

TOUCHSTONE FAMILY ASSOCIATION'S *MEN, ANGER & THE FAMILY* GROUP: ENCOURAGING DEMOCRATIC SELVES

Origin of the Group

Men, Anger & the Family is a group for men who have committed domestic aggression, physical and/ or emotional abuse, against their partners and/or children. It was developed in Richmond B.C. by Touchstone Family Association, in partnership with the Ministry of Children and Family Development, as a preventative measure, to fill the large gap in service for men who have acted abusively against their spouses and/or children but who have, in many cases, not been charged due to the relative moderateness of their acts. The Richmond RCMP has also joined the project, as it has a similar interest in providing preventative, strength-based services to this population. David Ravvin is the group's developer and facilitator (now co-facilitator).

Introduction

The group is unusual in that its focus is as much on child abuse, including the effects on children of witnessing abuse, as on partner abuse. The challenge for me in creating the group rested in developing a model of counselling that could economically—the group is eight sessions long and most clients enter the program with minimal or no previous counselling—engage and motivate-to-change both child and partner abusers without making either feel they're in the wrong group. Five important lessons from my previous group work informed the development of this group. 1) Group learning can be greatly deepened when apparently disparate subjects are explicitly integrated with overarching themes and concepts. 2) Men are most engaged in groups when they are invited to share their own experiences and beliefs. 3) Given 1 and 2, overarching group themes must evocatively portray men's experiences, and overarching concepts must at least be latent in men's thinking. 4) Men are very interested in conversations that consider how their masculinity implicates them in their own bad behaviour and suffering; and 5) Men are moved to end abusive behaviour most by their love for (their) children and by an awareness of how they pervert their own dignity by being abusive.

With these lessons in mind, the group employs as its overarching message the importance of both democratic human relations and historical self-awareness in overcoming master/slave relations. 1) Democratic relations involve conscientiously treating the other person as an equal, with fairness, respect, and decency. 2) Master/slave relations involve mistreating the other and being mistreated by the other within stable, long-standing power imbalances or during opportunistic moments of vengeance and one-upmanship between antagonistic equals. 3) Historical self-awareness involves vigilantly and conscientiously considering how one's past, present, and future actions degrade or elevate oneself and others.

If these concepts sound familiar and unremarkable in a discussion of domestic violence counselling, they are. I believe all three of these concepts underlie virtually all topics of such counselling, including relationships, communication, anger management, the intergenerational cycle of abuse, and parenting. (Democratic and master/slave relations have direct parallels in the canonical Duluth Equality and Power & Control wheels, respectively.) By weaving these concepts across sessions, *Men, Anger & the Family* attempts to explicitly integrate all domestic violence group discussion. The foregrounding of these concepts also lays the groundwork for the presentation of a compelling model of masculinity--the Democratic Self--that, while an embodiment of ungendered democratic principles, is muscularly and rationally male-friendly (to be developed later in this article).

These overarching concepts are introduced gradually, without much fanfare, in and around standard domestic violence group exercises. They help guide the men on a voyage of self-discovery. In every session the men are invited to generate lists of their beliefs and experiences. They are encouraged to acknowledge their own, and their forefathers', present and historical implication in master/slave relations but also to express their own often buried commitment to democratic relations. In this way every kind of abuse and its desistance is placed within the same historical and relational frame. The explicit, central challenge of the group is for the men, as Democratic Selves, to do things differently than their forefathers (and foremothers) did.

The Masculine Dilemma and a Poor Solution to It

In Session I, *Men and Anger*, the men are asked to generate two lists. These become the founding historical documents of each cycle of group and are displayed and frequently referred to in all following sessions. The first is a list of the thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and behaviours the men experience as their anger is escalating, respectively: *"Not again," "How dare they," "Why me?," sad, desperate, irritable, volatile, insulted, exhausted, confused, disappointed, sweaty, heart palpitating, tense, veins popping, clenched fist, pacing, pivoting.* The second is a list of the things the men were told, as boys, about what it means to be a Man: *authority, king of the castle, unemotional, breadwinner, dominant, macho, charismatic, confident, can-do, competent, tough, smarter than everyone, goes into the world, gets the woman, always right even if wrong, God, heroic.* The juxtaposition of the two lists--the embittered slave scotch-taped beneath the false master--turns the conversation in the direction of the masculine dilemma: *I want to be Superman but I'm a wounded creature enslaved to my feelings and the sleights and perceived sleights of others. Getting big with anger and abuse is how I stop feeling small, at least for the unhistorical moment that flesh hits flesh.*

In Session II, *Democratic Relations vs. Master/Slave Relations*, the men are asked to describe how they act under duress; how they act with men, women, and children; how they act when they have more or less or equal power. Briefly, we discuss how

authoritarian states maintain power, illegitimately, over their subjects. We discuss the casual one-upmanship between men who aren't friends; the matter-of-fact abuses of bosses at the workplace; the misplaced anger on the drive home and once there with the wife and kids; and the petty tit-for-tat that characterizes so many domestic relationships. A very familiar picture emerges of aggrieved human beings mistreated when weaker, mistreating when stronger, and clamouring for position, shifting from master to slave and back again, with their too-familiar equals. This clamouring emerges in the domestic sphere as an escalating exchange of angry pay-backs by partners with relatively equal power (the sarcastic remark; the cold glare; the threatened action; the resurrected grievance, the quiet put-down, the broken promise, the contemptuous roll of the eyes). Too often this conflict is "resolved" only when one party, usually the man, uses violence or threats of violence to cow the other. (The unequal and more stable master/slave relationship in which a man controls a woman with ongoing physical abuse or threats of abuse is not discussed at this point in the group.)

The Democratic Self as Solution

At this point in Session II, the model of the Democratic Self is introduced into the conversation. The men are asked to generate a list of democratic values and practices, which they have no difficulty doing: *equality, dialogue, co-operation, everyone has a voice, respect for everyone's rights, compromise, freedom, checks and balances, concern for the weak, rule of law, brotherhood*. The Democratic Self, the person who embodies these values and practices, is presented as an obvious human alternative to the master or the slave. But it is also a compelling model of masculinity--there is considerable overlap between the Democratic Self and the model of masculinity that is generated on the first night of group: *responsible, authority, confident, competent, can-do, goes into the world, heroic*.²

Finding Master/Slave Relations Everywhere

Over the course of the rest of the group the men are encouraged to see how deeply their lives are implicated in master/slave relations but also how plausible and desirable it is to behave differently, democratically.

In Session III, *Transmission of Abuse from Parent to Child*, the men are asked to give examples of abuses that took place in their own and their parents' childhoods, whether perpetrated by family members, friends or community members. Master/slave relations among human beings are established as an historical fact. In later sessions, the men are encouraged to see how master/slave relations specifically harm women and children, and how this harm is normalized in human culture.

For example, in Session VI, *What is a Child? and the Effects of Witnessing Abuse on Children*, the men generate a list of what they believe a young, sheltered child is like: *innocent, helpless, a learning sponge, spontaneous, playful, without preconceptions*,

emotional, loving, reliant on others, full of unconditional love, trusting, family is everything. Then they generate a list of how these attributes are perverted when a child is abused or witnesses abuse between their parents: *self-loathing, confused, mistrustful, inhibited, insecure, prone to violence, anger and escapism, thinks abuse and anger are the way to deal with things, reactive, in survival mode.*

In this exercise the men are encouraged to see how easily, often, and invisibly a child can be permanently enlisted in abusive power relations by his/her parents. Where a Democratic Self could have blossomed, a master/slave now grows unchecked.

As another example, in Session V, *Women and Conflict Between the Sexes*, the men create a list of what they believe girls learn about what it means to be a Woman: *take care of others; be pretty; don't complain; please your husband; settle for what you've got; defer to man; silence yourself; let others think they're smarter.* This list is contrasted with the Session I list of what boys are told a Man should be. Strikingly *Woman is subservient to Man* appears on both lists. This list is also compared with a list I had a group of female counsellors generate on the same subject (of what girls learn about what it means to be a Woman). The counsellors' list mirrors the men's list in its representation of Woman as a lady and caretaker but it adds another dimension—an attempt to democratize relations between the sexes: *woman is capable of having kids and working; education makes all the difference [for women]; good comebacks [by women] to gain respect and power; [woman's] mind before body; women improve with age; women not responsible [primarily] for others; read to open up the world.*

These exercises encourage men to see that women's lives, as with men's, are compromised by master/slave relations, but that women must also often contend with a built-in cultural enslavement to men, and now they're working to change things.³

Finding the Possibility of Democratic Relations Everywhere

Over the course of the group democratic relations are presented as the way out of master/slave relations. Standard domestic violence group teachings—communications and parenting, for example—are framed in explicit terms of democratic vs. master/slave relations in an attempt to integrate and deepen group subject matter across the sessions. This is made easier by the fact that standard teachings have already categorized these topics along democratic vs. master/slave lines.

As an example, in Session III, *Assertive Communication vs. Aggressive/Passive Communication*, assertive communication is recommended as a constructive way for human beings with different opinions, burning grievances, and enmeshed lives to talk to each other. The men generate a list of assertive communication's merits (*flexible, stand up for your rights, respect other's rights, compromise, a measured emotional reaction, fair- and open-minded, set reasonable boundaries*) that, in its clear articulation of

democratic values, explicitly connects this session with discussion of democratic practices in other sessions. Aggressive communication (described by the men as *dominant, overpowering, disrespectful of rights, over-reactive, and angry*), and passive communication (described as *withdrawn, eat it, under-reactive, no voice, burn with resentment afterwards*) are represented, respectively, as expressions of master and slave mentalities.

As another example, in Session VII, *Democratic Parenting vs. Authoritarian/Permissive Parenting*, the men generate a list of the characteristics of the ideal teenager (whose attributes uncoincidentally coincide with the Democratic Self): *responsible, respectful, self-sustaining; happy; knows right from wrong; gets an education; mature; autonomous; accepting of constructive criticism; assertive; empathetic; has fulfilling relationships; spiritually healthy; loves and is loved; self-confident*. The men are then asked to describe three parenting approaches: authoritarian, permissive, and democratic (the last approach described as *assertive, reasonable, good-natured, accountable, invites input from child, good communicator, respected not feared, firm and fair boundaries, respects the child, even-tempered, consistent*). Then they are asked which parenting style is most likely to produce the ideal teenager. The men generally indicate that it is the democratic parent who is most likely to produce the ideal teenager (Democratic Self). They also note the authoritarian parent rehearses the behaviour of the master; and the permissive parent that of the slave. And that both of these approaches are more likely than democratic parenting to recruit their children into master/slave relations.⁴

History as an Integrating and Deepening Concept

As mentioned in the introduction, the concept of history, along with that of democratic relations, is used throughout the group to integrate and deepen group conversation. The group's emphasis on democratic agency explicitly and implicitly places the men's actions within the larger historical context of Canada, other democracies, and non-democracies. As well, as the name of the group, *Men, Anger & the Family*, suggests, family is made the frame of the group. Each man is encouraged to view himself, his parents, and his grandparents as vulnerable children, as well as potential and real abusers and transmitters of societal norms. The men's children and grandchildren, as well, are portrayed not just as real and potential victims but as potential abusers. Each man is asked, as a Democratic Self, to Make Himself Historical (a frequent exhortation in the group) by vigilantly viewing his past, present, and future actions as profoundly consequential both for himself and others.

As well, just as the concepts of democratic and master/slave relations are used to frame and clarify discussions of communications and parenting, so is the concept of history. Assertive (democratic) communication, with its self-conscious awareness of the profound shortcomings of aggressive and passive communication, is presented as the communication style that, by its very conceptualization, is most likely to place a person's

communication successes and failures in historical context. Aggressive and passive forms of communication are portrayed, in the lists the men generate, as reactive, uncritical, and overly self-serving. Similarly, democratic parenting, with its self-conscious awareness of the profound shortcomings of authoritarian and permissive parenting, is presented as the parenting style that, also by its very conceptualization, is most likely to place a parent's parenting successes and failures in historical context. Authoritarian and permissive parenting practices are described, again in the lists the men generate, as reactive, uncritical, and overly self-serving.

History and Anger Management

Anger, too, is treated from a historical perspective, as anger is notoriously unhistorical. One of the characteristic features of anger is the intense focus of its subject. As the men attest, the angry person is unwaveringly—unhistorically—riveted on the object of anger or fear, just as an animal's attention is fixed on its prey or predator. This feature of anger is represented in the room by the only other "document" (along with the Session I lists of escalating anger and of what it means to be a Man) that is displayed in the room every session: a crude drawing of an angry, aggrieved stickman standing on a timeline in the here-and-now between another stickman who appears in the immediate past, as victimizer, and again in the immediate future as desired victim. The enraged stickman is fixated on his victimizer and would-be victim, oblivious to everything and everyone else around him, past, present, and future.

This drawing is used as a touchstone for every anger management strategy that is taught in the group. An anger ladder (a record of the thoughts, feeling, sensations, and behaviours of a person's escalating anger) is presented as a Making Historical of what was previously present but not accounted for. Counting to ten, the most basic of anger management strategies, is presented as a self-conscious accounting of what the future might hold based on what the past has held. A time-out (a safety plan agreed on between man and woman in the event of potentially uncontrollable rage) is presented as a democratic contract between man and woman in which the future is agreed upon to avoid the past's disasters. Self-questioning ("Is this thing that's angering me worth my attention? Am I justified in getting mad? Do I have a reasonable response?") is presented as a historical self-reckoning.

Conclusion and Personal Thoughts

In my experience (the group has run for two cycles) the men are quite responsive to the concepts of Making Oneself Historical and, particularly, the Democratic Self. Although it may seem from this article that these concepts are preached dogmatically in the group, I hope they are not. Dogmatism is of course contrary to the spirit of democracy. The concepts are used as framing and integrating tools and as such require a counsellor's pacing and soft touch if they are to resonate with the men. I have found these concepts help evoke the men's past experiences (master/slave relations) and their best dreams and

realities (democratic relations). Wanting to be a Democratic Self and Making Oneself Historical encourages men to confess their stories, and it is with these confessions that domestic violence groups have their greatest transformational force.

The concepts also have the power to discipline--to use a potentially undemocratic word--the men's hearts and minds. I have found they help contain group conversation, that is, keep things on topic rather than in, say, the land of blaming others. This discipline is a problematic game though. As I am the (male) "authority" in the room, I am also the potential Master. I try to be as democratic as possible, identifying myself frequently as a man with his own typically masculine problems. But this doesn't resolve the problem of my authority, which can only come from the historically demonstrated benefits of the concepts themselves, including their capacity to challenge the rigidities, prejudices, and self-satisfactions of their advocates, something the men have occasionally, assertively, taken advantage of with me.

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Notes

¹ Brayton Polka explicitly joins the concepts of democracy and history in his “Truth and Interpretation: An Essay in Thinking” (1990). Although his book does not deal with domestic violence, his discussion of these concepts influenced my decision to foreground them, however differently (more conventionally), in the group.

² The frequent contrasting of democratic values and master/slave actions in the group is a way of psycho-educationally depicting the kind of discrepancies between men’s non-violent values and their violent actions that Alan Jenkins invites counsellors to tease out in individual therapy, in, for example, “Invitations to Responsibility: The Therapeutic Engagement of Men Violent and Abuse” (1990).

³ By generating lists describing the construction, corruption, and possible re-construction of “all three kinds” of human beings—man, woman, and child—the men are encouraged to see how everyone is differently, though similarly, compromised by master/slave relations but potentially redeemed by democratic relations.

⁴ Democratic parenting, whether going by the name “democratic” or not, has become one of, if not the, predominant forms of parent counseling in Canada and the United States. It is my understanding, from my education in an Adlerian counselling program, that Adlerians were the first to formally develop the model of democratic parenting as well as the first to explicitly call this parenting approach “democratic”.
