

Tri-County Batterer Intervention Provider Network Meeting Minutes

July 1, 2003

Members Present: Chris Huffine (Men's Resource Center), Paula Manley (Manley Interventions), Guruseva Mason, Sandy Bacharach (Cuenta Conmigo), Mai Kayanuma (Men's Resource Center), Sopha Hung (Men's Resource Center), Courtenay Silvergleid (Portland State University)

Minutes by Courtenay Silvergleid

Topic for Today: Classism

Over the years, Tri-County has talked about race, ethnicity and spirituality, but has yet to address the issue of classism. Today is the day!

One member offered that she often deals with classism when men bring it up during group. This member uses the mens' frustrations regarding the class oppression they experience to build empathy for what women experience as a function of sexism.

Another member pointed out that there is a strong relationship between racism and classism. Just as homophobia has a strong element of sexism, racism often has classism embedded within it.

It was pointed out that there is a difference between income and what people think of as their "class". In other words, there is a "class" culture that is not wholly dependent upon and sometimes rather different than income.

Another member suggested that there are lots of class issues related to immigration status, such as legal status, work permits, permanent residency, and language. When you speak English, you have access to more resources. In the schools, kids have been punished for speaking languages other than English. It isn't just about language either, there is also an issue with accents. Different accents invoke different class privileges. European accents are desirable, while Asian accents are looked down upon.

The group then discussed how to define classism. Members agreed that it is not purely economics, but involves values as well. Classism is not just about the judgments and prejudices of mainstream culture. Often within cultures, there is intense judging as well.

One member pointed out that in Western culture, there is the possibility of class mobility. You can be born into a certain "class" culture, and then transition into a "higher class" through education and career advancement. In Asian families, whatever class you are born into defines you for life. In the words of this member, you are "damned for life" if you are born within a certain family.

One member discuss the usefulness of Pablo Friere's Pedagogy of the Oppressed when working with issues related to classism. This member offered that engaging people in dialogue about the things that affect their lives is effective in cutting through class.

This member pointed out that elite class education is based on disengaging people from what is real in life so that you can function as a ruler without needing to be conscious of the impact of what you are doing.

Another member brought up how important it is that providers be sensitive to the different learning styles that people have. If the only way that the men in your programs can establish that they have learned something is by writing, that is a class based criteria. In indigenous cultures, storytelling is more important than writing. Writing tends to be done in isolation. It is not focused on actually "communicating" or sharing with others. People tend to talk with one another in order to experience solidarity. Men in the groups need to experience solidarity. Then as providers, hopefully we can move that solidarity

need to experience solidarity. Then as providers, hopefully we can move that solidarity towards changing systems of dominance.

The group discussed how journals and other written assignments can form a classism. One solution is to have different standards for different people and to offer different levels of help depending on each man's specific needs. Group members agreed that it is important not to require complete sentences or good spelling and to allow men to share their journals verbally.

One member offered that one example of classism that s/he sees sometimes among providers is an unwillingness to recognize that some men have serious financial struggles. Certainly there are men that manipulate and use their impoverishment to avoid taking responsibility for their crimes, however there seems to be a general resistance to acknowledging how much poverty might be impacting men's ability to follow through with court-ordered intervention. Transportation costs, court fees, and fees for service impact men very differently. This member suggested that casual racist or sexist statements would not meet with the same level of acquiescence that classist statements currently enjoy among domestic violence intervention providers.

The group discussed the desire to hold perpetrators accountable without negatively impacting the family. Often it is the women and children that suffer the most when a low income family is required to support intervention costs. The group discussed the possibility of severing the link between accountability and money in order to better acknowledge class differences.

The group also discussed the importance of acknowledging that we all exhibit classism. We need to reduce our shame about our classism so that we can talk openly about it. This is a learning process for all of us. We are going to make mistakes.

Hopefully we can learn from them. The most important thing to do is focus on awareness and self-monitoring. We need to be careful that we don't jump to conclusions about the person in front of us in a group. My assumptions about the world may not be their assumptions. It is helpful to stop and reflect and ask oneself if one's own background is distorting and coloring what one "sees". It is important to try to get a picture of the other person's world-view. Ask questions and attempt to match language between you and the client. It is very intricate. There is no one formula that is appropriate for working with all men.

One issue that the group grappled with was how to work with men from different class cultures. One option is having group members from that same economic group talk with their peers. Another option is to listen carefully and learn language consistent with that class culture.

The group debated whether cultures are intrinsically violent. Some members suggested that cultures do not advocate violence at their core while others suggested that this belief is idealistic and that if you look around most (not all) cultures do engage values and actions of dominance (power and control). When a perpetrator makes a culturally based rationale for his violence it helps to be familiar with the culture. When they bring out the culture key, do you know how to respond? Don't want to get into a power struggle regarding interpreting culture.

An arm wrestling exercise was suggested as a way to highlight the value of collaboration versus competition in groups. Two men are told that for every time they can wrestle their opponent's arm to the table, they will get a reward (e.g., a piece of candy). They have five minutes to see how many times they can do this. In a competitive model each will resist the other, likely leading to more extended matches and few rewards. An alternative solution is for them to cooperatively take turns "pinning" the other's arm to the table, thereby generating multiple rewards for each.

As providers, we can be insensitive to the chaos of poverty. We may not adequately consider the impact of not having a mailing address or a phone. Things cost more when you are poor. One provider offers community service alternatives to paying fees. If a perpetrator would genuinely like to be here, but can't pay, he will do the community service option. Men who are trying to manipulate their system won't want to do the community service. Men with genuine financial barriers will take advantage of alternatives that are made available.

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One member suggested that accountability is different from punitiveness, but that it gets confusing in dominant US culture because we often mask our punitiveness by calling it accountability. “If I’m working with a man it might be that his life is too chaotic to do batterer intervention right now. The way that I deal with that can be more punitive or more focused on accountability. The sentencing option for this person doesn’t work at this time. You are not bad because you are not in a position in your life to do this. I think this is very different, taking an attitude that because you are not complying you are automatically assumed to be willfully refusing.”

In wrapping up the discussion, the following movie suggestion was made:
“People Like Us”, a movie about class in America.
