

A conversation with Lateral Violence

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Lateral Violence is the name given to the harmful and undermining practices that members of oppressed groups can engage in against each other as a result of marginalisation. This paper comprises an 'interview' with Lateral Violence, played by a senior Australian Aboriginal health worker. In this paper, Lateral Violence provides 'its own' exposé. It is hoped that this paper may be used as a script for running workshops on lateral violence.

Keywords: lateral violence, indigenous, Aboriginal, First Nations, gossip

INTRODUCTION

Lateral violence, sometimes also called 'horizontal violence' has received much investigation and discussion in recent years, and refers to the abuse and undermining practices that people in subjugated and marginalised groups engage with in relation to each other. Nurses have done a lot to raise awareness of the phenomenon, and the term has been taken up by First Nations groups in North America, Australia, and elsewhere. The following 'conversation' with Lateral Violence is a brief exploration of the kinds of harmful actions that can impact on Aboriginal communities as a result of colonisation and continued dispossession.

The following conversation follows the narrative concept of externalising conversations (White, 2007), through the specific practice of one person interviewing another who is role-playing a problem (see Cronin-Lampe, Tuguga, TeKira, & Herbert, 1998/1999; Sliep & CARE Counsellors, 1996/1998; Wingard, 1996/2001a, 1996/2001b). This practice, which has come to be called 'collective externalising conversations' (Denborough, 2008, p. 207) to distinguish it from externalising conversations that might occur in other contexts such as individual and family therapy, has been powerfully effective in allowing groups and communities to talk about problems that affect them. Like the examples of collective externalising conversations that have gone before, it is hoped that the following script will stimulate discussion and assist workers to run workshops on this significant issue.

Good afternoon Lateral Violence.

It's really good to meet you in person.

You usually seem to be in the shadows, so we appreciate it that today we can talk to you face to face. Can I ask you some questions?

Yes, go ahead.

What do you like to do?

I do my best work destroying people. I like to divide people and break their spirits. I break communities and create

nastiness between families because people don't know how to deal with me. I can even create violence and big punch-ups sometimes, hurting people and stabbing people. But often I use words and stories more than physical violence and break spirits that way.

What do you mean? How do you use words?

I often show myself in words. That's how my nastiness starts. I get people to tell stories about other people who aren't there. This can be very hurtful and painful for people and this makes me happy.

Why do you want to do this?

I want to keep Aboriginal people back. I don't want them to get anywhere. And if I can keep causing disharmony in Aboriginal communities, if they keep fighting with each other, then there will always be a place for me. I will be able to show myself all the time. I will get stronger and stronger. I want to be around for a long, long time. It keeps my spirit strong when I'm making other people weak.

[To the audience:] ***I'm not sure I like this character very much!***

[To Lateral Violence:] ***How long have you been trying to do this? How long have you been around?***

I've been around for quite a long time now. The thing is, Aboriginal people have to deal with racism, not being able to get housing or jobs. Many Aboriginal people have to deal with poverty, with alcohol. Many families were separated because of the Stolen Generations. Aboriginal people have faced so many injustices in this country for over two hundred years and all these things have made it much easier for me to do my work. I get into communities when they are facing racism, poverty, and injustice.

Because I've been around a long time, sometimes now I get carried on through generations. I love this! I'm pretty sneaky because I make people think I'm part of Aboriginal culture. I tell them that I'm part of their culture. I tell these lies and people believe me. They now say this is Aboriginal way, our way. And this protects me. They think I'm their way of dealing with things and this makes me very happy.

What makes you powerful?

I reckon I'm doing my best work when I get families to fight against one another. Or when I break down families. It's fantastic when everybody wants to take sides. This creates a bigger divide or division. One of my favourite saying is: 'If you talk to them, then we won't have anything to do with you. We're on their side.' Isn't that a beautiful phrase – 'We're on their side'.

I can also stop Aboriginal people from working with white people. I do that pretty well. And I confuse white people about Aboriginal culture too. I try to convince white people to think bad things about Aboriginal culture.

Actually, I'm very strong about culture. In some Aboriginal communities I try to get people of Aboriginal heritage to be suspicious and judge each other by asking 'who is Aboriginal and who is not really Aboriginal?' I try to get people to say who is fit to be Aboriginal and who is not fit to be Aboriginal. I start to manipulate who is and who is not. This works very well too!

As you can see I've got a few different specialities!

Yeah, but I bet you don't have many friends ...

No I don't have many friends. Just one really. My friend is Gossip. Gossip can be

harmless when it's not trying to hurt people, but nasty gossip gets back to people and breaks their spirits. It's pretty good stuff! When Gossip and I are working together we often start small. Someone might want to know how someone else is going so they ask 'How is so-and-so going?' So they start talking about someone else who is not there, and then they start hearing things they shouldn't hear. Or the conversations start taking a nasty journey. Nice, quiet gossip can be a way of checking things out but I twist gossip, turn things around, and make those conversations take a nasty journey. I'm really good at twisting harmless gossip into harsh gossip. I listen out for when people are talking about someone who is not present and, whenever there's an opportunity, I think 'I'm going to get in there'.

I make people quite sick this way. It's like there's a mental drain when I come into people's lives. I can make people really worried about what other people are saying and doing.

Is there anything that makes you particularly happy?

Yes. Can't you tell? It makes me happy to break people's spirits, to make them feel no good, to confuse them about their culture and Aboriginal ways of doing things. I usually either make people silent or I make them be nasty themselves. I start to convince them that the way to feel stronger is to be nasty. Once I get going, people get determined not to give in. This keeps nastiness alive and hopefully they then pass this onto their children.

[To audience:] ***This is unbelievable ... it's lucky I don't believe in violence or I'd be tempted to do this bloke in!***

[To Lateral Violence:] ***Sorry, what were you saying?***

I was talking about the children actually ... Whenever possible I try to get children to witness nastiness, to try to encourage them to be nasty. Sometimes this goes wrong though ... [pause]

This sometimes goes wrong?

Yes, but I don't really want to talk about that.

Oh, please continue Lateral Violence, we're so grateful that you are sharing your wisdom with us ...

Well, sometimes when children witness nastiness, they say to themselves 'I don't want to do that when I grow up'. In fact, sometimes children go and find one nice kind auntie or uncle, or someone I haven't got to yet, and they spend time with them. They say, 'I don't want to be nasty', and they grow up in ways that I can't infect. It's like they make some decision and I can't get to them.

Young people too actually. It seems they can stop me from coming into their lives by not getting into nastiness and gossip. Sometimes a group of young people don't let my friend Gossip into their lives and then I can't get in either.

Adults sometimes make a stand against me too. They get fed up with what is going on and they start trying things to undermine me. I know of one woman who was so fed up with the nasty talking about her I had created that she asked a lawyer to draw up a letter to the people I had infected. That actually worked quite well, I had to take a back seat for a while.

Another time, I had managed to get someone to tell lots of lies about this same woman in the workplace. Even though she was retired, I was able to get a really good thing going. But then this woman decided to confront the person who was telling the lies and she did this in a very nice, calm way. Of course,

I told the person just to deny everything. I told them just to smile and say hello and pretend that they had done nothing. But this woman just kept her voice low, she didn't get aggressive, but she also didn't back down. After she had done this I could tell she was really proud of how she had faced what I was doing but in a nice way. This really confused me. When people find nice ways to stop me spreading around it's quite hard for me to continue.

That's very interesting. What do you think about people knowing your name these days?

I kept my name a secret for a very long time. It worked better for me when I was undercover. Actually, it was nurses who first found out my name. I've done some good work in dividing nurses but, while I was doing it, somehow they found out my name. I don't know how this happened, although I suspect Gossip might have had something to do with it. Maybe Gossip isn't such a good friend after all.

And then this First Nations group in Canada, they noticed that I was doing a lot of work in their community. So they started talking about me. They even made a video about me. At first I felt quite proud about this. I quite liked the idea of being a movie star.

But then they started to show this DVD in other places. They brought it here to Australia and now Aboriginal people here seem to be noticing me more often. They're even holding workshops about me now. People are starting to talk about how they can confront nastiness but in nice ways. Some people seem to be getting quite excited about this. I'm not sure if that is a good development.

In fact, now I'm wondering if it was a good idea to agree to be interviewed.

I think I was more powerful when I was invisible and had no name. But it was a bit lonely and it has been nice talking to you.

***You know what, Lateral Violence?
As you've been talking, I've been
thinking about what you said about
having only one friend. And it sounds
like even that friendship might be a bit
rocky at the moment. Have you ever
thought about retiring? If you stopped
doing all this work to divide people and
break their spirits, maybe there'd be
chance to build more friendships ...***

You might be onto something there.
I'll give it some thought.

***Anyway, thanks for coming in today,
Lateral Violence.***

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