

Working With Men

In this section, four men write briefly about their work with men both individually and in groups. In the last few years a need for a particular focus on working with men has been more widely recognised and responded to. This article presents something about the current focus and experience in this one area.

Paul Baakman works in private practice as a psychotherapist in Christchurch and has passed his practical assessment as a psychodramatist.

Brendon Cartmel works as a consultant to organisations, works part-time in private practice and is an advanced trainee in Melbourne.

Andrew Gunner is a social worker working in a community centre and is an advanced trainee in Melbourne.

Peter Howie works at Macquarie House in Brisbane as a group worker and is an advanced trainee in psychodrama.





Balloons, Passengers and Eunuchs

by Paul Baakman

This article reflects some of my ideas around working with men. I argue for a positive view of masculinity. In my view this is a prerequisite for any man who wants to live a life other than that of the *Melancholic Robot*.

The man in the chair across from me is talking about his life. He tells me he gets very angry. He also tells me he no longer hits out ... he now hits himself and then feels better. I think of my friend's husband who recently killed himself. What has made these men so desperate and so violent? There is no single, simple answer, but what I do know is that both these men experienced an all-pervading alienation.

In my work as a psychotherapist I make the following observations: There is one group of men that for the purpose of this article I will call the *Overinflated Balloons*. These men espouse many of the traditional values surrounding work, relationships, and life in general. When they do appear in therapy it is often with reluctance, suspicion, and varying degrees of pressure from their partner. They are unable to mirror or role reverse with their partner, and behave in a defensive and myopic manner. They follow in the footsteps of their fathers, fearing vulnerability, intimacy and loss of control, and are addicted to pursuing sport or career.

Like a balloon in a detached daze, they float high above life.

The harshness of early pioneering life as well as enduring the unspeakable cruelties of several wars have contributed to this culture coming about in New Zealand and Australia.

Another group of men I will call the *Stranded Passengers*. Even though their journey has only just started they *feel* as though it has come to an abrupt halt. This feeling may have been brought about by a severe shock, like the ending of a primary relationship, the loss of job or career, or any other crisis that registers significantly on their personal Richter-scale. The shake-up leads to a wake-up.

The ensuing loss of faith in the old values and beliefs entails disorientation and a deep despair for which they may not have the language to express. They are "emotionally illiterate".

They may suddenly appear able to reverse roles with their partner, but seldom grasp the essence. They are quick to make any promise if only she would have him back. These are the pseudo-adjustments, brought about by the "false self" out of fear of standing alone.

There is a third group of men I call the *Voluntary Eunuchs*. These men are often younger, and always

kind, blind and naive. They feel attracted to anything claiming to herald the New Age, may go as far as to define themselves as "feminist" and, in their abhorrence of their own gender, go through life filled with shame that goes to the core. As such, they are unable to come to decisions, leave alone stick to them. They divide the world in "O.K." and "not O.K." and are ready to carry the banner for a victim or cause. Even if they are aware of an "inner truth", they do not value this as much as peace and niceness.

They are bewildered that, despite all the effort, they do not feel respected.

What all these men have in common is:

- the absence of a self-aware and emotionally available father,
- a self-important grandiose air, and when this fails: a deep depression and shame about being male,
- emotional isolation, especially from other men.

When these men take the plunge in therapy's waters it is essential that the therapist is somebody who feels "male energy" in essence is not only positive, but essential to any real change.

As a therapist and a man myself I remember the myriad of fine things men have initiated and brought about. I keep in mind (on a psychological level anyway) no-one chooses their gender, and that most people really do the best they can within the framework of the culture. And I keep seeing what there is to be gained by men who wish to renovate their role repertoire.

If, however, I see men only as Persecutors (and thus women only as Victims) I do a gross disservice, and have become disrespectful, if not harmful, to both.

Those who work with men can help to bring about a culture in which men are neither unjustly elevated, nor cruelly judged, but regarded with the respect, dignity and love all people require in order to become a force for good in the world.

Working with psychodrama I have found certain actions to lead somewhere positive.

In a typical session I may ask a man to concretise the alienated aspect of the self. I then talk with him in order to bring about a positive tele between him and his alienated self. At times this does not come about easily; there may be judgement and derision, or even worse, nothing at all.

At all times I am clearly and consistently "on the side" of the alienated self, and ask the man to form an alliance with me so that we may work together to bring about something life-giving to the alienated self.

I have found that following on from this a man experiences hope and energy. In further psychodramatic work he may choose a cushion to be his alienated self, and hold him, and in the role reversal experience being held. Men who do not have sufficient imaginative powers may need to do this work in a group where there are real bodies around, and the warm-up is brought about by group process.

When it comes to control of violent impulses some men will talk in gruff and rough ways to the self; "You behave you little bastard, or else!" Often this is how they were talked to as children, and so this is a sign of ugly introjects rearing their head! The man may be encouraged to find firm and loving roles through which to exercise impulse-control.

Men's groups can be an important step in a man's new start, and so can

mixed groups. A change in his current social atom is often required in order to have new roles encouraged and nurtured.

Men who continue this development do away with old roles dominated by unrecognised dependence, aggression or shame. The new roles enable true autonomy and intimacy to grow.



Men's Business *An Application of Role Training*

by Brendon Cartmel

Men's Business is my role training and task group for men who want to come to appreciate and to express their masculinity in new and satisfactory ways.

The initial attendants were people who knew me through a local church, community service centre and as a friend. The local papers were not responsive to free-press. Advertising is hard work. An encounter.

The coincidence of the Men's Movement literature (including Robert Bly and "Men's Circle" by Klaus Kauffman) and my development as a Role Trainer were the inspiration for establishing *Men's Business*.

The men are typically not interested in reading or ideas, find it difficult to talk in a group but are 100% earnest and honest in wanting to overcome their awkwardness in relating and ease the pain of isolation.

Women, wives and partners are jealous of the attention the group gives the men but demand their man attend and achieve results. Role Training provides direct application of learning and the men are always proud of their "homework" (tryouts of new behaviour).

Encouraging evidence is emerging of the Men's movement staying around and making an impact. I think it will be years before men generally have enough resolve to independently work at relating without deferring to or blaming women when in a mixed group. On systemic reflection maybe this should read: "years before women are confident enough to coach rather than push men to feel."



Men and Violence Group

by Andrew Gunner

Here I present an approach towards domestic violence that I used while running a group for men who were concerned about their domestic violence. I have also found this useful myself in counselling women involved in violent relationships.

I think that a key underdeveloped role in domestic violence is the Firm Limit Setter: "This violence is going to stop now". This role is often lacking in the man, woman, children, extended family and in the professional network. In endeavouring to act against the violence while working with domestic violence, I have all too often been drawn into speaking against the violent man. Of course this will alienate the man, but it can also alienate the woman who is loyal to her family.

I find it helpful to think that an aggressor is doing violence to himself each time he strikes. Commonly a man will strike his woman partner and then rationalise his behaviour. If he denies it happened at all he is wiping his own mind. If he denies his responsibility for the violence he is reinforcing his opinion of himself as "not powerful" in his own family. He is also developing a violent culture in which he has to live. This means that each time he strikes his partner, he is also doing violence to himself.

I presented this (point of view) in the group and encouraged the men to take responsibility for their own

violence in various ways including "charging themselves with assault". Some of the men thought this was over the top, but one man surprised us all. He said he had tried reporting himself to the police, but that the police would not listen.

This approach presents aspects of domestic violence, eg the "enraged beater" or the "public tongue lasher", as a problem for the man as well as for the woman. It encourages the aggressor to take responsibility himself, or (and) to understand other people who take action against the violence. It presents acting against the violence by legal proceedings as being in the long term interest of the aggressor. This encourages the development of the role of the Firm Limit Setter: "This violence is stopping now".



Men's Groups, Mens Groups, Mens' Groups

by Peter Howie

'What do I do? I've been a psychodrama student for 5 years. I've been a property developer for chris's sake. I'm not a psychologist, family health worker, teacher, psychiatrist, community development officer, psychoanalyst, group leader, etc. I don't work in the area and never have. Good thing I'm not a butcher! How do I get my foot in the door? I'm required to run some 80 supervised sessions for certification. For some people that would be a month or two's regular work. For me!!!'

Miranda suggested I run a personal development group for men. She thought I'd be a good role model and there weren't many such groups around. The idea seeped into my consciousness.

'Yes, I could do this. Perhaps? (PAUSE) Yes? (PAUSE) O.K. (GULP).'

The idea of running a men's group appealed to me. All the personal development and training groups that I had been in, men were outnumbered. Sometimes I had been the only male.

I speculated that the women outnumbering the men might:

Firstly, lead to a particular type of warm up in the groups which could mitigate against the men's needs.

Secondly, men knowing that this

is the makeup of many groups, could be discouraged from coming.

Thirdly, I knew that there were precious few such groups being run. I wasn't going to be competing with any existing groups, or entrenched interests.

So I picked a format, weekly evenings for 6 weeks, wrote up a flier and began to talk to people. I was given great encouragement by all the people I met. Many counselling people responded like this was what they'd all been waiting for. 'Someone to work with these problematic men'. Community workers, health workers, friends, neighbours, directors of community centres all gave me strong and friendly encouragement.

And so it happened. Six men booked and turned up for the first evening.

And my first discovery with the men's group. Men want to talk. Get 'em going and they can't be stopped. I know this can also be seen as flight behaviour. However I used it as a great group centred warm up. Put them in the room and watch them go. So much is revealed in the discussions. With a bit of judicious steering and appropriate resistances great sessions were had.

And are they different from groups with women? I can't say.

Difficulties with expression, with intimacy, with self esteem are not gender issues. They are individual issues. However I do know that none of these men would have come if not for it being a **men's group**. Their own needs and expectations and those of mine met in such a manner to produce an effective and enlivening group. Will I do it again? You bet!