Family violence – through the lens of reflective practice

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ABSTRACT

By applying my cultural sense of self and incorporating a case study, this reflective work examines family violence and the compulsive and seductive aspects of so-called "victim blaming" which, I contend, operate as a defence against institutional anxieties experienced and borne by individual practitioners. In this reflective piece I consider family violence, and aspects of domination described above from my lived experience as an indigenous woman, and as a migrant from the Global South. I also incorporate a social work case study from an Aotearoa New Zealand context to further explore cultural aspects of family violence or domination.

KEYWORDS: Family violence; reflective practice; meaningful engagement; power and control

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*My name is Luka; I live on the second floor; I live
upstairs from you;
Yes I think you've seen me before; if you hear
something late at night;
Some kind of trouble. Some kind of fight;
Just don't ask me what it was…
I think it's because I'm clumsy; I try not to talk
too loud;
Maybe it's because I'm crazy;
I try not to act too proud; they only hit until you cry;
And after that you don't ask why
You just don't argue anymore…*
(Suzanne Vega, 1987)

Family violence is defined as an expression and dimension of social domination which includes aspects of coercion including, but not limited to, physical acts of violence (Adams, 2012). This reflective work considers some of the more detailed aspects of domination and the way these are manifested as a pervasive aspect of culture. The concept of culture here references the background social norms which determine or prescribe behaviours and are internalised as beliefs. Domination as expressed in family violence relates to specific and implied acts signifying control,

authority, mastery, supremacy and influence and oppression (Ross, 2017).

According to Section 3(1) of the New Zealand Domestic Violence Act of 1995, Domestic violence is "in relation to any person, means violence against that person by any other person with whom that person is, or has been, in a domestic relationship". The statistical rate of family violence in Aotearoa New Zealand is alarmingly high; the New Zealand Family Violence Clearinghouse (NZFVC) indicates that, in 2016, there were 118,910 family violence investigations by the New Zealand Police. A total of 55% of Aotearoa New Zealand women speak of intimate partner violence (psychological/emotional abuse) in their lifetime. The impact on children and young people involved in such situations is immense. In 2015, for example, New Zealand Police recorded 10 homicides of children and young people under 20 years of age by a family member. In 2015, 63 children and youth were hospitalised for a serious, non-fatal assault perpetrated by a family member (NZFVC, 2017).

My journey in social work

I am a social worker who completed a master's degree in India as a medical and psychiatric social worker, and an accelerated master's degree in the United States (US) in direct practice social work (focused on application of social work theory and methods to the resolution and prevention of psychosocial problems experienced by individuals, families and groups). Moving to Aotearoa New Zealand was a conscious decision, and researching the bi-cultural aspect of social work practice in this country helped inform me about engaging with families of different cultures and ethnicities unique to Aotearoa New Zealand. When I was working in the US, Aotearoa New Zealand was seen as part of the Pacific Island group; as such, I found myself putting a label on people in Aotearoa New Zealand as "Pacific Islanders" in much the same way people in the US categorised me as "Asian" – something I did not appreciate. This made me reflect on the categorisation we social workers adopt, following the lead of others, which privileges the geographical over a deeper understanding of the communities we serve.

For example, as with Asian countries, the so-called Pacific Island nations of Samoa, Tonga, Cook Islands, Tuvalu, Niue, to name only a few, have different languages, manners of dressing, different ideas about family structure, duty, respect, and different world views. I reason with myself that it is near impossible to know the intricacies of all the different ethnicities we work with. However, acknowledging the similarities and differences would translate to active listening; of seeking to understand "their" story, as all meaningful intervention starts at the beginning.

In considering the dynamic of domination and oppression I have, during the course of my frontline work in Aotearoa New Zealand, compared *tangata whenua* (a term used to describe the Māori people as the original inhabitants of Aotearoa New Zealand)

philosophies to my experience of working with Indian women in the US, Malaysia, India and latterly in Aotearoa New Zealand. I have attempted to relate my experiential reality of being raised in post-Independence India to post-colonised New Zealand. The British presence in India is negligible since 1947; however, in New Zealand, the on-going *tangata whenua* lived reality along-side *tauiwi* (a term used to describe people who are not Māori), is difficult to understand without a critique of the colonial legacy. Decisions made pre-independence however, still impact every Indian to this day.

> One of the most enduring clichés about India is that it is a country of contradictions. Like all clichés, this one too has a grain of truth in it. At the heart of the contradiction stand Indian women: for it is true to say that they are among the most oppressed in the world, and it is equally true to say that they are among the most liberated, the most articulate and perhaps even the most free. (Butalia, 1997)

Mahatma Gandhi coined the term *Stree Shakthi* (women power) and Hinduism speaks positively of femininity (Ray, 2005). Female Hindu gods are the holders of knowledge and wealth, complementing their male counterparts. However, the lived reality of many Indian women today speaks a different story. Sexual violence has become an area of significant concern and attention as against physical and other forms of violence (Das, 2006). Safety issues have taken precedence over emotional wellbeing.

Case study: an exploration of the dynamics of oppression and domination in the place of work

The following case study is offered to further explore dynamics of oppression and domination in a social work practice context. All identifying characteristics of the people in this case study have been changed.

Shyla[i] is a 38-year-old female of Indian descent born and raised in Aotearoa New

Zealand. She has three children who are 5, 7 and 12 years old. Her partner, Robin, is not the father of her three children. Shyla is 12 weeks pregnant with Robin's child. Shyla and Robin have been together for four months. Shyla's neighbours who, are her main supports, called the police several times due to verbal and physical arguments (which have increased in intensity and frequency) at her house late at night. The police identified Robin as the perpetrator of violence and Shyla as the victim. Shyla's children, when interviewed, spoke about being scared for their mother when Robin is drinking or is angry. Shyla was assessed as a very child-focused mother; she has a collage of her children's growing up years on the front wall of her lounge, she bakes cookies, is closely linked with school activities and is a very involved mother.

Shyla spoke with social workers several times about the violence in the home and became very teary when information shared by her children was given to her. Shyla was urged several times by social workers to seek a protection order under the Domestic Violence Act (1995). After the fourth reported incident of physical family violence and, after initiating the process several times in the past, Shyla finally applied for a protection order. Once the protection order was granted, however, Shyla invited Robin back to her home.

Subsequently, over a period of two months, there were several police call-outs with regard to family violence perpetrated by Robin on Shyla. While Shyla had been commended by the social workers and other professionals when she obtained the protection order, the very same professionals now seemed to blame her for the violence in the home. The reasoning around this was that, had she not brought Robin back into the house, she would have mitigated the risk that she put herself and her children under. It appeared as though the victim was seen to be "culpable" for having committed herself to an unsafe relationship so *should* take responsibility when something went wrong. Vega's (1986) song "Luka" about

child abuse and exposure to family violence, which appears at the beginning of this article encapsulates how a person experiencing abuse feels about the importance of keeping intimate partner details private even when it is likely to be obvious to others around.

Reflective practice as the basis of meaningful engagement

Trained in an environment of evidence-based concrete philosophies in India, I struggled with reflective practice when I was in the US. What has been interesting for me is looking at the historical origins of critical thought. Critical thinking can be traced back in the East to ancient India and Buddhist philosophy (Gambrill, 2012). Questioning one's values, beliefs and seeking to reframe these with sound logical reasoning is the essence of critical thinking and reflective practice. The goal is to seek the truth so the knowledge gained assists in future practice.

Progress in a case is measured by evidence-based tools as well as reflecting on what was done and on how it was delivered and perceived. "Reflexivity means that we constantly get evidence about how effective or worthwhile our actions are, and we can change what we are doing according to the evidence and its value" (Adams, Dominelli, & Payne, 2009, p. 127). Kolb (1984) and Adams et al. (2009) have raised the idea of incorporating experiential learning and reflective observation into social work practice. Experiential learning highlights the role of one's experience of a situation and the role it plays in bettering practice. Reflective observation helps such learning to be cemented into one's ongoing practice. It promotes an understanding that the work one does as a social worker is dynamic. The "use of self" is a concept mentioned often to social work students. For example, Fook (2002) states that social work practitioners' face significant challenges such as identifying what they contribute to a relationship, how their contribution impacts on decisions, and what individual and structural power imbalances influence practice.

A personal audit of one's practice can be crucial to being effective. It is best practice to factor in a review/evaluation in any social work plan you make with a client and their family. Likewise it is important to review one's practice as we go. This will mean that one is working as a reflective practitioner linking with new developments, changes and changed inputs required, for the outcome to work in the best interests of the client. As an accountant would check the incomings and outgoings of a company's financial matters, a personal audit of self by a social worker can be seen to be hugely helpful to evaluating one's practice (West, 2010).

As a migrant Indian woman I often explore the predominant beliefs in my culture and what I have grown up to know and experience as internalised certainties. I have grown up seeing and knowing that ideas about male superiority, coercion and control form a natural background to entitlement and privilege. This privileged status is often afforded to the man, expected and reinforced by the surrounding dynamics and social norms.

The price of privilege is the objectification of the other and, as such, the empathetic and emotional world is frequently foreclosed as a way to defend and maintain the position and values required to manage "othering" (Lazaridis, Campani, & Benveniste, 2016). The power and layering (implicit meaning) of words, and communicating what is inferred but not expressly stated, is a familiar thing for me. The parallels that can be drawn with family violence are significant. Adams (2012) points out that, once one is immersed in a colonial environment, understandings of superiority and entitlement can become so familiar and ingrained that the legitimacy of empire becomes self-evident. Adams notes, further, that living and breathing within the centrality of a dominant cultural perspective will tend to diminish alternative perspectives beneath one "flat earth" reality; a reality where alternative perspectives have little currency.

Observing the case study of Shyla through my social work lens, and applying Duluth's power and control model (Pence & Paymar, 1993), it seemed to me that the violence the professionals were working to stem was being re-perpetuated by the very same professionals. At the start of the process, Shyla was seen to be absolved of all responsibility to stay safe. Once the external system imposed restrictions on the perpetrator (Robin), it seemed the professionals were absolved of their responsibility of ensuring the safety of the victim. The full circle, as the professionals viewed it, was that the victim re-possessed the responsibility of staying safe. It was unclear what opportunities the victim was given to claim her space, her identity or her strength to accomplish what was expected of her. It appeared that the time given for regenerative work in relation to the victim's emotional wellbeing was dictated by the professionals or process meant to assist her. It seemed that the pace of the client was not considered as a factor in the change process. My reflection was that, had this been considered, change was more *likely* to have been sustained and impactful on the client and her family.

These reflections led me to the conclusion that, in this case, the values and beliefs that are meant to fight power and control did not necessarily foster equality. Rather the values and beliefs that were in action were of the victim being required to rise up to the expectations put on her by the very people who were expected to understand her situation much better than others. Having grown up in an environment where people are more concerned about performing a task as per what is expected of them rather than what they wish to do, the unnecessary value placed on external expectations was starkly obvious to me. Knowing you need to change, and experiencing that on a "feeling" level are very different things. Knowing you need to leave the relationship and having the motivation to do it are exclusive of each other. Motivation is based on a sustained feeling of optimism and the professionals

involved with Shyla knew that Shyla was not optimistic, future-focused or thinking about herself and her children's safety and well-being. It appeared to me that knowing this did not translate to understanding her inability to be optimistic about change. It is likely that Shyla was justifying her actions to both Robin and the professionals she was working with.

It was clear that Shyla was at a moment in her life where she was not at her best. What was expected of her, however, was to better her previous attempts at improving her situation. Responsibility and expectations of the professionals governed the help process and these expectations were not informed by a sense of where her emotional and physical abilities were, given the stressful situation. Shyla was to act as the responsible mother to ensure the physical and emotional safety and well-being of her children. I am not discounting Shyla's ability to act. I am analysing the work of the professionals whose main responsibility is to assist the victim. It appeared that the professionals were unclear if her inability to act was about her being "able" to or whether she was "willing" to. Discerning this as a "willingness or capacity" matter *could* have steered the helping process down a different path. This *might* have given the client the ability to explore her resilience, her strength and the support that was offered rather than the client thinking about "letting people down" – be it her family, her friends, her children or the professionals working with her.

Conclusion

I have attempted to speak, through my journey in social work, about the importance social workers need to place on recognising our cultural positioning and identity. With fluid societies and travel between countries by social workers and the need to build solid communities, social workers have significant stress placed on them. Their work with people should be about appreciating their views and needs rather than a tokenistic

understanding of differences and similarities. For an indigenous person trained in theories that mainly originated from the West, my journey has made me aware of embedded and pervasive aspects of control and domination while working with families. Cultural considerations and understanding are best guided by understanding different world views from the perspective of the person belonging to that world view.

What started as a reflection from a structural perspective on work in the family violence sector has become an introspective journey for me. As a person privileged to enter the homes and lives of individuals and their families, the respect I accord these families and individuals needs to be sincere and without judgment. Concepts like non-judgmental attitude, sustainable engagement, and unconditional positive regard, which I was taught by the Western social work theorists, mean nothing to clients if these ideas are not demonstrated in action.

Staying true to myself as a practitioner is about recognising that what I do intuitively is distinct from logical and rational actions. In my work with people I tend to have an outward focus – on their story, their perspectives, their abilities and strengths, and their limitations. After several years of practice as a social worker, I at times do not question what I do unconsciously as long as what drives the action has a clear purpose. What has occurred to me through this reflection is that effective practice is to consciously question what drives my actions and thoughts. Questioning comes naturally to social workers and, as Einstein (2016) famously said, "The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existing."

Note

[i] No real names in this case study, details changed.

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