

A kiss with a fist is better than none

Conceptualizing Domestic Violence and People with Intellectual Difference.

Introduction

This short session is aimed at inviting you to walk in the shoes of women who experience domestic violence and who also live with an intellectual disability. By no means is this a complete re/telling of a complex, contradictory and pluralistic narrative. In telling this story my aim is simply to open space for you to consider the multiple layers of disadvantage that are faced by women with intellectual differences and how we make them up (Hacking, 2006).

To begin this session I will tell you a story that I have constructed but which is drawn from what is a typical narrative.

Cheryl is in her early thirties, she lives with her partner Fred, who is in his early sixties. They have been in relationship for 6 months. They live in a caravan park that has long term low cost housing. Cheryl met Fred in the park 7 months ago.

Life has been often untenable for Cheryl. She grew up in foster care, after her mother relinquished her at the age of 5 years old. She had 35 placements until she was 18. At 18 she was given a transitions package by community services. Over the years she has lived in hostels, group housing, on the streets and most recently was relocated to the caravan park. Cheryl has the label of challenging behaviour and intellectual disability. One of the markers of her life has been a poverty of relationships. While she was in care she was sexually assaulted by several careers. On moving into the community she experienced a number of violent incidences (physical and emotional abuse, sexual assaults, theft of her possessions) involving people in her environment.

When Cheryl moved into the park she was befriended by several men. These men would bring her gifts; take her out for meals and movies. She felt like she was making real friendships for the first time in her life. After a short period of time they would often come to her van and engage in sex with her, this they told her, was all part of being friends, and 'it is good fun isn't it Cheryl' they would say. "You get lots of pleasure don't you? We are good friends having a good time". Sometimes, there were several men having sex with her at a time and sometimes they would bring other women who lived in the park and there would be other men and women engaging in sexual activities. She was told that this was 'having a party and a good time'. On these occasions someone would take a video and encourage Cheryl and other women to engage in sexually explicit behaviours for the camera. These were then uploaded on the internet and often the men would ask Cheryl to watch the party again online when they came the next time to see her, as they were drinking and having sex and "being friends".

On one occasion Cheryl was bound and whipped while three men were having sex with her, it was very rough and painful, and it frightened her. She began to talk to a new support worker about what was happening, asking "do you think this is what people do, when they are your friends'. The support worker worked with Cheryl to understand that this was not what friends do and explained what was happening to her as sexual assault. The support worker arranged for her to see a sexual assault service

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and receive counseling. Cheryl began to refuse entry of these men and women into her van. But she was still not clear about what was friendship.

It was then she met Fred. He said he has seen what was happening to her and that 'it was not right' and if she wanted he would be her boyfriend and keep her safe. Cheryl thought this was a good thing. Fred suggested that he move into her van so he did not need to pay rent on his place and she could pay for him to live with her. Fred said it would be better for both of them, if this is what they did. He said it would also stop other men coming to the van wanting her to have sex with them. It was not very long before Fred had control of Cheryl's money, movements and had told the disability support service that they were no longer needed. Fred then claimed the Careers Pension as her career.

Cheryl was initially happy and felt safe. However, when Fred had a few beers, as he did every day, he lost his temper. Sometimes he said awful things to her, at others he forced her to engage in sex that she found painful and scary, at other times he would hit her, push her or lock her in the van tied up for days and days. While Fred was not always nice to her, he was not always unkind either, and the other men in the park had stopped coming over asking her to play and party. So on one level she did feel that she was safe living with Fred. Violence was something Cheryl was used to it had been present all her live.

When the disability worker called to check on her one day she said she was very happy living with Fred. The support worker noticed a lot of bruising on Cheryl's arms legs and neck, when she asked what had happened Cheryl said 'I have just been a bit clumsy lately.'

It is rare to hear women (like Cheryl) say that they are living in domestic violence. The poverty of relationship which marks their life journey means that typically any relationship is better than none. If there are any points in the relationship where there is care, kindness and intimacy most women will welcome the relationship, there are times that just being in the relationship is enough. Violence is also a dominant feature in living with this ability difference. So it is normal, intelligible for women and what is expected by many many women as just part of relationship, they know nothing different. (Chenoweth, 1993).

Some of what happens in Cheryl's life is about being a woman. Some of it is about having an intellectual disability. The intersection of these identities offers a complexity for people that may work with Cheryl. Disability services do not often know how to respond well to issues of domestic violence. Often, women with intellectual and other disabilities cannot access women's shelters because the shelter doesn't accommodate the support workers that are needed for them to stay. Most people see that Cheryl has made an active choice to live in this relationship, so it is up to her. Very

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few people take the time to deconstruct the performances being played here, which dance around the norms and mores of social constructs, and life experience.

For some time I have been deconstructing intimacy, violence and intellectual difference. The violence that I see women (and men) with intellectual difference experience is the same, in some ways, but also different to what non disabled people experience. Healy, Howe, Humphrey's Jennings and Julian (2008) says that the sexual violence against women with intellectual disabilities is more violent, lasts for longer periods of time with more than one perpetrator. One of the key findings in this report is that *"Members of the judiciary, lawyers, court officials and police require better education about family violence and its impact on women and children with disabilities.(p 17)"*. It is also our experience that many people will want to stay in a violent relationship rather than be alone so will not pursue leaving this relationship. Where indeed do they go? Thus it is important to work alongside women and the relationships that are part of their live story.

It is not uncommon that a woman like Cheryl will stay in one abusive relationship as it offers protection against the many other perpetrators who would otherwise engage in sex with her. It is not uncommon that the women (and men) we see who have intellectual difference do not understand that they can say no. Neither is it uncommon that they do not know what sexual assault, abuse or domestic violence is, because it has been ever present in their lives. It is also apparent that they do not know how to engage in protective behaviours, Johnson, Hillier, Harrison and Frawley (2001; Murphy, 2003; Walker-Hirsch, 2005) show that it is uncommon that people get good sex education, and what is available often fails to incorporate the explicit teaching which they need on social relationships and skilling.

Abuse is a dominant experience when you are defined as intellectually different. Robinson (2008) exposes the continued abuse and violence against people living in care in her PhD and shows that this is extreme. In nine narratives there are 251 accounts of physical and emotional abuse and 147 accounts of theft robbery extortion. This is also what we see for many people living in the community.

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People are used of being touched in clinical and care, often it is a part of their daily life. I often explain this as that people don't, know where they stop and someone else begins. Not knowing this leads to abuse. In their lives they often are touched much more than a person without a disability– by disability workers, taxi and bus drivers, teachers, parents and careers, health staff. They are often not told that they can resist this touch and will typically comply with any instructions. This makes them easy victims in many areas of their lives, including as victims of domestic violence. Sobsey (1994) argues that people are taught to be compliant from a young age and this also makes them vulnerable to abuse they just think that they have to do what they are told. They are compliant and unquestioning about what happens to them often.

The other element of what I see in my practice is that people, like all of us, want relationships. I say that people have poverty of relationships that are functional and freely given. In this poverty of relationships it is my experience that most people are skin hungry, by this I mean that they long of kind, gentle touch and intimacy. Thompson (2009) states that most men with intellectual disabilities who visit sex workers ask to be held nothing more, which tells us, I think, that there is no tender touch for people who are over touched in clinical ways.

All of these constructs lead to vulnerability. When we look at Cheryl there are some things that are about being a woman. Many women stay in domestic violence for many many reasons. Cheryl is no different than other women. She says that, it is the drinking that makes Fred hit her, or that she did something wrong that upset him that made him hit her. Many women who experience this talk about this as walking on egg shells when he gets home. Most people with intellectual disability will take responsibility and the blame for things (Perske, 1996); this is one of the things that make them vulnerable in the criminal justice system and also in relationships. In a way there is a layering of vulnerability – being a woman and having an intellectual disability act as dualistic points of disadvantage (Wolfensberger, 1972); if you add the difference of ethnicity then you again add another layer of complexity and disadvantage.

Being in any relationship is better than being in none – hence – a kiss with a fist is better than none (Florence and the Machine, 2009). There are many women who hold

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this standpoint. The pressure on us as women is to be in relationship – maybe it is the Cinderella myth, or the dominant norm of relationships in our social constructs. Relationships are primary drives for all of us and we only have to look at internet dating sites to see that around the world millions and millions of men and women are seeking a mate, to fill the Cinderella fairytale, which starts with a kiss. So it is for people with intellectual difference. They too want to love and be loved. The yearning for relationship and intimacy is a human calling. The social construction of intellectual disability continues to locate people outside of being human – however they are human and have the full range of human emotions and feeling (Rapley 2004; Bender, 1993). Livingstone (2006) says that the ingredients of a good life are – someone to love something to do and something to look forward too. Seems simple yet it is commonly absent for men and women with intellectual disabilities.

The role that intellectual disability plays in Cheryl's life is in a way quite nuanced, yet powerful. It is the marker of her social experience and life path. It is the language used to iterate and reiterate her identity and capacity when professionals engage with her.

It was the presence of having a disability that led to her mother (her father left upon hearing the diagnosis when she was 18 months old) abandoning her into care at the age of 5 (39% of children in care in south Australian in 2007 had a disability, <http://www.gcyp.sa.gov.au/2009/02/statistics-on-children-in-care-december-2008>). Her experiences in care mean that abuse was normal, in the absence of getting a good sex education along with learning about social skills she has seen sex as just what you do. When you grow up in care you learn resistance is pointless because you have no power in your own life to make things different. When Cheryl was a child she had no language with which to express her feelings of anger frustration hurt and pain, so she lashed out punched kicked bit and threw things. It always got a response. Often she was moved out of a bad situation often into a worse one. No one really asked her how she felt or what was happening. They just thought that she had an intellectual disability and so she was naturally a violent person. No one took the time to find out what the behaviour was saying to everyone around her. It was saying 'Help'.

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When she lived on the streets, sex was the way you got a meal a place to sleep or some money. Everyone did it. In a way sex is meaningless, I think, in this location. What holds meaning is intimacy. Sex can involve no exchange of intimacy. When I work with women and they talk about their lives desire for relationships, I think, what they have in mind as relationship is intimacy expressed as love - sex may be a part of this but it is not always. This intimacy can, I suspect, be very limited and women would not talk about it in this way – for Cheryl it is 'I am happy being here and I feel protected'. 'I only have to have sex with one person not several people'. There is some protection for her in this relationship which is less violent than what she was exposed to previously. Cheryl has been exposed often in her life to sexual and physical violence and this is the first time someone has said they will protect her. She may indeed read this, as love. What has previously been inscribed on her body and experience is sex that is impersonal, it was a means to an end. Having a disability has delimited her experience for knowing about safe respectful relationships. Her life path of living with a disability has meant she is not educated about sex or relationship or safety or violence and she has little idea that she can say no to the way she is being treated.

Often people will test out what is right by asking a support person – do you think that friends coming to your house giving you a lot to drink and you having sex with them is normal – friendship. This is testing the waters, trying to understand what friendship is. You can't know what you have never experienced. Some people know that what is happening is not ok but, don't know that they can leave. Some women would know that they can say this is not ok, some may understand it as violence but many others would accept what is happening without question. Many women with intellectual disabilities face considerable obstructions in reporting domestic violence – they have limited literacy and even less emotional literacy. For most people even having the words to talk about what is happening or talk about their feelings are minimal. When they go to the police often their statement is not heard or acted upon (Green and Simpson, 2000)

It is her disability that inhibits her capacity to conceptualize the relationship as violent. Violence is normal for many people with disabilities and they are not typically exposed to or involved in respectful safe relationships. You have to have experienced something, to know that it exists. The absence of the experience of functional intimate

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relationships delimits a person's capacity to think or imagine even that they can have that kind of relationship. Being a concrete thinker also means that many people cannot conceive the abstract ideal of a good relationship.

Having a disability in a way reduces the pool of people whom you can draw upon for relationship. Often we see very young women with men 20 – 30 years their elder, and other people with intellectual disabilities in relationships with people with mental illness/intellectual disability, and or people who have substance abuse issues. Their social construction and the stigma in their lives cultivate an environment where they are dominantly exposed to other people living marginalized and vulnerable lives. This makes their lives messy, complex and dangerous as they may engage in performances that are their experience of what is their norm, and/or resist them.

Intellectual disability is socially constructed and performed within the norms and mores sanctioned in notions of normativity (Rapley 2004). At the wider social level violence is the dominant social construct – in media, movies and sport, notions of gender and patriarchy are deeply saturated with violence. So it is a dominant message that people with intellectual disability are exposed to. Home and Away, My name is Earl, the Simpson etc, typically provide the intelligibility upon which they make sense of what constitutes relationship. Intellectual disability remains outcast in being human– the other; other (Rapley, 2004). For the women (and men) we work with, the impact of this othering is extreme. People are denied ordinary opportunities in life, work, friendships and relationships, educations and recreation. What we see is that people have a poverty of freely given functional respectful relationships; I would argue that most people would have no expectation of a relationship free from violence because they have never experienced it.

As you attend this conference on improving the experience of women who experience domestic violence and become involved in the legal system. I would say that these women are absent parties at the table – even when we know that they experience higher rates of violence and live more vulnerable lives, than women without disabilities. They typically cannot access a service – the way they communicate is a barrier to linking with mainstream service or taking up a legal avenue. There is a great

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deal of education needed for both professionals and people with the difference of intellectual disability if we are going to move this social reality towards ensuring safe good ordinary lives.

For now a kiss with a fist is better than none – (Florence and the Machine 2009)

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