

## The Theory of Feminist Poststructural Pedagogy Applied to the Training of Public Professionals in Intimate Partner Violence

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### ABSTRACT

Training professionals about intimate partner violence is a huge task requiring a theoretical framework that can address the complexity of the problem and highlight the need to be aware of power relationships and political dimensions of professional practice. This paper addresses the increasing recognition on the part of state agencies for specialist training in intimate partner violence as a critical component of an effective system response. The objective of the paper is to propose a feminist post-structuralist pedagogical model of delivering training to public professionals. We discuss issues of power, knowledge, and the discursive construction of the self. Our goal is to provide space for learners to think about what it means to embrace change agency and how to make a difference in their capacities as agents of the state. The paper concludes by proposing that an integrated model of learning is needed, one that goes beyond individualized responses and enables practitioners to develop the criticality and reflexivity central to a professional as a social change agent practice approach.

### RÉSUMÉ

Former les professionnels sur le sujet de la violence conjugale constitue une tâche imposante exigeant une structure théorique qui puisse à la fois répondre à la complexité du problème et mettre en évidence le besoin d'être conscient de la puissance des rapports de forces et des dimensions politiques de la pratique professionnelle. Cet article aborde le constat croissant, de la part des organismes gouvernementaux, du besoin en formation spécialisée sur la violence conjugale en tant que composante essentielle d'une réponse efficace du système. L'article a pour but de proposer un modèle pédagogique féministe et poststructuraliste pour la formation de professionnels publics. Nous y discutons des questions du pouvoir, de la connaissance et de la construction discursive du soi. Notre objectif est de fournir de l'espace pour que les apprenants réfléchissent à ce que cela signifie que d'accepter le changement à l'intérieur de l'organisme et à la façon de changer les choses en leur qualité d'agents gouvernementaux. En conclusion, l'article suggère le besoin d'une méthode d'apprentissage intégrée qui va

au-delà des réponses individuelles et permet  
aux intervenants de développer la criticité et la  
réflexivité, qui sont aussi fondamentales pour  
le professionnel que l'est l'approche par la  
pratique pour l'agent de changement social.

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## INTRODUCTION

In Canada, the response to intimate partner violence grew out of the grassroots women's movement of the 1970s and 1980s (Janovicek, 2007). Over the course of the emerging recognition that violence against women was a huge problem, the women's movement challenged governments to criminalize domestic violence by holding perpetrators accountable, and to provide increased safety to victims. The lobbying efforts of Canadian women forced federal, provincial, and territorial governments to take action, and a variety of policies to effect timely and multi-agency collaboration and programs for offenders were implemented, however erratically, across Canada. At the same time as pressure was applied to governments, feminists debated the advantages and disadvantages of increased state involvement in the issue. The debate about the merits of increased government involvement in meeting the goals of safety and accountability continue. Ursel (1998) argues that the debate centres on a key problem. On one side is the view that state involvement is critical to the provision of services for victims and their children, and in holding offenders accountable for their actions. On the other side, is the argument that the involvement of mainstream institutions results in the "co-optation, distortion, and depoliticization of the issue" (p. 138).

Although feminist theorizing about the role of the state straddles these political debates, a variety of strategies have been developed in the last thirty years with the goal of improving state responses to domestic violence. For example, within the justice system, legislation has provided victims with emergency protection orders and pro-arrest, pro-charge, and zero-tolerance policies that focus on safety (Holder, 2006; Ursel, 2002). The development of standardized risk assessment tools and primary-aggressor policies has improved the capacity of public professionals to help prevent further harm and re-victimization (Richards, Letchford, & Stratton, 2008). Still, many of the concerns voiced from the standpoint of abused women's advocates have been borne out, for example, victim blaming in cases where women do not leave their abuser and holding victims accountable for "failure to protect" their children from the violent parent (Brown, Callahan, Strega, Walmsely, & Dominelli, 2008). Nonetheless, others maintain that a convergence of state and women's issues is possible (Corsianos, 2009; Ursel, 1998). One such possible area for convergence is the area of specialized training on domestic violence.

There is evidence that specialized training on the dynamics of domestic violence has positive effects on victim safety; a recent Canadian report identified adequately funded training as a critical component of an effective professional response (Critical Components Project Team, 2008). Still, researchers are divided on the effectiveness of such training to change problematic attitudes or actions of public professionals. They argue for better knowledge of policy and its application to intervention processes and procedures. Those in favour of specialized training

focus on facilitating and encouraging innovative intervention techniques and applications of the law, and alternative sources of evidence when victims are reluctant to testify (Critical Components Project Team, 2008; Johnson, 2004). Locales where training occurs may benefit from considering institutional sexism; perhaps efforts to rectify this will result in improved training environments and outcomes. Szymanski (2003) claims that a feminist analysis of institutional sexism coupled with feminist training models within organizations is related to self-identification as a feminist, favourable attitudes toward feminism, greater acceptance of feminist ideologies and explanatory framework, and more involvement in feminist activities.

In this paper, we explore what feminist poststructural pedagogies can bring to specialized training for public professionals whose job it is to respond to and intervene in cases of intimate partner violence. As Manicom (1992) suggests, feminist practice involves challenging and deconstructing normative accounts of feminist pedagogy in order to advance women's position. We recognize education both as a site of struggle and a means of making change; it is a "politic of transformation" (Briskin & Coulter, 1992, p. 249). We take up the question posed by Manicom (1992): "[If] to engage in feminist pedagogy is to take a political standpoint that seeks to transform relations of domination and oppression, how does this appear in practice?" (p. 367). The question obliges us to ask if the practices we pass on increase the capacity of public professionals for transformative practice.

We began this project from the perspective that a feminist approach may be particularly useful for specialized training in intimate partner violence and to foster a less sexist environment within the institution. A feminist approach can provide learners with a greater understanding of the gendered dynamics of abuse, how these dynamics intersect with other social locations, and provide opportunities to look at how personal and professional understandings intersect with practices inside and outside the learning context. It can also help to draw attention to the work still to be done and the role of public professionals toward improved institutional capacities (e.g., policies and interventions, coordination across community sectors such as victim advocacy and batterer programs). It also provides space to reflect on some of our own challenges and imagined possibilities for a feminist poststructural pedagogical approach to specialized training in intimate partner violence for public professionals.

The training referred to in this paper was developed in a train-the-trainer format where trainees return to their workplaces and train their peers. The training focuses on specific skills and situations and explores better practice advice coming from peers as opposed to the experts from outside the professional context. The intent is to encourage sharing of practical strategies to bring the training to other agency members in hope of promoting effective change. In the context of intervening in situations of intimate partner violence, the focus is on the why and what to change. Our goal when working with public professionals is to support them in moving beyond simply the technical aspects of professional intervention toward the development of a more praxeological reflection on practice, one that embraced possibilities for change agency at the level of the intervenor.

Feminist poststructural pedagogy embraces the idea of reflection on practice through a key concept of positionality (Tetreault, 2010; Tisdell, 1998), which refers to difference and how aspects of our identity are indicators of relational positions rather than essential qualities, and that the effects change according to context (Tetreault, 2010). A focus on positionality in the learning context can help learners and educators to see the multiple ways in which the complex dynamics of difference and inequality operate inside the learning context in terms of what can be known, what can be said and by whom, and who has authority and why (Tisdell, 1998). Throughout the remainder of the paper, we consider institutional challenges faced by public professionals who desire a practice shaped by change agency. We also ask how educators who situate themselves

within a feminist perspective can support change and challenge public professionals to consider systems of inequality that surround them and shape their intervention. We reflect on what feminist educators can do to prepare to challenge the de-politicization of the personal if some are clearly reluctant to exploring these issues from a theme of positionality as it relates to tensions between cooptation and social change, “truths” about intimate partner violence, and authority. Each theme addresses positionality of the educator, positionality of the institution where learning occurs, and positionality in intervention.

## THE “TRUTH” ABOUT INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

Feminist poststructuralism draws attention to historical inequalities in the construction of knowledge, the intersection of power and knowledge, and how individual subjectivities and experiences work contradictorily in the (re)production process (Weedon, 1997). In the context of training public professionals in intimate partner violence, can feminist poststructuralism help us look at how historical truths about intimate partner violence function at the intersection of the individual and institutional power (Flax, 1993)? Our goal is to provide space to disrupt truths that function in professional practice through question posing. We ask learners to reflect on the kinds of beliefs and assumptions or truths about intimate partner violence that shape their practice. We explore the idea of multiple truths, where truths are located, and why some are more valuable and acceptable in professional practice than others.

There is no doubt about the difficulty of defining intimate partner violence—in the last forty years numerous terminologies reflecting shifting understandings and ideological standpoints have emerged. Dragiewicz (2011) argues that identifying what is “acceptable and unacceptable in terms of behaviour, and what constitutes harm, are culturally influenced and constantly under review as values and social norms evolve” (p. 8). A current lexicon of terms might include domestic violence, family violence, intimate partner violence, and violence against women. Terms such as violence against women are grounded in a feminist perspective, while other terms such as family violence, reflect sociological interpretations and helping professional perspectives (Mann, 2000). Intimate partner violence reflects advances in understanding difference among same-sex and opposite-sex relationships (Tjaden, Thoennes, & Allison, 1999). In the naming, each terminology affects a particular understanding about intimate partner violence with both possibility and challenge, yet they compete for legitimacy in the institutional spaces of public professionals. A concern of public professionals is how to sift through contesting understandings of the problem and effect a practice that is meaningful at the personal, institutional, and systemic levels of change agency.

Both the professional intervenors and the individuals with whom they intervene often identify naming the problem as the first task in any intervention. Indeed, naming the problem was one of our first tasks in the development stage. We uneasily settled on naming the problem intimate partner violence and defined it as “a variety of behaviours including physical and sexual assault; intimidation; coercion and threats; verbal, psychological, and emotional abuse; isolation; and financial abuse committed to gain or sustain power and control in the context of a current or former intimate relationship, including same-sex and dating relationships” (Rossiter, 2011, p. 6). While intimate partner violence has been widely accepted by the research and advocacy communities, many feminist scholars prefer a language that draws attention to the gendered nature of violence, often using terms such as woman abuse and violence against

women (Johnson & Dawson, 2011). Many feminists insist that violence between intimate partners is not random; is not one-time, but cyclical; is often severe; and in general, is perpetrated by men and women are the victims.

In order to address the issue of naming and therefore defining the problem, we provide a set of theoretical frameworks currently guiding professional practice to help learners begin to question patriarchal meanings and values attached to interventions in intimate partner violence. A second aspect of this exercise is to provide learners with an opportunity to start to build a praxeological practice. For example, we ask trainees to share knowledge currently available for public professionals to draw on in their intervention, where they think that particular knowledge comes from, and what its impact is on their intervention. The point of this exercise is to acknowledge how taken-for-granted views can impact practice interventions. Our hope is to take up the contradictory approaches to the problem of violence against women while remaining committed to social change ideals. Still, we are left wondering if in our own practice we compromise what we believe to be truths about woman abuse and thus contribute to anti-feminist claims of men's rights activists about gender symmetry. Are we failing women "without explicitly naming the perpetrator" and have we given in to outside pressure to "stop acknowledging men's disproportionate violence against women" (Dragiewicz, 2011, p. 21)? What are the links between truths, relations of power, and the construction of knowledge in the adult-learning context?

In our context, public professionals come to training expecting to learn what truths to teach their colleagues about intimate partner violence. While we examine current theories to deconstruct dominant truths and taken-for-granted assumptions, we still find ourselves deferring to dominant sources of truth. However problematic these truths may be, they are nonetheless sites of professional power. For example, in Canada a dominant source of legal truths about intimate partner violence is the Criminal Code of Canada (CCC), which does not recognize intimate partner terminology. Neither does it recognize violence among intimate partners. It does however identify a number of crimes that professionals can draw on to make sense of the problem such as assault, forcible confinement, sexual assault, sexual exploitation, harassment, threats, theft, extortion, arson, causing suffering. There are numerous CCC crimes that can be applied, yet, in terms of definitions of assault many professionals still tend to think of intimate partner violence solely as a physical act specifically between a man and a woman. Challenging status quo definitions of intimate partner violence and providing space for expanding the application of the law in the learning environment is not easy, and as we found, it was an effect of power. For example, it is not unusual to hear that a gender analysis is sexist. It is also common to hear jeers directed at more junior professional women and at the knowledge they bring to challenge status quo applications of the law. Rashida Manjoo, the 2011 Special Rapporteur of the United Nation's report on violence against women, sheds some light on the dynamic. She states that, "Institutional and structural forms of violence includ[ing] laws ... policies [and everyday practices] ... maintain one group's advantage over another in places of ... protection by the police, and government services and benefits" (pp. 1–2). Indeed, we find that the maintenance of power and privilege and undermining practices of violence outside the learning context is both challenged and secured through interactions in the learning environment, worked out through the reproduction of power relations (Tisdell 1998).

In professional practice, challenging popular truths about intimate partner violence is highly controversial. It raises questions about who will be intervening and what the scene will look like. Victim-blaming attitudes can diminish the sense of personal responsibility (Buzawa & Buzawa, 1996), level of involvement (Gracia, Garcia, & Lila, 2008), and views about criminal activity (Logan, Shannon, & Walker, 2006). Views shape perceptions about response and interventions. For example, some police officers enforce the law regardless of the victim's willingness

to cooperate while others are reluctant to get involved when the victim is uncooperative (DeJong, Burgess-Proctor, & Elis, 2008). Social workers might blame victims for exposing children to the abuse they experience, raising questions about who is at fault and who is the real victim (Profitt, 2008).

One currently popular component of intervention that brings standardization to practice interventions is risk assessment tools that arose as a directive/policy out of the advocacy work of the battered women's movement (Campbell, Webster, & Glass, 2009). In using the tool, an intervener examines the exposure and potential harm to victims and their children and measures potential risks of lethality that might be otherwise overlooked. We provide an exercise to question how standardization works as a double-edged sword. For example, on one hand, standardized risk assessment tools can serve as a reminder to responders of potential risks that might be otherwise overlooked and the importance of emphasizing victim-safety planning. On the other hand, standardized risk assessment tools exclude actions that do not fit institutional definitions of the problem, definitions of the problem that underlie the specific tool such as violence between extended family members. It is not only the unpredictability of violence that makes relying on the tools problematic but also the perspective on violence that frames the tool. These risk assessment tools, currently in use by professionals working in the institutions where our training takes place, fail to address victim experiences that not only include violence between intimate partners but also violence against women by a partner's family. In our training, while we encourage the use of risk assessment tools and also draw attention to systemic biases, we try to raise the idea that because "everything is [or has the potential to be] dangerous" (Foucault, 1983, p. 231) adopting a question posing practice facilitates activism. This is a problematic stance in the realm of law and the legal responsibilities of public professionals that we will return to later in the paper.

## WORKING THE PERSONAL TENSION BETWEEN PROFESSIONAL LIABILITY AND SOCIAL CHANGE ACTIVISM

The learning context is not immune to the larger social and structural reforms that affect the conditions of work and the social context that frame the practices of public professionals. As a result of the work of feminists and the women's movement, civil society has changed its views of intimate partner violence. In some cases, shifting views spanning the working lives of professionals have been enormous. Resulting policy shifts have forced public professionals to refocus their strategies and interventions, at times resulting in overwhelming top-down directives. Some have embraced the effects of shifted thinking and have led policy change, while others have resisted the restructuring effects on professional practice. In their examination of the dual construction of public professionals as either "deprofessionalized victims" of structural constraints (i.e., agents of the state) or "strategic operators," actively contesting the larger conditions that shape professional practice (i.e., agents of change), Gleeson and Knights (1996) argue the need to consider the tensions, conflicts, and struggles around and through which changes in the practice of professionals happen. A poststructuralist understanding of agency suggests that public professionals do carve out spaces for agency as "not simply colonised ... by a way of thinking imposed by those in higher levels of political authority" (Wood, Fleming, & Marks, 2008, p. 75). However, Tisdell (1998) reminds us of the need to also consider how positionality intersects with the restructuring of professional practice and the uptake of such practice shifts.

In our attempts to support public professionals in change efforts, we struggled, ourselves, with positioning, the power dynamic that professionalism perpetuates, and we are left wondering if our own actions “impinge upon what is sayable and doable” (Orner, 1992, p. 80).

We developed this initiative on the basis that feminists and public professionals can be engaged in change efforts. Toch (2008) argues that it is possible for public professionals to be change agents, particularly in terms of institutional reform. Developing a training for all agency personnel that enlists everyone in the agency as change agents can have the effect, argues Toch, of increasing the support of agency personnel in reform if

[they] are enlisted as change agents, encouraging them to get involved in the design and implementation of change. This approach not only reduces opposition to innovation but results in congruent change by harnessing the experience of [those professionals] who are targets of reform. (p. 60)

Of course, while agency involvement was critical in the early stage of development, not every individual who comes into the training is aware of this information.

One reason might be that the identification as feminist change agent is risky. As an early example illustrates, agents of feminist social change are often “working against the grain” (Cochran-Smith, 2004, p. 28) in “dangerous territories” (Roman & Eyre, 1997, p. i). For example, criticisms of feminism—directed at one of us personally—found their way into the public media just after the launch of this initiative. Although the individual’s name did not appear in the national online news story, it was identified in the comments section, along with derogatory comments about her specifically and feminism in general. To borrow from Dragiewicz (2011), the comments focused on “male persecution in the context of a feminist-controlled state” (p. 123). The comments were accompanied by threats, but the source was anonymous, unknown. Such anti-feminist claims underscore the “lingering opposition to women’s equality” (p. 123). In preparing our training in the context of an anti-feminist backlash, can we expect public professionals, who are aware of possible repercussions of being named and threatened in the media, to take up social change activism? What will it mean to challenge the status quo? Furthermore, how safe is it for public professionals to position themselves as change agents, let alone feminist change agents?

In order to model change agency, a feminist education begins by reflecting on how our everyday actions, including our pedagogies, challenge or support injustice. This can be particularly challenging when many public professionals work for agencies that practice institutional violence against vulnerable employees, including conventional practices that promote a climate of violence or that seem to be neutral but have discriminatory effects (Blaney, 2009). A concern that has emerged for us and affects our desire to engage learners reflexively is to now question ourselves about our own complicities in reproducing violence. In other words, when a statement based on prejudice is expressed, when does it stop becoming an intellectual exercise and become hate speech? How can we dispel biases without reproducing harmful stereotypes? How can we use personal experiences to look at institutional and systemic obstacles to social change?

Early on, we ask learners to reflect on how their biases might be classist, homophobic, racist, and/or sexist and how these views impact on them as trainers of peers in intimate partner violence. We provide examples of what they can do to address other learners’ biases and assumptions. We also provide opportunities to discuss how they can respond to their own biases after they become conscious of them. We use the exercise on the assumption that such beliefs can become self-fulfilling or validated in professional practice, producing a hegemonic effect. The goal is that critical reflection will trigger transformative learning (Tisdell, 1998).

A huge assumption is that public professionals are immune from abuse in their personal lives. For example, a concern of both the criminal justice system and the general public has been the issue of how professional responders can effectively handle complaints involving intimate partner violence if they themselves are victims or perpetrators (Erwin, Gershon, Tiburzi, & Lin, 2005). Our training is not immune from the dilemma, particularly if professionals disclose experiences to the trainer who is obligated to report cases involving children. Such tasks of disclosure are risky, both personally and professionally. Can public professionals be willing to put their professional credibility on the line in a professional development workshop? Yet, when we developed exercises to examine the impact of responding to intimate partner violence and the lives of professionals, we wanted to challenge the binary discourses of us–them and build empathy, concern, and commonalities of experience among professionals and victims (and perpetrators) of violence (Maine Coalition for Family Crisis Services & Muskie School of Public Service, n.d.).

Knowing that learners may expose personal vulnerabilities during such exercises, it is important to be prepared for disclosures of personal experiences of victimization and perpetration of violence against an intimate partner. While no one said, “don’t go there” when asked to reflect on the impact on violence in their own lives, silence is a recurring theme for many who participate in the training. Yet in the many times that we offered this course, it was the women, not the men, who volunteered to explore the continuum of violence in their own relationships—either as a victim of violence or as an individual prone to verbal outbursts. One woman who had experienced abuse voiced her experience of not being supported by her colleagues, of feeling undermined and silenced. Her story not only challenged the discourse positioning of us-and-them but also illustrated the riskiness of biography. What was unsafe, perhaps, leads to feeling greater safety when power relations are confronted and dealt with honestly, claims Tisdell (1998). However, public professionals may not be in a position to take such a risk.

In our experience, silence provided an opportunity to break the silence about professionals and intimate partner violence in a context that had not previously been considered. Silence became the voice for those represented in the curriculum, those for whom speaking out was too risky in terms of job security and collegial credibility. And it made available a space to provide the means to ask questions about what is underneath the silence.

Educators as change agents are committed not only to changing the learning environment but also to ultimately improving the conditions that surround it. Can we ask public professionals who may already be overburdened by unresolved cases to further engage in activism? Are they, as public professionals, able to lobby their employer for change? What is “safe” activism and what does that mean? Although public professionals live and work as situated agents within a social context, they are nevertheless, “conscious thinking subjects” (Weedon, 1997, p. 26). According to Weedon, “[s]ocial meanings are produced within social institutions and practices in which individuals, who are shaped by these institutions, are agents of change, rather than its authors” (p. 25). But what happens when a feminist position collides with legal requirements?

Professionals are required by law to report to child protection agencies all cases of intimate partner violence where children are present, regardless of fault, intensity of the violence, or even the outcome. The intent of mandatory reporting in cases where children are present is to hold perpetrators accountable for their actions: if you abuse an intimate partner in the presence of children, you will come to the attention of child protection services. Feminists have argued that mandatory reporting harms women and children because victimized women may be afraid to report, fearing the potential ramifications may have the unintended consequence of holding the victim responsible for exposing the children to their victimization (Profitt, 2008). Being aware of incidents and choosing not to report them can lead to prosecution if you are a public



professional. This is one issue that challenges notions of state agent as change agent and places public professional desires second to the rules of governance.

We presented rationale for specialized training that focused on public professionals as change makers to a group of researchers and public professionals at a national conference. On this point we were interrupted by an attending court judge who criticized the exercise that looked at the contradictory effects of mandatory reporting. Stating emphatically that “[mandatory reporting] is the law,” he closed the space for dialogue on a critical issue facing public professionals. His actions made us realize that public professionals “are not disempowered and marginalised groupings. Rather, they have constraints which limit their capacity to be visionaries, innovators, and more generally, agents of cultural change” (Wood, et al., 2008, p. 81).

We felt the space for critical reflection and discussion on this topic narrowed by institutional power. We were left wondering if activist positioning is too dangerous without associated institutional and systemic change. Or, in asking this question, are we buying into the status quo? Recognizing the interconnectedness of levels of agency and authority is key to transformative relations, just as power is a concern for professionals responding to intimate partner violence because it is an important step toward the reconstitution of the subject with whom one engages. Feminist scholars have used feminist poststructuralist theory to consider agency and professional use of power to “make a difference.” As Davies (2000) argues, not only is one’s agency affected by how the self is constructed through dominant discourses, but it is also affected by one’s capacity to recognize, “resist, subvert, and change the discourse themselves through which one is being constituted” (p. 67).

Our attempts to highlight the political dimensions of practice return us to our initial questions about public professionals and transformative work. If participants have made positive changes in their lives to end violence, they may have enough power to challenge the dominant discourse that upholds professional immunity to intimate partner violence. The problem that arose for us in training was the risks associated with challenging established binaries of powerful and powerless. Feminist poststructural pedagogy highlights a need to be aware of power relationships and political dimensions in professional practice and the challenges in building trusting relationships among social service professionals and the communities they serve. By incorporating the understanding gained from peers in training, trainees can leave with a renewed sense of the impact of perspective, position, power, and authority. Public professionals have the opportunity to demonstrate how new understandings of power may contribute to an empowered constitution of self and ultimately contribute to more effective interaction and outcome for individuals who have experienced intimate partner violence.

## A POLITICS OF VOICE

Feminist poststructural pedagogy takes up issues of authority in practice. It works to challenge unequal power relations by drawing attention to how marginalized knowledges are validated or not. Feminist poststructural pedagogy recognizes the dynamic nature of knowledge, the shortcomings of technical expertise in responding to complex questions, and the need to integrate the personal with the professional toward changing the contexts that affect practice (Ryan, 2009). We aimed to disrupt power by creating an environment where learners could problematize the conditions that have informed their own lives and could examine and acknowledge the limitations and possibilities of their own positionality (Tisdell, 1998, p. 153). We set out to create a learning environment where public professionals could examine how relations of power connect to their interventions. We sought to provide meaningful ways to recognize the complex social

location of victims and perpetrators of intimate partner violence. Moreover, we attempted to show how their interventions might work contradictorily to encourage and discourage seeking professional support.

One way we choose to examine power is to look at how difference functions as a barrier to seeking the support of public professionals. Scholars have striven to broaden understandings of intimate partner violence, for example, recognizing the heterogeneity of victims and perpetrators, but a homogenizing effect still remains (Pattavina, Hirschel, Buzawa, Faggiani, & Bentley, 2007). While we believe that looking at the effect of difference is critical to our own and the work of public professionals, as the following example illustrates, a residual effect impedes our best efforts to address power. Many of us unconsciously perpetuate power's manifestations (for example, sexism, racism, homophobia, etc.) in practice through our own deep prejudice and resulting limited vision. Furthermore, confronting our own prejudices while also maintaining a directive role as challengers of unequal power relations is neither easy nor comfortable.

Over lunch during one of the training sessions, I was called on to respond to an acquaintance who was in crisis and needed immediate support. While she talking, I could hear the parallel conversation in my head that blamed her—that questioned her ability to see yet another relationship as abusive. I couldn't hear her. Fortunately, I did not have enough time to speak more in-depth with her and instead told her that we would meet later, and returned to the group. I shared the experience with the group, particularly the parallel conversation with myself, by drawing attention to the power of victim-blaming discourses. At the time, I didn't discuss my "authority" or my social location with learners as affecting my construction of knowledge. After reflecting on it further, like Tisdell (1998) I now talk about it, not only in terms of dominant discourses of the topic but also in terms of how my positionality of authority affects what and who I hear.

While feminist educators may have a desire to share experiences, authority is a complex problem in the learning context. Manicom (1992) suggests "dismantling authority relations" as a means of equalizing power relations (p. 370). But is this possible or desirable?

One means of addressing authority in the feminist learning context has been to invite guest speakers to provide their authority on the topic, speaking their personal experience through testimony. Testimony has provided crucial evidence for challenging normative views. But what are the politics of reproducing normative assumptions that will form the basis of professional practice when we identify the testifier, the provider of the story and the experience? How do we participate in these complicated "processes of identity production ... the discursive nature of experience and ... the politics of its construction" (Scott, 1992, p. 37)?

Early on we decided to provide learners with materials that challenge the singularity of victim identity. We developed a module that focuses on the diversity of experiences of victimization to draw attention to the complexity of victim identity, agency, and reporting issues. The module provides space for dialogue on difference from within the context of trainees and trainers where universal assumptions about social and cultural locations can be checked. Yet, while difference is generally recognized, it is not considered equal and is not given equal space in the learning environment. For example, it is not unusual to hear jeers from male learners when discussing issues about male victimization. Jeers make it even more difficult to speak to experiences in a same-sex relationship to a possible homophobic audience. And, when younger and less-experienced professionals mentioned broadening their understanding of what constitutes intimate partner violence crimes, there were criticisms and laughter from more senior professionals.

As mentioned previously we created a module for learners to talk about their own experiences of intimate partner violence with their peers. The purpose of the module is to draw

attention to the fact that professionals also live in families and communities where the prevalence of factors contributing to intimate partner violence exert their influence, and that their professional training does not make them immune to the social and cultural forces that converge to produce intimate partner violence. Yet in the evaluation of the training, the attention to these problems did not deter learners from insisting that “the victim” be invited in order to put a face to victimization and bring greater clarity to the issues.

Whose authority counts continues to be a dilemma. On the one hand, we are proposing that the public professionals have authority over the learning experience, both their own and those learning experiences they will be providing once they return to their agency. On the other hand, as our example above illustrates, the paradox of desires to both express the experience of pain and inevitable misunderstandings of these experiences (Tsao, 2011) underlies our decision to challenge conferring power based on authority of experience to victims in a performance of their pain for the benefit of learners. Our fear is that we participate in revictimization and subjecting pain to trivializing, pathologizing, or even valourizing. Moreover, as Tsao questions, “to what extent is an individual’s pain knowable by others?” (p. 43). Does identity confer authority? If what is said poses problematic assumptions, then what? Will trainees take it upon themselves to question the knowledge, identity, and authority of that person’s experiences? Will all of this be reproduced in the practice?

Authority in the learning environment can thwart a desire to make a difference, particularly when more senior learners express a desire to maintain the status quo. We wonder if our attempts to bring in diversity and to highlight “the difference that difference makes” (Marcano, 2010, p. 53) is still located within a heterosexual framework—the challenge is the reproduction of the narrative of partner legitimization. Feminist theory recognizes the dynamic nature of knowledge, the shortcomings of technical expertise in responding to complex questions, and the need to integrate the personal with the professional toward changing the contexts that affect practice (Ryan, 2009). But is this possible through professional development or learning? Professional development provides first responders with a space to reflect on how they use their authority when intervening with victims of intimate partner violence and to broaden their knowledge about groups that have been most vulnerable to stereotypes. It allows them to reflect on how social location has impacted their own professional interventions. However, the contradictory dimensions of authority are plentiful in the feminist learning environment.

In feminist poststructural pedagogy there is recognition of a “constantly shifting identity associated with a person’s social position ... [and therefore] ... an increased capacity for agency and an identification of different truths (Moore, 2003, p. 24). Individuals are simultaneous members of different social structures and as such their identity is shaped and impacted by social systems of privilege and oppression. The shifting identity is in response to multiple social group memberships. This is what we found, but not necessarily in a positive manner. For example, when a white learner identified issues of victimization and perpetration within First Nations, she appeared, on the surface, to be welcomed. Problems arose when she drew solely on this context for her examples. Our fear is the reproduction of assumptions that perpetration and victimization are predominantly found in marginalized communities. Indeed, Luke (1996) cautions that a politics of voice in the learning environment can be counter productive if the basis of authority over knowledge depends on a truth of lived experience or if it de-authorizes an individual from speaking on the basis of a lack of experience. Moreover, even if an expanded understanding may affect better practice, it may not translate into the everyday. As a more senior professional stated, “different populations, unique barriers ... this training is to give people an understanding that everyone may think that way at times, but you have to stay clear of that when you go into a domestic violence situation” (personal communication, 2008).

## SUMMARY

Regardless of where one is situated, working in the field of intimate partner violence is a highly contested space in the everyday lives of women (Goldblatt & Buchbinder, 2003). Feminist educators challenge the distinction between theory and practice, and argue for reflective practice. We found that feminist poststructural theory offers possibilities for considering a convergence of state and activist goals. For example, feminist poststructural pedagogy provides a space to complicate the gendered nature of intimate partner violence and engage learners in examinations of the intersection of the personal with professional, critically reflect on practice and the effects of positionality on practice, and consider the professional use of power. It helped in recognizing that speaking our complicity in violence, including acts of pedagogical violence, is not an easy practice and therefore recognition of the counterpoint—the power of silence—became as equally an important pedagogical moment. We set out asking ourselves a number of questions about the possibilities of feminist poststructural pedagogies for a transformative practice with public professionals in mainstream institutions. While some reflections have enhanced our practice, others continue to raise unanswered questions.

Feminists continue to debate the advantages and disadvantages of increased state involvement in intimate partner violence. The debates centre on the construction of a problematic dualism: the criticality of state involvement in the provision of services for victims and their children, and holding offenders accountable for their actions, which raises the concern that increased state involvement will lead to co-optation and depoliticization of the issue (Ursel, 1998). We hoped that by providing a reflexive learning practice we could somehow challenge the division and provide space for supporting the efforts of those public professionals who seek transformative practice. For some, it provided a discourse for discussion on gendered violence; for others it was an opportunity to raise strategic thinking and broaden the use of locations of truth. For still others, jeers and laughter became acts of silencing.

As feminist educators, theory guides our work, organizes knowledge, and identifies paths to improve the experiences of women and other vulnerable groups. Feminist poststructural pedagogy provides space to critically engage with learners in discussions about the theories that give shape to their practice and how the same theories contradictorily intersect with their vision of their work. Indeed, learners reminded us of our own implications of how truth effects the primary sources of power and authority available to public professionals. Feminist poststructural pedagogy provides the spaces to take up the various truths about intimate partner violence as they effect public perceptions, which are especially critical in terms of whether or not victims contact the authorities.

Authority and power influenced what counted as knowledge and the job of public professionals. As learners worked to address power relations, their efforts were influenced by positionality. In spite of our efforts to address binary oppositions between intervenor and intervened, to make visible and therefore challenge taken-for-granted ways of thinking about victims, accused, identity, learning, knowledge, and gender in the performed and documented professional practices, testimony from previous interventions was sought and while problematized has remained a reminder of the desire for normative accounts of the “truth” about intimate partner violence. A feminist pedagogical promise of a safe space for “equal talk among equals,” (Luke, 1996, p. 292) is complex, particularly in relation to a politics of speaking and the broader contexts within which voice is located (Gore 1992).

Our training highlights the struggles that public professionals grapple with in their personal assumptions, practice, and contradictions, and emphasizes the implications in reproducing violence. In spite of our training efforts, we remain uncertain about the extent to which

the training makes a difference in terms of offender accountability and victim safety. To gain a better idea on this critical issue, we need to hear from the victims of intimate partner violence and whether or not they see a difference in the interventions of public professionals as a result of specialized training (Blaney, 2010). Because this critical piece is yet to be accomplished, we do not know if the feminist goals of safety and accountability have been effected. All we know is that our training provides the most current thinking on the topic. What public professionals do with this information is unclear.

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