

THE INVITATIONS OF IRRESPONSIBILITY: UTILIZING EXCUSES IN COUNSELLING WITH MEN WHO HAVE BEEN ABUSIVE

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Therapeutic intervention with men who have abused others has evolved from early models that stressed confrontation and coercion toward newer approaches emphasizing engagement and collaboration. A collateral development has been a re-thinking of the once inviolable principle that offenders must "take responsibility" before they can be expected to change. In this paper, I hope to contribute to this ongoing evolution by considering how offenders' use of excuses, normally seen as an impediment to change, can be utilized in a collaborative way. I review research that helps us better appreciate the pro-social value of excuse-making and show how I have used a response-based framework in trying to accept the invitations offered by clients when they engage in blaming, problem talk, and other forms of externalizing responsibility. In learning to accept the invitations of irresponsibility, we can further contribute to the movement away from treating clients as objects of therapeutic intervention toward negotiating a fuller therapeutic partnership in which they are the subjects of their own anti-violence initiatives.

Therapeutic intervention with men who have harmed others has evolved considerably over the past two decades. Early approaches such as the Duluth Model (Pence & Paymar, 1993) tended to emphasize the need for confrontation and external correction in order to oblige the client to change his behavior for the better. Inspired by Alan Jenkins' (1990) invitational innovations, later models showed that a collaborative approach was possible in which the man was an active partner in the change process. This evolution continued with solution-focused insights that the path to change could be broadened to include routes that bypassed the need to "take

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responsibility," a taken-for-granted necessity of earlier approaches (Lee, Sebold, & Uken, 2003). In this paper, I propose to contribute to this ongoing evolution by looking at how the clients' use of excuses, normally seen as an impediment to change, can actually provide further therapeutic material that can be incorporated into a collaborative change process. I will review research that helps us better appreciate the pro-social value of excuse-making and show how I have used a response-based framework in trying to accept the invitations offered by clients when they engage in blaming, excuses, and other forms of externalizing responsibility.

FROM COERCION TO COLLABORATION: A KEY SHIFT IN WORKING WITH MEN WHO HAVE HARMED OTHERS

The Duluth approach (Pence & Paymar, 1993) was an important bench mark in the development of a just social response to victims of spousal violence. Their uncompromising stance on the offender's responsibility for his violence, as well as their insistence on an integrated community response that includes protection for victims, police and criminal justice interventions, and the development of appropriate legislation and social policies, provided a foundation upon which further efforts could be built.

According to the Duluth model, spousal violence was to be understood as a symptom of internalized patriarchal authority (Adams, 1989) and addressed through confrontation and re-education of the men's sexist beliefs and attitudes, not as a mental health issue to be treated with psychotherapy. As a result, facilitators were to act as counter-authorities who directed clients toward identification of their malevolent intentions toward their partners and exposed the men's sham attempts to present their actions as honourable. Pence and Paymar (1993, pp. 40–41) provided the following example of how this agenda should be enacted in a Duluth "education group":

Facilitator: Here's the list of all the ways or words that people have said they use to put their partners down or attack them emotionally: slut, bitch, fat, bad mother, tramp. . . . Let's look at some of this in context. By that I mean, I don't suppose, Joe, when you called her a slut you were sitting back relaxed in a nonthreatening posture using a soft tender voice?

Joe: No, I don't suppose so either.

Facilitator: Describe for the group what your tone was.

Joe: Well, I guess my tone was gruff.

Facilitator: You guess? Or was it?

Joe: Yeah, it was. I didn't think I made any moves toward her. I pretty much just called her a slut.

Facilitator: Okay, Joe, let's you and I act this out to get a better idea of it.

Joe: How about we don't?

Facilitator: Look at it this way, if you act it out for two minutes now, I won't ask you to do it next week when you'd have to role play the whole scene.

Joe: OK. (He stands up.) I was standing. She was sitting.

Facilitator: Where am I? (The scene is acted out.)

Facilitator: How about observations? Kyle, what actions did you see that went hand in hand with the words?

Kyle: He was pretty intimidating.

Facilitator: Tell Joe directly. (Facilitators constantly need to prompt the men to talk directly to each other rather than addressing their remarks to the facilitator when discussing role plays.)

Kyle: You were pretty intimidating with your body and the way you grabbed your jacket.

Facilitator: Jack, what about you? Did you see anything else that went with Joe's words?

Jack: His tone. He said it was gruff—it might have been a bit more than gruff to her.

Facilitator: (Points to Joe.)

Jack: (Directing his remark to Joe.) You're a big guy. I'm sure that put a scare into her.

Working from the assumption that Joe's thinking and behavior have been thoroughly conditioned by his patriarchal culture, and that therefore all his words and deeds are suspect, the facilitator seeks to constrain Joe's conversational and behavioral options and oblige him to say and do "the right thing." But in thus assuming a hierarchical position with respect to Joe, the facilitator introduces his/her own form of authoritarianism. The coercive and superior tone of the facilitator bears a disturbing similarity to the attitudes being targeted for change, and the rationalizations used to justify talking to the men in this way would likewise be hard to distinguish from those the men might use in attempting to put a beneficent face on their own oppressive behavior (e.g., "You have to take charge because they're up to no good"). It is small wonder that "only 10% of all the men who come in to volunteer for the group complete the 26-week program" (Pence & Paymar, 1993, p. 24), although within the essentializing and pathologizing framework of the program this 90% drop out rate is seen as further evidence of the men's entrenched recalcitrance to change, not as a comment on the helpfulness of the approach.

Australian therapist Alan Jenkins offered an alternative to such authority-based approaches in his 1990 book, *Invitations to Responsibility*, by stressing engagement over confrontation in counselling with men who have been abusive to others. Rather than confronting and pressuring the men to acknowledge and change their problematic behaviors, Jenkins (1990) developed a mode of questioning that "invites the man to take some responsibility for the content of what is discussed and also to challenge himself about his ability to discuss sensitive issues such as incidents of violence" (p. 66). In an initial session, for instance, Jenkins (1990) might remark:

A lot of men beat around the bush and never find the courage to mention their violence —many can't handle the feelings that come up inside when they start to face up and so they cop out instead or try to run away from it. What do you think it says about you that you are here today? (p. 67)

This question invites the client to notice they have a choice in how they participate in the session, and that some choices will require more courage than others. Jenkins' questions, inasmuch as they opened up rather than restricted conversational alternatives for the client, formed a template for a new way of working collaboratively with men who have harmed others and anticipated a sea change in work with abusive males. The shift from coercion to collaboration has been so pervasive that it is now "generally accepted in the field of offender rehabilitation that confrontational methods are not helpful in assisting motivation and change" (Maruna & Mann, 2006, p. 167).

NO EXCUSES: TAKING RESPONSIBILITY

While Jenkins nicely sidestepped the irony of using force to cure abuses of force, and helped to open the door to developing a more collaborative style of intervention with men who have abused others, the goal of getting clients to "take responsibility" for their abusive behavior initially remained largely unquestioned. Jenkins (1990) himself, as evident in the title of his book, saw the purpose of therapeutic engagement as inviting the client to take responsibility and advised the therapist "to decline invitations to attribute blame externally by interrupting" (p. 72) when clients were trying to explain or excuse their behavior. And still today, across a range of intervention strategies, "it is commonly believed that batterers who deny responsibility are at heightened risk for reoffending" (Henning & Holdford, 2006, p. 111). Men who enter programs designed to help them resolve their mistreatment of others are generally expected to indicate their willingness to take responsibility by talking and acting in specified ways, such as making clear statements of "ownership" for their violence, eschewing the use of excuses or justifications, and expressing an understanding of the impact of their behavior on others. Those who talk otherwise may find their accounts "rejected by therapists as examples of criminal thinking" (Maruna & Mann, 2006, p. 165). Maruna (2004) has borrowed the term "responsibilization" from Garland (1997) to refer to the pressure clients face to take a subject position with respect to their offending behavior. While Maruna was focusing primarily on correctional programs, which typically employ an approach which is a kind of hybrid between Duluth feminist principles and cognitive-behavioral intervention strategies, a similar emphasis on taking responsibility can be found even in collaborative models such as Jenkins' invitational approach.

However, there is growing evidence that "taking responsibility" may not be as straightforwardly beneficial as has long been assumed. For example, in a

longitudinal study of 2,824 men emerging from a domestic violence treatment program, Henning and Holdford (2006) could find “little evidence . . . to support the hypothesis that minimization, denial, and victim blaming are associated with increased recidivism” (p. 110). In fact, these authors found that “participants who denied minor character flaws in a possible attempt to appear socially conforming were actually less likely to recidivate than those who were more forthcoming on a standardized self-report measure” (Henning & Holdford, 2006, p. 124). Further evidence that some aspects of refusing to take responsibility may actually be associated with positive changes in behavior was provided in a study showing that sex offenders deemed by a parole board to be “deniers” (i.e., as denying responsibility for their offences) were significantly *less* likely to reoffend than those who admitted to what they had done (Hood, Shute, Feilzer, & Wilcox, 2002, p. 387). Nor are these results atypical; in their overview of these and other relevant studies, Maruna and Mann (2006) note that “no systematic review of the literature . . . has found conclusive evidence of a link between responsibility taking and future recidivism” (p. 163). They conclude:

In terms of the rehabilitation process . . . it may be better for an individual who has committed a crime to believe ‘I only did that because I was drunk and I was badly provoked’ than to internalize the blame for an offense with the seemingly dangerous attribution ‘I did it because I wanted to’ or ‘I did it because that is the type of person I am.’ Individuals making such internal attributions may take responsibility for their offense, but they also show a shocking lack of social awareness and provide little evidence that they should be reintegrated or forgiven. (Maruna & Mann, 2006, p. 164)

Other researchers have suggested that, more than merely being based on a false premise, programs that require offenders to “take responsibility” may paradoxically play an active role in creating an irresponsible subject on which to operate. Kathryn Fox (1999) corroborated her assertions that “institutions produce the types they need to do their work” (p. 436), and that “intervention into socially problematic behavior is justified by an ideology of pathology” (p. 450) by documenting how the “discursive construction of criminal selves” (p. 436) in a jail-based cognitive rehabilitation program for violent inmates had the effect of “reproducing criminal types” (p. 435) assumed to be, as one facilitator colloquially put it, “lying sack[s] of shit” (quoted in Fox, 1999, p. 441). Fox detailed how inmates’ reports of their behavioral choices were “decontextualized from [social] situations and rearticulated as the product of thinking errors characteristic of criminals” (p. 438) and how any objections to this process were recast as further evidence of an “ingrained criminality” (p. 439) that compelled offenders to persist in their spurious protests. In this respect, the “interpretation of inmates as pathological [was] impervious to contrary evidence—inmates’ [protests were] reinterpreted to fit the category of deviant” (pp. 450–451) and thus further reinforced the program’s tautological starting premises. Facilitators refused to acknowledge their part in group interactions or discuss their fundamental assumptions and insisted on interpreting participants’ frustration

with this technique as further evidence of the need for this style of intervention. Fox gives as an example the observation that “facilitators’ assumptions about the essential anger of inmates helped to arouse sufficient anger among participants to bolster the construction . . . that there was more anger than inmates admitted” (p. 447). This “excessive” anger inspired facilitators to further corrective measures, resulting in more inmate anger, and so on in a self-perpetuating cycle that revolved around the unassailable presupposition of “an extraordinary pathology” (p. 436) driving inmate behavior.

Of particular relevance to the theme of this paper are Fox’s observations on how the inmates were pathologized for any attempt to assert a view of themselves as non-pathological. For example, when one inmate tried to insist he was “a good person” despite his criminal conviction, his very protests were taken as demonstrating just how far from redemption he really was: “clinging to the belief that he was essentially a decent person was deemed erroneous and further evidence of how deeply ingrained his criminal thinking was” (Fox, 1999, p. 448). Contrary to the evidence unearthed by Henning and Holdford (2006), Hood, Shute, Feilzer, and Wilcox (2002), Maruna (2001), and many others (see Maruna & Mann, 2006, for an overview), that offenders who “deflect deviant identities” (Fox, 1999, p. 436) tend to do better than those who “take responsibility,” the program participants studied by Fox were “persuaded and enforced” (p. 447) to accept a “globalized” (p. 444) identity of intractable criminality. Recidivism research suggests that, to the extent this aspect of the treatment was successful, clients would actually be less likely to change after completing the program. This may be one factor that helps explain why traditional batterers’ treatment programs have often received poor evaluation results (Gondolf, 2004).

BEYOND RESPONSIBILIZATION

A notable exception to the focus on avowing responsibility in work with men who have abused others was provided by Lee, Sebold and Uken (2003) in their *Solution-Focused Treatment of Domestic Violence Offenders*. These authors explicitly state that “‘owning’ or ‘taking responsibility’ for problem behaviors is not helpful or necessary in order for participants to discover what will work in improving their relationships” (p. 40), a corollary of the solution-focused tenet that “admitting to problems has no relation to changing behavior” (p. 55). Instead, they direct their efforts toward helping the men develop workable goals for an improved future and propose “to hold them accountable for doing something differently in their lives” (p. 56). However, while clients in solution-focused therapy are unlikely to face confrontation or coercion, they can expect to face “long-term, persistent re-direction” (p. 23) from past to present and future orientation and from problem to solution talk. Participants in Sebold and Uken’s group are told they “must develop a goal to work on” and “will be expected to work on it between sessions and will

be expected to report on their efforts” (p. 34). The cost for failure to do so is expulsion from the program, and even though extensive efforts are made to assist the men in developing adequate goals, there is a clear expectation that certain kinds of talk are not acceptable. Specifically, one of the group rules tells participants not to engage in “blaming talk” (p. 45). The authors comment that “this rule implies that participants are responsible for and will be held accountable for change” and “lets participants know that the group is not going to be a blame or gripe session” (p. 45). Like the responsabilizing agenda in traditional programs, the solution-focussed emphasis on future goals rather than past problems steers the talk away from a consideration of excuses and blame.

As an alternative to ridding therapeutic proceedings of all signs of excuses and blame, Maruna and Mann (2006) recommend that “those working with offenders rethink their assumptions about excuse-making” (p. 166). They argue that generating excuses is a natural social activity utilized by all people in the wake of having committed socially undesirable actions, and one that has many functions other than simply trying to avoid responsibility for what one has done. Someone arriving late for a meeting, for example, might offer the excuse that “traffic was bad.” While portraying the excuse maker as the object of forces that limited their ability to get to the meeting on time, and therefore as less culpable for a social faux pas, this simple statement also accomplishes the important social tasks of acknowledging that one has possibly inconvenienced others, that one is conscious of this possibility, and that one therefore stands in a position of social indebtedness. All of these elements of excuse-making could have therapeutic relevance in working with those who abuse others.

This is not to say that excuses are essentially or invariably good. Like any complex social behavior, excuses and their kin serve a number of agendas and are associated with a range of motivations. Excuses can be self-serving, manipulative, and used to camouflage reprehensible acts. But the very inclination to camouflage such acts indicates a social awareness that may (or may not) indicate the beginnings of a willingness to bring one’s behavioral choices more into line with prevailing social expectations. Maruna and Mann (2006) advocate utilizing excuses as potentially rich therapeutic fodder from which the therapist can draw inferences about the client’s explanatory style, knowledge of risk factors, and thoughts on how to live a better life. They recommend that “counsellors listen with interest to the messy, realistic explanations that clients offer, rather than rejecting these automatically as cover-ups. Honoring accounts in this way not only builds trust and promotes cooperation, it also generates more valuable material for therapeutic work” (p. 168). Excuses are one more place to look, then, for the possible beginnings of change.

SOME CLINICAL EXAMPLES

In the spirit of Maruna and Mann’s call for a more nuanced appreciation of excuse-making, consider the following examples:

- 1) A 15-year-old boy in a residential treatment program for “acting-out youth” becomes enraged and “trashes the room” by breaking things and throwing furniture. One of the chairs he throws bounces around before crashing into and breaking a window. In debriefing the situation later, the boy is willing to take responsibility for breaking furniture and for dealing with his anger inappropriately but insists that the breaking of the window was “an accident.”
- 2) A 22-year-old man in prison for several violent assaults is nearing the end of his sentence. In his “anger management” class he describes feeling “edgy” and “pissed” because he is “short” (near his release date) and that he is hoping someone will “look at me the wrong way” so he can “explode” and “let it all out.” In explaining why he feels this way, he says that he thinks part of it may be feeling apprehensive about “what’s going to happen after I get out” and wanting to “get it out of my system” so he can leave prison feeling “relaxed” and “happy.”
- 3) A 34-year-old man who had physically assaulted his wife and thrown her out the front door half dressed acknowledges that “what I did was wrong” but also stresses that he has never done anything like that with any other partner nor on any other occasion with his wife. He also emphasizes that people are not considering how he was excluded and unappreciated by his wife and her family.
- 4) A 45-year-old man who had been verbally abusive and controlling toward his separated wife presents a long and disparaging account of the many unreasonable things he feels she has done during the marriage and their separation. He summarizes his account by remarking, “I’ve realized I’ll never figure her out.”

It is easy to see how these four men would run afoul of the authorities in a traditional responsabilizing program. In the first example, the young man’s position that since he did not purposely throw the chair with the intention of breaking the window he should not be held accountable for its destruction, would likely be greeted with incredulous exhortations to see that since he is the thrower of the chair, and the chair broke the window, he is responsible for the outcome. In the second example, the inmate’s apparent disregard for fair treatment of others might incite staff to urge him to consider a “better way to handle your feelings.” The third man’s implication that there is something exceptionally difficult about his wife’s behavior that resulted in him uncharacteristically resorting to violence would likely invite attempts to get him to “break through his denial” and “stop making excuses.” And the fourth man’s disparaging implication that his wife’s behavior is beyond the comprehension of a normal rational person (such as him), could easily result in invitations to “focus on your behaviour, not hers.”

While it is possible that all these traditional interventions might eventually lead to fertile therapeutic ground, it can be expected that the journey there would not be easy. It is likely, for instance, that the chair-throwing adolescent would continue to insist on the accidental nature of the broken window, that the inmate would suspect

that the counsellor has an inadequate understanding of the nature of jailhouse dynamics and behavioral options, that the third man would continue to present, albeit more subtly, evidence that his wife's behavior was a significant factor in "what happened," and that the fourth man would likewise continue to seek ways to establish the dubious nature of his wife's character. Nor could these clients expect any better reception for their views in a solution-focused program, where they would be encouraged to detail their future rather than explain their past.

RECLAIMING EXCUSES/PROBLEM TALK

A clue to developing an alternative to these excuse-eschewing interventions can be found in heeding Maruna's call for a more nuanced appreciation of the complexity of excuse making. As noted previously, even the simple excuse "traffic was bad" indicates an investment in the social order that holds potential therapeutic benefit in working with those who have offended against others. This can be seen in part by considering other options the excuse maker might have taken. He or she could, for instance, have simply chosen to say nothing. If the lateness was not too great, or it would have been obtrusive or ungracious to offer an apology, this option might have been the most fitting. On the whole, however, choosing to say something indicates more concern for one's social relationships than does saying nothing.

Alternatively, the excuse maker could have offered a bolder appraisal of the reasons for their tardiness: "I didn't take enough care to get here on time." While the honesty of such an admission might garner some private appreciation from listeners who do not have to respond directly, such a bald statement is likely to present the recipient of the remark with an awkward social task. Even if the recipient does not feel offended by the implication that the meeting was not an important enough event to take care over, she/he would likely still feel some inclination to clothe the nakedness of the admission with a surrogate excuse that might ease the social tension so the focus could return to the ostensible purpose of the gathering: "I know, I got distracted too," or "Yeah, I underestimated how bad the traffic would be." The burden placed on the recipient by this kind of "honesty" highlights how offering an excuse such as "the traffic was bad" is often a way to take rather than avoid social responsibility.

A third alternative to saying nothing or being more direct would be for the excuse maker to offer an even more elaborate explanation for their lateness: "Sorry I was late. My son was behind getting out of school so I burned the supper and had to start over. So then I couldn't catch the lane reversal on 10th and had to go around. There was some construction over there and some bozo in a dump truck broke down and blocked both lanes." This excuse would present the recipient with a challenge somewhat similar to the "honesty" example in that it requires the listener to centralize the concerns of the excuse maker and marginalize, at least temporarily, their own. If being late wasn't really a problem before such an excuse was offered, it may well be afterwards, since the disruption to proceedings has now been compounded.

In avoiding options which are too little and too much in favor of those which are “just right,” excuse makers reveal their expert knowledge of how their actions fit with and disrupt their social world. As Felson and Ribner (1981) put it, excuses can be understood as “a type of aligning action . . . indicating to the audience that the actor is aligned with the social order even though he or she has violated it” (p. 138). For therapeutic approaches which emphasize and build on the pre-existing abilities of their clients, eliciting and highlighting such social acuity is a fundamental building block of change.

A RESPONSE-BASED APPROACH TO INTERPERSONAL VIOLENCE

One approach that builds on clients’ pre-existing abilities is the response-based approach (Coates, Todd, & Wade, 2003; Coates & Wade, 2004, 2007; Todd, Wade, & Renoux, 2004; Wade, 1997, 2000, 2007). The response-based approach to therapeutic conversations is based in part on a distinction between the language of effects and the language of responses. The language of effects can be thought of as an “interpretive repertoire” (Wetherell & Potter, 1988, p. 168) that features the logic of cause/effect reasoning and represents human actions/problems/difficulties as the result or outcome of some supposed causal process (e.g., “depression” as the result of a brain chemical imbalance or male violence as the result of a combination of factors such as over-socialization to a rigid and aggressive gender role, relationship anxiety caused by unresolved attachment issues, a “need” for power and control, etc.). By contrast, the language of responses can be thought of as an interpretive repertoire that highlights issues of volition, choice and agency (e.g., accounts which detail specific interactions with particular individuals in a given social context and feature personal judgment and decision making in negotiating such social matrixes).

The distinction between effects and responses has proved useful in work with victims and perpetrators of violence. In traditional work with victims, much attention has been paid to how they are affected by violence, but relatively little attention has been paid to how they respond to violence. This inattention to responses has resulted in an incomplete and overly negative view of victims and contributed greatly to the stereotype of the passive victim. Through a detailed examination of how they resist and respond to mistreatment, it is possible to reconnect victims with their pre-existing histories of resistance. This can go a long way toward dispelling troubling notions that they somehow “put up with,” “failed to recognize,” or otherwise “went along with” the abuse they have experienced (see Todd, Wade, & Renoux, 2004; Wade, 1997, 2000, 2007; Weaver, Todd, Ogden, & Craik, 2007, for further explication of the importance of the distinction between effects and responses in work with victims of violence).

The distinction between effects and responses is also useful in working with those who have mistreated others (Stewart, Todd, & Kopeck, 2010; Todd, 2000;

Todd & Wade, 2001; Todd, Ogden, & Weaver-Dunlop, 2009). While offenders are often skilled at presenting their abusive behavior as an effect of internal or external forces over which they could not be expected to exert much control, their talk also features many examples of how they see their behavior as a freely chosen response to the circumstances they have faced. By differentially orienting to offenders' use of the language of responses as opposed to the language of effects, it is possible to develop therapeutic conversations that emphasize agency, choice, and volition without the need to confront, educate, or otherwise assume a hierarchical position with respect to the offender.

To illustrate the therapeutic utility of focusing on this alternation between interpretive repertoires, consider the following segment from an actual therapeutic interview. Prior to the excerpted section, the client had been complaining extensively about the untrustworthy nature of women in general and, in particular, the women he had been in relationships with. This can be seen as utilizing the strategy of "indirection" (McKendy, 2006, p. 489) to incline the listener toward concluding that perhaps the client's behavior was an understandable result of the problematic actions of others. Note, however, how the client interrupts his blaming monologue to spontaneously shift into the language of responses to implicate himself as the prime architect of his own difficulties (*italicized in bold*):

Client: We weren't getting along and then she accepted this guy's phone number, you know. And I got really pissed off at him because, one, he's my friend, and two, you don't do stuff like that, you know. Like, that's wrong, it's just morally wrong in my books. And she never told me about kissing this guy until we moved out here. And it was like, you know, I have a very hard time trusting women. I have yet to have a woman that's . . . *and . . . it's my own fault, maybe it's because of me.* . . . But, you know, I've yet to have a woman . . . remain loyal.

Therapist: What's got you thinking, maybe I had a hand in this, maybe it's my own fault?

C: Because . . . *I feel I push them away. I force them away.*

T: How?

C: By being angry, being jealous. I'm a very jealous person.

T: So you've been thinking over this problem, where the trust doesn't seem to be there, like, 'I'm wondering if my anger . . .'

C: Yeah, I think it's got a lot to do with it. *I push them away. I pushed Sue away, because I can't just let them just go and do what they want. I have a hard time. I want . . . you know, I don't want to be a push-over . . . but I don't want to be . . . as aggressive as I have been.*

Such spontaneous shifts in "agentive positioning" (O'Connor, 2000, p. 38) were noted by Patricia O'Connor, who examined how criminals talked about their crimes. She found that there was often a subtlety and complexity to how criminals positioned themselves as agents with respect to their own criminal acts. O'Connor borrowed

Goffman's (1974) term "frame breaks" to refer to those moments when a speaker breaks from the frame of an account they are developing, such as describing a crime they committed, to comment on what they are saying. O'Connor (2000) found that the men she interviewed frequently utilized such frame breaks to comment on issues related to culpability and responsibility for their own behavior. She gives as an example a brief comment from a man who, in describing an incident in which he shot someone, broke from his account to remark, "I don't know if instincts had me shoot that guy?" (p. 40). This comment, though it bears a close kinship to classic blaming statements with which a person might attribute their actions to the impersonal, involuntary agency of "instinct," can also be seen as subtly raising the issue of accountability since it is presented in the form of a question and therefore implies the issue of culpability for the crime remains unresolved.

According to O'Connor (2000), frame breaks such as these, wherein speakers "problematize" their own agency, are "key moments" in counselling conversations which are "fruitful to the rehabilitative and therapeutic processes" (p. 40). O'Connor argues that such moments offer a natural "opportunity for fruitful probing" and, as such, "can be a starting point for establishing productive rehabilitative talk" (p. 152). This is apparent in the above quoted counselling excerpt where there is no need to confront or otherwise interrupt the client's blaming talk, but only to capitalize on his brief moment of response talk by asking a few unobtrusive probing questions.

From a response-based perspective, utilizing frame breaks to capitalize on the spontaneous use of the language of responses is a primary therapeutic intervention strategy. However, Maruna's research on excuses helps emphasize that much of therapeutic value can also be accomplished when clients are using the language of effects (i.e., making excuses). Those who have mistreated others frequently use the language of effects to present themselves as acted upon by internal or external forces that overwhelm their good intentions and compel them to act in ways that they would not were their personal agency not constrained or compromised by the specified forces. These attempts by perpetrators to claim the object position with respect to some putative reason for their violence can be understood as implicit admissions that acting in the manner they are accused of is not socially acceptable. Such object position claims therefore embed pro-social values that can be oriented to in counselling conversations.

To return to the excuse makers considered earlier, for example, following are examples of responses a counsellor could try based on a reading of the implicit pro-social values embedded in the client's position. To make the contrast clearer, a more traditional responsabilizing response will also be given:

- 1) Client: I didn't break the window—it was an accident.
Responsibilizing approach:
Don't you think that since you threw the chair you should take responsibility for the window breaking?

Response-based:

- i) So if you had done it on purpose, you'd be more concerned. Can you tell me more about why breaking things on purpose is not OK for you?
 - ii) Is that something that's been important in your life—knowing the difference between an accident and doing things on purpose?
- 2) Client: I'm pretty edgy right now. In a way, I'd kind of like someone to piss me off so I could get rid of some stress before I have to go out there.

Responsibilizing approach:

Is there a better way to handle how you're feeling?

Response-based:

- i) Why is leaving prison in a good frame of mind important to you?
 - ii) So someone would have to start it before you'd go there. Why wouldn't you just start something yourself?
- 3) Client: I know what I did was wrong, but what I wonder is why it's never happened before or with anyone else?

Responsibilizing approach:

You say you know what you did was wrong, but you are also saying she's to blame.

Response-based:

- i) So if this had happened again or with someone else, you'd be more concerned. Am I getting that right?
 - ii) Sounds like you've been wondering who's really to blame here. How do you go about deciding what's fair in terms of whom to blame for what?
- 4) Client: After all the shit she's put me through, I've realized I'll never figure her out.

Responsibilizing approach:

I think our job here is to focus on your behavior rather than hers. How do you think you might have contributed to the problems in the marriage?

Response-based:

- i) So you're thinking that spending more time trying to figure out what she's doing is probably pretty pointless. What tells you that and what do you think is a better thing to focus on?
- ii) Has realizing that been helpful to you?

To further contrast the difference between a responsibilizing and response-based approach, we can also return to the Duluth transcript reproduced earlier and look for opportunities to highlight implicit pro-social awareness. For example, when "Joe" recounts, "I don't think I made any moves toward her," the facilitator responds by ignoring Joe's input and getting him to act out the scene. This intervention is based on the assumption that Joe is minimizing the negative impact of his behavior and acting out the scene will reveal the true nature of his actions so that he can break through his denial and gain an honest awareness of what he is doing. However,

Joe's statement can also be seen as implicitly demonstrating the very awareness that the counsellor is trying to impart. For example, the counsellor could respond, "So if you had moved toward her as well as called her a name, you'd be even more concerned. What makes that worse for you?" This response highlights the fact that Joe is already aware that using intimidation with a spouse is inappropriate and something to be avoided. It is also something he chooses to do or not do and is therefore something he can immediately choose to change. The Duluth construction of his intimidation as an effect of ingrained sexist beliefs of which he is not fully aware means that the choice to change is delayed until the problematic beliefs can be brought into awareness over a half-year course of therapy from which there is a 90% dropout rate for clients who are not forced to be there.

SUMMARY: TOWARD FULLER COLLABORATION WITH THE SUBJECT OF NON/VIOLENCE

The evolution of treatment strategies with men who have harmed others can be seen as a movement from coercion toward fuller and fuller collaboration. The Duluth assumption of a malevolent subjectivity molded in the image of patriarchy meant that the client could not be trusted to cooperate in making things safer and assumed the status of an object to be acted upon through a program of "re-education." This set up an unhelpful polarity in which all the agency of violence was concentrated in the deficient subjectivity of the client, and all the agency of non-violence was concentrated in the proficient subjectivity of the "facilitator."

Jenkins broke through the Duluth dichotomy by showing how men could be invited into a collaborative process in which they played an active part in contesting their own use of violence. The client was thus seen as a subject who could offer useful contributions to achieving a non-violent future. However, the intervention was still one which privileged the discourses of the counsellor. Clients were invited to move from their discursive home turf of "messy, realistic explanations" (Maruna & Mann, 2006, p. 168) into the counsellor's preferred idiom of personal responsibility and were to be "respectfully interrupted" if they strayed too far from the chosen path.

Recidivism research has not borne out the hope that helping offenders to "take responsibility" would lead to improved future conduct. This finding is consistent with the solution-focused approach to working with domestic violence offenders, which seeks to help the men position themselves as the subject of future solutions, rather than of past violence. But the teleological imperative of the solution-focused approach means that clients still face "persistent, gentle interruption" (Pichot & Dolan, 2003, p. 61) if they try to explain past problems rather than detail future solutions.

Rethinking our attitudes toward excuses opens up new conversational territory and offers an opportunity to negotiate a fuller therapeutic partnership in our work

with men who have harmed others. O'Connor's research expands our appreciation of the pre-existing ability of these men by showing how their agentive positioning reflects an awareness of the social consequences of their offensive actions. Maruna broadens this focus by showing how excuses and blame often contain implicit pro-social commitments that can form the basis of lasting change. Their research positions us to better appreciate how even deflections of responsibility can be understood as aspects of the client's subjectivity with which we can collaborate in building a non-violent future. From this point of view, the client's subjectivity is not simply a problematic precipitate of patriarchal authority and thus a potentially dangerous source of violence, but also ultimately our best ally in making things safer for victims of violence.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have developed some of the implications of a response-based approach for accepting the invitations of irresponsibility. The distinction between effects and responses fundamental to this model is useful in orienting to the external versus internal attributions of responsibility inherent to excuse-making. However, I am less interested in advocating for a particular approach than I am in seconding Maruna's call for a general re-evaluation of the therapeutic potential of excuses, and believe that any practitioner willing to question their assumptions about excuse-making can add to what they are already doing by learning to better accept the invitations extended by clients when they offer excuses. Rather than pressure clients to abandon their rationalizations, excuses, and indirections on the grounds they impede change, I have found it helpful to regard them as opportunities to establish moments of collaboration between two subjects, both of whom are capable of acts of objectification and coercion as well as initiating interactions of fairness and respect. The invitations of irresponsibility, then, give us the opportunity to enact in the therapy the very behaviors we hope our clients will adopt in their own lives as they move toward positioning themselves as the subjects of their own non-violence initiatives.

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