

White Privilege and the Fiction of Colour Blindness: Implications for Best Practice Standards for Aboriginal Victims of Family Violence

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...but it's the same for white women'

(Lucashenko 1994, p. 21)

Introduction

Firstly, I acknowledge the important work of the White feminist movement in the family violence¹ field in bringing this serious issue to the fore in society's consciousness. Yet as a result, contemporary understandings of family violence have been firmly grounded in White feminist analyses about the issue and these approaches continue to dominate the family violence landscape (Dobash & Dobash 1992). In this article, I will highlight why this is problematic for Aboriginal people by shedding light on the 'colour blindness' which is evident in the White feminist family violence principles, such as those upon which the WA Best Practice Model for the Provision of Programs for Victims of Domestic Violence (DVPU 2000) are based.

A brief word on White feminist theory

In very brief terms, according to White feminist theory, family violence occurs as a result of patriarchal power that continues to dominate our social structures and institutions (Dobash & Dobash 1992). Male dominance and male privilege² form the foundation of social structures, with the position of women being a subordinate one that is more vulnerable to abuse at the hands of men (Nancarrow 2006).

White privilege

White privilege refers to the advantages and benefits that White people generally, including White feminists, derive socially and economically, as a result of being White. It has been described as being so common and pervasive that most White people are not aware of its existence, and that Whiteness is seen as neutral or the norm, the standard to which all other groups are compared, and therefore does not require any premeditated actions to be taken to check its validity (Donnelly, et al, 2005). Systems developed to support victims of family violence, such as the legal-judicial systems are reported as being '... biased against women who contradict the White middle-class notion of women' (Gillis, et al. 2006, p1163).

In addition, White applications of the anti-discrimination social and legal reforms that have occurred over the past three decades in Australia that were designed to address some of the social inequities that existed³, have led to tokenistic responses to meeting the needs of Aboriginal victims of family violence. This has occurred via the implementation of practices based on notions of formal equality, where sameness of treatment is equated with fairness of treatment⁴. These

¹ Indigenous concepts of violence are broader than the usual definitions in the mainstream literature and the term family violence better reflects Indigenous peoples' experiences (see Blagg 2000; HREOC 2006).

² Male privilege refers to the advantages and benefits that men derive in society, simply as a result of being male.

³ E.g., Racial Discrimination Act (CW), 1975; Racial Hatred Act (CW), 1995 and the WA Equal Opportunity Act, 1984.

⁴ Formal equality prescribes equal treatment of all people regardless of circumstances on the understanding that all have the same rights and entitlements. It is premised on the notion that by extending equal rights to all, inequalities will be eliminated [EOC (WA), 2006, p.6].

practices have erased race (Richie 2001), or made it invisible (Huggins 1998), so that it is absent from consideration in the development of models of service delivery and best practice standards for services to Indigenous victims (and perpetrators), as I will show in the following section.

The WA Best Practice Model

I will outline the underlying assumptions upon which the Western Australian Best Practice Model for the provision of Programs for Victims of Domestic Violence (DVPU 2000) is based and then provide an Aboriginal perspective on these assumptions.

Human Rights

Family violence consists of a range of behaviours used to control another in intimate relationships. Family violence is a violation of basic human rights as people are entitled to live in dignity, free from fear and harm in their own home, or domestic environment. Children have the same rights ascribed to adults in respect of violence and abuse.

I agree, however it is hypocritical to engage in a dialogue about basic human rights in the family violence context, whilst disregarding the human rights of Aboriginal peoples in the broader oppressive social and economic context. This amounts to engaging in culture-blind practices and can be observed in the exertion of power and control by key mainstream agencies involved in a Reducing Aboriginal Imprisonment Strategy (RAIS) to expand the Family Violence Court Case Management Model in the Perth Metropolitan Area. Although acknowledging that the model was never designed for Aboriginal people and using this explanation to account for the low numbers of Aboriginal clients utilising the service, input from the local Aboriginal community has only belatedly been sought in a superficial, 'tinkering at the periphery' and tokenistic way. This is via the establishment of yet another Aboriginal Reference Group who are charged with providing advice on how to make the pre-determined mainstream model more 'culturally appropriate'. So at some level, there is acceptance that the model is not likely to be suitable for Aboriginal victims.

This continued exclusion, marginalisation, and denial of our right to be self-determining in an Aboriginal strategy is justified on the basis of the decision, without any reference to the local Aboriginal community, to 'mainstream' the strategy, because the courts and victims services are for everyone. This amounts to colour-blind practices wherein 'everyone' equates to White victims and Aboriginal, migrant and other cultural groups have been actively excluded from providing input into developing the model of service delivery that is purported to be 'for everyone'.

Responsibility for Violence

The perpetrators of family violence are responsible for their actions. The notion of blame being attributed to the victim is not acceptable.

I agree. However, this should not preclude the restoration of relationships between perpetrators and their victims, and perpetrators and their communities, that some Aboriginal women prioritise over perpetrators taking responsibility (Nancarrow 2006). In addition, there must be an equal emphasis on addressing the underlying issues for Aboriginal perpetrators, not just the presenting issues (ibid), if we are to see real and meaningful change.

Empowerment

Services will incorporate ways of intervening and responding to promote the safety of victims and assist victims to make their own choices from an informed position. Children are vulnerable people in our society and require additional care in respect to decisions made by adults.

Concepts of empowerment and safety, and what it means for Aboriginal victims must be determined by us and must extend beyond the four walls of the counsellor's rooms, beyond the four walls of a support service, and back to the design, development and implementation of support services. It must extend beyond what White service providers think is 'support', to Aboriginal concepts of 'support' (Hovane 2006).

Concepts of safety for Aboriginal victims must also extend beyond physical safety and physical location, to incorporate concepts of cultural safety⁵, threats to cultural identity, cultural appropriateness and cultural relevance. Otherwise mainstream services continue to employ colour-blind practices and implement White models that disempower and fail to promote the safety of Aboriginal victims.

This can be observed in the mainstream practice of prioritising what is easiest for agencies over client-centredness. If there is no Aboriginal input into the design of the model of service delivery, then the cultural safety of the model has been fundamentally compromised. Further, the active resistance to upholding an earlier commitment and requirement to employ Aboriginal workers in the RAIS further undermines the provision of culturally safe services. Ironically, under the guise of 'pragmatism' mainstream agencies have used legislation designed to support culturally safe Aboriginal service provision, to argue against requiring the employment of Aboriginal workers. Instead, isolated cases of Aboriginal victims preferring to consult a White worker are circulated as the norm by those agencies, thereby maintaining the status quo of culturally unsafe, culture-blind mainstream services.

It is also important to note that the issue of cultural safety must extend to Aboriginal workers employed in colour-blind mainstream agencies, who themselves can face having to operate within oppressive and culturally unsafe environments. Issues of cultural safety must therefore be addressed systemically.

Access & Equity

Family violence is experienced by victims of all classes, races, religions, ethnicity, ages, ability and sexual preference. All victims are entitled to access services which are provided in a fair and equitable manner.

This is reflective of the dominant discourse that family violence knows no boundaries, it can happen to every woman, and it is a social problem that cuts across all cultures and class. White translations of the notion that it could happen to every woman, has typically meant that it could happen to those in power, and 'every woman' equated to middle-class White women (Richie 2001). Whilst it is agreed that family violence can happen to any woman, the practice of mainstreaming victims' services via the fiction of colour-blindness and colour-blind practices based on formal equality (EOC 2006) is discriminatory.

In contrast, substantive equality principles provide a useful framework to address system discrimination and are central to Aboriginal definitions of fairness and equity.

Substantive equality involves achieving equitable outcomes as well as equal opportunity. It takes into account the effects of past discrimination. It recognises that rights, entitlements, opportunities and access are not equally distributed throughout society. It recognises that equal or the same application of rules to unequal groups can have unequal results.

Where service delivery agencies cater to the dominant, majority group, then people who are different may miss out on essential services. Hence it is necessary to treat people differently because people have different needs. (EOC 2004, p.6).

Colour-blind services and practices that are not experienced as being safe and relevant by Aboriginal victims are not 'accessible' and consequently Aboriginal victims do not have fair and equitable access to them.

⁵ I draw on the WA Aboriginal Justice Agreement that talks about cultural security as the 'maintenance and protection of cultural identity'. Generally it means that we do not force people to work or be serviced in ways that compromise their cultural integrity or safety; where they're not comfortable with the environment and practices within a service, but are limited in their choices and access to services. It is also about putting in place systems and processes that support cultural integrity and safety – be it from a physical, mental, emotional or spiritual perspective.

Criminality

Services will acknowledge that family violence includes behaviours which are criminal offences and interventions by workers will support a criminal justice focus.

Family violence is not part of our cultures and is not acceptable. However, one of the problems with a criminal justice focus in response to family violence is the denial of self-determination, wherein Aboriginal voices have been excluded from and marginalised within the dominant White discourse for too long. For example, some Aboriginal women do not necessarily see the criminal justice system as providing the answers to family violence and indeed view the criminal justice system as another tool of oppression that perpetuates further violence against them and their communities (Nancarrow 2006). Client-centred practice means not imposing a philosophical orientation on Aboriginal victims, but rather, sharing power and working with Aboriginal victims to develop appropriate services to meet their needs.

Cultural Diversity

Victims are entitled to services that respect their cultural and linguistic diversity and provide appropriate responses.

How does culture-blind mainstream service provision respect cultural and linguistic diversity, and hope to provide appropriate responses? For example, the culture-blind mainstreaming of the RAIS under the mantra that 'the courts are for everyone', whilst actively excluding real and meaningful input from the local Aboriginal community and migrant and other cultural groups, does not respect cultural and linguistic diversity and therefore cannot provide appropriate responses.

Such an approach is disrespectful to and tokenises diversity, as if it were something of such little consequence that can easily be overcome by a few Aboriginal pictures on the walls, some Aboriginal-friendly pamphlets and a few Aboriginal workers, for example. Rather, respect for cultural and linguistic diversity must occur at a structural and systemic level in order to achieve 'appropriate responses'.

Quality of Service

Victims are entitled to confidential and professional services relevant to their circumstances that are delivered by trained, skilled and supervised workers.

I agree, but from whose perspective? Contrary to popular culture-blind mainstream beliefs, 'different' qualities, skills and competencies does not equate to a lesser quality of service. Concepts of 'quality' suitably 'trained, skilled' and 'suitably qualified' must be informed by Aboriginal perspectives. For example, suitably qualified may equate to Aboriginality as opposed to a tertiary qualification. 'Trained' may equate to a significant period of cultural immersion in an Aboriginal community as opposed to doing a course in a classroom. I argue that whilst our perspectives about the specific competencies that we require of victims workers continue to be dismissed and marginalised, hidden under the pseudo-solidarity of victimhood or womanhood (Donnelly et al. 2005), then Aboriginal victims cannot receive quality services.

Context of family violence

Service providers need to have an understanding of the social, cultural and political context in which family violence is perpetrated, as well as recognize that the majority of victims are women and children.

I agree, but again ask, from whose perspective? Violence against Aboriginal women must be understood from a historical perspective of colonisation and dispossession. It must be understood in terms of oppression and the intersectionality of race, gender and class as we cannot generalise about all Aboriginal women's experiences (Sokoloff & Dupont 2005). As noted by other Indigenous women: '...white women are colonists too, they are part of the dominant culture which continually oppresses us in this country...' (Huggins 1998, p.8) and '...our reality is not your reality...our oppressions are not interchangeable' (Lucashenko 1994, p.21). White women need to realise that race oppression includes the oppression of Aboriginal men by White women.

Conclusion

So to summarise, in order to develop effective services and relevant best practice principles for the provision of Aboriginal victims services we need to accept that there is no such thing as culturally neutral service delivery (Bent-Goodley 2005), wherein some form of magical theoretical superglue (Lucashenko 1994) binds Aboriginal and White women together in the same experiences of family violence.

We need to work towards culturally competent service delivery; there needs to be an understanding of the historical context of colonisation; and a cultural foundation to the best practice principles is required (Bent-Goodley 2005). Further, agencies and service providers need to guard against an increasing reluctance to consider and engage with new ideas and evidence from within a '...ever-narrowing and unchanging circle of self-referential ideas and evidence' (Dobash & Dobash 1998, p.1). The voices of victims including Aboriginal victims are:

...an essential process to keep governments, town and city administrations, police, and other agencies on track to make services effective and geared towards women's and children's real needs. It is not an optional extra. (Hague & Mullender 2006, p. 585).

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