

4.

Furthering conversation about partnerships of accountability:

Talking about issues of
leadership, ethics and care

by

Kiwi Tamasese, Charles Waldegrave,
Flora Tuhaka & Waruhi Campbell

Publisher's note

Since the publication and widespread distribution of the article 'Cultural and gender accountability in the "just therapy" approach', by Kiwi Tamasese & Charles Waldegrave (1994), many different groups and individuals have been inspired by the possibilities of working in partnership across divisions of power and have tried to translate the accountability processes and structures of The Family Centre to their own contexts. Many of these attempts have been creative, positive and have led to generative actions in the broader world. Other attempts, however, although created from goodwill, have come across difficulties.

The following paper has been written in the hope of honouring the diversity of work that is currently being explored in relation to processes of accountability. It extends and builds upon the work that is documented in 'Cultural and gender accountability in the "just therapy" approach'. It particularly focuses upon the learnings of The Family Centre in relation to the role of leadership, ethics and care when trying to use caucusing as a way of furthering partnerships across divides of power and domination.

The process of creating this paper

The following paper has been created out of conversations that took place at The Family Centre in Wellington, New Zealand, between Warihi Campbell, Kiwi Tamasese, Flora Tuhaka and Charles Waldegrave. Cheryl White, Maggie Carey & David Denborough acted as interviewers. David then wrote up an initial draft which was completed in partnership with The Family Centre.

The processes of partnership and accountability within The Family Centre are concerned with finding ways in which people can come together across differences and relations of power to address issues of social action and justice in the broader society. Our partnerships are orientated towards the big picture. What goes on among us within the agency is an important foundation for the work we do in trying to play a part in transforming the society in which we live.

Over the last fifteen years within The Family Centre, which consists of Maori, Pacific Island and Pakeha (European) women and men workers, we have been committed to finding ways of working together that will provide a foundation for our work in our respective communities.

In order to work together we have had to grapple with the following questions:

How do workers, women and men and people of different cultures in an agency or institution, protect against gender and culture bias in their work on a day-to-day basis? Furthermore, how do they do this in societies where sexist and racist assumptions are an integral part of the upbringing and way of life, as they are in most modern industrial states?
(Tamasese & Waldegrave 1994)

Developing processes of accountability

In response to these questions we have developed partnerships and processes of accountability which we described in an earlier paper (Tamasese & Waldegrave 1994):

Within our overall collective at The Family Centre, the Maori and Pacific Island sections are self-determining. The Pakeha (white section), because it is the dominant culture, runs its own affairs, but it is accountable to the other two sections. Although all staff are committed to developed concepts of equality, unintentional impositions are still likely to occur because of our cultural histories. This accountability ensures an ongoing process of monitoring against intrusion into the processes of the groups that are dominated in the wider society.

Likewise, the women and the men caucus separately at times to address their own issues. As with the cultural work, we have found it helpful to agree to creative forms of accountability and monitoring that address our gendered histories and consequent biases. The women's work is self-determining. The men manage their affairs and responsibilities, but are accountable to the women. The point of such caucuses is to highlight the particular concerns of key groups so that their needs are not lost in a compromised partnership.

Cultural caucuses have now been institutionalised as cultural sections. With regard to gender, we have formalised groupings of men and groupings of women into separate caucuses ... In our view, the best judges of injustice are the groups that have been unjustly treated. Thus, the women are accorded the role of guardians of gender equity, and the Maori and Pacific Island sections the guardians of cultural equity at The Family Centre. They have the right at any time to call the agency, or parts of it, to address equity issues. When they do, the agency is absolutely committed to seeking a solution that satisfies the guardians to whom the rest of the agency is accountable. This is not an authoritarian process. We endeavour to seek a consensus that we can practice with integrity, that satisfies those to whom we are accountable. (pp.58-59)

Our structures of accountability have been designed within an organisation committed to consensus – of which the dominant group is a part. The caucusing mechanism which is a part of the accountability process is not an authoritarian mechanism by which people associated with dominance or people of non-dominant groups take power or act over others with power. The structure of the process, through which issues are taken back into caucuses, is the shift in power that is required so that meaningful, dignified, respectful dialogue can take place. If the caucuses don't agree after a number of sessions then they go away and meet separately for a further amount of time. The caucuses then come together again. If still there is no consensus the groups go their separate ways for further time. This could occur over months. The process goes on until the group to whom the issue is accountable to is satisfied and until the dominant group has reached a place that they too can live with. This is an authentic dialogue. This is the meaning of partnership. It preserves the values of love, humility and respect.

A clarification of language

It seems important to clarify what we mean by the word accountability. The word ‘accountability’ and phrases such as: ‘They’ve got to be accountable’, ‘You’ve got to be accountable to me’, or ‘Let’s hold them accountable’, are widely heard within New Right ideology and within management circles throughout western capitalist societies. The new market environment is increasingly requiring hierarchical, authoritarian accountability. The word ‘accountability’, for example, is currently being used to justify the de-funding of universities and social services.

As the New Right has had dominance of definition in the broader culture for some time now, it is all too easy for confusion to occur about our usage of the word ‘accountability’. We must be vigilant to ensure that the language of the New Right, of hierarchy, authority, check-points, performance indicators and evaluation does not contaminate our attempts to carve out new territories of partnership. We are talking about ways of working that seek to give space to the marginalised, that seek to create the possibility of meaningful respectful dialogue across power differentials. We are trying to speak a language of partnership. Phrases such as: ‘They’ve got to be accountable’, are not born of a language of partnership – they are authoritarian statements. What we are seeking are partnerships of accountability which facilitate the responsibility of dominant groups to deconstruct their dominance.

Ongoing conscientisation

The caucusing process provides a mechanism whereby the marginalised can have a space within an agency and workplace. It is a mechanism which provides space for both caucuses to do their own work. We believe that a caucusing partnership structure can only work as long as it sits alongside a parallel process of conscientisation (Freire 1970) for both the dominant and marginalised groups. This occurs within the caucuses.

The primary responsibility for the day-to-day check and balance lies with the group that is associated with dominance. It is the dominant group’s responsibility to continue to work on their consciousness around issues of power and all the biases associated with it. Members of the dominant group need to conscientise themselves and each other so that the responsibility for the call to stop certain sorts of behaviours, or certain discriminating practices or policy, is

not left to the marginalised caucus. This is crucial. There must be a 'self-start' process in place because, once the process of caucusing becomes the only evaluative tool, it can become burdensome to the marginalised groups.

If the accountability mechanism becomes solely a check, an evaluative mechanism, there can be two profoundly negative consequences. Firstly, the responsibility begins to fall too heavily on the marginalised caucus to service the partnership. Secondly, the weight of this responsibility means that there is no room for meaningful partnership. The role of the marginalised group becomes one of increasing supervision and evaluation, while the dominant caucus becomes increasingly passive. The process becomes reactive and the possibility for a meaningful deconstruction of power is lost. The possibilities of standing together in new territories of partnership diminish. There is room only to relate within old hierarchical relations – even if sometimes these are temporarily reversed.

When the ongoing conscientisation process is working well, the relationship between the caucuses becomes less of a focus. The emphasis becomes one of self-determination for the marginalised group, and awareness and new action on the part of the dominating group. The primary work begins to happen within the caucuses, not between them, and the conversations that occur within the caucuses have positive effects not only within the agency but in the broader work that the agency is involved in.

Leadership

We have learned over the years that our caucuses require clear and consistent leadership. Dominant caucuses require leadership in order to prevent paralysis and individualising (see Tamasese & Waldegrave 1994, p.57). Marginalised caucuses require leadership to take care that stories of marginalisation do not build upon one another in ways that could spiral downwards.

Some groups advocate no leadership as a way of creating greater democracy. This is not the place from which we come. Although we too wish to see the end of patriarchal prototypes of leadership, we know that there are forms of leadership that do not replicate domination and that keep processes of accountability and caucusing safe. These forms of leadership encourage self-reflection that aids the deconstruction of power relations. This is the type of leadership we are calling people into.

Before processes of accountability and partnership are entered into, there needs to be a collective agreement in relation to leadership. This is particularly true for dominant groups as, all too often, if leadership is not structured and agreed upon, it will be contested, and all sorts of divisions can occur. This leaves the marginalised group more vulnerable to the process. It might be necessary for caucuses to meet first and work through what would need to happen to enable people/individuals to step into leadership around particular issues at particular times.

An invitation to partnership is not an invitation for dominant groups to abdicate their leadership or their responsibility for the process. Out of goodwill, dominant groups may step out of any form of leadership but in so doing unintentionally paralyse the process of change. It is the dominant group who is responsible for the deconstruction of their dominance. They should not give away their responsibility to play a meaningful part in consensus decision-making about the processes of partnership. Once again, before beginning a process of partnership, clarifying the common understandings about different responsibilities is crucial – especially within a workplace.

Leadership within the caucuses is very important. If people are going to use the caucusing idea they need to have leadership that is very clear about the purpose of each caucus in their particular context. If there are to be more than two caucuses then there must be enough leaders to facilitate them, and these leaders need to have worked together sufficiently so that there is one common orientation. Without clear and consistent leadership caucusing can become ineffective.

Institutional space

We believe it is important that workplaces put aside some institutional space and time for these issues. There needs to be some flexibility in management. The organisation needs to make a symbolic gesture of goodwill and demonstrate practical commitment to the issues.

Compromises will need to be worked through in a generous spirit. Configurations will work out differently in different contexts. At The Family Centre we work for as many hours a week that the issues need working on. It may be quite different in some workplaces. If people are working nine-to-five, for

example, an organisation might allocate five or six hours over a period of two weeks. The staff may be invited to contribute some time of their own – perhaps matching hour for hour with the organisation. Workplaces need to work out what is sustainable and what are realistic goals and expectations.

Issues for the leadership of caucuses of marginalised groups

Caucuses of marginalised groups need leadership. People's pain needs to be collected, to be made sense of. A collective sense of purpose needs to be harnessed. Put simply, people need to be made to feel okay. The caucus is often the first safe place that people have found to expose their pain – it needs to be listened to. Ways forward also need to be found. It needs to be seen that people's stories are not solely a collection of pain, but contain obvious points of celebration and resistance.

There are various steps to this process:

Caucus as a space of building a clear collective voice

People will come to the caucus with different understandings of issues and of cultural marginalisation. In order for the partnership to work smoothly the caucus needs to get to a point of having consensus around any given issue.

Caucus as a space of healing for individual experiences of marginalisation

We know that people who come into caucuses will often have personal familial stories, or personal individual stories of hurt. Often they will not have had a safe space to talk about experiences of racism or sexism, so the caucus becomes the space where all of these experiences can be given voice. This can mean that the caucus is suddenly filled with one person after another connecting their painful stories to powerful common threads like colonisation. The caucus needs to be a place of healing these personal experiences.

When people enter a caucus with a great deal of personal pain from past experiences, they need a lot of support and space to heal in order to be able to safely take part in partnerships. A big question for marginalised caucuses is, therefore: are the people in the caucus in a place where it is right for them to participate in partnership? The caucus needs to be very clear about whether the group is in a position to engage in partnership.

Caucus as a space of knowledge-building

Throughout the process of developing a clear voice, the caucus is a place of cultural analysis and gender analysis. What also often takes place is a researching for liberative elements of cultural histories. This is very thorough research and is not to be underestimated. Within The Family Centre women's caucus there is often a sub-caucus of Maori women, of Samoan women and of Pakeha women. Each sub-caucus has conducted their research into their own stories. For instance, in the Samoan caucus it involved two women travelling to Samoa to look at the stories of Samoan womanhood. The Maori and Pakeha women's sub-caucuses conducted similarly significant research. Each sub-caucus found ways of representing what they had found, and the directions in which they wished to head.

Caucus as a space of negotiations of mutual interests

Within caucuses there is often a diversity of experiences. For example, within the women's caucus there are women from a variety of cultures. The caucus needs to be a space in which to negotiate mutual interests.

Through a process of separate exploration and research (as mentioned above), the Maori, Samoan and Pakeha sub-caucuses of the women's caucus have articulated each of their different interests. When the results of this search were shared between the sub-caucuses, mutual interests and specific interests were identified. If there were interests specific to any particular sub-caucus then a commitment was sought from the other two sub-caucuses to support this sub-caucus in their specific issue. For example, the Maori women are specifically interested in recovering their own stories, unearthing the liberative spaces for themselves, and the liberative spaces that are relevant to their relationships with their men and other cultures. The Pakeha women are similarly involved in unearthing liberative histories in relation to their womanhood, but they have a further responsibility to work with Pakeha men on the whole issue of cultural marginalisation and racism.

A similar process occurs when working in cultural caucuses to negotiate mutual interests/responsibilities between men and women of the same culture.

Caucus as a checkpoint for agency structure and policy

Caucuses often spend time discussing specific proposals that would advance awareness in the agency in relation to the group's experience. These proposals

often involve issues like scholarships for people from marginalised groups to attend conferences/training, having some time from the institution to be a part of the minority people's caucus, etc. They are often cogent, small but significant.

Caucus as a checkpoint for therapeutic practice and underlying values

Caucuses may also be a place of innovation and thoughtfulness about current therapeutic work that is happening in the agency.

The leadership role in each of these areas is to facilitate the task at hand. It is also to care for and support all of those within the caucus, and to liaise with the leadership of the dominant caucus to ensure that when the groups meet together again that this is a generative process.

Issues for the leadership of dominant group caucuses

As mentioned earlier, one of the primary reasons for the caucusing process is for the dominant group to work with their own, to build understanding, and to take action. There needs to be an ongoing process of education by the dominant group with their own an ongoing process of deconstructing power. It can be difficult to maintain the energy within dominant groups to engage in this ongoing deconstruction, but we must be creative. If partnerships are going to work then we must find generative ways of working within dominant caucuses. What follows are a number of themes that we have found useful in relation to the sorts of conversations that occur in dominant caucuses.

Responsibility

The primary purpose of the dominating group is to take responsibility for injustice. Where the whole process can get off track is when personal individual issues are prioritised over collective responsibility. Inevitably people wish to talk about the hard times they have had (this seems especially true for men on issues of gender). People suddenly realise that the caucus is a place where they can get a bit of nurturing for themselves. There is a place for this. It's no good telling people just to be tough. Being trained into domination has its real effects, but the primary role of the caucus is one of responsibility. Leadership is really important to keep the caucus on track.

Team building

A crucial part of the process is creating connections between the members of the dominant group to build a collective identity. As teams of dominant people are traditionally based upon notions of superiority, how to team build around a collective identity that will not confirm dominance is a continual challenge.

Caring and support

These words characterise the conversations that occur within the caucus. There is space made for people to be able to speak of how they are coping with the issues and what they mean in their own lives. When we are addressing behaviours of dominance that we, others or institutions enact, it is so much easier to learn if someone is supporting us through the process and keeping an eye all the time on issues of responsibility.

Addressing the 'prime break'

The 'prime break' in gender caucuses is the break between women and men. It's not between fathers and sons or any of the other breaks that we may have experienced. In cultural caucus the 'prime break' is between the Pakeha (white) and Maori and Pakeha (white) and Samoan, etc. It's from this orientation the whole deconstruction takes place.

Self-consciousness

The deconstruction of the 'prime break' hopefully leads to increased self-consciousness. Explorations are made into the constraints which members of the caucus face in relation to their ability to be non-sexist, or non-racist. A self-consciousness begins to be built about our biases and also the lessons that have been learned.

Understandings of power and power difference

Issues of power are central to liberation, so a thorough exploration of understandings of power occurs within the caucus. Members' participation in acts of power and their real effects are deconstructed.

Collective responsibility

Finding ways of developing a sense of collective responsibility and collective

care is perhaps the biggest challenge for dominant caucuses. Caucuses cannot work effectively if people within them wish to operate as individuals rather than as one of a collective. If people speak in discourses of their own individual rights as workers, or if people emphasise their own individual story and experience over the experiences of the marginalised group, it can make the process difficult. Building a sense of collective identity and responsibility seems especially difficult for white people. Within men's groups in which there are men of different cultures present it is easier. But within white caucuses individualism runs deep. What often really helps is that in partnership the dominant group has the models of the other cultural caucuses to learn from – especially in relation to building consensus. Nevertheless, building a sense of collective responsibility can take time.

Tracing liberative elements

Within dominant caucuses we have needed to explore and bring to life liberative elements from our histories that show other ways forward. Within men's caucuses we have searched for elements within the history of manhood that offer different possibilities than those offered by current dominant stories of masculinity. Men of different cultures explore different stories from their own cultural traditions – this is true also for white men. Men also endeavour to unearth liberative stories within their own family histories. Trying to find the contradictions to the stereotypes of masculinity within our own histories and traditions is an important part of the caucusing process.

To be able to constrain and extend one another

Gradually members of dominant caucuses begin to take responsibility for each other. Within the context of collective care, members of the caucus begin to gently interrupt oppressive behaviours in each other before the marginalised group have to. A collective pride begins to grow in relation to this. At the same time, seeing the caucus take responsibility for each other gives the non-dominant group the greatest confidence. If a member of the dominant group can pre-empt the actions of other members then this provides much more safety.

Honouring the other

It's important that the dominant group begins to honour the concerns of the non-dominant group. Over time this involves pre-empting issues that may come up

and making changes so that the everyday concerns of the non-dominant group become a part of the institutional life of the workplace. For instance, for Maori and Pacific Island peoples² elders are very significant. Providing time to welcome elders and acknowledge them within the workplace is an important aspect of the running of The Family Centre.

Making the caucus livable

Within the dominant caucus we have found it important to make the process liveable and sustainable. Events that lighten the process, like going out to dinner together, can play a significant part in ensuring that the process is not always associated with addressing painful issues.

Providing care for the group

The leadership needs to facilitate a process so that the group begins to take care of each other. Members of the dominant group need encouragement because they are starting something that is new and challenging for them. It is up to members of the dominant group to acknowledge and encourage each other so that they do not have to look to members of the marginalised group to provide it.

Values

The work of the caucuses, the partnerships within the agency, and our work in the broader society, are based upon carefully constructed values.

Accountability that fosters commitment to actions makes a difference to the lives of those who suffer. If it lies in the bedrock of values like humility, reciprocity, love, and sacredness, a mutual learning can take place, for both those who call for accountability and those who respond. It becomes a mutual learning in vulnerability. (Tamasese & Waldegrave 1994, p.66)

The values of humility, sacredness, respect, justice and love, trust and co-operation are absolutely central to our processes of accountability. Some of these values derive from our particular cultural context. For example, reciprocity is a significant value in Maori and Samoan culture which does not really have the same significance in Pakeha (white) culture. All three cultural caucuses have met and worked to establish what are the values that we wish to underpin and sustain

our ways of working in partnership together. There has been a process of naming these values and building upon them. The words that we use now have been carefully chosen as they resonate with our particular histories. In a different context there would be different words and values.

It seems crucial that, prior to people entering into processes of partnership, they must agree to the bedrock of values on which their partnership will be based. Prior to initiating any processes of accountability it would be very important to invite the caucuses to consider a number of questions about the values that will underpin the partnerships:

- * What are the values in their own culture/histories that will enable them to walk into partnership?
- * What are the key values in their own culture/histories that will sustain this partnership, and that will hold the process together?
- * What are the key values in their own culture/histories that will enable them to respect their partners in this partnership?

Both the dominant and marginalised groups will need to agree to these values before the process begins.

Creating new territories of partnership

What has also been extremely significant in our quest for partnership (and yet rarely focused on by others) has been the search for grounding our partnerships in history. We have always believed that this work is primarily concerned with ethics and history. That's where we link in with the narrative tradition. We believe that narratives need to go back into history (or forward into history from a Maori perspective). We need to look at the ethics and liberative narratives within our people's histories. Within all our people's histories there are non-liberative and liberative stories, traditions and practices. We are being selective about our histories. We are looking for the liberative practices and building upon these – building from strength to strength.

In particular, we have been determined to find histories of ways of relating that exist in territories beyond hierarchical arrangements. These histories are the foundations upon which we wish to build our partnerships.

... the cultural memories of the subjugated peoples hold vestiges of relationships other than the vertical arrangements of relationships that are characteristic in Western nations. These cultural memories are being recovered, for they often hold a differing value system of humility, respect, sacredness, reciprocity, and love, that underpins new structures and processes of accountability ... (Tamasese & Waldegrave 1994, p.65)

Throughout western cultures vertical arrangements of relationships and hierarchy are so common that within explorations of partnership and power there is always the potential to replicate these vertical arrangements, or to reverse them. All around us abound the culture, structures, attitudes and rituals of domination. Our quest has been to recover histories of different ways of relating:

For example, our analysis of pre-colonised Samoa revealed a covenant relationship (feagaiga) between brother and sister that had the capacity to equalise the relationships between women and men (Falenaoti 1992). (Tamasese & Waldegrave 1994, p.65)

This covenant has at times held our partnerships together, as Kiwi describes:

Even if we are in some way enraged with the action of the men's caucus, what is foremost at the end of the day is 'they are our brothers'. We recognise that pushing them into the river equals pushing us in as well.

For any partnership that is seeking to do things differently, that is seeking to step into new territories, there will need to be foundations. In different contexts people will do this differently. Within individualistic cultures the challenge to unearth/create liberative structures that do not simply replicate or reverse hierarchical ways of relating is a profound one. Faith and cultural traditions may be places to start, so too may be the histories of alternative social movements.

Speaking from a different place

Not only have we had to find alternative foundations for the partnerships, we have also had to find spaces from which to speak to each other which are outside traditional oppressor-oppressed relations, as Kiwi describes:

As women it has been important to name our oppression clearly, but stepping into a conversation with the men with dignity and with honour has required more than this. We have had to move to a space that is other than being 'the oppressed'. We have had to name oppressive acts, and to speak clearly about how these acts must stop, but equally importantly we have had to say: 'We are not here to meet you as the oppressed, we are speaking to you as co-partners. We are in this together. This is an invitation. If you would like us all to be working together, this is how it could work.' This is no longer speaking from a position of powerlessness. It is speaking from a position of empowerment. It is important that we caucus as a group until we can get to this point. It is a strong, dignified place. It is not stepping into acts of power over the dominant group. It is a new territory that we are stepping into. It takes the dominant group into a different space too. It has meant that when we come back from our caucuses we speak differently – with pride and a power that is not born of domination.

Developing partnerships of accountability around issues of sexual identity

In some workplaces these ideas of caucusing have been applied in relation to differences of sexual identity. Caucuses have been established to work on issues related to sexual identity and heterosexual dominance. This is not an area of caucusing which we have written about. The process of caucusing can have different meanings and implications in this area. Dilemmas can be raised when lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender people who have chosen not to publicly identify themselves are invited into caucuses. Caucusing could unintentionally force them either to declare themselves or alternatively place them in a group with whom they are quite uncomfortable. Processes should be developed that address this issue. How to acknowledge the similarities and differences in experience of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people is also an important consideration. Developing responses to these and other relevant issues would take care and thoughtful leadership. This model may require some adaptation to those circumstances.

Keeping the process positive

There is enormous pressure on all those involved in the process of partnership due to the seriousness of the issues. Acknowledging this brings a gentleness to the conversations. Within these partnerships, the steps taken by both groups are recognised and acknowledged – by both groups. Even though what may amount to the dominant group as significant might be only a few yards of movement to the marginalised group, it is recognised. The dominant group then recognises this generosity, and a positive cycle is developed.

When trying to address and talk about and work together on issues of power and oppression, it is very important that caring processes infuse the partnership accountability structures. This occurs both within separate caucuses, but also in the process of the caucuses coming together again.

If the non-dominant group is going to express their pain or hurt to the dominant group then this is handled extremely carefully and with great care. Often it is pre-empted with considerable gentle preparation: 'We've got some things that we need to share with you. They are not going to be easy to receive but they are going to be very painful to tell. These are things that really need time for reflection. We'd really like to hear what you think but we don't need any response today.' Such careful preparation creates a sacred place. It reduces the possibilities for defensiveness. It is then the responsibility of the dominant group to go away and care for each other through the process of taking responsibility for what has occurred and to find ways of taking action – both within the agency and beyond.

Taking care of trust

In essence, accountability is about the building of trust with the group with whom trust has been broken ... It is an offering of vulnerability in trust to each other, so that the pain of injustice can be transformed.
(Tamasese & Waldegrave 1994, p.66)

Trust is what makes this process work. Members of the marginalised culture or gender are in some ways learning to trust again through these processes. When trust is broken, it can bring great sorrow to the members of the

marginalised group. Can we develop protective mechanisms so that marginalised cultures and genders are not left so vulnerable to situations when misunderstandings occur?

If there is a deliberate violation of a prior understanding and trust is broken then it is inevitable that significant injury will occur. However, what is more common within partnerships is that members of the dominant group inadvertently enact domination, and it is this that threatens the trust of the partnership.

Are there ways of protecting the trust that is crucial to the process of partnership?

Realism rather than romanticism

Sometimes breaks in partnerships may not have occurred if the partnership had been more realistic and open about what could have been achieved. When we are coming from different cultural thought constructions it is inevitable that there will at times be unintended difficulties. If members of dominant groups were able to be realistic in naming what they can deliver and what they can't deliver, perhaps people in the marginalised group may be more prepared for mistakes. However, this is a complicated area. How can ways be found to pre-empt inevitable misunderstandings that do not abdicate responsibility of the dominant group, nor deny the experience of members of marginalised groups, and do not detract from the urgency and commitment to challenge domination?

When entering into partnerships, it can be very easy to tap into visionary, utopian ideals. These ideals then energise possibilities. After two or three really good experiences these ideals and expectations are initially confirmed. When a misunderstanding then takes place the shock can be extreme.

How can members of dominant groups protect against hypocrisy by being clear about what is possible and what is not? How can it be ensured that the process does not become romanticised? How can members of marginalised groups take real care with their trust? A part of this care may involve finding ways back to the big picture.

Developing partnerships of accountability in different contexts

The structures we have developed are in a context of a small agency in which people are working in long-term committed relationships. We have never suggested that our ways of working can be easily translated into different contexts. It is clear that processes of accountability will not work in situations where any party does not want to, or does not feel safe. No marginalised group should be expected to go into partnership, and no partnership should be entered into without first both groups doing preliminary work to ensure that there is sufficient commitment, common ground and agreement to honour and sustain the partnership.

Some common difficulties that seem to be occurring as people try to instigate partnership/accountability processes in their own contexts include:

Leadership

A variety of common problems can be summed up under the heading of leadership. Some of the areas in which leadership problems have occurred include: a lack of importance being placed on the role of leadership within caucuses; division between leaders of the different caucuses; caucuses being established with no organised leadership at all and no mechanisms by which the leaders of each caucus will bring the groups back together again. Without good leadership it is possible for caucuses to escalate in the direction of despair and pain, and for the process to become divisive when the opposite is intended.

Caucusing as healing in itself

At times there seems to have been a belief that all a group needs to do in order to address an issue of injustice between them is to caucus. Somehow the act of caucusing in and of itself is seen as liberating, and that when the caucuses come back together again there is faith that relationships will somehow be enhanced. Unfortunately, however, where caucusing has occurred outside of ongoing partnerships, people have at times come back together in increased distress and the process has been divisive rather than enhancing relationships.

Maintaining a focus

If the initial caucuses are painful and divisive, attending to this distress can become the entire focus of energy. Ongoing accountability processes can become a focus in

themselves, rather than as a facilitative structure to enable partnerships to work together on broader issues of injustice in the wider world.

Institutional power

At times, caucusing has occurred within workplaces or training courses with little regard given to the complexities of institutional power relations. Supervisors, management personnel or tutors/teachers have become members of a marginalised caucus while students, employees, supervisees have become members of the dominant caucus. Situations like this require great care.

Transient workers

Within The Family Centre, people within the caucusing process are those who have long-term commitment to each other and the workplace. Involving people within caucusing who will only be around for the short-term, such as students or visitors, may be complicated.

Practical constraints

Practical constraints have also created difficulties. The size of caucuses when accountability processes have been used within conferences and/or large workshops have greatly limited possibilities, as have time constraints. Attempting to use caucusing in time-limited contexts with large numbers of people can be problematic.

Focusing on the big picture

Throughout the processes of partnership we have had to find ways to stay focused on the big picture and not get caught up in minute differences or conflict. This is not always easy, however, and of course who determines what is a small issue and what is a big issue can be highly contentious.

As therapists, we bring to partnerships a deep sensitivity to shifts of power no matter how small they are. Whether they occur in conversation, in the kitchen, in the workplace, or in caucuses, our work within family therapy sensitises us to minute power shifts. This keen sensitivity to minute relations of power can complicate our work in accountability. Any small shift of power that occurs gets noticed and invites a comment. Our internal focus in family therapy orientates us to these small power shifts. What can then occur is that if we notice power shift A

we might link it to power shift B. It is easy to make a jump of logic to link power shift B to power shift C. Suddenly a small shift in power is linked in our hearts to an act of gross oppression and a sense of outrage and injustice can escalate.

Remaining focused on the big picture is important. Our accountability processes are the foundation for the work we do in our respective communities. Our partnerships within the agency remain continually orientated to the work we do in the broader society. A common commitment to big picture change, and working together in relation to bringing about this change, generates trust. It is a trust that is based on collective action.

Conclusion

Within this paper we have tried to clarify some of the foundations upon which our partnerships of accountability are built. We have also tried to describe some of the recent points of growth. We have spoken of leadership, ethics and care, and we have evoked the liberative histories upon which we base our work. We have emphasised how important the initial processes of negotiating partnership relationships are, the importance of understanding power differences and deconstruction, and how consensual rather than authoritarian processes need to be primary. We hope that the more detailed explanations which we have provided here will prove helpful to others in their own endeavours to create meaningful partnerships.

These issues remain very complex. It took generations to build up the divisions, injustices and relations of power which we are trying to address. It will take some generations to overcome them. What we can do is make a start.

References

- Freire, P., 1970: *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Tamasese, K. & Waldegrave, C. 1994: 'Cultural and gender accountability in the "just therapy" approach.' *Dulwich Centre Newsletter*, Nos.2&3.

Publishers' acknowledgements

Dulwich Centre Publications would like to acknowledge the helpful feedback we received from Sue Hetzel, Zoy Kazan and Chris Behan.