Inspired by the creative and community-based aesthetics of photovoice, we believed that photovoice would allow participants to explore the phenomenon of safety more creatively than traditional interviews or focus groups. We also appreciated that photovoice would allow for more non-verbal ways to express insight into safe coping. We wanted participants' focus group-based discussion about their photos and themes to reinforce the insights and skills people developed through the group and to share what is needed to facilitate

safety within the broader community.

The research team was comprised of three social workers, one of whom is a doctoral student at Saint Louis University and the director of research and evaluation at the community mental health center where the study took place, another who is a therapist and coordinates a community arts program at the study site, and a third who is an associate professor at Saint Louis University. In our study, each participant shared their time, knowledge, and insight to make the project possible by taking photographs, meeting individually with a researcher to discuss the meanings of their photographs, and meeting in focus groups with other participants to provide critical feedback on author-generated themes.

The project was to culminate in a gallery-based exhibition of the participants' photographs. Entitled *Standing in the Balance*, the exhibition was designed as an installation featuring participants' photographs, quotes from the research interviews, and objects representing the concept of safety. The exhibition was considered essential to the photovoice process, as it provided a way for participants to share insights with a range of community stakeholders. However, the onset of the pandemic disrupted our attempts to hold a traditional gallery-based event. The purpose of this essay is to share how our research team collaborated with participants to re-envision the exhibition, and how the pandemic itself shaped our interpretation of participants' insights about safety and safe coping.

Re-envisioning the Exhibition

At the time COVID-19 was beginning to disrupt routines in the United States, participants had taken their photographs and participated in both individual and focus group interviews. We had nearly completed the planning of the exhibition when our local government issued a stay-at-home order on March 23, 2020. We were concerned that a crowd of people gathered together would likely be experienced as unsafe for many people concerned about COVID-19, so we decided to postpone the event. The decision to postpone the event was difficult in many ways. Many participants in the photovoice project were eager to move ahead with sharing their work and disappointed in not being able to hold the exhibition as planned. As we grappled with how to move forward, we initially decided against a virtual presentation. Although we agreed that virtual spaces can allow for the co-production of meaning for other community-based participatory research projects, we were concerned about how an exhibition that was only virtual could potentially restrict access for persons in poverty who are more likely to lack reliable access to internet. Furthermore, study participants communicated that physical and social environments that are both safe and validating contributed to their own process of growth, and we wanted to enact this theme through the exhibition by holding it in an accessible, physical space within a community where many participants lived. Therefore, the aesthetic experience we hoped to facilitate through the presentation was never meant to be just a product of viewing the photographs. We believed that a more dynamic, consummatory experience could emerge when persons gather together and interact in a shared space to engage with the exhibition.

Three months later, we recognized that the pandemic would not resolve any time soon, but we still wondered how we could follow through with the work we started. In July 2020, I (Nathaniel) participated in a virtual workshop facilitated by Con Christeson entitled *Co-Creating*

the Future. This workshop gathered approximately 20 artists and "creative beings of any discipline" to identify what is needed to keep creating in the world reshaped by the pandemic (C. Christeson, personal communication, June 15, 2020). The focus was on the collective, on what people needed when the normal outlets for expressing creative, community-based work were shuttered. As we complied with the region's stay-at-home order, we each wondered in our self-contained Zoom rectangles where our creative works could find a home and, more fundamentally, what we needed to feel at home in the world. Through the conversations in this workshop, the notion became clearer that participants' perspectives on safe coping were even more applicable in a world that seemed threatening in concretely new ways.

Throughout this workshop, the facilitator challenged us to re-imagine how we could share participants' photos with the community and made her own studio space available to us. We shared this opportunity with participants and discussed it individually with them to solicit feedback, as we did not want to move ahead with the exhibition without incorporating their perspectives. In accordance with a trauma-informed care perspective, we prioritized participants having opportunities for choice and collaboration throughout the photovoice installation process. Before and during installation, participants were asked how they would like the exhibit to look and feel. They were invited to share what reactions or emotions they hoped viewers would experience upon seeing the work. Participants were then supported in identifying tangible representations of the abstract concepts they hoped to convey. For example, the windowsills framing the street-facing windows where photographs were mounted were lined with plants, quilts, and candles—all items that participants identified as embodying a safe, welcoming ambiance.

By re-imagining how to share participants' photographs, we believe we found a way to connect their insights to others who may feel impacted by the pandemic. Presenting *Standing in the Balance* during the COVID-19 pandemic created unique challenges. However, it also necessitated creative experimentation in ways that enriched the installation and exhibition process. Although the exhibition differed significantly from the original installation plan, the alterations ultimately enhanced the exhibit's accessibility to the public. Maximizing the exhibition's accessibility in the context of a pandemic required us to adjust how and where it was shared with the community. The installation was mounted in a street-facing storefront at a local art studio rather than in a traditional gallery space contained within a building. This allowed for the organizers to host an opening where viewers could wear masks, maintain social distance, and remain outdoors. The street-facing nature of the installation also meant that it would remain viewable to all passersby throughout the time it was installed, from November 11-28, 2020. The second key adaptation that was made to maximize accessibility was livestreaming the opening via Facebook. Since several project participants and potential attendees were unable to attend an in-person event, the livestream allowed these individuals to view the installation and participate by sharing their perspectives through comments. Approximately 350 views of the livestream were recorded over the course of the event.

Mounted on the windows themselves were the photographs taken by participants, with illustrative quotes from the individual interviews and focus groups. Feedback from participants informed the orientation and relational aesthetics of these components. Participants expressed a preference for the photos mingling amidst each other, rather than being grouped by each artist.

Therefore, the photos were spatially oriented based on thematic similarity. Interview quotes were selected based on their poignancy and alignment with the concepts being visually conveyed. Participant quotes were then written on the glass window, serving as a link between potentially divergent visual experiences. One participant also highlighted how the St. Louis bus system is a key conduit for connection, communication, and transportation. To represent this observation, a color-coded "map" was constructed which linked the photographs to one another, wherein each color represented a code identified through the data analysis phase. The goal was to create an installation that embodied the complexity of each individual's lived experience moving through trauma and substance use challenges, while de-stigmatizing mental illness by highlighting similarities in how we, as a community, collectively define and seek safety.

The event was promoted through local news outlets, social media, and through the university and community mental health center's communications networks. It was important to us that the community be made aware of the exhibition as a way to honor the participants' artistry and insight. Promoting the event and recording viewer responses were both prioritized as multiple participants stated that it was important to them to understand the impact the exhibit had on the community. To convey the event's impact to participants, one researcher created a written list of viewer comments posted to the livestream and collected from a survey, which was given to each participant as a memento from the exhibition.

A brief online survey was created to assess viewers' cognitive and affective reactions to *Standing in the Balance*; this survey was approved by the university's institutional review board. The survey was shared on a QR code posted to the exhibition and as a link on the agency's website. From a research perspective, the survey response rate was abysmal, with only three responses. However, from a reflective standpoint, the viewers' comments provided validation of the project that could be shared with the study's original participants. One respondent shared that they learned from the exhibit that "PTSD feels and looks differently from person to person." This was supported by another respondent who stated that they learned that "human connection is stronger than the separation forced upon us" and that "photography is a beautiful way to share that separation amongst one another." To this point, the final respondent remarked on the "power of community engagement and collaboration" reflected in the "power" of the curated content. For one viewer, *Standing in the Balance* provoked the realization "that for some, this feeling of isolation and alienation is not unique to this time" and that "you can really feel the collective effort of the moment." Other participants reported feeling "connection, because all of the quotes and visuals resonated in some way with my PTSD."

Revising our Findings: Staying Safe in the Pandemic

We opened this essay with Gadamer's (1960/2004) assertion that "the picture contains an indissoluble connection with its world" (p. 138). I (Nathaniel) have a background in philosophy and periodically return to *On Germans and Other Greeks* (Schmidt, 2001) to inform my social science research. Gadamer's (1960/2004) assertion provoked consideration of what ways participants' photos remained connected to the world shaped by the pandemic, a line of questioning the first author shared with the other members of the research team. We considered whether our pre-pandemic exploration of safety could inform how we understand the current crisis. Our event is just one of many that were postponed or disrupted due to the

pandemic—including graduations, anniversaries, religious services, birthdays, funerals. What meaning does this project take on in a world that seems in many ways unfamiliar? For example, going into public for simple tasks like buying groceries may have felt or could continue to feel threatening, especially when others may choose not to follow public health advice like wearing a mask. We are hoping to find a way in which disruption can take on productive meaning that is as much personal as it is utilitarian for social work research and practice. It was overwhelming at times to sit with the uncertainty that has accompanied us at different times through the pandemic, and it was not initially obvious how participants' insights into safety translated to this unfamiliar experience.

Large-scale disasters, such as a pandemic, are associated with social and psychological ills such as trauma and stressor-related disorders, mood disorders, substance use, intimate partner violence, and child abuse (Czeisler et al., 2020; Galea et al., 2020). The first year of the pandemic was marked by increased unemployment, with millions filing for unemployment in the first few months of the pandemic in the United States (Kochhar, 2020); a rapid increase in firearm sales (Mannix et al., 2020); and social unrest related to police brutality and right-wing extremism. Each of these conditions may contribute to deeper senses of alienation associated with the degradation of social bonds. Disruption is felt through the interaction of biological, personal, and social factors. Social factors—such as systemic racism and poverty—have made communities more susceptible to the effects of the virus, especially communities of color (Lassale et al., 2020; Raisi-Estabragh et al., 2020). Because of differences in social conditions and ideology, "we are not all experiencing the same pandemic" (Newman, 2020, p. 32). This pandemic may rupture our expectations and assumptions about the world and force us to consider what material and psychosocial needs are most important for the time being. For some, these needs may include freedom of movement, hazard pay or access to personal protective equipment, connection, imagination, or feeling effective. Traumatic events can threaten people's conscious or unconscious assumptions of a *just world*—that bad things only happen to bad people—or the belief that enough of the world feels stable and predictable.

In our experience, the dual senses of *dehiscence* were useful for capturing the phenomenon of disruption underlying COVID-19. Dehiscence refers to (a) the surgical sense of a ruptured wound—messy, breaking open our expectations—and (b) the botanical sense of the seed pod that, upon maturation, bursts open (Lacan, 1977). The botanical sense of dehiscence draws attention to how a rupture may give way to new growth. As John Dewey (1934) stated, "Recovery is never the mere return to a prior state, for it is enriched by the state of disparity and resistance through which it has successfully passed" (p. 13). This dynamic is reminiscent of how Seeking Safety participants were able to disrupt their former patterns of responding to distress and to renegotiate the meaning of their traumatic experiences. We also feel this dynamic at play—breaking apart so that something generative and new may emerge—in the process of re-envisioning the exhibition.

Initially, we interpreted our findings in view of how people with traumatic stress and substance use cope safely with distress and argued for a socio-ecological model of post-traumatic growth and recovery (Dell et al., 2021). Given the far-reaching effects of the pandemic, we believe that participants' insights may generalize to the public in ways that would not have resonated prior to the pandemic. Through this project, participants communicated the importance of safety in

environments and the role of interpersonal relationships on feelings of safety. Participants described an array of skills that can be used creatively to cope with distress: "There are so many things that you can try, people that will help you, things you can do to get to where you need to be to address the issue." Coping with distress was likened to a journey, in which one gradually becomes oriented towards more possibility. Furthermore, participants shared how, when they developed insight into what worked for them, they felt more sensitive to the struggles faced by others. Our belief that participants' insights spoke to the present moment motivated us to press ahead with the exhibition, as we hoped that participants' insights into the possible recovery from traumatic stress and substance use could resonate with those who have been negatively affected by the pandemic. The apparent gulf between now and 12 months ago transformed from a barrier to understanding to a facilitator of understanding the present moment. This is what Gadamer (1960/2004) calls the hermeneutic significance of temporal distance: "Time is no longer primarily a gulf to be bridged because it separates; it is actually the supportive ground of the course of events in which the present is rooted" (p. 297).

Conclusion

We can only imagine how many other community-based or arts-based research projects were put on hold because of the pandemic. Finding ways to adapt and re-imagine our work can often lead to new discoveries and growth, for the researchers and participants, that we would not have otherwise experienced. Community-based photovoice exhibitions can continue to be held if there are resources for reimagining the installation. For us, that meant finding the support of an artist who was willing to let us install the exhibition in the studio's street-facing storefront windows. Although we initially rejected holding a solely virtual exhibition, we found that using a hybrid virtual/community-based design facilitated access to a wider array of stakeholders. We were able to make participants' photos publicly visible, as a temporary part of the neighborhood, and accessible via the livestream to those who, for instance, live in facilities put on lockdown during the pandemic. Study participants were also essential to making the event happen: At each major decision point related to the installation, we sought to include and incorporate participants' perspectives. While some participants were content just to participate in taking photos and discussing them, others were just as committed to providing feedback on what they wanted to communicate through the exhibition—such as a feeling of home, or comfort, communicated through quilted textiles or sources of warm light as part of the exhibition. In the spirit of photovoice methodology, giving our participants a voice and active role in this re-imagining the installation provided opportunities for growth and learning by all of us involved and enhanced the project beyond our expectations. Creative arts approaches, such as photovoice, can facilitate verbal and non-verbal expression, and can be valuable for persons with serious mental illness, researchers, and practitioners for discovering insight into the recovery process. We hope that our narrative will provide encouragement to others to identify ways of adapting their projects to ever evolving times.

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How Social Workers Can Address Poverty in America

Jordan Wilfong and Angeline Cirino

Abstract: During this era of growing inequality in America, social workers must address systemic poverty. This article includes a collaboration between a social work assistant professor and undergraduate student regarding how the profession can approach the topic of poverty in America. Our collaboration allowed both of us to consider how important it is for social workers to engage in advocacy efforts to fight against the extreme levels of poverty in America, which are experienced most frequently among people with marginalized identities. We also explore how our life experiences and families influenced our awareness about poverty in America, and subsequently, created a desire to fight for a fairer world grounded in economic, racial, and social justice. Ultimately, this experience crystalized our belief that social work education must involve students and professors working together to address poverty in America, a generational struggle of which social workers must be a part.

Keywords: social work education, poverty, economic justice, advocacy, social policy

Introduction

While the list of social problems in America is a long and painful one, living in poverty is a consistent theme running through many of our country's issues. Poverty not only creates income- and health-related challenges, it exacerbates inequality. Certain populations are disproportionately affected by poverty due to the structural oppression that has haunted America since its inception (United Nations General Assembly, 2018). At our best, social workers advocate for equality as well as the elimination of discriminatory systems (Kirk & Reid, 2002). Now, as activists across the country call for structural changes to address America's high rate of poverty, we believe social workers have a professional responsibility to participate in this movement for economic justice.

In this paper, an assistant professor of social work (Jordan) and an undergraduate social work student (Angeline) consider our roles in reducing poverty in America. Our collaboration began after I (Angeline) was a student in two of Jordan's social policy courses in which the consequences of poverty were among the main topics. After the courses were over, I applied for and received an internal research grant to work with Jordan on a literature review to study how the topic of poverty is covered in bachelor's- and master's-level social work education. The project evolved into an opportunity for us to examine not only our own missions for economic justice, but also the political nature of social work. Through our project, we recognized more clearly that social workers need to advocate for structural and political changes within society. We begin this paper by discussing our professional missions as social workers and how our political and personal beliefs about poverty were influenced by our family backgrounds and social work education. Second, we comment on the existing research on how social work education is preparing students to work at reducing poverty. Finally, we close with a discussion on the importance of social workers creating change to address issues of poverty—ideas which were generated through our work together on this project.

Developing a Passion for Social Work and Economic Justice

After completing our project together, we recognized that advocacy for economic and social justice is the cornerstone of our professional mission as social workers. However, we also found that our paths to this realization were considerably different. My (Angeline's) path emerged from the influence of my family. My aunt is a social worker who, growing up, exposed me to the caring and thoughtful perspectives that social workers offer; she also debunked the negative stereotype of social workers doing impossible work for little pay. My parents provided me with an understanding of how people should offer opportunities and resources to individuals living in poverty, which is one of the main reasons I decided to become a social worker. My parents welcomed a family friend into our home when she was having financial struggles and would otherwise be homeless. For several years, my family volunteered their time by preparing and serving meals for people experiencing homelessness. Through these actions, my family showed how to care for others without judgment. I then became aware of how those experiencing poverty have more limited opportunities and available services, cementing my belief in the need for economic justice. This underlying awareness of poverty and experience with this population taught me to view poverty through an empathic lens. These beliefs have only been strengthened through my time in the BSW program, which has provided me with additional knowledge and skills to advocate for economic justice. I learned about the disproportionate barriers low-income individuals and families face and the reality that escaping poverty is not a simple feat based solely on merit. The combination of a family background in service and learning about deeply rooted inequality in college gave me the momentum to continue my education and start conversations about poverty and injustice in my personal life. Having discussions in class and reading research about the sheer amount of people living in poverty versus the accumulated wealth of the select few made me realize the importance of educating others and having a more active role in economic change.

On the other hand, I (Jordan) did not grow up with a social worker in my family, or someone to have discussions with about poverty and economic justice. While my parents were both first generation college graduates and helping professionals (a nurse and a primary care doctor) who worked in low-income neighborhoods and regularly provided financial support to friends and family members in need, they approached social problems on an individual level and therefore did not have conversations with me about poverty or systemic oppression. In the suburban Pittsburgh community where I grew up, people tended to "blame the victim"—individuals experiencing poverty were viewed as responsible for their own struggle. While my parents did not actively embrace the belief system of their surrounding community, they did not speak out against it either. As a result, although I have vivid memories of my parents showing incredible kindness and generosity to their patients, such as holding free medical care events for low-income older adults every year, I also recall them exposing me to right-wing media on radio and television, spaces where empathy for the disadvantaged and an understanding of systemic oppression were completely absent from the dialogue. As such, I was only able to understand the topic of poverty in America after attending social work school and working for six years as a child and family therapist in marginalized communities. I draw upon this transformative experience when teaching students about the need for more social policies that foster economic justice. I believe my experiences can serve as an example for students who may have not yet recognized how poverty is related to systemic oppression or that policies are needed to provide

more opportunity and resources to disenfranchised populations. I view myself as someone who was exposed to the importance of helping others on an individual level, but only saw the light about the need for systemic changes after attending social work school. To some extent, I believe this personal experience shows that people can be "shown the light" about economic justice even if they weren't exposed to it while growing up.

Although our paths were different, we both recognize that our professional objectives as social workers must include advocating for major changes to reduce inequality in America. Some social workers undoubtedly were fortunate, like Angeline, to have parents who taught them about economic justice, whereas others had experiences similar to myself (Jordan). Perhaps our work together on this project provides an example of how each social worker must examine their own path to understanding the need to advocate for economic justice.

Our Missions for Economic Justice

This project allowed us the opportunity to apply the topic of economic justice to our current and future professional work. I (Angeline) am in my final year of the BSW program and cannot predict exactly where my career will begin, but I have an interest in mental health and realize that poverty can be a major stressor that affects mental wellbeing. My goal is to help others in therapy sessions and inform any clients experiencing poverty of what resources are available to them. I believe that social workers, through connecting others to services they need, help people by giving clients their own voice and choice to make the best decision for themselves. This is especially true in cases of poverty, as each individual and family situation has specific needs to be met. While I have limited experience working with those living in poverty, social work education has taught me how America's history and current policies affect poor and marginalized populations. Our project revealed that poverty is often not the main topic of courses, but it runs through as a common theme in most social work classes. I realized how important this all-encompassing issue of poverty is when many political decisions are made and how many misconceptions the public has about poverty and earned success. For me, choosing a career in social work is being a guide and advocate to those who face systemic barriers such as institutional racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia. I believe that empathy towards others is a crucial step in addressing the issue of poverty on both a micro- and macro-level in America. Learning about poverty in America has motivated me to be more informed on current events and the conditions confronting marginalized populations so that I can create changes with my vote. When I start my career as a social worker, I plan to conduct more research on policies that allow for equal access to mental health treatment. I believe that social workers must have the empathy and training needed to understand how difficult living in poverty can be and to develop skills needed to work with this population.

I (Jordan) believe my professional mission is to prepare students to promote economic justice. This involves educating students on policies and practices that can reduce poverty in America, as well as the need to change the historical systems of oppression that create and sustain inequality. Although the courses I teach always include content on oppression in American society, I remind students to not give in to despair. We must maintain a belief in societal change. I believe this hope for a better tomorrow is essential and is in keeping with the many social workers and activists throughout history who have helped create progress for populations in need.

Additionally, I utilize my position as a university professor to get more involved in local government and community issues. Right now, this includes communicating with the local leaders and organizations responsible for implementing programs to help populations experiencing poverty, as well as participating in activism around social and economic justice. I have written several opinion pieces in a local newspaper related to the lack of attention toward the high rates of poverty within the area; these articles have been well-received by many within the community. I have also started to build relationships with local leaders and am committed to taking on a community leadership role in the future. I am doing this not only to assist with the work of addressing poverty, but to show my students why social workers should get involved in local policy issues. Given our profession's commitment to economic justice, I believe social workers need a seat at the negotiating table when key decisions are made on issues affecting populations experiencing poverty. I consider it a great honor to teach students who are excited to enter the field and make positive changes in society, and I believe education plays a vital role in accomplishing the field's mission.

Social Work Education on Poverty

Working together on this project not only provided an opportunity to consider our professional missions as social workers, but also gave us the chance to review research on how poverty is taught in bachelor- and master-level social work educational programs. We believe poverty should be covered in a comprehensive manner within social work education, especially since a previous study of the top fifty U.S. social work schools indicated that fewer than one-quarter of them offered more than one course on poverty (Harding et al., 2005). Fortunately, our review of the available research yielded several suggestions by social work educators on how to incorporate poverty-based curriculum in the classroom, which we found reassuring. Social work researchers have published articles indicating that several instructional techniques are effective at teaching students how to understand and address poverty in America—including poverty simulations, volunteering at homeless shelters, assisting clients in accessing public assistance, education on the devious financial services that target poorer communities, and expanding technological skills to increase employment opportunities in lower income areas (Eamon et al., 2013; Hitchcock et al., 2018; Jackson et al., 2018; Karger, 2015; Keeney et al., 2019; McNutt et al., 2001; Robinson, 2018; Vandsburger et al., 2010). In addition, we found that several key elements are critical to social workers playing a more active role in creating systemic changes. To be involved, social workers need education on the causes and consequences of poverty, knowledge on how to assist clients experiencing poverty, and recognition of the need for policies to expand economic justice within society.

After we reviewed the literature on poverty education in social work, our discussions with one another revolved around the necessity of teaching social work students about future policy solutions that will expand economic justice. The policies we discussed were vast, but some of the major ones included a $15 minimum wage; universal basic income for all U.S. citizens; national healthcare through "Medicare for All"; access to affordable childcare; paid maternity leave; a "Green New Deal" to create millions of clean energy jobs; and significantly more funding for employment, education, mental health programs, and housing in lower income communities (Dillon & DelCarlino, 2017; Mitchell et al., 2019; Ray, 2020; Rebell & Wolff, 2017; Zipperer, 2019). We recognize these suggestions are met with immediate derisions in

some circles due to the tax money required to fund them. However, we believe they could easily be implemented through diverting tax dollars from the U.S. military, prison, and criminal justice systems, all of which are funded at the highest rates of any country in the world (United Nations General Assembly, 2018), in addition to requiring the wealthiest Americans to pay their fair share in taxes. Moreover, through investing more of the additional tax revenue in communities with high populations of Black, Indigenous, and other people of color, it would be possible to address the long-standing effects of systemic racism and oppression.

Overall, reviewing the research on how social work education is currently addressing the topic of poverty made us reflect on our own experiences in social work education. We believe it is essential for students and educators to have conversation in social work education programs on addressing poverty and translate these skills into advocacy. Without an open discussion about the reality of income inequality, systemic racism, and the cycle of poverty, change will not happen. Our experiences as students in social work programs were transformational because they provided us space to develop the knowledge, skills, and abilities to advocate for needed changes. It is our hope that other social work students have similar experiences, and that educators take the needed time to create these types of learning environments.

Social Work is Needed Now More than Ever

This project provided us the opportunity to consider the responsibility of social workers in expanding economic justice. We would like to close with some thoughts on the role of social workers in today's society. As was mentioned briefly in Angeline's reflection, many in the lay public hold a stereotypical view about social workers, believing that we are doing impossible work that has little chance of addressing the structural inequalities afflicting American society. We believe this damaging stereotype is one of the main reasons why America has failed to make strides in reversing the country's exceedingly high rates of poverty. Specifically, instead of recognizing the great value of having a profession such as social work that is dedicated to supporting marginalized populations, some people diminish the necessity of providing more programs and policies to address poverty and inequality. Nevertheless, the truth is that social workers are needed now more than ever, and our field should be given greater compensation and resources for the work we do. In order for economic justice to occur within our country, social workers should be recognized through higher pay and more funding to develop programs grounded in economic justice and opportunity. The alternative is a more persistent level of poverty, inequality, and ultimately, death.

Fortunately, we are encouraged that progressive activists from across the country are leading a national movement that offers some measure of hope for economic justice. In fact, some say this generation of young adults in America is the most progressive and justice-oriented in our country's history. As such, we believe social workers need to join this movement and proudly push economic justice forward by getting involved in the political process in their communities and advocating for more resources and opportunities across society. We must not allow the gross level of economic inequality currently taking place in our country to stop our desire for change, but instead confront these issues with knowledge, passion, and compassion. In short, in an era of devastating social inequality and poverty, a field such as social work that is dedicated to economic and social justice has the unique ability to empower populations and should be

emboldened to make these changes. This is an issue we believe all social workers, social work educational programs, and the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) should push forward. It is our time to take a stand on behalf of ourselves, our principles, and the clients to whom we are of service.

We believe the next generation of social workers can make groundbreaking progress toward the creation of economic justice. Social work educators, therefore, have a responsibility to inspire students to make transformational changes upon entering the field, on both a micro- and macro-level. Through this project, we came to firmly believe that social work classrooms ought to include political activism, poverty simulations, volunteer opportunities, and the development of skills for students to address the intersectional factors that result in certain populations experiencing more poverty and oppression, skills such as empowerment, advocacy, and connecting clients to available resources and social programs. While many social work educators and students are undoubtedly engaging in this type of work already, we believe more work is needed. It will take great courage and empathy for structural changes to happen, and we look forward to doing our part to make this country a better place.

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Appropriately Uncomfortable:
A Conversation Among Three Colleagues About Structural Oppression Focusing on Racism and the Need for Action

Carmela Fusciello Smith, Jemel P. Aguilar, and Stephen Monroe Tomczak

Abstract: In this reflection, three social work colleagues discuss three different perspectives on one statement about racism. We detail our emotionally challenging conversations about racism, microaggressions, and the meaning of social justice in social work to build a different bond and sense of understanding. We delve into how we understand each other, our differing viewpoints on the murders of Black people in American society such as George Floyd, and our perspectives on social workers' relationships to social justice, racism, and social change in the context of the 2020 turmoil.

*Keywords***:** oppression, racism, social work faculty, higher education

Background and Context for the Conversation

After the deaths of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor, many businesses, universities, and social service agencies released anti-racism statements acknowledging that the long-standing tradition of police violence against Black and Brown people should end, and that Black and Brown people will no longer be sidelined or ignored by many people in the United States of America. We are faculty in a social work department at a state university in the New England area. Our university mission speaks to the need for social justice in and outside the university and, as social workers, our profession also speaks to social justice in its core values and mandates. To realize the social justice mission of our university and discipline, the management committee of our department decided to put forth a statement outlining our commitment to anti-racism while also admonishing the behaviors of the individuals that facilitated the deaths of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor, or those complicit in covering up the deaths of these individuals.

One author of this paper, Dr. Tomczak, a White male tenured faculty member, volunteered to draft this letter and send it to the faculty community for review and suggestions. After the meeting in which the letter was discussed, a White female non-tenured faculty contacted the faculty member that agreed to write the letter and suggested that he reach out to others, particularly faculty of color, to collaborate on a draft letter that could integrate multiple perspectives on racism, Black Lives Matter, and the police. While the male faculty member acknowledged the value in doing so, to the surprise of the White female faculty member, this did not occur. The draft letter was then emailed to all faculty. Two faculty members of color quickly shared their concerns and reactions to this letter, including questions about the positionality of the management committee in relation to the current events, the role of faculty of color in discussing racism in society given the differential impact of racism on Black people in the department compared to other non-Black or Brown faculty members, and the underlying frustration that a social work faculty which espouses its commitment to social justice through its

mission and vision still struggles to discuss oppression within the department. One faculty member of color questioned why an all-White management committee thought it would be a good idea to have a White man single-handedly write a letter on behalf of the department addressing anti-racism.

Our discussions occurred outside of departmental tensions and interactions. These conversations were difficult at times, and we challenged one another in diverse ways. What follows are our separate reflections, followed by descriptions of our positionality, and then an integrated reflection based on looking back now on the conversation. We include our inner thoughts and interactions to help explain our different positionalities. We then discuss the larger departmental process for change, and finally we pose reflection questions for readers derived from our discussions to provoke the emotionally challenging reflection of one's role in racism and racist structures in American society.

Carmela Fusciello Smith

Dr. Tomczak recognized that our department wanted to communicate our commitment to anti-racism by adding a statement into the ring of anti-racism statements. We, the management committee, composed a statement that Dr. Tomczak volunteered to draft because everyone has a letter out. After the meeting, I suggested he reach out to others, particularly faculty of color. This would bring people together to collaborate on a draft with multiple perspectives. While he acknowledged the value in doing so, to my surprise, he never contacted the other faculty. When the draft was distributed by email, two of the faculty of color shared their concerns regarding an all-White management committee thinking it would be a good idea to have a White man single-handedly write a letter on behalf of the department addressing anti-racism. One of the responses to one of the faculty of color by a White male tenured faculty stated, "Okay then, can you change the letter????" This suggested that the faculty of color write it themselves. The topic of anti-racism requires collaboration, particularly from the very population it has an impact on—people of color—where their voices take the lead. However, this does not mean they shoulder the work in writing the letter, but that a place is created for all to join. I decided to write a response to the group calling out this microaggression. The White male faculty that drafted the letter was upset with me for using the term "microaggression" to describe his action. Prior to this, we had an excellent working relationship, and I considered him a friend. The White male faculty defended his actions in the group email. He suggested to the group we take a vote on whether to keep the letter or not. Our department has rules for voting, and this could have been done. I responded to the group email stating that suggesting a vote with majority rule further marginalizes faculty of color since the majority of faculty are White. Yes, I called out another microaggression.

He texted me how upset he was. He needed time to process the emails. We set up a time to meet, via Zoom, the following week. He shared with me his tireless efforts for social justice. He went on to defend his actions of being a "social justice warrior" and that he has been "woke" before the term came about. I gave my perspective of his actions. I asked him to consider viewing this from another lens—from a lens of people that continue to be oppressed—and to consider how his actions and defensiveness over his right to draft a letter without including the voices that it

directly impacts comes from a place of White privilege.

I also mentioned to him that I noticed he used the same draft letter in his role with another committee on campus—the faculty leadership committee. He smiled and said they welcomed and appreciated the letter. I asked if the committee was diverse. He said there was only one Asian faculty member and that the others were White. I asked, if after the board reviewed the letter, the draft prompted any discussion on the lack of diversity on their board and if any efforts were being made to engage, include, and recruit faculty of color and other oppressed populations on the faculty leadership committee. His proud smile disappeared as he reflected on this question and said, "Well, no."

To that I asked, "Then what exactly is the purpose of the letter? Who does it serve? Did it move anyone to take anti-oppression action steps?" It's like the term "courageous conversations." It is passive; where are the "courageous actions"? Just talking about oppression is oppressive in and of itself. Having conversations that do not include action steps, accountability, or a change in culture enables oppression to continue.

I have concern around the oppression I see in our department, our university, our community, and our world. I know there's a risk with being non-tenured and speaking up. One tenured faculty stated, "Be careful; the very people you are calling out serve on the Department Evaluation Committee and on Promotion and Tenure." I'm not sure if this was a friendly warning or a threat. Either way, it's a warning. I view racism through my experience as a woman dealing with sexism. I have experienced sexism from my first job, when I was a teenager, to my present position. When people say, "We've come a long way"—which seems to suggest that we can rest as if we are almost there—I respond with, "We still have a long way to go," to communicate we are far off from equality, yet alone equity.

In many places of employment, I have seen how trainings around anti-racism, sexual harassment, and cultural competency have not always yielded changes in the behavior of people who hold power—which, in my experiences, have usually been White men. We need authentic actions and changes in behaviors. We need to stop defending our good intentions. We need to be humble. Is it possible to be humble in academia? Yes, it is possible. We need to listen and learn from others and be honest with ourselves that we do not know what is best. Let go of the ego. We need action. We need to hold our anti-racist, anti-sexist, and other anti-oppression actions accountable through the lens of the people who are oppressed, not our own (D'Angelo, 2018). This means being uncomfortable, which is a daily feeling of people who are oppressed.

Stephen Monroe Tomczak

"Microaggressions??" The word stood out to me as I scanned the email. How could this be, I thought? Surely my colleagues knew of my long history in anti-racist activism. Perhaps they did not know that I was involved as a student at our university in the anti-apartheid movement in the 1980s, but they certainly knew of my more recent work to advance social justice in our department, university, and the broader community. Indeed, it was my dedication to that work, and to the movement against police violence in particular, that had prompted me to volunteer to

draft our department statement on the killings of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor.

I had disclosed to my colleagues in our department management committee that I had a personal experience of losing a dear friend to an egregious incident of police murder in 2001—an incident that had ignited my now 20-year involvement in the struggle against police violence, including work with local African American activists who had experienced similar losses.

Not only this, but, as president of our faculty union, I had been a tireless advocate for non-tenured faculty—many of whom were faculty of color—in our department and outside of it. Surely these more recent demonstrations of my clear allyship had to count for something? Indeed, this concern had also prompted me to volunteer to write this draft, as often faculty of color are asked to assume responsibility for addressing racial justice issues, placing additional burdens on them at times when they may be experiencing great emotional discomfort.

And yet this statement was now being questioned as coming from a "White perspective" when I had clearly tried to frame it in a way that expressed universal yearnings for social and economic justice! Unbelievable, I thought! I had called out every intersecting system of oppression I could name in this draft statement, and yet it seemed not to be appreciated!

It took several weeks to get beyond this emotional reaction that I now understand was the product of what D'Angelo (2018) and others have termed "White fragility"—a state of consciousness that particularly seems to afflict White allies such as myself.

My whole identity, indeed, was wrapped up in my work as an opponent of injustices: social, economic, political. My teaching, heavily influenced by dissertation chair Dr. David Gil, was focused on encouraging critical consciousness of intersecting systems of oppression. I had been "woke" before there was woke, for goodness sake!

And yet there was a missing piece of this critical consciousness, one I was not fully aware of, one I am still working to understand and overcome. While I prided myself on my great empathy for various oppressed and exploited peoples, and my understanding of, and fierce support for, their struggles, I did not fully recognize the limitations imposed on my perception by not being able to experience the world through their eyes.

Although some in the management group had suggested that we might involve some of our faculty of color, I had no understanding initially that drafting and distributing this statement—which I saw as being significantly more critical of systemic injustices than many I had seen—could be seen as inadvertently excluding faculty of color, and thereby unintentionally committing, yes, microaggressions.

Indeed, this issue of intentionality was central to my initial understanding of the whole process. To me, intentionality mattered. Since this time, and in large measure as a byproduct of the discussions that have led to this article, my perspective on intentionality has shifted. While I don't believe it to be entirely irrelevant to assessing the meaning of people's actions, I am more

aware of how so-called "good intentions" can mask a blindness to the consequences of one's actions and the harm it causes to others.

The work of anti-racism, and the broader anti-oppression work of which this is a part, fundamentally involves—for those who enjoy a privileged position in U.S. society—careful consideration of the implications of one's behaviors and actions, and how they may contribute to, or challenge, existing systems of oppression and marginalization. It is frankly difficult for those of us who enjoy White privilege to be aware of how this endemic condition in our society blinds us to the way in which our actions perpetuate oppression and White supremacy, even if we ourselves are ardent foes of this.

Jemel P. Aguilar

Wait…did I read that wrong? Let me check the…yup! I don't know if I want to respond to this email written by a White male faculty member from a White male perspective. Oh wait, a female faculty member of color just responded pointing out that our department cannot talk about racism. You go! That is right—we can't talk about racism without the conversation going off the rails! At least someone is starting to say something, but I should also say something about this letter, the intentions, and the implications of the process for me and other people of color in the department…but I don't want to get into this back-and-forth about the department and its widespread oppression because the conversation is going to get ugly. White people don't like to hear that they might be doing something offensive. What can I write…let me read it again so I can decide what to target in my email. Okay, I am going to write back to the two main people and say what I think can be done with this letter. Ugh, I need to rewrite this email because it is getting too long and complicated. Let me just point out a couple of things. Email sent! Oh, *I* should write the letter…yeah, good idea…ignore the faculty of color and then saddle them with correcting your offensive behavior.

Ugh. Someone thinks we should all sign on to this letter. Why is it so hard for people to accept that we—marginalized people—see what is happening in the world differently than White folks? Why is it that some White folks think that we—marginalized populations—have to sign on to their letters? Is it to make them feel better because they think they are the exception to being racist and upholding White supremacy? I never understand why people, in general, expect everyone to agree with everything that others say. Why can't we all just have our own opinions, even if that means we disagree? And why can't we grow to understand that some opinions are borne out of racist ideologies, White supremacy, and oppression, while others develop in response to systems of oppression? I don't want to align on a statement about racism with people who I have seen engage in oppressive behaviors!

This email exchange is getting tense, and I really have so many other things to do right now. Why should I make time to explain to other people that being well-meaning doesn't do anything for me, and that well-meaning isn't enough? I have enough to do with teaching classes, talking with students of color about their experiences in the department and the field, quarantining myself, writing chapters for a book, and keeping up my own house. I must put an end to my participation in this email exchange. I am thinking, write to the management committee because

they decided to put this out there and just bow out of the discussion and make sure that I am not explicitly or implicitly associated with this letter. I have to be careful in how I write this letter because I do not want to leave room for anyone to say that I agreed just so that they can point to another marginalized identity as aligning with the White people who act from systems of oppression. After two hours of writing and rewriting, I finally came up with a brief email to say I want out of this ongoing email conversation. Email sent!

Dr. Smith wants to talk. I know what that means…we are going to have a conversation about why I should be a part of talks about oppression in the department. In our phone conversation, we talked about the looting and racism that is happening across the United States of America, and then we discussed how we saw a comment posted on a Facebook profile about the potential for looting in a local outlet center. Our reasons why we would not go near the outlet varied. Dr. Smith as a COVID-19 risk reduction strategy, and me to reduce the risk of being shot merely because of the color of my skin. The discussion with Dr. Smith was really interesting. We decided to co-author a letter from our perspectives and thoughts about the murders of Black and Brown people. I think it is a good idea that Dr. Smith and I write a letter about our positions on the murders. I said, "I think we should send out a letter from our department to the rest of our university to make it more widely available," but Dr. Smith suggested to keep it to our department, which I guess is fine. I don't want us to hold back in the letter by acting as if we have the answers to racism; too many White folks think they have the answer to racism and simplify solutions.

A couple days later, I meet with Dr. Tomczak about bylaws documents. I don't know if I will bring up the letter that the management committee sponsored and that he wrote. I might, but I am just not sure. I have so much to deal with right now and this feels like an added burden. Wow…Dr. Tomczak is bringing this up. How do I want to approach this discussion? He is part of the group that wrote this letter, and I want him to understand how I interpreted his writing. I decide to show him how my background influences my reading of the letter by taking him line by line through the letter and telling him my reaction. I say, "Over the years of working and living in the United States of America, I have come to expect standard responses when it comes to talking about racism and oppression." When I read the letter, I found those usual responses. The first line in the letter suggests the killings of Black and Brown people such as George Floyd are recent occurrences, but this is untrue. Lynching and "driving while Black," for example, are both parts of our American history and now people are finally acting up. I say, "The murders and assaults of Black and Brown people have been going on for years, and finally White folks are waking up to it." I tell him that I don't know why anyone would describe the murders and assaults against marginalized people as "recent," or why the "solutions" such as anti-racism or diversity trainings would work. When have anti-racism or diversity trainings led to substantial behavior changes that don't include hiding one's racism or oppressive behaviors, or tokenizing marginalized people by hiring more marginalized people without changing how White people interact with marginalized people that are hired? I know that I was hired in this department because of the color of my skin, and I see that in my everyday interactions with others in the department. But I also know and get clear indications that I can't say what I feel with all the emotion that is attached to those experiences because I will be labeled by White folks as sensitive, aggressive, or difficult. White people want me to make my statements about their

racism with White fragility in mind, which means I must say what I am feeling in a way that they are willing to hear.

Where We Are Today, What We Are Doing, and What We Are Hopeful For

We are not going to delve too deep into the larger group process or the discussions and interactions that are occurring at this time within this group. We do not want to replicate the oppressive actions of speaking for others who can speak for themselves. Thus, we've provided a bird's-eye view of the larger group process to frame how our experiences and reactions flow into and challenge systems outside of our triad, as well as show how our triad is challenged by other systems. We joined colleagues in a larger group that initially sought to rewrite or write an anti-racism position statement. By the end of the initial meeting, the larger group collectively decided that we had preliminary work to complete before we could position ourselves within the call for changes in American society. Hence, we didn't write a letter—and that is a good thing. We abandoned the original letter and decided to continue to meet as a group to discuss our focus, our interactions, and what should be written in a letter in reaction to the continual murder of Black and Brown populations at the hands of police officers.

Much has taken place from the onset of coming together to write this article to the point of submission. There have been missteps, backward steps, and, thankfully, some small steps forward. We realize how polite that sentence is but, to be completely honest, since we started writing this article, there have been significant statements of oppression within our department. The following are a few instances which occurred while we were working on this article:

1. A statement by a White male faculty suggesting people of color do not write as well as White people.
2. A statement by a White male faculty suggesting not to hire women if they are pregnant.
3. A statement by a White male faculty suggesting he is experiencing oppression from the anti-oppression discussions.

We acknowledge our primary focus in this reflection is on racism. We wanted to illustrate an aspect of oppression and share our personal experience and collective process. However, our framework engages anti-oppression to strive for social justice for every oppressed group. If not, we fear the focus on one oppressed group allows other oppressed groups to languish. For example, the Civil Rights Movement (1954-1968) focused largely on racial equity concerns, with an emphasis on Black men. It wasn't until the 1970s and 1980s that it began to comprise other oppressed groups and issues (Banks, 2010; Grant & Sleeter, 2008), including gender and sexism, sexual orientations and heterosexism, language and linguicism, class and economic injustice, and disability and ableism (Gorski & Goodman, 2011).

In current-day oppression based on race, people in American society have become more aware that racist *statements* are looked down upon by many in American society; thus, many people have moved away from making explicitly racist statements. Decreasing or eliminating obvious racist statements, however, does not translate to a decrease in or elimination of racist *behaviors*.

While a person might realize that it is distasteful to say pejorative terms for marginalized populations, the same person might act paternalistically against marginalized populations by

- speaking for the population;
- tensing up when marginalized populations discuss their experiences with oppression in community and organizational settings;
- becoming silent when discussions of racism or oppression arise in mixed marginalized and privileged groups;
- redirecting conversations about racism or oppression toward their own feelings of discomfort;
- suggesting they are being oppressed when they're called out on an oppressive statement; and/or
- being unable or unwilling to identify racist or oppressive statements in the moment.

Conversely, marginalized populations also contribute to their own oppression by

- permitting the subjugation of their own marginalized people to get ahead or maintain a sense of protection;
- apologizing or excusing or minimizing the oppressive statements or behaviors of people; and/or
- espousing a need for anti-racist, anti-oppressive, or social justice efforts and then not showing up to do the work.

Although other examples could be included, the ones above illustrate how everyone can and does contribute to oppression, albeit in different ways.

We acknowledge that there will be increased resistance before the situation gets better. This increased resistance that we are experiencing means the work of anti-oppression is moving forward. This gives us hope. We must have hope with actions for change to take place. We wish we could conclude with some type of outline for how we reduced or ended oppression. Unfortunately, this process is ongoing. Racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, and other forms of oppression continue to exist in the hearts and minds of those around us. They even sit in anti-oppression groups and trainings. They can be found within organizations that put forth anti-oppression statements, and they work or volunteer in professions that espouse social justice values. This is why there is no end to anti-oppression work. We recognize we need to continue to put forth actions not just now, but for the rest of our lives, and pass on the work to future generations. We need to create and establish significant disincentives to challenge the structure of oppression. Oppression of marginalized groups must come to an end, and we must all be committed to doing the work.

Based on our experiences detailed in this article, we ask readers: How have *you* participated in oppression?

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Discourses of Opposition

Allan Irving

*Keywords***:** anti-empiricism, satire, Enlightenment, postmodernism, arts

Since I was young I have enjoyed nonsense rhymes and limericks; as well as irony, satire and forms of mockery. Although I have been an academic for over forty years, I have always felt allergic to academic discipline, accompanied by a desire to escape Enlightenment categories. For the past twenty years or so an international group of academics, and practitioners associated with social work and drawn to postmodern ways of being and thinking, have met every fall in Burlington, Vermont for conversation and often frivolity. The group is the Global Partnership for Transformative Social Work (www.GPTSW.net). One of the evenings—entertainment night—is devoted to performances by participants: music, poetry, storytelling, skits…. At this event I read one of my poems written with the satirical intent of sending up a sacred cow of academic thought. This poem takes to task social work's obsession with empiricism, and number crunching embedded in neoliberal thought. Before reading I gave each participant a stick of celery, and when in the poem the line TIME TO CRUNCH appears, each person was to crunch on the celery stick. My hope was that this crunching would highlight the absurdity of empiricism as our only anchor in life.

FAREWELL to NUMBAAA CRUNCHAAS

So there I was spewing spondees on the Hellespont,
  Some nice soundings anapests as well, losing count of all my majors,
   And got to thinking whatever happened to those
                    Numbaa Crunchaaas?
Torqueing their brains into abacuses and yardsticks of ruin.
   TIME TO CRUNCH.
Their frontal lobes dangerously overheating
     Het-up haematotherms
Contributing to global warming; such holy rollers, doltish culters,
Just give me rolling papers.
Wastrels in winklepickers, and drainpipe trousers,
numbaa crunchaas renovating their bathrooms on weekends
  they grunt and grind, chop, click and stamp.
Give me drug runneres in art deco motorboats any day.
TIME TO CRUNCH
Formulas of disambiguation, mired in Pentecostal glossolalia,
  Numbaa crunching even at the Stray Dog Café, like neoliberal
Enforcers with footwear issues. Wanting the rigor of a lightning bolt—
But Have you ever been hit by a lightning bolt? Torsions of energy?
Do you hear that crunching sound—DO YOU?
  Not a squirrel preparing for Winter or even

  Pico Della Mirandola puting in his knashers,
Only the tromboning din of clapped out crunchaas,
 Cradling their nugatory numbers, boiling potroasts for dinner.
TIME TO CRUNCH.
For they were the crunchaas, the numbaa crunchaas, now only woozy
Ghosts
Once stoned on orchid dust
Brandishing advance algorithms in their tumuli, plowed under
  By that human sickness: the need to know
No more room left on that runway of promise
  Or time for mashups in the moshpits of the sublime.
OH YES, TIME TO CRUNCH
Jaded termites have ballocksed the foundational joists
Ushering in a postmodern reign of error,
                              improved out of all knowledge
resisting the regularization ….of…experience…..into
          the soluble and coherent.
Parading an affinity for dispersal, mapping on to queer coordinates,
  Vectors on fire, Cartesian planar space banished to Ecuador
Quodlibets in abundance, philosophical wrestling rings,
  Fractured horizons, each day perishing, time's walls the strangest
 Prison.
Hark hark the dogs do bark, the postmoderns are coming to town
   With their badass entourage,
Some in rags, some rolling with Lady Gaga,
And one in a glittering gown.
And before I'd had either coffee, or
  A chance to tally the consequences
I knew we were in a story composed by no one from
Nothing.
So adieu, ciao, cheerio Numbaaa Crunchaas.
TIME TO CRUNCH one last time

Even though this poem has nonsense elements, underlying it is the wish to negate prevailing neoliberal positivism. In the 1960s as an undergraduate philosophy student, I was greatly influenced by Herbert Marcuse's (1941) *Reason and Revolution* where he states that he wrote the book largely to help preserve "a mental faculty in danger of being obliterated: the power of negative thinking" (p. vii). Marcuse wanted to set in opposition to the prevailing totalitarian power of given facts that tend to define the entire universe of discourse, languages of contradiction and liberation. For many years my thought and writing have been driven by my wish to escape the baleful and deadening influence of the Enlightenment and its valorizing of empiricism and instead to argue for Foucault's (1997) hope that we become artists of our own lives.

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