Reflection on “Invitations to Responsibility”

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Introduction

With his book, “Invitations to Responsibility”, Alan Jenkins presents therapeutic methods for engaging violent and abusive men (1990). I have strong structural social work leanings and was attracted to this book because the idea of individual responsibility gets missed when viewing problematic behaviour as results of oppressive systems. I grappled with the idea of individual perpetrators accepting responsibility for their actions. With structuralism, and indeed narrative therapy, we are able to externalize issues as caused by outside sources and societal structures of oppression.

While Jenkins does not, in this book, identify his methods as narrative, he and his clients are constructing new narratives of responsibility. They are able to externalize the forces causing violence while inviting perpetrators of violent and abusive acts to accept responsibility for their actions. This process also invites perpetrators to face up to external drivers to avoid repeating violent and abusive behaviour.

Systems thinking comes into play when Jenkins examines the effects that violent and abusive men have on their family systems. He invites perpetrators to accept responsibility for their actions and for the effects their actions have on their families.

This paper will focus on: the meaningfulness of conforming to traditional masculine stereotypes; labeling abuse as abuse rather than using other less impactful words; journaling and story writing; and the importance of recognizing urges to abuse to reduce recidivism.

Conforming to Traditional Norms

Appealing to my structuralist thinking, Jenkins cites another author when writing that Russell “regards male rapists, child sexual offenders and sexual harassers as over-conforming, as
opposed to deviant, in the context of traditional male gender roles (Russell, 1984 cited in Jenkins, 1990, p. 43). The traditional stereotype holds that men are expected to engage in frequent sexual activities and to hold positions of authority over others (Gross, 1978; Nobre, Jenkins, 1990; & Pinto-Gouveia, 2006). In many cases, these are the structural factors contributing to male perpetrators’ sense of entitlement to sex and authority.

From a structural feminist perspective, abusive men “resort to the power of their fists or their genitals to achieve” and maintain control within “the patriarchal social structure” (Jenkins, 1990, p. 30). Feminist movements can work to change these systemic issues on a structural level clinical therapists need to work with individual perpetrators on accepting responsibility and changing behaviour.

**Abuse is Abuse**

“Violence and sexual behaviour have the potential to become persistent, intimidating and exploitative and hence abusive when perpetrated by individuals occupying “superior” roles in which they have greater attributed status or power, greater physical strength and greater access to resources and knowledge. Abuse of any kind is characterized by a more powerful person taking advantage of a less powerful person” (Finkelhor, 1983 cited in Jenkins, 1990, p. 37).

It is “helpful to use clear and unambiguous language, from the commencement of therapy, in order to help the man label his behaviour appropriately” (Jenkins, 1990, p. 152). Jenkins uses the term “abuse” rather than “words like “fondling” or “interfering with” (Jenkins, 1990, p. 152). Likewise, “slapping” ad “hitting” are described as “abuse” or “violence”.

Using the word “abuse” rather than another word removes the ability to label it as something seemingly lesser like “fondling” or “interference”. This is essential to the process of
inviting the man to accept responsibility for his abusive actions. Whether working at the micro-, meso- or macro-levels, social workers will need to use clear terminology that does not allow perpetrators to minimalize their actions by using words that denote a certain level of abuse. Abuse is abuse.

Write it Down

For a man to accept responsibility for his abusive actions, he will need to write down (or record) the details of his abuse. This process creates “a permanent record which can greatly assist the process of facing up” to the entire story of his abuse (Jenkins, 1990, p. 153). The man is also invited to notice “any feelings of inner strength associated with facing up as well as inevitable feelings of discomfort and distress” (Jenkins, 1990, p. 153). This is an ongoing process that can be recited and discussed during therapy sessions.

Stories can also be written by the man to describe the events and wider-ranging effects of his abuse as experienced by his victim(s). This process forces the man to consider the feelings experienced by his victim(s) which makes him see others as humans rather than objects.

It is also helpful to keep a log of feelings and experiences throughout the therapeutic process. “In this way, he may discover helpful cues to take action early” (Jenkins, 1990, p. 95). As the man discovers the thoughts, actions and triggers leading up to abusive actions, he can be more fully prepared to stop the cycle. He will also work with the therapist to create plans to stop the buildup towards abusive actions – to limit his chances of recidivism.

Once the man is fully aware of the details of his abusive actions and the deleterious long-term effects of his actions on his victim(s), he can begin writing an apology which may or may not be provided to the victim(s). In the instance of sexual abuse of a child, “An apology is a
ritual for declaring and demonstrating his acceptance of responsibility which requires an understanding and acceptance of the need to put the child’s and other family members’ needs first…It is given to help lift the burden of responsibility from the child and should contain no requests for or expectations of forgiveness” (Jenkins, 1990, p. 189). The apology step is a process whereby the man announces his acceptance of full responsibility for past actions and for ensuring abusive actions do not happen in the future.

**Recognize Urges**

It must be understood that an abusive husband will have the urge for continued violence and that the abusive parent will have urges to abuse children again in the future. These urges must be recognised so the man can deal with them rather than forgetting or denying urges that will or have occurred.

If a man says that he no longer has urges to abuse children, Jenkins suggests the following response:

“I am surprised you haven’t [experienced sexual feelings or urges] already. Frankly, the sooner you do the better. Then you can learn to face them and deal with them in responsible ways. Only then can you feel genuinely confident that you have put abuse behind you. Otherwise your confidence is based more on hope and wishful thinking.” (Jenkins, 1990, p. 195).

Jenkins also states that, “the man is invited to seek and welcome evidence of sexual urges and to externalize and challenge restraints which promote avoidance of this responsibility” (1990, p. 195). He explains that avoidance or suppression of urges does little to prevent relapse into abusive behaviour.

**Discussion**
Jenkins’ book expanded my learning beyond structural practice dealing largely with victims of systemic oppression. “Invitations to Responsibility” provided meaningful ways of responding to, and helping, perpetrators of violence and abuse. It is not enough to tell perpetrators that they are guilty, they need to be invited to recognize that they are solely responsible for their actions.

Though my career path is one of meso- and macro-levels of social work, this learning will enable me to help violent and abusive individuals recognize their own responsibilities. It will not be enough to simply acknowledge their actions - I will invite them to explore their actions more deeply so as to recognize their own culpability. And when possible, I will refer them to experienced clinical therapists.

Whether working with violent and/or abusive communities or working on organizational and public policy, Jenkins’ ideas will remain with me throughout my career. His book will prove a powerful addition to my career as a structural social worker.

References

