

# The eye of the beholder

## Encountering women's experience of domestic violence and abuse as a male researcher and art therapist

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### Introduction

This chapter addresses issues that arose from being a male researcher and art therapist conducting arts-based research with women who had experienced domestic violence and abuse. Engaging in such research required that I critically engage with issues of gender within the context of conducting research. Through the lens of one particular vignette taken from a larger study, this paper will engage with broader ideas about gender and the conducting of arts-based research and art therapy. Whilst this chapter will have relevance for those men engaged in research or art therapy that involves aspects of domestic violence and abuse, it will also have relevance to those who are interested in wider discussions to be had about the influence of gender upon relationships within therapy and research. This has always been a topic worthy of sustained investigation, but the contemporary emergence within public discourse about abuses of male privilege within various professions makes this an especially important subject to attend to.

Drawing upon the work of Sandra Harding (1998, 2004), Jeff Hearn (1998) and Ann Murphy (2012), I will explore how feminist standpoint theory and reflexivity helped to manage, and make sense of, the concerns and anxieties that arose whilst conducting research into violence against women. Anxieties about research becoming therapy merged with anxieties about being a male researcher working with women who had experienced domestic violence and abuse. Whilst this chapter does not aim to outline in depth what an arts-based research methodology looks like within the context of studying domestic violence and abuse, it begins by describing the methodology in enough detail to provide a context within which the nature of the research process can be appreciated. The findings of the research are presented in sufficient detail to allow the overall findings of the research to be understood. There then follows examples of words and images produced by one woman, who used her participation as a way of ensuring that she was seen clearly by myself and by other research participants. This aspect of wanting to be seen became an embodiment of the need to acknowledge my own standpoint and reflexive position as a male

researcher. Evaluative comments about participation made by other women are used to show how vulnerability was a feature of taking part in this research for both participants and for me. The concept of vulnerability is examined with reference made to ideas about imagination and empathy from the perspective of feminist philosophy, which in turn helps to shape a discussion about the place of gender within research, art therapy and the boundary between them.

In keeping with the principles of feminist standpoint theory and strong objectivity, as set forth by Harding (1998), this chapter is written from a first-person perspective.

### **Definitions of domestic violence and abuse**

At the time of writing, the UK Government defines domestic violence and abuse as '*any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive, threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are, or have been, intimate partners or family members regardless of gender or sexuality*' (Home Office, 2016). The key difference between this definition and earlier definitions is the acceptance that coercion and control underpin all forms of domestic violence and abuse. Similarly, the US Department of Justice states that '*[d]omestic violence can be physical, sexual, emotional, economic, or psychological actions or threats of actions that influence another person.*' (Department of Justice, 2018).

The term 'domestic violence and abuse' does not fully encompass the spectrum of behaviours that current definitions encompass, but it is the most commonly used and understood term that exists right now. The current definitions are useful in incorporating behaviours that would previously have fallen outside of what was considered unacceptable within intimate relationships, and were thus effectively hidden both from public consciousness and state-sponsored measurements and responses.

### **Context and methodology**

The research project that informs this chapter was conducted between 2009 and 2014. Based upon an earlier research project I had contributed to, which used an arts-based and Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach to better understand the experiences of refugees and asylum seekers (O'Neill, 2010), this later research was focused upon employing an arts-based methodology to explore women's responses to having lived with, and moved away from, domestic violence and abuse. Having previously been commissioned to work as an art therapist with women who had experienced domestic violence and abuse, I was confident that I was able to work safely and effectively within this research context. I was curious to know how an arts-based method, with its emphasis upon participants' imaginations, that had been shown to be of value in understanding experiences of asylum and migration could be of equal value in understanding experiences of domestic violence and abuse.

The research methodology synthesised elements of ethno-mimesis (O'Neill, 2009, 2010), sensory and visual ethnography (Pink, 2007, 2009) and feminist standpoint theory (Leavy, 2007; Harding, 2004, 1990). The primary aim was to enable a way for women to use art materials to express their responses to domestic violence, in a form that allowed access to imaginative and sensory representations and that allowed for the appearance of thoughts about the future as well as the past and the present. Alongside the objective to make women's responses visible was that to make participation safe via an ethics of care (Prosser, Clark & Wiles, 2008). Equally, by being reflexively mindful of my own gender, and its potential impact upon the dynamics of power and women's willingness to engage with the research (Beecham, 2009; Harding, 1998; Hearn, 1998), I aspired to communicate in a way that was attentive and non-judgemental. This issue of reflexivity is expanded upon below.

Recruitment was managed with the support of a service affiliated with Women's Aid (a UK-based federation of support services). Several groups were operated over a one-year period. Each group would meet for one morning a week for twelve weeks, with the time being used to produce images and words whilst considering different aspects of living with and moving away from domestic violence and abuse. An earlier pilot group had identified that the topics of home, family, past, present and future were all useful ways in which to frame experiences and expectations. Although several dozen women engaged with the research at various points, the ethical choice was taken to only include the stories of those women who stayed for the whole duration and who were able to present and summarise a completed narrative. A total of eight complete stories have been included in the subsequent dissemination of the research findings (Bird, 2018). A relatively small number, but given the depth of disclosure within those stories, they can be deemed to be of sufficient quantity to render the data meaningful (Baker & Rosalind, 2012).

### **Transitional stories of domestic violence and abuse**

The outcome of the research was the formulation of a concept that I have termed *transitional stories of domestic violence and abuse*. A transitional story of domestic violence and abuse refers to the representation of physical and emotional movement between places, movement through time and changes in personal relationships. These transitions can contribute to how women think about themselves and engage in tactics of agency and resistance. Transitional stories incorporate the past, the present and the future. How women have survived domestic violence and abuse informs the ways in which they resist it in the present and the future. Resistance emerges in mental processes, such as a determination to have a better life or to regain a sense of harmony. It also appears in acts of daily living such as choices made about internal décor, decisions made about food, gardening and countryside visits. Transitional stories illustrate how internal and external features work together and it is this

intertwining of the psychological and the physical, and the joining together of the past, the present and the future that makes transitional stories of domestic violence and abuse unique. Transitional stories of domestic violence make reference to processes that Susan Brison (2002) has identified in the way women attempt to remake themselves following sexual violence. They also contain elements of what Vanessa May (2013) identifies as being important to the concept of the relational self and social belonging: change, motion, and the importance of everyday social actions. Both Brison (2002) and May (2013) identify social relationships as central to notions of identity and belonging, which fits with my own findings that show the crucial role of social relationships within transitional stories.

### **Feminist standpoint theory and reflexivity**

Throughout the process of developing, conducting and evaluating the research, I grappled with a number of interconnected issues. The first issue was how to reconcile the uncertainty I had about my own gender when studying a subject that potentially placed me in the position of association with the perpetration of violence against women, in terms of being part of a patriarchal system of power and a representative of masculine aggression. The second issue was the challenge of accommodating non-linear and physical forms of knowledge within the traditionally text-based practice of social science research. A final and related issue was the concern I had that my participation in the research would have the potential to be unsettling for those women taking part in the research or that the research process would become too much like a therapeutic intervention. In addressing these issues I came to the conclusion that they were linked in terms of how gender was an important component of the relationship between myself and participants and between myself and the expressions of knowledge made by those participants. Feminist epistemologies in general and feminist standpoint theory in particular provided a solution to thinking about those issues. Politically, conducting the research without recourse to feminist principles would have been problematic. Given that the historical developments within social and legal attitudes towards domestic violence have only been possible because of those activists and researchers who have explicitly aligned themselves with feminism (Dobash & Dobash, 1992; Hague & Malos, 2005), to not engage with feminism when researching any aspect of violence against women would be to work in a very limited way, ignorant of the gendered forces that enable that violence, and of the ways of countering those forces. Hearn (1998) for example states that the male researcher, 'if engaged in researching any aspect of men's violence towards women, must ensure that research is not planned and conducted in isolation from feminism, as to do so is likely to 'reproduce some of the "knowledge" of anti-feminism' (p.43). Hearn also identifies an epistemological problem when men study violence against women: a problem that centres on the gendered valuing of objective

and subjective knowledge. Hearn claims that there is a complex relationship between experience, knowledge, theory and politics; writing that '[i]n many respects, men's knowledge as researchers ... remains severely limited by virtue of men's power locations as members of an oppressor class ... relative to women's knowledge of the effects of men.' (p.42). As a way of addressing this complexity and the gendered valuing of knowledge, Hearn advocates for the 'linking together of fragments of knowledge' (p.42). Similar issues have been addressed by David Beecham (2009). However, whilst Beecham argues that there is a danger of over-simplifying the relationship between gender and power by creating a polarised view of the oppressors and the oppressed, his suggestion that the researcher 'should acknowledge that all knowledge is situated and that there is value to "insider" and "outsider" perspectives' (p.6) complements the linking together of fragments of knowledge advocated by Hearn. Both Hearn and Beecham employ feminist thought to help manage being a male researcher investigating men's violence towards women; they pay particular attention to the effects of gender upon knowledge production and values, whilst suggesting the adoption of an inclusive attitude towards the emergence of different types and expressions of knowledge. It is just such an acknowledgement and valuing of different types and expressions of knowledge that forms a vital element of feminist standpoint theory.

Feminist standpoint theory argues for starting off thought from the lives of others – and in particular those people marginalised in relation to dominant groups. Harding (2004) for example makes the claim that '[s]tarting off research from women's lives will generate less partial and distorted accounts not only of women's lives but also of men's lives and of the whole social order' (p.128). Furthermore, when providing a critique of a number of feminist epistemologies, Harding suggests that 'different epistemologies offer possibilities for different distributions of political power' (1998, p.175) in terms of how they legitimise different kinds of knowledge. For example when considering the limits of empiricism – including feminist empiricism – Harding claims that it overvalues objective reason whilst undervaluing subjective, emotional and embodied knowledge. Harding goes further in suggesting that the traditional way in which objectivity has been conceived and applied is a weak form of objectivity because it rarely – if ever – acknowledges the historical or situated nature of the object of enquiry or the subjectivity of the researcher. It is only when the researcher acknowledges their own standpoint and situated position, and that of the people whom they are working with, that a stronger form of objectivity emerges. It is through rigorous and strong reflexivity and the accommodation of different perspectives that more value-conscious forms of strong-objectivity are generated.

The importance of reflexivity to the researcher who is working within a feminist standpoint framework was therefore important within the context of conducting research about domestic violence and abuse. This is especially so where there is a difference in gender between participants and researcher.

There are some specific areas that will be presented here that show how that gender difference had an influence upon the research process. The first is how participants responded to their engagement with the process and how this was expressed visually and verbally. The second is how I in turn responded to participants, and my concerns about the blurring of the boundary between art therapy and arts-based research. In both of these cases, vulnerability played an important role. I will use images created by one woman to illustrate the first area of concern.

### The eye of the beholder

One theme that appeared within women's stories was their response to encounters with professional services. How they felt about being seen, heard and supported by those services seemed to be carried over into how they felt about being supported within the research process. This is evidenced in several images made by Lorraine (names of participants are pseudonyms). Figure 5.1 illustrates where Lorraine explored her sense of sadness in a way that allowed it to be seen by the rest of us in the group. The eye that she placed very centrally within that image acts as a very literal sign for the act of seeing and being seen, and this use of an eye to connect to the viewer was repeated twice more by Lorraine.

The symbol of the eye appeared again in Figure 5.2. Lorraine spoke about this image being to do with the 'eye of the beholder', stating that it showed how she was thinking about herself now, something that she had been unable to do in the past. She later said that she was calm when making this image and that it helped her to sort out her thinking about problems she was having at the time. She also stated that it showed the outline of a fish that was swimming

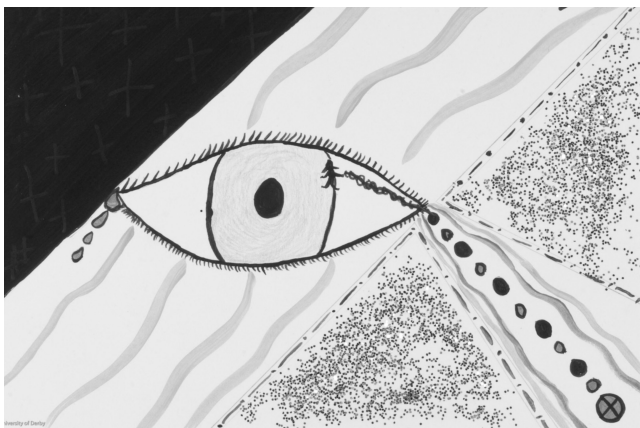


Figure 5.1 Eye with tears by Lorraine. Research conducted with Dr Jamie Bird. 2012.



Figure 5.2 Eye of the beholder by Lorraine. Research conducted with Dr Jamie Bird. 2012.

away from it all (the eye is placed centrally within the fish shape). Incidentally, in using the symbol of a fish Lorraine was using the metaphor of nature to represent escape and freedom. Nature motifs were a metaphor used by many of the participants.

My interpretation of Figure 5.2 was firstly to perceive it as calming in its use of pastel blues, greens and pinks. I also found it a particularly emotive image in how the single eye seems to hold the viewer in its gaze. It picks up upon the theme Lorraine had introduced in Figure 5.1 about being seen by the group, but here appears calmer and more serene. As such, this image can be interpreted as an embodiment of Lorraine's growing confidence and sense of self, which meant for her an ability to both perceive her experiences of domestic violence and abuse more clearly and to have those experiences seen and validated by others. In art therapy terms this fits with ideas about witnessing (Leahmonth, 1994). This theme of seeing and being seen carries on into Figure 5.3 that shows a female figure with a crown winking at the viewer.

Lorraine stated that Figure 5.3 was a representation of a queen and that it was about her gaining control and respect. It was representative of new beginnings and about how her participation in groups such as *The Freedom Programme*<sup>1</sup> had helped her to gain new goals and strategies. She did not elaborate upon those goals and strategies, but what is evident is that they had enhanced her confidence in a way that allowed her to engage with others in a more assertive way. In the context of her participation here, this seemed to include the rest of the group and me as the observers or witnesses of the image through the way in which the woman on the page holds the viewer's gaze so forcibly. There





Figure 5.3 Winking queen by Lorraine. Research conducted with Dr Jamie Bird. 2012.

is though an ambiguity within the image. The observation has been made by others who have viewed this image that the winking eye can also be read as a bruised eye and that, despite that possibly violent reference, the queen is still able to hold the viewer's gaze and still wear her crown. This might be a useful visual metaphor of the idea of being simultaneously both a victim in a legal sense, but also a survivor and a resistor of the effects of domestic violence and abuse (Allen, 2012). In that way Figure 5.3 is an image whose meaning is contained within the mind of the viewer – or 'the eye of the beholder' to use Lorraine's metaphor – and that along with all of Lorraine's images and words that allude to being seen clearly, asks questions about the place of witnessing and interpretation within arts-based research and art therapy.

In terms of my own reflexive response to Lorraine's images, as a male researcher I did feel that I was being confronted and challenged, in the sense of becoming the object of her gaze and of being asked to see her clearly. In that sense there is an equalising of the power relationship between Lorraine as a female participant and me as a male researcher in terms of who was the subject and who was the object. There was thus a subversion of what might be considered the ordinary appearance of something like the male gaze (Mulvey, 2009) within arts-based research or art therapy. The consequence of viewing Lorraine's images, and reflecting on the sense of becoming the object of her gaze, was that my sense of uncertainty identified earlier about being a man researching aspects of men's violence against women, was increased.

## Vulnerability

In referencing how her participation in *The Freedom Programme* had been of value, Lorraine was echoing observations made by other participants that taking part in the research was useful in terms of contributing to their sense of



agency. Whilst there were positive views expressed by women when evaluating their participation, a more ambivalent response emerged where Lisa wrote as part of her assessment of her participation: '*I was reluctant to talk about my issues as I didn't wish to be reminded thank you!*' Although reassured that the methodology was safe, guided as it was by an ethics of care (Prosser, Clark & Wiles, 2008), comments such as those made by Lisa reflected concerns that emerge when employing a methodology that has the potential to leave participants feeling uncertain and vulnerable.

The sense of vulnerability expressed by participants resonates with Ann Murphy's (2012) observations about the place of vulnerability and ambiguity within feminist ontology and political imagination. Building upon Michèle Le Doeuff's (2002) examination of the denial of imagination and imagery within philosophy, Murphy argues that it is vulnerability that makes us open to others, to their corporeal, ontological and ethical otherness, which in turn has the potential to enable empathy. Conversely, Murphy argues that corporeal vulnerability can just as easily provoke a retreat from what is imagined to be the other in fear and repulsion. From this perspective, imagination, and its association to the vulnerable corporeal body, can become a potential source of wounding and violence or a prompt for caring and compassion. In Murphy's view, both vulnerability and imagination occupy ambiguous positions within philosophy: something to be drawn back from as well as something to be approached. Murphy talks of an 'emergent feminist ontology of corporeal vulnerability' (2012, p.99) and considers the implications of an ethics based upon vulnerability, where the ambiguous nature of vulnerability is embraced and acknowledged, rather than denied so that the beneficial components of care and compassion do not become 'concealed by [vulnerability's] overwhelming association with violence' (p.98) that so much philosophy espouses. Murphy calls attention to the way in which images of violence permeate continental philosophy's accounts of identity and difference, and argues for a conception of self and otherness that is based upon an interdependence that is both ambiguous and vulnerable. As such, any idea of an emancipatory future (of the sort that feminist politics might imagine and which the research described here came to include) would be required to acknowledge and embrace the ambiguity that is inherent within corporeal vulnerability and its associated influence upon imagination, rather than attempt to transcend it. Murphy's conception of ambiguity and vulnerability is useful in understanding the responses to violence expressed by participants in the way it can assist in appreciating the ways in which women represented their memories and imaginations. It also helps in appreciating their responses to questions about thoughts of participation.

The vulnerability expressed by participants also mirrors the observation made by Abrahams et al. (2004) and Williamson (2000) that narrative and testimony-based research runs the risk of being experienced as traumatically cathartic for women who have experienced domestic violence and abuse. Likewise, Rumbold, Fenner & Brophy-Dixon (2012) identify arts-based

research's potential to evoke vulnerability within participants. The research that has been outlined here shows the potential for catharsis and vulnerability to be present when engaging in arts-based research with women who have experienced domestic violence and abuse. Unsettling feelings from the past seeped into thoughts about the present and the future. Uncertainty about the future often generated further anxiety. Such a process may have occurred had the research been purely word-based, but I believe that the image-based nature of the method made this process of emotional catharsis more likely because of the sometimes unexpected and unplanned appearance of unsettling thoughts and feelings that were provoked by images, or emerge in images. However, that participants were able to work slowly, that the groups were contained within the supportive framework offered by the host organisation and that I was able to draw upon my experience as an art therapist meant that where there was the appearance of feelings of vulnerability these were contained and managed in a way that meant participants did not feel out of control.

### **The relationship between research and therapy**

The concerns that Lisa expressed about talking about her past, and that Emma had about being reminded of the past, echoed my own concerns about the methodology moving rather too close to a form of therapeutic intervention. There were times when the process of working with participants felt closer to therapy than it did to research. Above I have spoken about how the expression allowed by the making of images could occasionally be experienced by some women as making them uncomfortably vulnerable. Those women who took part would occasionally refer to the groups as art therapy or state that their participation felt therapeutic. To begin with, this did raise concerns that the participation would in some way be counter-productive. Those concerns dissipated when I observed that participants were able to continue engaging in the process even where it was at points unsettling for them. I also gained reassurance from working closely with the services that I aligned myself with for the purposes of this research: each woman who took part had a named worker within those services and there was a well-established process of ensuring participants well-being and safety. Over time I also came to realise that the subject of enquiry and the methodology I had formed to investigate it was inevitably going to generate the expression of strong thoughts and feelings that had revelatory and cathartic qualities to them, and that the expression of those would be of benefit to the participants. The ethical protocol I had established had taken account of the possibility of a strong effect appearing within the research, and again the support of the host services was a key feature of that protocol. The aspect I was least ready to accept was the therapeutic benefit that the women gained from their participation. What allowed me to become more comfortable with this element was in seeing it as a manifestation of the underpinning philosophy of the methodologies I had chosen to adopt. Participatory

arts, PAR and feminist-standpoint methods have an explicit aim of aiding participants as well as future audiences (O'Neill, 2010), but it took some time for this to sit comfortably with my initial assumptions about research needing to be neutral and disinterested and my fears about an overly therapeutic approach to participants' engagement in the research.

There is literature that identifies the complexity of trying to empathise with participants (Rice, 2000) and that acknowledges the potential for participants to be re-traumatised through their participation (Abrahams et al., 2004; Williamson, 2000). Letherby (2003) highlights the tensions that exist between a desire for emancipation and a need for researchers to control the flow of the production of knowledge, a tension that undermines a sense of equality of power within research. This latter point resonates with how certain aspects of therapy have been criticised as exhibiting an unbalanced power relationship between client and therapist, particularly where there are differences of gender between client and therapist (Hogan, 2012). Such observations drive the need to create good ethical frameworks within which to research domestic violence and abuse. What is lacking though is an acknowledgement that participation, whilst running the risk of adding to a sense of trauma, might also have the potential to ease such feelings or to give a renewed sense of hope or to enhance well-being. Had the research I conducted been framed as the trying out of a therapeutic intervention, then such thoughts would not have arisen because the evaluation of therapeutic potential would have been an avowed aim. The research though was not framed in that way and instead was sociological in nature. Where the tension lay was in my sensitivity to women's participation – in the moment-to-moment sequence of events – that was almost indistinguishable to how I have observed people participating in art therapy. What stopped it becoming an explicit expression of art therapy was my careful guidance away from a sustained attention upon the past, and by being more transparent in how I responded to women's images and words than if I was in the role of an art therapist. In hindsight though, guided by how some of the women responded to the question I asked about how my being a male researcher influenced their participation, I wish that I had been even more transparent than I was. For example, my desire to remain neutral and to focus more upon listening than responding was perceived by one woman as being withholding and distant and therefore as an expression of an aspect of power that she associated with me as male; a response that highlights a tension that arises in being a male researcher investigating women's experience of domestic violence and abuse as much as it highlights the tension between emancipation and therapeutic potential.

The tension between emancipation and therapeutic potential fits with a point Alan Radley (2009) makes about the potential conflict between using stories purely as a way of contemplating suffering and using stories as part of an activist agenda for ideological reasons. Radley references Catherine Reismann (2002 cited in Radley, 2009), who when writing about her experience of revisiting a participant's story of domestic violence, realises that in her original

desire to find a positive end to the participant's story, failed to confront its full horror. Radley suggests that this example demonstrates 'the need for researchers to face up to difficult moments of witnessing, even where they are powerless to do anything about them at the time' (2009, p.65). This observation chimes with Frank's (1995) advocating for the need to pay attention to those stories about illness that do not have narrative arcs that end with either a cure or a quest fulfilled. It was difficult to be a witness to participants' stories, especially where good endings existed only in the future. The trouble I had reading Figure 5.3 in terms of labelling the eye as winking rather than bruised shows that encountering the tougher story is not easy.

These thoughts about therapeutic potential, emancipation and my own feeling of ambiguity can be viewed as an additional point to be made about the role of vulnerability; only this time they are much more inclusive of my own thoughts and feelings, where I felt a sense of ambiguity and vulnerability about the research process. That I was able to acknowledge such feelings, and that participants were able to express their own similar feelings, suggests that I was able to meet the criteria of researcher reflexivity, accountability and openness to being questioned by participants that Richardson (2000) and Finley (2003) put forward as being markers of good quality participatory and arts-based research.

## Conclusion

I have referred to how, as a man investigating women's experiences of domestic violence and abuse, I was required to engage with issues of gender. From very early on it became evident that not only would I need to work closely with supporting services, whose ethos was grounded within the principles of feminism, but also on a personal level I would need to acquaint myself, and be comfortable with, those principles. Feminist standpoint theory proved useful in helping me, as a man, appreciate women's perspectives of gender, power and violence. In this chapter I have reflected upon my position as a man investigating women's experience of domestic violence with respect to thoughts about vulnerability and the differences in power within the relationship between participants and researcher. A number of authors have been cited in those discussions (Murphy, 2012; Letherby, 2003; Rice, 2000; Williamson, 2000). The notion of strong objectivity within feminist standpoint epistemology has relevance (Harding, 2004) in terms of embracing reflexivity. Letherby (2003) states that '[feminist standpoint] supporters recognize that the production of knowledge is a political act in that the researcher's own personhood is always part of research' (p.45) and in terms of men being advocates and users of reflexivity within feminist standpoint epistemology. Harding (1998) writes that men can gain from insights provided by a reflexive position in their own 'struggles against androcentrism and male supremacy in family life, in emotional relations, at work, in public agenda politics' (p.185). These thoughts, along

with those offered by male researchers who have also adopted a reflexive and feminist approach to research (Beecham, 2009; Brod, 1998; Hearn, 1998), point towards the value and validity of being a male researcher investigating women's responses to domestic violence and abuse. My own encounter with the transitional stories told by women forced me to confront my own memories and desires about home, family and agency and of how those are gendered and become embodied within everyday acts. I was able to reflect upon how my own behaviour within the family home is shaped by my history and culturally situated ideas about the gendered division of labour within the home. Investigating domestic violence and abuse more widely made me acutely aware of how my own communication style and expression of feelings might be perceived as being coercive and controlling. In this way the research was emancipatory for me as well as for the participants. Being in the same room as the women who were sharing their thoughts and feelings about domestic violence meant that the encounter I had with domestic violence was an embodied one. The literature that I accessed throughout the research process did have a profound impact upon my understanding of gender, power and violence, but the encounter with the physicality of women's stories and the face-to-face nature of our communication brought that understanding to life. In this way, the notion of embodied and corporeal vulnerability being an aid to a feminist understanding of empathy (Murphy, 2012), that I associated with the underpinning epistemology of the research, was evident in how participants and I were able to share a physical space and be open to disclosure and the witnessing of stories told.

I have made reference to how one woman found my opacity problematic. That same woman also said that my presence as a man meant that she was not able to talk about the violence and abuse she had suffered, in particular sexual abuse, in the way that she would like to have done. This is a real concern and demonstrates that there will be limits to what a male researcher is able to hear and witness when working with women. In contrast, other women were able to say that my presence did not act as a barrier to their participation and even went so far as to say that it allowed them to appreciate that some men are able to listen to what they have to say. That variety of responses to my presence as a male researcher can be read as an example of how the quality of participation within arts-based research will be unique to the individual. To continue the metaphor, the response will be within the 'eye of the beholder'. That unique response will be framed within the context of the gender of both parties. It will also be framed within the context of factors such as ethnicity, economic status or health status. Making sense of the interplay of those various forces requires reference to the notion of intersectionality. This chapter has limited itself to a consideration of gender and has put forward the notion that vulnerability is an important concept to understand and occupy if wanting to be reflexive within the context of arts-based research. The argument that I wish to end on is to propose that vulnerability would be similarly useful when

being reflexive about other intersecting factors and just as useful within a more explicitly therapeutic intervention.

## Note

- 1 *The Freedom Programme* is a twelve-week programme that aims to help participants identify patterns of coercion and control that can occur within abusive relationships and to recognise the differences between healthy and unhealthy relationships. It is principally a psycho-educational approach that borrows heavily from the *Duluth Model* of power and control (Shepard & Pence, 1999).

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