

“A critical reflection on feminist interventions in working with women from non-English speaking backgrounds who have experienced violence.”

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Paper presented at the
Brisbane International Feminist Conference 2008

Abstract

One in five Australians were born overseas. It is reasonable to expect that our community will be continually growing in diversity and thereby multiculturalism's position will shift from the outskirts of our Social Policies to the way of life in Australia. Women in Australia who are from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (CALD) are vulnerable to domestic and sexual violence as per the broader community. We assert that in our professional experience, we observe that the personal and systemic barriers that women from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB) are experiencing exacerbate the risks and consequences resulting in heightened vulnerability and isolation. Violence against women is a human rights issue, and it is important to acknowledge that systemic response to, and public dialogue on the issue of violence as it relates to women from CALD remains a human rights consideration in Australia.

This paper will contend that while a gendered/feminist analysis is of critical importance in working with women who have experienced violence, interventions and understandings need to incorporate principles of social justice and equity in practice. This presentation will attempt to provide some practical ways of broadening a feminist analysis that considers the existence and legitimacy of alternative worldviews. This will include worldviews that “*appear to allow*” for the abuse of women and children and where acknowledgement and respect of differences is to be seen as opportunities to be worked with in the intervention.

The aim of the presentation is not to ask that listeners compromise their feminist framework, but to highlight what might be some of the challenges when applying a western analysis of feminist interventions to therapeutic work with women from NESB. In reflecting on feminist interventions we will touch on the role of advocacy when working with women from NESB who have experienced violence.

We aim to ‘sow some seeds’ for a broadening and/or expansion of a feminist framework that emphasizes flexibility, openness to diversity, critical self-reflection and backing away from dualisms.

Introduction

Australian community is multicultural and its growth in diversity constitutes uniqueness of which we seem to be both proud of and somewhat resistant to. One in five Australians has been born overseas and has cultural and linguistic heritage other than English (DIAC, 2008). More than a half of this population consist of women and girls (DIAC, 2008). Furthermore, a considerably high percentage of those women and girls have been exposed and/or subjected to the experience of violence with significant component of it being sexual abuse (NASASV, 2002).

Sexual abuse is an issue that is relevant to the experiences of women all around the World. Though, there are significant differences in the forms that violence against women is perpetrated, there is even greater diversity in the way the experience of violence itself is perceived, understood and incorporated into individual women's worldviews. The environment, social attitude and cultural values are few of the factors that are constantly influencing the processes within the individual. The necessity of understanding the violent experience within the environmental/social context is one of the victim's basic needs.

In Australia we seem to have systems or rather intentions of systems in place to respond to these needs. Generally, we do intend to validate women's experiences and to place these experiences in social/environmental context. While not refraining from naming violence where it needs to be named, we focus on empowering women with information and opportunities for sharing. Many of us within the women sector who are working within the feminist framework where the importance of the relationship between the social and the individual is understood and respected, intuitively know that not to acknowledge is to exclude. Being ourselves aware of the constant struggle for inclusive social identity in a male dominated worldview, many of us feminists feel sensitised enough to be cautious around the potential of exclusion (Charles & Hughes-Freeland, 1996).

However, having intentions is not merely enough. For as much as it is important to have that initial direction set we need to ensure this to be followed by the necessary determination and perseverance. There is no doubt that our responses do not work well for a significant group of women in our community and if we are to provide service in this community they need to be tailored for the community's specific needs. The choice we often make, and we need to be really clear about, is whether we are prepared to support all women in our community who are in need of our service or we are responding to the needs of only those women whose cultural and linguistic discourses we share, and who fit within the '*being able to understand*' criteria.

This paper is looking at some of the issues of feminist framework and inclusive practise when working with women from NESB who have experienced sexual violence and exploring some of the aspects that often omitted by service providers, have implications in cross-cultural counselling and therapeutic contexts.

Concepts of culture or related discourses have been very popular, in some circles of social related theories for over a century (Hall, 1976). As the recognition of diversity has grown the emphasis on definitions of '*culture*' has been both supported and disputed by many minds dwelling on the issues of individual and social relativity and the influences that those definitions potentially have on both the '*object*' and '*subject*' of such deliberations (Abu-Lughod, 1991; Ong, 1999).

It is intentional that such definitions are avoided in this paper leaving this path of deliberations for individuals' to choose. Also, it is my particular choice to

use the non-academic word 'we' when referring to professionals working within the feminist framework. The intention behind such expression is to indicate both my personal sense of professional belonging and the responsibility that I take over my own self-critique.

Working across cultures

In today's society many professionals attempt to attend to their professional development needs of being aware of the impact that cultural discourses have onto forming relationships both with clients and with other professionals from diverse backgrounds. Many of us, considering ourselves 'culturally aware professionals' continue to build libraries where culture related information has its own space ensuring that we know 'how to' when we run into trouble with intercultural issues that seem to be causing us so much discomfort. We develop policies and are keen to ensure that the issues of access and equity in our workplaces are well documented and adhere to the standards that somewhere within ourselves call for a degree of dignity and fairness.

As much as these practises need to be acknowledged for the due they possess, it needs to be emphasised that this is not what the essence of cross-cultural practice is about. To have some knowledge of diversity as well as ensuring adequate policies in place is to attend to the first step of recognising variety in needs, from which then attempts to ensure adequate access can be made. There is no doubt that this is a crucial undertaking in enabling the cross-cultural practice but still, though fundamental, this is just the structural step.

Cross-cultural counselling

Furthermore, having information about some aspects of a person's cultural background does not mean to possess understanding of these aspects that is similar to the one the above individual holds. As much as we wish to be understanding, the fact is that both our perception and understandings are guided by our own discourses (Foucault, 1966; Kondo, 1990) and it is the ability to differentiate and suspend them that allows for perception of another person's experience of reality. This ever-present aspect of the therapeutic work is challenging enough to pose significant barriers while working with individuals from same as our cultural background (James, 1890; Thornton, 2008) however, has the potential of becoming an insurmountable block when working with people from NESB.

At IWSS we often hear NESB women's comments expressing feelings of not being heard or understood while accessing other, including feminist, services. On the other hand it is not uncommon to hear our mainstream colleagues' frustration in saying "*she simply can't get it no matter how many times I explain*" or "*she is not engaging at all*". This aspect of working with people from NESB might often feel very challenging and frustrating, especially where the bridging of understanding is as crucial as in sexual violence related therapy.

However, it is important to remember that the awareness of another individual's culture is one of the tools that are to assist in working with

diversity but it must not be mistaken for the practice itself. Being aware of some of the aspects of the context in which violence was experienced is still amiss from the understanding of the meaning of the violent experience that individual women themselves have. To work with women from NESB who have experienced violence is to be able to understand that though there is a great diversity in the way those violent experiences are perceived, justified and incorporated into individual women's worldviews, all experiences considered by individual women themselves as violent, involve the same universal feelings such as hurt and pain (James, 1890; Thornton, 2008).

It is on this common level that we need to seek the understanding of the meaning of alternative realities when working with women whose cultural discourses are not common to ours. It is the courage and determination to bypass the cultural personas of overwhelming difference that allow the opportunity to arrive at the platform onto which human to human can meet. It is through the simplicity of asking the NESB woman about what it is that is hurting her without the load of our own assumptions, prejudice and overriding educative attitude that we can really hear her. For working onto this platform we work with the essence of human experiences while bypassing that insurmountable barrier of their symbols and forms.

However, we must not make the mistake of expecting this act be that of the women themselves. It is the professional first of all that needs to leave his/her culture behind and to come 'empty handed' to reach the wealth of another person's experience. It is not less challenging for the culture of western feminism to accept this confronting demand when faced against its own values to acknowledge that its own analysis are culturally biased and often exclusive of the worldviews of others. Many of our feminist colleagues find it confronting when commented on lacking openness; for in the feminist framework it is embedded so deeply. However, it must to be remembered that the need for self inquiry relates to all aspects of our perceptions and feminism being our framework as well.

To miss this important point is to follow the road of continuous frustration in looking for more appropriate solutions on the structural level where there are none to find. We often witness 'willing' practitioners so preoccupied with the appropriate cultural persona that it renders them paralysed and unable to connect with another woman. There is an area/level in interpersonal relating that must be reached for this connection to be experienced and it is natural for us to go there as long as the focus is directed. Staying on the level of acquired cultural qualities is to be led where diversity has no end and where solution we search is not to be found.

Lessons from diversity

The fundamental fact which all of us need to remember is that we are a multicultural community. There is no other way to respond to the needs of our community, but to embrace this multiculturalism together with its growing diversity. As much discomfort as it might cause, it is the refining of what has been thought of as solid cohesion while incorporating new definitions that is the process of forming our social Australian identity. Even though the dynamic

aspects of such processes might seem as one of the unity diversion it is important that we seek the opportunities that diversity within itself brings.

Diversity in itself is not a single direction construct and needs to be understood according to the twofold function that it possesses. It is this function that provides us with the opportunity to perceive two different aspects of the same truth and to understand that diversity and universality are two spectrums of the same whole.

It is through working with diversity and embracing all of its aspects that we are given opportunity to become aware and to differentiate between the constant and the variable aspects of human personality. It is the ability to observe within this spectrum that grants us the perception of the One-Self. Every time another aspect of diversity reaches our awareness, an opportunity arises for us to refine our previous construct of this Self. We might feel resistant in response to this craft of having our own misconceptions shed; however, the opportunity is there. It is brought up with each and every woman in our community whom we secretly exclude by assigning her the name of 'the other', 'the not being able to understand', 'the different' self.

Accordingly, we must recognise differences of opinion, practices and perspectives on life as essential in building diverse unity and acknowledge that every individual contributes to the wholeness of our community. Furthermore, and as a consequence each has the right to be heard and have his/her opinion respected, considered and included in all community's endeavours and expressions.

IWSS aims to assist new and existing members of Australian Community to extend their awareness of the broad Community, its resources and opportunities and recognises the importance of this awareness as an essential step in active participation and constructive change. This aim needs to be shared by others.

A word on integration

The outcomes reminding us that as a community we seem to fail in the responsive approaches for women from NESB are indicated by the various comments we hear at IWSS from mainstream services. Either "*the women do not want to come because they have different ways of dealing with the issues*", or having "*their culture allowing for violence*", or they are simply being "*unwilling to integrate into our system*".

At IWSS we hear so often comments from service providers about people from NESB failing to 'integrate' into our community that it forms a growing desire to scream out the question as to who is the one to integrate. The expectation of integrating is so intense that many if not all, new migrants coming to Australia attend to it prioritising it ahead of such basic needs as physical and emotional health. Much of the support provided for new migrants is designed to assist this process and the anticipation that the outsiders will integrate themselves into our solid and well defined structure is strongly present.

However, integration in itself is not a process to be undertaken by an outside part, especially not the one that is perceived as excluded in the first place. Integration is a process where a whole is regaining its own identity through inclusion of all its aspects. The volition to initiate, undergo, and complete the process of integration comes from the already self-perceived whole itself (Cox, La Caze & Levine, 2008).

An important aspect of this relation is in the fact that we see new communities/migrants as outsiders. As long as we take this type of disowning attitude, we will be unable to share in their intellectual, spiritual, and cultural wealth. Additionally, such perspective induces viewing the service and resources we provide to new migrants as outpouring to some outside community, and is often followed by the feelings of loss and the discomfort of resistance. However, this act of disowning new members of our community is to fail in perceiving our own enhancement and growth as a society and to pass by the experience of achievement that we as Australians create for ourselves. It is only after our act of integrating 'them' that we are to see from an entirely different perspective and can enjoy sharing knowing that it is us, Australia, growing itself.

The essence of integrating our own diversity is not about allowing some outside community into our united system but it is about introspection and the courage to look deeply into the Australian identity where the old preconceptions, stereotypes and cognitive constructs built on the fear of difference still have their place.

Spirituality in working with women from NESB

One of the very important and potent areas of counselling when working with women from NESB who have experienced violence is their spirituality. Unfortunately, this is the same area that many professionals working with women from NESB share to be causing in them much discomfort and anxiety. Peculiarly enough, many feminists following themselves the search for the ultimate Self incorporate various spiritual practices of other cultures' religions (Charles & Hughes-Freeland, 1996) and yet express feeling inadequate to discuss these spiritual aspects with their NESB clients.

It is our experience in IWSS that many women from NESB consider their spirituality of paramount importance in understanding who they are. Moreover, it is exactly this component of their identity that is often the only stable and constant aspect in their life. Leaving a country of origin together with everything that is culturally reflecting who a woman believes she is has a very drastic implication for the dynamics of the constantly forming individual and social identity (Hall, 1996).

Accessing another woman's spiritual beliefs provides opportunity to understand the perception of her own relation to life at large and it also allows a glimpse of the meaning that she herself assigns to her own experiences of violence. Not to participate in this journey, which many NESB women seeking counselling invite therapists to, is to bypass the incredible opportunity to be

witness of these women's personal expeditions into meanings of their own perception of the World and relationships.

The topic of spirituality within the counselling context requires deliberations much deeper than the scope of this paper and it is not my intentions to go into further discussions, however, I still would like to call for more courage on the professionals' side to explore such possibilities when the opportunity arrives.

Feminism, cross-cultural work and the practise of self-reflection

In the words revered Buddhist teacher, Shunryu Suzuki "in the beginners mind there are many possibilities, but in the experts mind there are few."

Undertaking to provide support to women affected by violence requires us to open up to understanding the huge diversity that exists within and between individuals, communities and cultures. When providing support to survivors of gender-based violence, it is a basic requirement of the feminist practitioner to understand that each individual woman's experiences of violence are different. Ideally, we go to the support relationship with no pre-conceived assumptions or judgements regarding a woman's understandings of her own experience or the impacts that these experiences may have had. But while, as feminist practitioners we acknowledge that we are not the experts in the lives of others, I believe that sound feminist practice also requires a commitment to developing expertise in understanding ourselves. Self-understanding can never be complete and is an on-going and developmental process that requires constant self-reflection. This is vitally important when working in the area of violence against women, where the personally challenging and often deeply distressing nature of the work needs to be constantly reflected on so to ensure that workers are healthy enough to provide safe and appropriate services to survivors.

As put forward by my colleague Beata, self-reflective practice is also of paramount importance when working with diversity. Indeed, self-awareness provides a necessary foundation to being comfortable with and respecting cultural difference. Self-reflection within the context of cross-cultural work requires us to consider how our beliefs, values and ways of being have been influenced by culture. How do these beliefs and values inform our words and actions? In what ways are our words and actions inclusive or exclusive of others, particularly others who are different from ourselves? What are the implications of this for cross-cultural practice?

Grass-roots feminism has a long tradition of reflecting on the manner in which social and political inequity has contributed to the many sites of oppression, and prides itself on its anti-racist, anti-classist, anti-homophobic and anti-imperialist stance. However, to undertake interpersonal support work in a cross-cultural context, it is also important to remember that feminist philosophies (diverse as they are) are worldviews that have been formed within a cultural context. In this sense then, a feminist approach must also be critically reflected on – we must also consider the ways in which our approach may blinker us to truly understanding another's perspective and, therefore, prevent us from providing services that are truly inclusive.

There are aspects of cultural diversity that we are generally more familiar with because they are easily observable – these may include such things as religious affiliation, dress, language, customs and lifestyles. One of the less easily observable aspects of cultural diversity is that of worldview – the manner in which individuals and communities make sense of the world and their place in it. When working within the support context I believe that failing to recognise, and reflect on, this diversity of worldviews, can lead to exclusionary practices within service organisations – feminist or otherwise.

One quite useful conceptual framework for understanding diversity of worldviews, are the set of distinctions between collectivist and individualist cultures. Like all cultural traditions, feminism is located somewhere between the black and white poles of the collectivist/individualist dichotomy. While on one hand feminist process values the collectivist approach of consensus-based decision making, it also holds that honest and direct communication is central to this process even if this causes disharmony and disunity. A more collectivist approach to communication may have as its focus maintaining harmony, keeping the peace and saving face – either one's own or another's. It is generally understood that there is no one universal feminist identity and most of us here today will generally speak about our individual identities in terms of the individual "I" as opposed to the collective "we". As a feminist it is expected that I will speak only for myself on feminist issues, and I take as a given my right to my own individual opinions. Those from more collectivist societies however may see themselves only from within the context of their family or cultural group, and their beliefs, values and opinions may be largely determined by this group.

While feminism has claimed and owned aspects of the collectivist worldview, the framework for the practical application of many aspects of the feminist approach has been developed within a largely individualist cultural context. A simple reflection on those aspects of collectivist societies that are *not* associated with feminist approaches, can provide a good foundation for considering how diversity of worldviews can impact on the practical application of even the most fundamental of feminist approaches. Take as an example the empowerment framework. An empowerment framework is the cornerstone of the feminist approach to working with survivors of domestic and sexual abuse. In fact, feminist or not, it is the good-practice standard for undertaking this work. The empowerment approach is so important because it seeks not to mirror any aspect of the abusive experience. Among other things it seeks to prioritise the needs of the woman, and guards against the abuse of power in the support relationship. And yet, the practical application of an empowerment framework, if not coupled with flexibility and reflection on self and culture, does present some challenges when working with diversity.

I'll provide an example. I am working with a woman who has recently arrived in Australia and does not speak any English. She has come to Australia under the humanitarian program and has spent the last 8 years in a refugee camp in Tanzania, before which she lived in a small village in her country of origin. She is in crisis, has complex needs and no understanding of Australian systems and services. How do I foster non-dependence, and take

the non-expert stance, in the support relationship with a woman who may be wholly dependent on my knowledge of and expertise in Australian systems; and my capacity to advocate on her behalf within these systems? Can a woman who has never encountered government bureaucracy of any kind, and whose language has no words for “domestic violence”, “child protection”, “legal aid”, “government welfare” make truly independent, informed and timely decisions? If a woman from a cultural background in which community roles are highly defined and differentiated comes to me seeking my expertise and knowledge, how relevant (and therefore accessible) will she find my non-expert stance? Is it never appropriate to give advice or directives?

On another day I am seeing a woman who is very distressed by the physical violence used by her husband during sexual intimacy which she openly states she neither invites nor wants. When I ask her about how she is feeling and how she understands her experiences she consistently refers to her cultural beliefs and provides answers that relate to her family and community. If my partner forces me to have sex with him or her, I adamantly believe that I have been sexually assaulted - conversely I am working with a woman who just as adamantly believes that there is no such thing as sexual assault in marriage. Am I right – and she wrong? Is it appropriate for me to interpret this woman's belief only within the context of her oppression within her culture? Is it useful to do so or is this condescending? How does this dynamic play out within the support context? What does it mean to promote individual empowerment with a woman who sense of self is strongly linked to family and community ties, and whose identity is defined by her place within these structures?

This brings me to another important aspect of a feminist framework - social change. Within the area of domestic and sexual assault, this commitment to activating for social and cultural change is an important part of preventing violence against women and children. Participating in social action is also recognised as a useful and practical strategy for women to claim back the power lost in the abusive experience. However, the concept of activating and advocating for social and cultural change, when we are working with individuals from social and cultural groups that are different from our own is complicated by diversity. The premise behind the commitment to social and cultural change is that the society and/or culture is faulty or inherently wrong and is in need of the change. On human rights issues such as infibulation or violence against women and children this may well be a valid premise; but feminists from the Western ‘developed’ world must also be careful to avoid any stance which endows us with the responsibility of stepping in and ‘saving’ women of other cultural traditions from ‘their own ignorance’.

I remember a few years ago being disturbed by feminist rhetoric and discourse around the issue of the wearing of hijabs by Muslim women. I am a subscriber to the Australian Feminist Policy Network email list and there was much discussion about the manner in which the hijab is an oppressive practice imposed by Muslim men on Muslim women, the manner in which the hijab oppresses all women, and hence, the role of feminists in activating to eliminate the practice. I was stunned that the feminist chant of ‘whatever we wear, wherever we go’, seemed all of a sudden not to apply to a significant

number of Australian women, and was surprised by the lack of understanding that this cultural practice may in fact be rich with cultural and spiritual meanings that may or may not have its roots in the oppression of women. It seemed strange to me that no-one was acknowledging that this issue had only arisen with such fervour since the 9/11 attacks in New York. Quite a simple analysis of this fact seemed to me to suggest that much of the feminist rhetoric on this issue was fear-based. I was struck by the monocultural understandings, and it had an important impact on my work with women from diverse cultural backgrounds. For me personally, it was a reminder of the importance of taking a woman-centred approach to my work rather the 'me-centred' approach that seeks only to fortify and reinforce my own feminist identity, and resolve my own emotional responses to difference.

When working cross-culturally it is important to acknowledge our obligation to understand customs, beliefs and understandings from the 'cultural relativist' standpoint that seeks to understand all cultural practices from the standpoint of the other. As feminists, however, we may at the same time feel keenly motivated to change cultural practices that we feel are objectively wrong. In this way, cultural relativism can begin to feel like another theoretical approach that supports the ongoing oppression of women. Our stance is only paradoxical, however, if we feel the need to position ourselves at either pole of a black/white, right/wrong, good/bad dichotomy. While I recognise the extreme forms of female genital cutting as an abuse of human rights, if I wish to practice inclusively, it is important to refrain from the expression of horror, disgust and moral outrage.

When working directly with diversity of any kind, taking the non-expert stance requires us to locate ourselves in the middle ground between polarised and divisive standpoints. While I acknowledge the important role that a non-compromising approach to women's rights has contributed to changing the world in which I live – and that I enjoy the benefits of this approach by feminists throughout history – I also believe that in direct work with women, a rigidly dualistic approach runs the significant risk of excluding those with alternative worldviews.

I have asked more questions than I have answered - my intention has been to invite analysis and reflection rather than give directives or provide a 'dos and don'ts' approach to feminist cross-cultural work. Feminist cross-cultural work, indeed working with diversity of any kind, ultimately requires us to be able to tolerate a degree of framework ambiguity. This does not mean that we cannot have strongly-held beliefs, or that we need be ambivalent on issues that are important to us, but I feel that it is important to critically reflect on the implications and usefulness of our approach to cross-cultural work, and to be open to integrating other worldviews and understandings into our feminist approaches. For me, feminism represents a framework against which I reflect on my own commitment to woman-centred practice - as opposed to a dogma or a set of universal truths against which I judge others. Indeed, I believe that if we genuinely wish for a more just and equitable world for all women it is important to embrace self-reflection over self-righteousness, flexibility over rigidity, and diversity over dichotomy.

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