

Superman? Really?

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This is an expanded version of an article of the same name, based on a workshop at the No To Violence 2012 Australasian Conference on Responses to Men's Domestic and Family Violence (see <http://ntv.org.au/conference/> for workshop summaries, podcasts, transcripts and other resources arising from the conference). While addressed to men, women's and men's reflections on the questions raised in the article are equally welcome.

Men have essential roles to perform in ending men's violence against women. We are the ones committing the violence. We are the ones who benefit from gender-based power, privilege and entitlement—in our relationships, families, workplaces, communities, public spaces and in our use of public space. We are the ones who, over generations, centuries and millennia, have shaped society through valuing and devaluing, glorifying and making invisible, counting and discounting ... all based (in part) on our patriarchal lens.

We have 'succeeded' so well in this that we no longer have to actively construct this privilege and entitlement for ourselves. It is given to us by virtue of being men (Pease, 2010).

I believe that all men have a responsibility for noticing our use, both individually and collectively, of privilege and entitlement, of noticing the invisible burdens of responsibilities we place on women without negotiation. All men have a responsibility to listen to and understand women's and children's voices and accounts of how their space for action and freedom is reduced by the way that men act, and by the structures and institutions of our society.

In my experience—as someone who like many men reading this journal is trying to step out, or step up, to this journey of noticing and listening—this is hard work. The emotions involved can be intense: shame, grief, vulnerability and self-doubt. Acting in solidarity with, and being allies to, women and children whose worlds are reduced due to our privilege means opening ourselves up to their suffering, the literal definition of compassion. This can test our capacity to engage in collective, sustainable practices of justice-doing to avoid burnout, despair and cynicism (Reynolds, 2011; Macy & Brown, 1998). It also tests our capacity not to get lost in 'our journey', and to stay centred on the voices of women and children.

While this requires much reflection and vigilance, and a constant awareness of the micro-politics of how we use our space as men, physically and metaphorically, there is also much beauty and intimacy in this stepping out, or stepping up. There is much for us to re/connect with, to live more fully, by stepping into an aware being-with, and away from a defensive, power-over stance. It could be argued that this work can be liberational for men, if we take responsibility for this journeying without further burdening women for guidance, praise or recognition.

It is sometimes written or said in violence against women prevention spaces that most men aren't violent, and that it's the responsibility of the majority who aren't to take a stand against this violence, and against gender inequality. While I see some value in this, I also experience discomfort in the separating out of those who do, and those who don't, use violence. Some, perhaps many men who don't perpetrate sexual or physical violence against women, or any patterned use of family or domestic violence, contribute as much to gender-based inequalities as those who do. Using violence is not the only means of benefiting from male privilege.

There is perhaps a particular responsibility on men who engage in the struggle to end men's violence against women—whether at the prevention or family violence sector response end—to participate in this journeying. How we engage with our privilege and entitlement can have an important modelling influence on other men—whether those at a White Ribbon Day event, or sitting in a men's behaviour change group session. At least as importantly, how we enter and work within these spaces as prevention or family violence workers—spaces that women have struggled for decades to create and protect—can say lots about what we value and devalue, prioritise or fail to notice, count or discount.

Male Accountability Wheel

Based on women's stories of aspiring male allies reproducing the very sexism that they sought to challenge, Ben Atherton-Zeman (2011) adapted the Duluth Power and Control Wheel to invite male allies to reflect and learn from their own behaviour. He also adapted the Equality Wheel to devise a Male Accountability Wheel, focusing on ways in which male allies can stay open and listen to feminist colleagues in their anti-sexism work, and to be aware of their own privilege and entitlement. Ben has kindly provided permission for NTV to reproduce the latest iterations of these wheels in this journal.

Figure 1. Power and Control and Male Accountability Wheels for men working to end gender based violence

The analogy of the superhero cape

In planning a workshop with NTV Executive Officer Danny Blay for a recent conference, Danny pondered about the use of hero metaphors to encourage male family violence and prevention workers to identify and reflect on the ways they might be using male privilege and entitlement in their work, the effects this has on women workers and on the work itself, and how men can support each other to transform their use of gender-based power and privilege. While we knew the use of hero metaphors would be provocative and might in some ways caricature the issues, we thought this could be an apt way to encourage lively debate and discussion.

We conceived this workshop out of concern that if we locate the identification and transformation of men's privilege and entitlement as an entirely individual matter, as an outcome of each male worker's individual and separate professional and personal journey in this work, the status quo of gender inequity within the violence against women response and prevention sectors will continue. We were curious as to how men's journeying could become actively normalised through professional development and reflective practice, and what institutional forms of accountability might operate to support and sustain these processes.

In taking the concept of the hero further, Danny and I used the metaphor of the Superman cape as a way of teasing out relevant issues in some detail. Through small-group work and whole-group discussions, the workshop invited participants to reflect on a series of capes that men who work in violence prevention or response might wear. Each small group took a particular cape and considered the implications of it being worn by men.

The Cape of Goodness

Men wear this cape, and/or it is given to them, when they are thought of as 'good men' because they are working to stop or prevent men's violence against women ... "isn't he such a *good man*

for doing this work!"; "There needs to be more men like him, women have been doing all the work in family violence for decades and at last we have men like him joining us."

What effect does wearing this cape have on the voices of women who have been doing response and prevention work for *far* longer than men?

Might women feel pressured to deny any concerns about a particular man's behaviour, practice or work, or to choose not to voice them, because he is a 'good man' for doing the work?

What effect might this cape have on protecting the man from his behaviour, work and efforts being scrutinised?

What does it mean, in terms of gender inequity, for men's efforts to be rewarded and praised based only on commitment and intent, while women's efforts might be scrutinised in other ways?

What might be the warning signs that doing good, as a form of self-identity and peer status, is taking centre stage above solidarity and struggle through justice-doing?

The Cape of Privilege

As Bob Pease argues in *Undoing Privilege*, academic and applied efforts to reduce inequality have often focused more on analyses of oppression than analyses of privilege. We still see this in some current gender equity work, where the framing is on working towards a minimum level of representation of women in positions of political, corporate or leadership power, rather than maximum quotas for men.

In what ways might men who work towards the end of men's violence against women benefit from the privilege of being male?

How might this privilege translate in terms of un-negotiated responsibilities that are left for women to do? What might men just *assume* that women will do?

What might men be blind to as a result of this privilege?

The Cape of Benefits

Motivations for our social justice work are rarely 'pure'. There are important benefits for ourselves in doing this work, and this in itself isn't a problem. We do not just do this work because we want to help 'them', whomever this 'them' is, as this can be just another process of othering. Transforming our own relating, being and the structures we contribute towards is more about a focus on how we can stop causing harm. But giving up privilege is a hard ask if it also doesn't help us to become more alive (Macy & Brown, 1998).

Is it important for men to consider the benefits that they gain from doing violence against women prevention and response work?

Which benefits are healthy and important both for the man and others in his life, and which benefits might detract from the work or take centre stage?

Can some benefits come at the expense of others who are doing the work, or to others in their lives?

The Cape of Hyper-Masculinity

Many male readers of this article are undoubtedly taking an active approach towards constructing and co-constructing their sense of masculinity, and of what being a man means to them. Nevertheless, as prevention and family violence workers, we are not immune to the dominant narratives and pressures that have shaped our ways of relating, prioritising and defining 'success'.

Are there ways in which men, operating within the prevention and male family violence response spaces, can bring with them hyper-masculine ways of being and relating?

What effects might this have on power relations with co-workers, or with others in community organisations?

What effects might this have on gender inequality, and on the spaces and power for women to act?

What effects might this have on what types of work are valued, and devalued?

What does this mean for men's leadership in these spaces, and co-leadership with women?

The Cape of Secrecy

Like men in men's behaviour change programs, it's likely that many (all?) of us men are not totally 'honest' about our use of gender-based power. This might in part be due to the invisibility of much of our privilege, and its effects on others (particularly in terms of subtle, everyday acts of privilege). It might be due in part to the shame involved in admitting that we have violated our own ethical stances through our use of gender-based power and entitlement (Kulkens, 2013). In some instances, it might even involve a degree of lying or deceit.

What do we need to know about men who engage in prevention and male family violence response work—in terms of their personal journeys of transforming privilege and gender-based power?

What accountabilities should there be, and to whom?

In speaking out about violence against women, what can men be hiding?

What to do about the capes

Taking this analogy further, a number of questions could be asked about what men can do about these capes. Do some or all of the capes act somewhat invisibly to the men, and/or to others? What might be needed to make them more visible, so that men can see how they operate and influence their actions? What can men do to take responsibility to *monitor* the capes, rather than to leave this to women and children affected by them? Can the capes ever be entirely removed?

Questions arise as to the ways in which men can support each other in this noticing. What might make men reluctant to try to take off a particular cape? How can men support each other to work with this reluctance and their vulnerability, and more generally, to create a safer space for women's critiquing and dissent?

Further questions arise at the organisational or institutional level, regarding what processes of accountability might look like. In what ways can organisations assist male workers to explore the influence of the capes on their work? Should we expect male *workers* in men's behaviour

change programs to undergo some level of partner contact? What might the role of gender auditing play at an organisational level?

Giving up privilege

I can understand readers getting to the end of this article and feeling a sense of heaviness or negativity, that the efforts of men who do prevention or family violence work will never be enough. I can understand readers feeling that their existing efforts to step out, or step up, are not being understood or appreciated.

There has been a long history of women's efforts, struggles and strivings being intensely scrutinised, judged, devalued and dismissed. Worse, women have been, and continue to be, hated in some ways in our society. Many women have had the experience of having to work incredibly hard, just to get to the position of not being judged, let alone praised (just ask what it's like to be a mother, or a policewoman). Putting this into perspective can help us not to get lost in our own negativity and difficulties, and to get on with it.

I know for myself that some of these capes can be very seductive. It doesn't mean that this is bad, or that I am bad. But to recognise how one might be feeding a particular cape, or any other cape that makes sense to us and to the women in our lives, involves us in a subversive act that is both personal and political. In a parallel process to the work done in men's behaviour change programs to encourage men to give up certain behaviours (and more fundamentally, ways of being) and to leap towards something more ethical, just and alive, we too might face the struggle of noticing, feeling, giving up and moving (if not leaping) towards highly personal and political change. Perhaps we too need to nurture this movement with both support and accountability.

References

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