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A Narrative Approach to Group Work with Men Who Batter

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A narrative approach to group work with men who batter is presented with case examples. The approach is based in feminist and constructionist theory and seeks to expose and undermine the effects of patriarchal discourse in the lives and relationships of group members. The approach emphasizes an understanding of gender discourse, taking responsibility for actions, and exploring new definitional possibilities for participants and their relationships. The techniques of radical listening, the principle of least contest, breaking the allure of male entitlement and its effects, and cocreating a new male way of being are discussed with case examples.

KEYWORDS *narrative practice, male group work, feminist practice, batterer group work*

It started up with a tiff, and then she said something hurtful . . . and I suppose I said some pretty critical things about her, just to defend myself, and . . . she got terribly angry and lost control and screamed at me, and I hate that. I sort of pushed her to stop her screaming, and she clawed my face, see, she made quite a mark on me, God, it still hurts. I felt quite frightened, and I just hit her to make it stop. I can't stand screaming and . . . she was yelling . . . and saying awful things . . . and I just hit her with my hand to stop the hysterics, but she went on coming at me and coming at me, and then I picked up the poker from the fireplace just to hold it between us as a barrier, and just at that moment she jerked her head down . . . and met the poker with a ghastly crack—oh, God—of course I didn't mean to hit her, I mean I didn't hit her—and then she

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went down on the floor and she was so bloody quiet lying there with her eyes closed (Arnold Baffin, quoted in Murdoch, 1973, pp. 36–37)

Once each week a group of 10 men, court ordered into therapy for battering their female partners, meet with a social worker who uses narrative practices to help them deconstruct cultural discourse about gender and power and construct alternative, more satisfying, nonviolent ways of being with the women in their lives. Consistent with feminist analysis of male violence against women, the patriarchal infrastructure, “the system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women” (Walby, 1990, p. 20) is indicted, as are cultural discourses codified in laws and official practices (MacKinnon, 1994) that support and reproduce it. Narrative social work invites the men to explore male power, privilege, and entitlement and to examine the influence of these on their personal and interpersonal behavior. This article offers a description of the narrative approach used in the counselling of male batterers. Although names have been changed to preserve anonymity, accurate examples are given to support these descriptions. The article begins with a brief overview of the common group approaches of practice used with male batterers, followed by a description of a narrative approach and examples of its use in a male batterers’ group.

COMMON GROUP APPROACHES UTILIZED BY MEN WHO BATTER

Male battering of their partners was not recognized as a problem until the battered women’s movement of the 1970s brought it to mainstream attention (Caesar & Hamberger, 1989; Mederos, 1999; Pleck, 1987). In the mid-1970s group counseling programs for abusive men were developed in response to the rising awareness of battering as a problem. Groups such as Raven, the Domestic Abuse Project, and Emerge were formed to offer specialized services to male abusers and their partners. These programs focused primarily on the relationship between batterer and partner, and a common framework for counseling abusive men emerged: (1) examine belief systems that underlie abusive conduct, (2) identify and define controlling behaviors, (3) develop an awareness of the effects of violence, (4) teach alternatives to controlling behaviors, and (5) maintain contact with victims of violence to ascertain the offender’s level of violence and to provide referrals and support to battered women (Mederos, 1999).

By the early 1980s through practice experience with male abusers, intervention programs matured. Models developed during this period can be divided into three main conceptual approaches: feminist, cognitive-behavioral, and family-systems (Caesar & Hamberger, 1989; Gondolf, 1997; Pirog-Good & Stets-Kealey, 1985; Rosenbaum, 2002).

Feminist-based interventions are built on two premises of male battering. First, male battering is a chosen act with the distinct purpose of controlling woman partners, and the act is coercive in nature. Second, its purpose is to establish and keep a hierarchical relationship through intimidation and control via the use of power (Adams, 1988; Dobash & Dobash, 1979, 1999). The intentional use of power to control women is manifested in physical abuse but is reinforced by other forms of control such as psychological abuse (Adams, 1988; Henley, 1971), economic abuse (Walker, 1999), domestic abuse (Mederos, 1999), and social isolation (Martin, 1976; Pagelow, 1981; Schechter, 1982; Walker, 1984).

Feminist-based interventions, like other approaches, are heavily influenced by social learning theory that maintains that male violence is ingrained in society and is learned and subsequently reinforced via experience and observation (Bandura, 1977; Dobash & Dobash, 1999; Edleson, Miller, & Stone, 1983; Kanfer & Phillips, 1970; Novaco, 1978; Staats, 1963). Based on these premises, feminist-based group programs educate the male abuser about the long and short term effects of abuse, confront his minimization of abusive actions, provide education on forms of abuse and intimidation, and support the male in his effort to change. The Duluth model (Pence & Paymar, 1993) is perhaps the most well known feminist-based model and holds at its central core the principle that abusive men have a belief system that supports and obscures their violent behavior and that this belief system is acquired from a patriarchal society. Central components of this practice include the Power and Control Wheel (Pence & Paymar, 1993) and the Equality Wheel (Pence & Paymar, 1993) that are examined and related to the individual's relational experiences.

Cognitive-behavioral interventions, like feminist-based interventions, are based in social learning theory but in a modified form known as social behaviorism (Hamberger & Lohr, 1989; Staats 1968, 1975). The cognitive approach places less emphasis on sociocultural and political norms as the cause for battering and instead emphasizes cognitive distortions and situational automatic thoughts as the key components of specific instances of battering, with the cognitive process being covert components and violent acts being overt components of battering (Hamberger, 1997). Although a full overview of cognitive-behavioral approaches is beyond the scope of this article, the general approach lies in undoing language conditioning by retraining the abuser to control and manage the effects of verbal links (concepts) and the emotional, verbal, and behavioral responses that result from them. This involves exploring an individual's emotional-motivational repertoire, verbal-motor repertoire, and language-cognitive repertoire via assertiveness training, relaxation training, and stress inoculation (Novaco, 1975, 1978). Many of these approaches were adapted from Meichenbaum (1977), rational emotive therapy (Edleson et al., 1983; Ellis, 1970), and problem-solving treatment (D'Zurilla & Goldfried, 1971) among others.

Family-systems approaches maintain that the primary influences in relational education is the family, thus it is believed that in an abusive family, violence is taught and learned as a normal way of being. The abusive family is understood to be locked in a cycle of violence in which each member plays revolving roles of victim and victimizer (Rosenbaum, 2002). Walker (1979, 1999) maintained that the primary abusive relationship passes through a three-phase cycle. The first being the tension phase, second the violent episode, and third the reconciliation or honeymoon period. Intervention in this model is done with both partners and centers on first-order and second-order changes (Watzlawick, 1974). First-order changes involve the realization that both partners can choose to interact without taking on the learned roles of victim and victimizer. Second-order changes involve a change in the power balance of the relationship centered on communication and control between partners. This comes through awareness of the family system, interaction of all members and listening, and giving honest feedback to one another (Satir, 1972).

The theory of restraint or negative explanation (Bateson 1972, 1979; Jenkins, 1993) is a fourth, and less traditional, approach to working with male abusers. This approach rests on the assumption that males will relate nonabusively with others, unless restrained from doing so. "Restraints are traditions, habits, and beliefs which influence the ways that abusive males make sense of and participate in the world" (Jenkins, 1993, p. 32). Intervention involves an exploration into these personal restraints to remove them from the abuser's life effectively freeing him to interact with others in nonviolent ways.

A discussion of the evidence of effectiveness of the various group approaches reviewed, though important, cannot be encompassed in this article. There are ongoing debates regarding what factors contribute to change, and there is considerable evidence that all methods intended to be therapeutic are equivalent (Hall, 2008). For a thorough review of the current debate regarding relative effectiveness of various therapeutic approaches, including relational factors contributing to change, ways in which approaches can be studied, and whether approaches designed to be therapeutic are equivalent or nonequivalent please see Wampold (2001).

NARRATIVE SOCIAL GROUP WORK PRACTICE WITH MEN WHO BATTER

Narrative practice with men who batter their female partners is based on postmodern constructionist theory and seeks to assist men in exploring the effects of male power, privilege, and entitlement on their personal behavior, in their relationships and in society as a whole. The narrative approach was originated by White and Epstein (1990) and has been applied

to varying populations (Diamond, 2002; Monk, Winslade, & Sinclair, 2007; Winslade & Monk, 2006, 2008), including various groups (Pollio, 2001; Wood & Roche, 2001). The goals of a narrative approach with male batterers is to expose and isolate the requirements of the patriarchy for both genders, show the cost of these requirements, and invite the male abuser to freely choose if he wishes to reject male entitlement's rules for himself, his partner, and their relationship. The ultimate focus of this practice is for men to coauthor new ways of being that are based on self-definitional choice, independent of patriarchal requirements, which lead to respect of all women and partner equality in intimate relationships. Narrative practice with men who batter is organized by four major practice principles: (1) radical listening, (2) the principle of least contest, (3) breaking the allure of male entitlement and its affects, and (4) cocreating a new male way of being.

The Principle of Radical Listening

Radical listening involves taking a respectful, accepting, authenticating, non-judgmental stance with clients (Weingarten, 1992). This respectful stance is achieved when working with abusive males via four processes: (1) listening with planned emptiness (Middleman & Wood, 1990; Wood & Tully, 2006), (2) attentive listening, (3) relentless curiosity and optimism (Freedman & Combs, 1996), and (4) language analysis.

Listening with planned emptiness. This is a skill in which the worker attempts to clear the mind of preconceived ideas concerning men and male abusers to cultivate a mental area in which to learn about the male from his perspective. "This means staying open, even in one's area of expertise, to the vast realms that may be unimaginable. 'Why not?' becomes as important as 'Why?'" (Middleman & Wood, 1990, p. 25). A mental frame is constructed where undeveloped ideas and partial stories of life experience can exist like puzzle pieces. Ambiguity is accepted; events that exist free from judicious reasoning collect in the frame and may fit together for the client later when a new angle is explored and the pieces are seen through a different light. Listening with planned emptiness serves two purposes, it allows group members the freedom to explore life events openly, and the approach counters therapeutic bias.

Attentive listening. Attentive listening involves utilizing nonverbal communication and short phrases that express to clients that they are being understood and that their stories are important enough to be heard. It represents active, responsive listening that reassures the listener and encourages open conversation.

Relentless curiosity and optimism. This is a state in which the worker is genuinely interested in understanding and clarifying the male abuser's

perception of his world—his strengths, challenges, limitations, and boundaries. Curiosity is of particular importance when exploring the male abuser's understanding of gender roles and the way he believes he must act and function in society as a male and the rules he believes his partner must follow as a female. The worker is also optimistic and believes wholeheartedly that change can occur. With infinite patience, he asks question after question, inquiring into the details that elaborate, explicate, and make vivid the narratives group members offer in pieces, over time.

Attunement to client language. Attunement to client language is based on the postmodernist concept that truth is a social construct and that language is not merely created from thought but also affects thought (Gergen, 2009). Ideas and concept are born when words are created to organize and symbolize them, therefore it is important when working with male abusers to take note of the words and phrases that they use to describe their relationships with others. Often these words are clues into how they view and structure their world and the boundaries that exist for them. Phrases used like "supposed to" or "should" or "have to" when describing relationships represent a gender-role boundary defined by a personal, familial, and/or cultural belief system. These phrases will almost inevitably lead back to "unwritten rules" in a relationship in which one is being contained by boundaries and another has been recruited into policing those boundaries.

The utilization of radical listening is the cornerstone of a respectful narrative approach with men who batter rests on the explanatory theory of reciprocity that maintains that if one is listened to and treated with respect, then they will act in kind. It is important to build a trusting and considerate therapeutic relationship with male abusers through radical listening so that joining will be facilitated. The principle of least contest is a further process in establishing this relationship.

The Principle of Least Contest

The principle of least contest is based on the premise that force generates counterforce, hence it is better to begin with as little force as possible to overcome a problem or confront an idea so that as little resistance as possible is generated (Wood & Tully, 2006). In applying this principle to a narrative practice with men who batter it holds that the first step in confronting an abusive belief system is to externalize it as something separate from the individual, and then seek to understand the belief. Where do the beliefs come from? How long have they been held? Who gains from them? Who loses? What are the costs? Confrontation of abusive ideas in this model begins with a thorough exploration of those ideas. Included in this exploration are the costs of such a choice. Through understanding comes responsibility for choice and through responsibility comes accountability for choice. A narrative exploration involves methodically confronting the belief system

that would lead someone to abuse rather than confronting the abusive act itself.

Breaking the Allure of Male Entitlement and Its Affects

The narrative process with male batterers begins with the worker engaging the group members in an externalizing conversation, a conversation in which he linguistically separates the problem, for example, entitlement, from the men. In this approach the men are not the problem, rather the discourses, the ideas that support battering, are the problem (White, 2007). It should be noted at this point that only ideas, beliefs, and feelings are externalized, never the violent acts that men have perpetrated. This difference may be illustrated by the two questions, “Why do you hit your wife?” and “Where do you think you first adopted the idea that it is okay to hit your wife?” The first question focuses on the abusive act itself and is accusatory in nature. It may elicit a defensive response. The second question focuses on the belief that it is acceptable to strike women and is more readily externalized and deconstructed.

In the example below, the worker helps the group to externalize “men’s rights,” constitute it as a separate entity, and explore the rules associated with it. Please note that the phrase *men’s rights* came from the group, not the worker; this is an example of being attuned to client language and using the terms generated in the group. The social worker seeks to follow members into their conceptual worlds and is genuinely curious about their meanings and understandings of the concept *men’s rights*. The following is an example of externalizing conversation from the group. A point of note, the facilitator in this example is male, but the approach described is not gender specific. The fundamental aim of a narrative approach to men who batter is to address the construction of discourse and a facilitator of any race, nationality, and gender can use the primary skills, attitudes, and methods of this approach. The conversation picks up where John (all names have been changed) claims that women deserve to be hit when they disrespect men. This is a common topic in batterers groups.

John: You know how women are. You tell them to do something and they start getting smart with you. I won’t let her get over on me. No woman’s going to get over on me.

Scott: Yea, that’s right, if you let her get over on you then that’s it. Once they see you as soft they’ll back-talk you all the time and that’s it.

SW: So what’s wrong with her talking back? Why can’t she disagree?

John: It’s just not supposed to happen. Women are supposed to respect men and not talk back. If something is important to me then she needs to let it go. I decide.

Eric: Yep, that's right.

Here the worker is using the principles of radical listening and least contest to pick up on the idea of what is "supposed to" be in a relationship. This is a common phrase used in batterers groups and offers an avenue into beliefs that support battering. It is used to begin externalization of the larger set of rules that "supposed to" represents.

SW: Okay. We've used the term *supposed to* quite a bit. So there is an expectation there? It sounds to me like the expectation is that in a relationship between a man and women that the man should have the last word. Is that right?

Eric: Yea that's right. I mean I don't think that I'm a bad person it's just that somebody has to be in charge. Like on a football team there is the coach, I am the coach – [Body language indicating general group agreement].

SW: John, you had mentioned before that when you get in an argument with your wife Amanda that she doesn't know when to shut up. I was wondering who or what decides when she is supposed to shut up? What creates that line that she is not supposed to cross?

John: Well, it's just the way it is. I mean there is only so much a man should take.

SW: How about the rest of you? Do you all have lines with your wives and girlfriends too? Lines that they are not supposed to cross? [Head nods all the way around.]

SW: So it sounds like that as men in relationships with women it is expected that you are to be in charge and that lines and boundaries are formed based on what women are "supposed to" and not "supposed to" do. Almost as if there is a set of unwritten rules that exists inside our relationships and defines our roles, so that in a relationship there are three of us, man, woman, and rules. An example of this seems to be that as men you are entitled to the final say. Is that right? What do you all think?

The worker is now expanding the ideas inherent in the phrase *supposed to* so that a set of rules for men in relationships is exposed. This will allow the rules to be explored as separate from them, reduce defensiveness, and created space for conversation.

SW: So let's give these rules a name? Kind of like the constitution is a list of rules and rights, what could this list of unwritten rules be called?

George: The fucking male manifesto! [There is general group laughter and the social worker stays to the task.]

SW: Could we call them that? Could we call this set of rules the male manifesto? Are you all okay with that?

John: They're more like rights to me. Like men's rights.

SW: Ok, should we call them “men’s rights?”

At this point “men’s rights” has been externalized and personified as an invisible third member of their relationships that serves to define how they must interact with their partner. Now the worker will explore how “men’s rights” affects their relationships and themselves, its unwritten rules will begin to be listed, and its coercive consequences exposed. Questions used include the following: According to “men’s rights” what are the rules you are to live by? What are the rules that others must live by? Do its rules change? What are its requirements of you and your wife? A list of entitlement’s rules for men and women is made including No back-talking, no complaining, women must obey men at all times, men must enforce the requirements or risk losing control and being weak. This last consequence is an important point that by not upholding “men’s rights” there are consequences for the men themselves. This is explored and emphasized further below, as the conversation continues with tracing the effects of these rules on their lives and the lives of loved ones. The idea that both genders are controlled by these rules is introduced, and the beliefs begin to be challenged as something separate from them.

SW: John, what do you think your wife thinks about these “men’s rights”?

John: I guess she doesn’t like it too much. She knows that I won’t back down and that it’s my way or the highway.

SW: So, these rights intimidate her? These rules establish boundaries in your relationships and use you to police them to keep her in her place? If the argument escalates and she breaks the rules then you are required to force her back in line? These rights use you in a way.

John: I’m not being used.

SW: Are you sure? If you all don’t follow these rules for you and your partners and you let your wives and girlfriends get over on you, it was said before that you feel like fools, you each feel like less of a man. This idea of men’s rights is a two-way sword; you must live up to them or face consequences, just like your wives.

John: Do you think that I’m being controlled?

Here the worker has externalized men’s rights, explored its effects, and created enough space to begin to question the rules that govern male ways of being.

SW: What do you all think? Do you like hitting your partners? Is there pride in that? Do you all feel good about it afterwards? Do you brag about it to your friends? Is it a source of pride for you? [The general group consensus is no.] Does it bring you and your wife closer together in a loving relationship? [The clear consensus is that it does not.] Your actions

are your actions and you are responsible for them, but it does seem as though you're relationship has been invaded by this idea of men's rights and its requirements. They control you both and keep you emotionally separated. You both must live by a continuum of rules and consequences ranging from don't complain "or else," to don't escape "or else," and it has recruited you to serve as its police force. She can't speak her mind to you without breaking its rules; you can't let her speak without breaking its rules and having it convince you that you are weak and a fool. These are the words that you all used. You can't express emotion to her unless it is approved by these rules. You have to fit into its box for men via being tough all the time and she has to fit into its box for women through meeting its expectations or face its wrath via you. It has paralyzed your communication by limiting conversation to appropriate topics and has ruled every aspect of your home. You are bound by its requirements. Who then is really in charge, you or the rules that you both must live by?

It could be that the rules are taking your life away, that you are owned.

Steve: So you're saying that we're being controlled?

SW: Yes, I think that you are. Are either of you happy?

Mike: No, not really [General group agreement].

It is important to note at this point that the group worker takes a strong transparent position that group members are being controlled by the dominant discourse of masculinity. Offering this perspective may be viewed as differing slightly from a traditional narrative approach as presented by White and Epstein (1990), but it is this practitioner's contention that a position of transparent intentional counteraction to the dominant narrative is important as it expands and pushes the conversation into new territory. The group participants may not agree with the facilitator's perceptions, but an alternative understanding is presented regarding their actions in an effort to open conversational doors that may challenge the dominant discourse.

With "men's rights" and the unspoken rules it represents now exposed and challenged, further deconstruction of the rules can occur. In opening up "men's rights," through deconstructive questioning, the goal is to allow the abusive male to separate from these now-exposed rules to form his own meaning and ways of being with spouse, children, and other relations. As this new space is opened, and the effects of "men's rights" dislodged from the male abuser's perception, he may be encouraged to look for new ways of being by exploring his own values and internal set of rules apart from those by which he has unknowingly been guided.

The next step in dislodging the beliefs symbolized by "men's rights" is to explore them further by looking at where the ideas originated, and what affect it has had on women, men, beliefs, laws, and culture. When did the idea of men's rights first enter their lives? How did it recruit them

into adopting its ideas? Who else has come under its influence? How about families? Generations? Culture? Laws? The focus is on a gradual move from the personal to political, tracing back in slow spirals, with the eventual goal of overlapping all aspects of personal, generational, and political to form a picture of a society entrenched and controlled by patriarchal beliefs. The goal is for the male abuser to realize that he is under the control of gender expectations and with this gained knowledge, is now faced with the choice of following its rules or resisting them.

SW: How do you all think these rules for men came about, these men's rights? Where did they come from?

John: My Dad used to hit my mom and tell her what to do. I saw it growing up.

SW: Do you think your father was following these rules?

John: He was teaching me to be a man, I'll tell you that. He was showing me that you've got to keep women in line. But, I didn't agree with him hitting my Mom.

Barry: My Dad was a drunk. He used to hit my Mom and shit until I put a stop to it. I got big enough and one night when he got real drunk and hit my mom I hit him in the head with a bat and told him to leave her alone. He never touched her after that. [Others shared similar stories of violence and how they learned the ideas behind "men's rights."]

SW: It shows a lot of courage to talk about this and there are a lot of commonalities in what you've been through. So what do you think these experiences have taught you about the world? It sounds like quite a few of you have disagreed with the treatment of women in the past, especially your moms, and I know some of you don't want your daughters treated this way. Let me ask a big question, how has this idea of men's rights, these rules, affected the society that we live in? It sounds like in your families your fathers were in charge. If groups of families make a town, and groups of towns make a society, then how do you think the idea of men being in charge, these men's rights has affected the way we think as a society? [The conversation is broadened to assist the men to recognize that the discourse of masculinity, "men's rights" have larger more political influences. A discussion occurs around women and job disparity and the worker connects the larger political domain, to the personal domain, in the following example.]

SW: Did you all know that on average women are paid 20% less than men for doing the same job? [The group responds *no*.] What would it be like if men we were paid 20% less than women if the world worked off the rules of women's entitlement? [The group expresses anger and disgruntlement.] That's exactly where women are now. Why should they take it? John, why should your wife take it? Why would your daughter take it? Or why should you take it if you'd like to stay at home with your kids but that option is taken away from you because of how much money your wife

can make. You are just as trapped as she is. [Mike expresses surprise at this realization.] You are a clear example of how these rules are not only controlling her but also you and your children because she is not bringing home as much money as a man would. [The group discusses.] Besides what's called equal pay can you all think of other ways that these ideas of men's rights control women in our society? It took women almost 100 years to be able to vote in their own country. What would it be like for you to live in a county where you could not vote, had limited opportunity to work, and had to obey your wives or risk violence?

Cocreating a New Male Way of Being

With understanding comes responsibility. The rules of "men's rights" have been exposed, externalized, deconstructed, and the effects discussed. The male batterers are now in a position to redefine themselves and their relationships. The final phase is for the men to renounce gender rules and discuss alternatives and ways in which they can take back their lives. It is often helpful for this conversation to focus on generations. Questions found helpful for groups include the following: Do you want to continue the beliefs that have justified the violent abuse of your mothers, wives, and daughters? Do you want to pass these ideas on to your children the way they were passed on to you? Do you want your children to have better relationships than you have now, if so, what changes in beliefs need to occur?

As group members make the commitment to change, questions that build upon strengths and resiliencies are used to find those times when they have had control over their lives. How can you take control of your relationship back from these men's requirements? Are there times in the past when you have done so? When have you chosen to allow your wife a voice in the relationship? What was this like for her? What was it like for your relationship? If you share control, in what ways can this increase happiness in your family? What is it like for you to be in control of your life rather than these male ideas? In the absence of traditional men's rules can control of self include flexibility, understanding, and respect? What might your daughters and mothers think about the changes you have made and your choice to not live by men's rules anymore?

FINAL THOUGHTS

A narrative approach to male batterer groups focuses on exposing patriarchal discourse, externalizing and discussing the unwritten rules of traditional masculinity, tracing the effects on male batterers and their relationships, exploring the effects of these rules in larger society, assisting the batterer to see these destructive effects, and providing space for the batterer to

redefine. The approach is designed to reduce defensiveness by externalizing the problem, while enhancing responsibility for actions by discussing the ideas surrounding gender and relationships. Through externalization, the narrative approach provides a unique space for male batterers in a group setting to explore beliefs with one another, in a nondefensive manner, so that possibilities for change can occur. Finally, by externalizing patriarchal beliefs, rather than placing the problem in the batterer, the potential for broader advocacy work can occur if male batterers' desire to address the negative effects of traditional gender discourse with young men in their community. Those men formerly under the influence of patriarchal gender discourse can educate other young men about its effects and assist them to make choices free of these influences. This, in turn, may assist in challenging patriarchal beliefs at the societal level effectively bridging the micropractice and macropractice gap.

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