PSP LearningHub

Understanding Resistance in Practice

What is Resistance?

It is about recognising people's inherent ability to respond to adversity. Resistance can take many forms – from overtly standing up to a perpetrator to small acts or thoughts that go unnoticed by others. These acts of resistance represent a victim's efforts to resist, defy or strive against the abuse and their efforts to maintain their dignity.

"Whenever people are abused, they do many things to try and reduce, prevent or stop the abuse in some way. This is known as resistance and is based on the belief that whenever people are treated badly, they resist"

(Wade, 1997).

Often acts of violence and acts of resistance are hidden. Focusing on a victim's responses to adverse situations is known as response-based practice. At its core, a response-based approach to practice is about noticing how, in any given moment, a person exercises some caution, creativity, deliberation, and awareness that enables them to handle a difficult situation. It is about interpreting these responses as forms of 'resistance' that victims use to keep hold of and reassert their dignity.

Key Response-Based Practice Ideas

- Violence is not mutual. It is the actions taken by one person against the will and wellbeing of another. Violence is also social. It involves at least two people and is committed in a social situation.
- Dignity is central to social life: it is through our social interactions that we derive and develop our sense of identity, self-esteem, and self-worth. Violence is an affront to dignity. Even in extreme adversity, victims search for and find ways to maintain and assert their dignity.
- Violence is deliberate: perpetrators make a planned and deliberate choice to use violence against women and children. They anticipate and take steps to supress a victim's resistance to their violence.

- Resistance is ever present: whenever there is an act of violence there is a response. Whether in the behaviours or minds of a victim, these responses signify their resistance and defiance of the violence.
- Humans are responsive and active: We are active 'agents' not passive and affected 'objects'. Resistance is a response to violence, not an effect or impact of violence.
- Social responses are crucial: The nature and quality of how people perceive and respond to us contributes to our sense of worth and dignity. Victims of violence respond physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually to the positive or negative response they receive from others.

'We need to locate the problem in the social world, not in the person them self'

Vikki Reynolds, 2016

Why is Resistance Important to Our Work?

Paying attention to responses and acts of resistance is important because:

- it is useful for a victim's self-esteem, their sense of power and self- worth for them to think about what they did to oppose the abuse. Examining their resistance to violence can help victims resolve any feelings they have of being responsible for the abuse
- women and children who have been abused may find it more comfortable and safer to talk about what they did in a response to violence rather than what was done to them
- when we look at how women and children respond to and resist violence, we immediately see their existing capacities, their knowledge, skills, and their strength of spirit. We are drawn to the ways they assert their independence and resist the violence. These strengths and capacities are the foundations of our conversations, planning and relationships with women and children
- it helps us and others to see women and children as active and responding agents rather than being passive victims of abuse
- accounts of resistance reveal pre-existing abilities, emergent capacities, and feelings or acts of despair, determination, love, or fear. Such responses inspire us to empathise and work with women and children. It shifts our focus from working "on" to working "with" and "for" mothers, children, and families

- a history of resistance is accompanied by a history of violence
- exploring the multiple points in time when a woman or child has resisted abuse makes visible the multiple and deliberate tactics used by the perpetrator to supress and control a victim's resistance. It provides us with an accurate and detailed description of the violence and victims responses. Response-based practice is not just about being positive and strengths based-it is about being accurate. This is vital to effective planning and our work with women, children, and perpetrators.

Types of Resistance

The resistance strategies available to women and children depends on factors such as: their culture, ethnicity, age, class, or sexuality. Victims usually resist in ways that are not obvious to the perpetrator or onlookers. Victims may choose not to talk about the abuse to keep safe or avoid negative judgement by others. At other times, victims may gauge it safe to overtly oppose the violence. Overtime, women and children engage in both hidden and obvious acts of resistance that allows them to experience a sense of accomplishment

In being blind to a victim's resistance, some people assume that victims have not done enough to protect themselves, believe that the victim creates their own misfortune, or that the victim is in some way responsible for the abuse. Examples of how resistance can be misinterpreted are:

Resistance	Misinterpretation
Not showing emotions	Emotionally detachment, avoidance
Not doing what the perpetrator wanted	Passive aggressive, uncooperative
Doing nice things for perpetrators	Co-dependency
Children agreeing with dad's view of mum	Colluding with violent father

Some examples of a victim's resistance to a perpetrator's abuse are included in the table below.

Perpetrator's Actions	Victim's Resistance
Isolation of victim	Attempts to maintain friendships: physically or via phone or social media when he is out or asleep
	Remembering good times with friends
Attempts to humiliate the victim	Thinking or acting in ways that helps maintain self-respect and feelings of self-worth
	Holding her head up high. Privately hating the victim
Attempts to control the victim	Acting in a way that shows she refuses to be controlled – doing the opposite of what the perpetrator wants or likes
	Doing what the perpetrator wants her to do in a very dramatic way
	Quietly disregarding instructions
	Finding ways to get out of the house and escape control
Attempts to mutualise the violence	Refusal to respond to or accept statements such as conflict, argument
	Ringing the police after being abused
	Showering after sexual abuse
Makes excuses for the violence	Thinking or acting in ways that show for herself that there is no excuse for the victim or that the abuse is wrong

Perpetrator's Actions	Victim's Resistance
	Knowing and thinking that she did not deserve the abuse, it was wrong, the perpetrator is fully responsible
	Refusal to accept a perpetrators view of himself as gentle, emotional
	Telling others about the abuse
	Refusing to stay at home and hide physical evidence of the abuse
	Refusing to wear glasses or makeup to cover up abuse
If the perpetrator tries to hurt the victim	Doing things to reduce, ensure, or escape the pain
	Numbing their feelings when they are abused, taking her mind to a peaceful place
	A child might interrupt –say he is feeling sick to stop the violence
	A child might take his siblings for a walk or into their room to protect them from violence
	Refusing to show emotional vulnerability, privately hating the perpetrator

Social Responses

The term “social responses” refers to the responses of others to the individuals faced with adversity including violence. These responses are provided by:

- people in a victim’s social network or those present during an assault
- members of institutions charged with responding (child protection, police, judges)
- others whose actions influence societal standards (law, policy, media, curriculum) or norms (racism, homophobia)
- conditions (geographic isolation, poverty) that enable or prevent violence and that limit or promote justice and individual freedoms.

Victims of violence respond physically, emotionally, mentally, socially, and spiritually to positive or negative social responses.

Victims who receive positive social responses:

- tend to recover more quickly and fully
- are more likely to work with authorities
- are more likely to report violence in the future.

Victims who receive negative social responses:

- are less likely to co-operate with authorities
- are less likely to disclose violence again
- are more likely to receive a diagnosis of mental disorder.

Putting Response and Resistance into Our Practice

Response based practice involves changing our mindset, our language, and the way we engage with, understand, and respond to women and children experiencing violence. Some ways we put this into our practice include:

- listening for and identifying acts of resistance. Women and children may not conceptualise or see what they do as acts of resistance. It involves careful questioning

that enables women and children to explore the meanings they attach to their responses

- asking questions or prompts that may help unearth resistance including:
    - What did you do? How did you do that? What kind of expression was on your face? Did you feel like you could do something? What went through your mind? What did the perpetrator do next? Again, how did you respond?
    - What is it like for you to think about your response as resistance? What do you think about that?
    - Have you talked with anyone about the violence? How did they respond? How did that make you feel? Does anyone know you feel or act like that? What do they say and do when you tell them?
- getting information about the context: where were you? Who else was there? What did you do? What did others do? What else was happening at the time? What did they say to you? What was their body language like?
- remembering to appreciate and communicate to victims the resourcefulness and ingenuity of their acts of resistance
- recognising that processing responses as acts of resistance may take time for both victims and practitioners. It is important to pace the conversations and allow time and space for victims to make sense of their responses. Reflective pauses and silence in conversations is OK
- 'honouring' acts of resistance – this does not mean downplaying risk or romanticising resistance –not all acts of resistance are strengths based. If a woman or child's resistance places them at higher risk or is harmful, encourage, and support them to use other forms of resistance and ways to maintain or expand their dignity and control of her life
- remembering that how we talk and what we write matters. Tell it like it is and make explicit who is responsible for the violence. Avoid language that mutualises the violence or constructs women and children as passive objects that have been "affected" or "impacted" by violence
- getting an accurate and detailed picture of the patterns of abuse and the patterns of resistance to that abuse. Descriptions of resistance reveal who a person is and what they stand for–we see them for what they can do not what has been done to them
- thinking about the types of things you do as a professional to uphold the dignity of victims and perpetrators. Some simple ways you can do this include:

- showing your respect by being courteous, communicating regularly, and using the language of the family
- taking time to listen to and reflect on what women, children, and perpetrators say and thanking them for sharing their stories
- appreciating a mother's efforts and capacity to parent in the face of violence. Likewise recognising a child's efforts to keep themselves and others safe
- making sure women and children know they are not responsible for the violence. The abuse is not because of something they did or said
- treating men as capable human beings who have all the skills, knowledge, and ability to not use violence. Engage with him around times when he did not use violence, his hopes for his children and himself
- listening and taking seriously where mothers and children are at and what they think will make things better
- acknowledging that children can and want to talk about their experience of violence.
- seeking supervision if you respond strongly to a child's story or if you feel you get stuck.

When using the Three Houses tool (Weld & Greening, 2004), think about adding in the "rickety response-based shed". Ask children what is good, what their dreams are, and what worries them. Then ask them what they do about the things that worry them. This illuminates and fills the rickety response shed with their ideas, capacities, and courage that keeps them safe. Such information can drive interventions designed to help children recover from the effects of violence once they are in a safe secure and violence free environment.

To hear more about response-based practice watch Allan's presentation here.

Please see: Dignity Driven Practice and Dignity Driven Practice – Recognising Resistance Practice Tips for more information.

References

Coates, L., Wade, A. (2007). Language and Violence: Analysis of Four Discursive Operations. *Journal of Family Violence, 22.* 511-522.

Wade, A. (2015). Response-Based Practice. In Neukrug, E. (ed). *The Sage Encyclopedia of Theory in Counselling and Psychotherapy*. Sage Reference: Los Angeles.