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Acknowledging, Negotiating and Working with Difference: Domestic Violence and Minoritisation

Sophie Smailes and Khatidja Chantler

Abstract

In this paper we consider our experiences of researching domestic violence in the context of minoritisation. As two members of a multi-ethnic and multi-professionally located team we reflect on our research process and its parallels with the research findings. From this we draw out key implications for counselling practice.

Firstly, issues of ‘race’, gender and power were a significant aspect of our experience within the research team, and are intrinsic to minoritised women’s experience of service responses (and how service responses are informed) – and a powerful, yet often unexplored, dynamic in our counselling practice. Secondly, we discuss the balance between emotional and practical support that is needed by minoritised women experiencing domestic violence – a finding reflected in the team’s processes and also a tension within therapeutic practice. Thirdly we reflect on issues of ‘outsiders and insiders’ in terms of the research process and findings, and the impact and influence of these power roles on counselling practice.

Finally we acknowledge that it is only by retrospectively engaging with each other and our differences that we have been able to explore our parallel processes and consider their implications for counselling practice.

Keywords: research process, minoritisation, domestic violence, parallel process, power, race/cultural anxiety, cultural matching

Introduction

Abuse, including domestic violence features heavily in what clients bring to counselling. Survivors and feminist researchers have long argued about the central role that abuse plays in mental distress (Arnold 1994; 1995, Pembroke 1994). This concern has now also been formally recognised, by the Department of Health, in its national women's mental health strategy, which recognises the links between abuse and mental disease (Dept of Health 2002). Yet, despite the increasing engagement with discourses around the impacts and influence of abuse, one of the key gaps is in regard to the experiences of minoritised women (Aitken and Burman 1999, Burman et al 1998) and this omission is also reflected at a policy level (Chantler 2002). Our study (Batsleer et al 2002) helps to increase understanding of the multi-dimensional nature of abuse by both exploring the common experiences of women, as well as highlighting the minoritised dimensions of abuse, which are rarely acknowledged. We use the term 'minoritised' (rather than minority ethnic group) to highlight that groups do not occupy the position of minority by virtue of some inherent property (e.g. of their culture or religion), but acquire this position as an outcome of a socio-historical process.

We have two key aims for this article. Firstly, we highlight the ways in which 'findings' are generated not only by undertaking what is traditionally thought of as 'research' activity but also by reflecting on our different locations as researchers, as well as the experiences generated during the research process. Secondly, such a reflexive process both draws on counselling and psychotherapy theory and practice,

and offers implications about counselling minoritised women with experiences of domestic violence (see also Burman and Chantler, forthcoming).

We begin this article by briefly describing our study and then move on to introducing ourselves. The latter is important as we acknowledge that the perspectives offered here are ours, sometimes individual, sometimes shared. The paper therefore has our different voices to illustrate the different, and sometimes competing, perspectives about the nature of our enquiry and process. We also acknowledge that different members of the research team may well have alternative interpretations of the research process and so have no desire to present this as representative of everybody's experience. We then move on to draw on three issues of particular relevance to the research and our process: a) the impact of culture, 'race' and gender; b) tensions between task and process and c) 'outsiders' and 'insiders'. We relate these topics to the research process and findings, and elaborate on our (individual and shared) process within the research. Through this process we highlight the implications for counselling and research practice.

Aims of and Summary of Methods Used in the Study

The study, 'From Violence to Independence' was an 11-month project jointly funded by the European Social Fund and the Manchester Metropolitan University (September 2001-July 2002). It sought to identify, model and evaluate support services for African, African-Caribbean, Irish, Jewish and South Asian women living with or escaping domestic violence.

The approach used was qualitative and had three phases:

- a) Thirteen 1:1 organisational interviews (plus 26 secondary contacts). Organisations contacted included those working specifically in the domestic violence field, including minoritised women's refuges, other supporting agencies (e.g. Social Services, Health etc) and minoritised community-based groups.
- b) Twenty-five in-depth 1:1 interviews with survivors from the above cultural backgrounds. Participants were accessed through refuges, other service providers, 'snowballing' and various networks. All participants were unknown by the interviewers. Issues of consent, confidentiality and practicalities like language, childcare, transport and venue were explored prior to all interviews taking place.
- c) Facilitating 3 support groups for women with experiences of domestic violence based on the expressed views of women in b). Participants were primarily self selected from the interviews. Other participants were drawn through further 'snowballing', as well as through our networks with services.

Where permission was given, interviews were taped and transcribed. A thematic approach was used, drawing out parallels and contrasts.

The project team comprised of 7 culturally diverse female staff based within the Women Studies Research Centre of the University. Team members came from varied professional trainings and backgrounds, different institutional positions crossing three departments, and were attached to the project for different amounts of time and were variously funded - all of which contributed to the often difficult team dynamics.

Introducing Ourselves

I (Sophie) am a white, middle class woman and work as a lecturer and researcher and a practising Person Centred counsellor. As a counsellor, I work in two voluntary organisations, in Manchester, UK. My interest and commitment to the work of this research is informed by a number of personal, political and professional factors. Firstly, I am committed to working with women in ways which reflect, and bring to light their lives and realities, acknowledging and validating the multi-layered identities and contexts which mediate women's narratives and experiences. The project also appealed because it is firmly located in issues of minoritisation – highlighting discourses, which locate 'race' in terms of invisibility/visibility discourses, as well as explicitly engaging with the impact and influence of diversity on the delivery, and experience, of health/care. My involvement is also informed by working therapeutically with women who have experienced domestic violence. On a final, and more prosaic note, my motivation is also informed by my academic location – that research and publications play an important and intrinsic part of my role at University.

I (Khatidja) would describe myself as South Asian, and as an independent researcher, trainer, counsellor and supervisor – and a co-director in relation to this project. My interest in research arises from a practitioner base spanning health and social care work in both the statutory and voluntary sector in the UK. In the course of my working experience, one of my persistent observations has been the marginalisation of certain groups of people within service development and provision. Hence as John McCleod argues in relation to counselling and psychotherapy:

On the whole, the theory and practice of counselling and psychotherapy have served the dominant groups in society and largely ignored the problems of people who are discriminated against. (1993:108).

Even where organisations make attempts to redress such inequalities, they are frequently overwhelmed both by the complexity of initiating and sustaining coherent changes, as well as by their own anxieties, particularly in relation to ‘race’ (see Chantler et al 2001). So for me (Khatidja), involvement in research is also a political intervention, stemming from my gender, cultural and class locations and these factors influenced my motivation in this project.

Topic 1 : ‘Race’, Culture and Gender

I (Sophie) found my experiences of working within the research team reflected processes, which go on in the outside world. Hence I was monitoring my talk, responses, and feelings for, among other things, fear of getting it wrong or being experienced as culturally/racially insensitive. Race/culture anxiety is well founded as, contextually we live in a society, which allocates meaning, value and power to different sections of society, based, on perceived racial, cultural, class and gender norms. As part of this society we can, and do both consciously/unconsciously, intentionally/unintentionally, engage with notions of racism, sexism, classism etc - and as a consequence, may well be taking such ‘baggage’ with us, and (un)knowingly recreating research and counselling relationships based on racist/sexist/classist forms. In such a climate majoritised and minoritised people have a stock of experiences with which to inform and measure our understandings and experiences. These can serve to highlight inequities where there were believed to be none, and very occasionally inform perceptions of

discrimination where there is none. Thus, fear of getting it wrong can mediate our responses and, indeed, our understanding while at the same time potentially be informed by narrow assumptions and stereotypes. Our research findings highlight how militating discourses of ‘political correctness’ can silence and dis-enable the crucial debates and discussions, which are so necessary to engage constructively with issues of culture, ‘race’ and gender.

Considering the subject matter and composition of the research team, I also made assumptions that, as a group of women working together, it would (and indeed should) be a co-operative and collaborative process where issues of power and roles would not be a particular relevance! Our different roles within the research and the way we were brought in, our academic/professional locations and our personal/cultural backgrounds all played a part in the process of the research team – multiple identities and positionings which, as Bhavani & Phoenix (1994) discuss, are fluid, often conflictual and responsive to contextual settings. Our research findings paralleled these assumptions of homogeneity where some organisations would take a ‘blanket approach’ in providing services to women. So unless differences were made explicit (often by the woman) then everyone was treated the same. However, treating ‘everyone the same’ decontextualises, in this case, minoritised women’s political, social, cultural and religious realities as being irrelevant – and negates implicit notions of power and invisibility between minoritised and dominant groups (Lewis 1998).

These assumptions can include the notion of universality in terms of worldviews and meanings (Lyddon 1998) – that what is understood, as ‘normative’ to one person will be the same for another person. Therefore:

cultural norms themselves [*are*] contested and changing [*and*] represent flexible guidelines within which behaviour is negotiated rather than an ‘independent variable’ which is solely responsible for determining behaviour” (Ahmad, 1996 : 215).

At the same time not to acknowledge the material, emotional and cognitive impact and influence of culture would be to negate its very real influence on our behaviour and beliefs (Culley, 2000).

My (Khatidja) locations as both a co-director of the research project and a South Asian woman seemed to transgress some deeply held beliefs about what my place is or should be. Being positioned as both powerful (job role) and passive (stereotype attributed to Asian women) presented many challenges that manifested themselves in complex ways. Perhaps inevitably because of these, I (more so than my fellow co-director) became the container for difficult and painful emotions, particularly, anger. Differences between team members were not openly addressed and perhaps were not seen to be necessary at the beginning of the project – in the interests of collaborative working, establishing trust and creating a safe space. No doubt much of this was also informed by another set of (unspoken) assumptions that as women committed to working on this project, we would have few differences between us and that we would be able to iron them out relatively easily (see also Burman and Chantler, forthcoming).

However, when I needed to draw on the authority invested in my job role this proved problematic. An example of this was in relation to me being a persistent advocate for South Asian specific group work when it appeared that this work was going to be jeopardised. This closely reflects what happens in services' responses to South Asian women, frequently characterised by indifference, lack of engagement, being overwhelmed by the practical difficulties of organising and delivering services in more than one language, and fears and anxieties about differences in culture. Whilst recognising the tight time scale of the project, for me, the research provided opportunities to do things differently, not only to highlight the difficulties of organising such a group, but also to make available time and space to think and act creatively to overcome some of these obstacles. Whereas my commitment was driven from a political base, paradoxically, it was perceived by some members of the research team as being managerial, bureaucratic and output driven.

Interestingly, in terms of the dynamics of 'race', my main support came from my fellow co-director, a white Jewish woman - rather than the other Black researchers in the group. Hence notions of 'cultural matching' which feature so markedly in the conceptualisation and design of services need to be used with some caution (Burman et al, 1998; Chantler et al, 2001).

We highlight these awkward points in our research process to illustrate the learning from this for our counselling practice. We elaborate on three key lessons. Firstly, exploring client preferences inevitably means addressing differences in culture/identity within counselling relationships and working with its implications. Central to this process is an active involvement with issues of power relations. For

person-centred counsellors, the concepts of racialised and gendered conditions of worth, among others, may be useful in considering how our own identities impact on our work with clients (Chantler (in press), Shafi 1998). Typically, this is uncomfortable terrain, as it risks bringing to the surface stereotypes within counselling relationships of ‘race’, gender and domestic violence. Within some of our interview material, both from survivors’ and workers’ perspectives, it was clear that stereotypes abound. An example of this was where domestic violence was thought to occur within specific sections of minoritised communities. The depositing of domestic violence, for instance, on Orthodox Jewish communities and Irish Travellers not only pathologised these sections of Jewish and Irish communities, but can also lead to abandoning any hope for the women, and ourselves, and/or a normative acceptance of this violence. Hence an awareness and engagement with our own beliefs are crucial to working effectively in this area.

Secondly, it may be the case that in client-led therapy, we have anxieties associated with raising issues that the client may not have taken the lead in articulating. These concerns are not irrelevant to our work as in essence our role is to work with the client’s internal frame of reference, which, in this case, may mean that ‘differences’ and diversity are not explicitly voiced or considered. However, as a key aspect of therapy is equally about attending to the unspoken in a sensitive and timely way, we would argue that ‘differences’ form an important part of the unspoken and are therefore a legitimate (and necessary) area of exploration.

Thirdly then, what are the costs of silencing difference? Our research experience indicates that earlier attention to our team differences may well have

facilitated a speedier resolution to conflicts by creating an environment where it was possible to discuss both similarities and differences. While we were much more able to discuss issues around difference with our research participants, and steering group, as a research team, we seemed less inclined to engage with our own differences. Our assumptions of a common political commitment to working with (minoritised) women, (i.e. our similarities), possibly lulled us into a false sense of security. Similarly, in a counselling relationship a common commitment with the client, to their well-being and process may also result in a silencing of contextual differences. Thus, as with the research team a failure to attend to difference not only silences a potentially fruitful exploration both for counsellor and client, but also serves to sediment prevailing power relations.

Topic 2: Task and Process : Practical versus Emotional

Throughout the research, both in terms of our own process and our contact with services, particularly domestic violence services, we were left in no doubt about the enormous volume of work involved in supporting (minoritised) women with experiences of domestic violence. Often this was conducted without adequate resourcing, or indeed without proper support to staff.

Domestic violence services can be pre-occupied with task-focused responses e.g. housing, finances, education which, while absolutely vital to a woman's move to independence, can overlook her emotional experiences. This gap was reflected in some of the survivor accounts where women were expected to somehow manage the enormous emotional upheaval in relation to the practical 'setting up home'

independently of their abuse/r' with limited resources, and secondly put aside the complex and powerful feelings generated by their abuse. At the same time it is also important to note that many survivors were very satisfied with the service they received, both practically and emotionally. However, one key area of practical support that on the whole, seemed to be poorly dealt with was immigration. For some women their immigration status meant that it was very difficult to access any services, including the very basic requirement of a 'safe' space within a refuge. Many women become trapped in abusive relationships if their immigration status means they have 'no recourse to public funds'. As refuges rents are paid for via the public purse, women with no entitlement to public funds are frequently turned away from refuge and other welfare services. Notwithstanding this, the focus on practical interventions helps organisations manage the overwhelming nature of survivors' experiences.

Here we noticed a striking parallel process between the research team and our findings. Like the organisations we were researching, the research team had to focus on the tasks to complete the research project within a very tight time scale. In doing so, it often felt that there was not sufficient time to process the feelings generated by the research, particularly at the time when researchers were interviewing survivors and thinking about setting up the group work. This was despite our endeavours to attend to process and emotional responses by providing space within the research team for discussion, as well as non-managerial supervision. Members of the team accessed support in a variety of ways, as support was acknowledged as both necessary and helpful to the research process. Within this, emotional responses to interview material as well as to other aspects of the research process were valued as a significant contributor to reflexive practice. The frequently painful nature of these

emotional responses was often a challenging and uncomfortable experience within the research team. These difficulties further emphasise the complex nature of abuse and the messiness of working with both emotional processes and practical necessities.

Our research clearly demonstrated the need to attend to both the practical and the emotional needs of women experiencing domestic violence (Batsleer et al 2002). Practical issues such as finance, housing, jobs, transport, safety and security, health and childcare responsibilities have an impact on our clients' well being. While we can support our clients' emotional responses – we also have to work with the unremitting powerlessness and poverty in many women's lives. To ignore this is to ignore the individual's frame of reference and to diminish their reality. Paying attention to racial, social, economic, cultural and political contexts acknowledges that we are part of a racially, sexually, materially and culturally oppressive society and hence not only our clients' but also our own subjectivities are informed by these contexts (Lyddon 1998, Guillaumin 1995, Pope-Davis & Liu 1998). These form part of the counselling relationship's process and we believe it is of central importance, to our counselling (and research) practice, to pay attention to the implications of our clients' (our participants') and our own locations, and to the power dynamics inherent in both counselling and research relationships.

As our study illustrated, paying attention to practical interventions, such as free childcare, transport, and translators enormously facilitated women's choices to access our group work, as did working explicitly with cultural and religious beliefs. It is important to note that we are not presenting the groups we worked with as homogeneous communities with replicable language needs, and/or cultural and

religious allegiances. Rather we recognised the possibility of need and, in consultation with the women, worked with responding to their contextual realities.

Topic 3: Insiders/Outsiders

As a research team we worked very closely with one another and met regularly. In the process of forming the 3 support groups a number of difficulties were encountered which made the possibility of developing a South Asian women's group unlikely. It was then that another worker was brought into the research team to help meet our research findings, which indicated that some South Asian women would like such a group. The bringing in of a perceived 'outsider' into our team was because, at some level, we were unable to meet this need. I (Sophie), found this a difficult process, because I felt voiceless and powerless and, as a consequence, inadequate and resentful. Interestingly, I feel that this was reflected in our research, both from an organisational view where difficulties in meeting needs are hard to acknowledge and can 'freeze' further action, but also in terms of the distress of not being able to meet needs (Warshaw 1994). Informing these difficulties was that the research team was in a particularly 'discordant' stage in terms of communication and process – further exacerbating the need to work together. When two further 'outsiders' were brought in at a later stage, feelings of co-ownership and acceptance had moved on and I, for one, no longer felt threatened by this notion of outsiders!

Whilst recognising the discomfort of the research team about introducing an 'outsider', I (Khatidja) had an alternative interpretation of the discomfort. It seemed that much of the research team's discomfort and anxiety mirrored the situations of women and children experiencing domestic violence. Domestic violence is

characterised by secrecy, a sense of failure and the shame of bringing in outsiders. All these emotions were present in the research team, and were informed by feelings of having failed the group/family, being displaced, and the difficulty in letting go of ‘ownership’ – whilst at the same time experiencing difficulties/anxieties in setting up the group work as a whole. Staying with this ambivalence would have meant that the South Asian group would almost certainly not have been set up. A practical way forward was to bring in additional resources (in the form of an ‘outsider’). It was also an important, if difficult, challenge to shift the ambivalence to try and secure the establishment of the South Asian group. One interpretation is that my focus was about ensuring that the research remit was delivered and that this dictated the process. Whilst I would acknowledge that it was important to me to meet our research objectives, this was also influenced by a politics to model group work for those groups whom traditionally find it hardest to access services.

In considering the implications for counselling practice, as counsellors, by our very nature we are outsiders, and that in itself can be part of our strength. Ideally, women will have a choice of with whom to work, when and where. So the need to provide women with a choice of whether to work with a South Asian group and/or a ‘mixed’ group was the impetus behind bringing in the ‘outsider’. Hence we learn that in order to meet our clients’ needs we might need to refer them on to someone who is better placed to support them. The risk here is (paralleled in our research), that as soon as we feel overwhelmed or ‘deskilled’ we might be tempted to refer on. The bringing in of an ‘outsider’ to our research project was not about our failings but rather about linking in with known resources, which were better placed to meet the

needs of the women. So a balance of working through the difficulty, and, appropriately referring on to another worker is an integral part of our work as counsellors – knowing our limitations and boundaries – and ideally being able to communicate them.

As we have previously discussed in an ideal world clients should have a choice of counsellors. What limits this choice is the diversity of available counsellors as well as money, transport, childcare, access, language and immigration status. We worked hard to provide women with the choice of culturally specific, and non-specific groups and acknowledge that this is incredibly hard work requiring a proactive, political commitment to issues of equality.

The implications of our study, for counselling relationships, is that being transparent with ourselves, and the clients, about differences, facilitates our work with minoritised clients. If culturally and religiously we assume the ‘outsider’ position we must be able to work with the feelings that this generates – both within the counselling relationship as well as in supervision. What assumptions and stereotypes are we working with? What are our fears and anxieties both about working across differences as well as issues of domestic violence? How are the power dynamics impacting on the process of the counselling? We should note here, that the corresponding position of ‘insider’, that is, a counsellor with a similar cultural background, and/or with personal experiences of domestic violence is just as needful of scrutiny, for it too has a set of assumptions, which influence our practice. So we need not automatically assume that cultural matching (Burman et al 1998, Shafi 1998,

Netto et al 2001) is always the only desired model – confirmed by the women themselves.

Concluding comments

Our culturally diverse research team struggled to make explicit, and to explore, issues of diversity within the research group. Our retrospective reflections have had the added benefit of providing an opportunity to understand more fully each other's perspectives. Significant themes emerged which present challenges to 'working together' – including the messiness of attempting to do anti-racist, feminist research. Central themes from our research findings and process, which have relevance for research, counselling and psychotherapeutic practices, include issues of 'race', culture and gender; task and process, and insiders/ outsiders.

First, our research highlights the need to proactively engage with issues of 'race', culture and gender, and to develop fluency about the implications of our own structural locations in counselling and research relationships. Failure to do so, can contribute to underlying dynamics within the relationship remaining unexplored with negative consequences. Neither can we 'shift' this issue onto minoritised counsellors and researchers in a naive form of 'cultural matching'. We need to challenge notions of cultural matching as an assumed preference for clients/participants, whilst at the same time respecting the enormous value of culturally specific organisations (Batsleer et al 2002). Indeed our research demonstrated the need for both sorts of provisions and interventions as indicated by some of the research participants who used both the culturally specific group work as well as the 'mixed' provision. What this also

highlights is the importance of choice, and the need for counsellor preference to rest with clients, where possible.

Second, just as many domestic violence services privileged practical concerns over emotional concerns, counselling and psychotherapy traditionally privileges emotional concerns. Our findings clearly indicate the need to work with both, to see the inter-connection between the two, rather than the compartmentalisation into two discrete categories. Such a ‘splitting’ is unlikely to benefit clients who are struggling with practical and material realities and who need emotional support. For instance working with a woman who has no recourse to public funds because of her immigration status, who is in an abusive relationship and has little access to practical support can be so overwhelming that we may overlook or restrict the interconnected nature of the practical and emotional. The temptation here could be to prioritise one aspect over another e.g. going into rescue mode, growing impatient or avoiding the story all together. As counsellors, giving a congruent voice to the overwhelmingness of the encounter, the wanting the story to stop, the distress of staying and being unable to leave, the feelings of helplessness and of wanting to respond in terms of focusing on practical ‘making it better’ issues will potentially validate our client’s own experiences.

Third, the shame involved in recruiting ‘outsiders’ to our research team was a crucial lesson. It highlighted just how difficult it is to communicate and explore our own limitations and differences, and to work with them. It would have been far easier to project our difficulties on to the impossibilities of working with difference – both in

practical and emotional terms, thus abandoning the South Asian women's group. Challenging this resulted in an appropriate extension of our research team, which was then better placed to meet our research and political objectives. For counsellors, this requires a willingness to enter into the client's world, no matter how uncomfortable or 'alien'. Frames of references are informed by gender, race, culture, class, sexuality and so on – to take the outsider/insider role of any of these identities is to assume monolithic realities without exploring and giving space to unique and individual responses.

These themes resonate with counselling and research practice, illustrating how the wider political context impacts on what can be told and heard. They also highlight the centrality of interfaces between culture, class, gender and abuse and the necessity of opening up the debates around how we as researchers, and counsellors, engage with these issues.

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