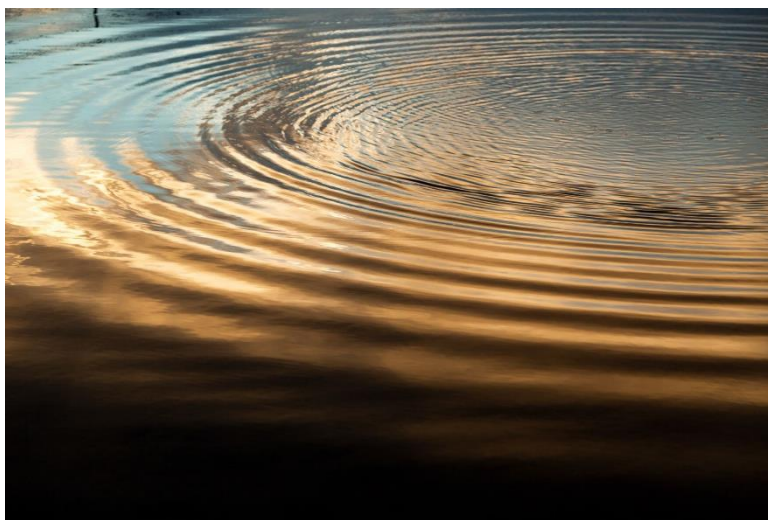


Views from the Mirror: Reflections on being a female facilitator in a Men's Behaviour Change Program

"What is it like to be the only woman in the room?" The responses to this question always astound me. Energised, inspired, responsible, small, on guard, proud, fearful, hope and strong are some of the feelings that female facilitators of Men's Behaviour Change Programs



(MBCPs) have so generously shared with me when responding to this question. In every woman's reflections I can see a part of myself. For me, being the only woman in the room can be energising, heart-warming, emboldening, daunting, frustrating, and exhausting and this is only within the first 10 minutes of a group session!

"My very presence is a mirror for his shame"

Some women speak about feeling othered or a heightened sense of their femaleness. I am the person in the room who has the closest semblance to the people who have survived the man's most shameful and abhorrent acts of violence. I am the man hater, the nagging wife, the carer, the oppressor, the little sister and the sexy teacher. My words are always up for scrutiny as the men wait to catch me out. To prove to themselves, and to the rest of the group, that I am just like the rest of them (women) and therefore his use of violence towards his mother, his sister, his wife or his daughter was justified. My very presence is a mirror for his shame. [Transference and Countertransference](#) are highly charged in MBCPs.

I have regretfully played the role of “the oppressor”, when cornering a man into admitting the harm that he has caused his family. I have also unintentionally, and unashamedly, been perceived as the sexy teacher. How I responded to my experience of being sexualised provided a big learning opportunity for a user of sexual violence. These archetypes, offensive and restricting as they can be, have transformative potential for both the facilitator and the men in the group.

Women have also spoken to me about having a heightened awareness of how men use their bodies within the space. How the men sit in their chairs, how the room smells, their posture and movement as they talk, and when they are silent. All of our senses can become heightened when facilitating MBCPs, some senses more than others. I can't say that I have ever been aware of the 'male smell' in the room but I am certainly well acquainted with the '14 way man spread'.



What about man number 15? More formally known as the co-facilitator. Many of us have a blacklist of male facilitators. Those who we would rather be stranded in the middle of the Nullarbor, with no water and only a jar of vegemite for sustenance, than spend an agonising two hours co-facilitating with. I have several male facilitators on my, 'will do no harm' list, and an additional bunch on my 'good enough' list. Let me paint you a disturbing picture. I have been facilitating MBCP's for some years now. I have completed the relevant graduate certificate study in MBCPs, and I am recognised as a so called "principal practitioner". Pretty much, if I don't want to work with a male co-facilitator who has a history of undermining his female co-facilitator, or colluding with men in the group, or who is not open to feedback and has unchecked privilege, my bosses will listen to me. I have earned my stripes and my voice matters.

Sadly, for many newer female facilitators, man number 15 will not only be your co-facilitator, but your principal, your beacon of wisdom. You, the pupil, will likely have a better understanding of the dynamics of family violence. You might also have more experience working in family violence. This doesn't matter. Of course, there will be issues. So much time and energy will be invested in overcoming this inevitable power imbalance. He has been practicing this way with impunity for so long. Every organisation has at least one of them. Your supervisors will be well aware of it. Hopefully, you will be one of numerous women in the organisation to complain about working with man number 15. If this is you, then maybe, just maybe, he will be moved on.

Harsh as it may sound, I wouldn't lose sleep over this because man number 15 will be instantly snapped up by another employer. Male facilitators are few and far between, the rare jewels of the sector. He will set himself up in his new workplace and continue to cause harm to more female facilitators, reinforcing to the group participants that hierarchical

relationships are healthy and normal. And the cycle goes on. Much is still to be done to address this problematic phenomenon that has been rife in the Men's Behaviour Change Sector for too long.



I probably sound bitter and cynical, but this is not the case. I have had some truly elating experiences when facilitating MBCPs. One such example of this was my co-facilitation relationship with Nick (not his real name). Nick and I didn't have the same facilitation style, nor did we have the same level of experience. This didn't matter because we had an equal investment in maintaining a respectful and

vibrant co-facilitation relationship.

Before group started Nick and I would do a 'check-in'. Here we would speak about our day or our week to give the other person a sense of where we were at emotionally and energetically for the night. Synergy of this kind was valuable in our co-facilitation relationship so that we could support each other throughout the group session. After our check-in we would have a robust session planning discussion. **We supported each other's ideas by encouraging space for disagreement, honesty and learning.** Our post-group process was given high priority, no matter how busy we were. Two days after group, Nick and I would meet for one hour and speak about how we, as individual facilitators, and as a co-facilitating pair, responded to the group discussions. The microscope was held over us and not the men. It was during this time that Nick could tell me that I self-deprecate in front of the men and that this reinforces their narrative of women being fickle or having less credibility. It was positioning Nick as the expert and myself as the trainee. It was also during this time that I could tell Nick that his initial refusal to accept that a man had sexualised me during group was collusive and dismissive.

Feedback can sometimes be hard to receive. When such feedback is offered with care and the receiver is invested in self learning and growth, the feedback process is a gift. Critical self-reflection, respectful communication, honesty and care were the pillars of our co-facilitation relationship. How can we hope for the men in the group to adopt these same practices in their relationships if even the co-facilitators can't get it right?

It is probably obvious in my previous writing that I was conscious of my gender and "otherness" when facilitating MBCPs. To my surprise, my otherness was less apparent when co-facilitating with Nick. I also observed a less obvious hierarchy between facilitators and participants which is often a characteristic in MBCPs. The power dynamics between Nick, myself and the men was of course unavoidable. Naming it and trying not to reinforce it allowed the group to unify in quite a special way. Our group culture was characterised by our collective interest to uphold nonviolence. For some men this calling was less about adopting nonviolence in their homes and more about nonviolence within the group. This is to be expected in MBCPs, when men are newer to the group and may have lower motivation

to change. The group culture is like a petri dish where we create what we want to see in the world. Our role as facilitators is to live nonviolence and co-create nonviolence in group. It's up to the men to then take this into their relationships.

“As much as I would love to say that I live and breathe nonviolence, this is not the case”

Some of the male participants take big steps towards addressing their use of violence while others still have much more work to do. However, what I know for sure is that for two hours a week, for 20 weeks, the men in our group got to experience what respectful and supportive conversations look like. As much as I would love to say that I live and breathe nonviolence, this is not the



case. Sometimes I have misused my power in group by being judgemental or dismissive. These transgressions required a repair process. Like we often encourage the men to do with their partners, I would ask the man affected about the harm that I had caused him in an attempt to understand the impact of my behaviour, I would then apologise and try not to repeat the behaviour.

The consistent feedback we received from men in our group was regarding our co-facilitation. One of our higher risk clients was Harry (not his real name), who had attended 30 sessions of the MBCP due to multiple breaches that he made throughout the program. In his farewell speech to the group Harry said that he has never in his life witnessed the kind of respectful relationship that Nick and I shared with the men. Harry still has a long way to go and it was evident throughout the group that his use of violence did not cease. However, the change that we saw in him at week 30 was his belief that nonviolence was possible, and that nonviolence starts with himself. Harry also left with a more critical awareness of the harmful effect that hierarchies and entitlement thinking was having in his relationships.

Many women in my team were eager to work with Nick. Male facilitators like Nick who have an ongoing practice of critical self-reflection and an openness to feedback are rewarded handsomely. Not only are they acclaimed for simply doing their job, adopting best practice approaches, but they are also offered more work and more opportunities than their female counterparts. My career progression in MBCP has been both rewarding and disappointing. Navigating the minefield that I described above requires grit, an ongoing critical self-reflection practice and excellent supervision. There are many incredible workers in MBCP and over the years I found my light in connecting with them. I hope that you can too.