Violences faites aux femmes
Arcand, Suzanne, Damant, Dominique

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During the last three decades, feminist activists and scholars have succeeded in lifting the veil of secrecy of violence against women behind closed doors. They have been instrumental in documenting its prevalence and severity, risk factors and the “psychological, physical, social, and economic impacts for victims, their families, and society” (Statistics Canada, 2006, p. 12). Feminist activists promoted public and professional understandings of the issue and worked tirelessly to develop crisis responses, supportive services and treatment programs, as well as sensitive policies and practices in law enforcement and criminal justice institutions. While “it is safe to say that many women – hundreds of thousands perhaps – are safer today than they were thirty-five years ago” (Richie, 2006, p. xvi), feminists have come to recognize that “structural arrangements seriously complicate individual options for women who are marginalized and that no one monolithic response will work to eradicate individual or systemic abuse” (p. xvii). As
such, feminist scholars have recently begun to take up the challenge of understanding women’s experiences and needs vis-à-vis intimate partner violence in the complex contexts of their own social locations with particular attention to the workings of “race” and culture (Agnew, 1998; Bograd, 1999; Crenshaw, 1995; Davies and Krane, 2003; Kanuha, 1990; Krane and Davies, 2002, 2007; Krane, Oxman-Martinez and Ducey, 2000; Oxman-Martinez and Krane, 2005; Sokoloff and Pratt, 2006).

This chapter contributes to this developing feminist discourse. It explores the challenges faced in translating core feminist commitments to anti-racism and cultural sensitivity on the front-lines of practice in a shelter for women experiencing intimate partner violence. It entails reflections on a critical case study of a shelter for battered women located in Canada. This particular shelter serves a diverse clientele with an explicit mandate to offer feminist intervention that is non-racist and culturally sensitive. The driving force behind shelter intervention is in concert with broader feminist projects to emancipate women from oppressive gender relations, in this case, from those that are reproduced in relationships with intimate partners. In this chapter, we suggest that an intersectional framework for understanding women’s complex identities and social locations might provide guidance in responding to arguably some of the most marginalized and disenfranchised women in crisis and their children. By social location we are referring to the simultaneous contexts – as defined by socially, historically and geographically constructed systems of race, class, gender and the like – in which individuals experience their everyday lives. This understanding of social location is in accordance with feminist and anti-racist theories espoused by writers such as Collins (1990), Crenshaw (1995) and Razack (1998).

The chapter begins with a snapshot of the cardinal tenets of feminist practice undertaken in the shelter as derived from its organizational documents. These practices are in concert with dominant feminist discourse in this field. The next section offers a summary of the study from which our reflections on anti-racism and cultural sensitivity emerge in practice. The third section commences with a brief introduction to two residents, Zohreen and Eunice, in order to show the different ways in which experiences of “race,” culture, ethnicity and the like emerge in practice at the shelter. Against this backdrop, we then present excerpts from in-depth interviews with staff and residents to highlight the challenges of translating anti-racism and cultural sensitivity from theory into practice. Recognizing that bringing this commitment into practice is daunting and far from straightforward, the chapter concludes with insights from an intersectional framework. It offers guiding principles on how we might build upon contemporary
feminist efforts to attend to both universalizing of women’s experiences in situations of intimate partner violence and the distinct identities and social locations of individual women.

**TENETS OF FEMINIST SHELTER PRACTICES: A PERUSAL OF ORGANIZATIONAL DOCUMENTS**

The shelter upon which this paper is based identifies itself as a feminist organization created by women for women. Founded in the early 1970s by volunteers and community activists, its woman-centered emphasis is very much in keeping with the history of the sheltering movement in Canada (Gilman, 1988). Services include safe refuge for up to two months, counseling, information and referrals for housing, employment, welfare, legal aid, etc., and follow-up programs for women and their children who have successfully established independence from an abusive partner after their departure from the shelter. Shelter workers also engage in public education on the issue of violence against girls, teens and women, seeking to sensitize professional and lay members of the public on this very issue – its prevalence and risk factors, the characteristic cycle of violence, and the potential sources of support and treatment in the local community context. These facets of its mandate are typical of shelters across Canada (Taylor-Butts, 2005; Tutty and Goard, 2002).

According to Weisz, Taggart, Mockler and Streich (1994, cited in Tutty and Rothery, 2002), shelters provide an urgent and often time-limited environment to women who have few options. Shelter residents have been found to be amongst the most brutalized and marginalized women, many of whom are poor mothers. The majority has previously sought refuge at a shelter, with one-third reporting a range of “three to twelve” previous admissions (Tutty and Rothery, 2002, p. 31).

The primary objective of the shelter is to meet the needs of women who are seeking a safe place where they can start to heal from their experiences of intimate partner violence. The strategies of feminist intervention are clearly laid out through the organizational documents which emphasize a commitment to the relationship between the “personal” experience of violence and the “political” notion of shared oppression, as well as the commitment to the liberation of women from violence as follows:

- redefine violence as a social and political issue;
- condemn the violence and render the abuser responsible;
- develop an awareness of women’s oppression and the role of guilt in paralyzing women;
- develop solidarity amongst women based on shared experiences without obscuring differences, facilitated by communal living, sharing responsibilities for cooking and cleaning, and group discussions;
- foster women’s beliefs in themselves;
- validate women’s strengths and inner resources;
- validate women’s anger, insecurity, and fears;
- examine the cycle of violence and enhance women’s self-esteem; and,
- empower women to set realistic goals for themselves and to reach those goals.

Alongside talk of shared gender oppression, the shelter’s written documents promote an understanding of “how women’s disadvantaged social, political, and economic situations make us […] vulnerable […] for abuse.” The perspective taken at the shelter explicitly recognizes and confronts “discrimination on the basis of gender, sexual orientation, race, cultural background, religion, income level, age, educational background, and level of physical and mental ability” (Volunteer Handbook). At this shelter, feminist intervention is guided by the concept of “empowerment and recognizing that as women we have all been subject to oppression. Consequently, we must achieve independence for ourselves and for the women with whom we work” (Volunteer Handbook). An appreciation of shared gender oppression and the goal to empower women to live violence-free – long considered hallmarks of feminist thought and practice in this arena (Baker, 1997; Roberts and Roberts, 2005; Wharton, 1987, 1989; Worell and Remer, 1992) – emerge in an organizational context that demands attention to the multiple sites of oppression in women’s lives. How do practices take into account women’s shared oppression and liberation from violence while at the same time appreciating the intersecting social locations of each individual woman? The context within which our reflections on practice emerge is the focus of the next section.

THE STUDY

The reflections presented in this paper are drawn from a case study of a battered women’s shelter in a large Canadian city. The focus of the study was on understanding the workings of culture, religion and “race”¹ in

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¹ “Race” is placed in quotations marks to underscore the position that “race” is not biologically grounded, and to remind us that we are unable to “think about racist power structures and marginalization processes without invoking the socially constructed concept of ‘race’” (Davis, 1996, p. 43).
everyday shelter practice. With pride in the diversity of its staff and residents, and with commitments to embracing anti-racist and culturally sensitive approaches to intervening in instances of intimate partner violence, this particular organization welcomed the opportunity to explore its practices with a view to articulate insights that may enhance such practice. Reflections on practice were garnered from interviews with the staff and residents, as well as perusals of organizational documents such as the mission statement, volunteer handbook, and annual reports of the shelter.

Briefly, this shelter employs 12 paid workers: five primary workers, two child care workers, and five weekend/night workers. Together, they offer 24-hour coverage. The workers range in age from 24 to 60 years. Five of the workers are married, two are divorced, and five are single. Whereas four of the workers do not have children, the others are mothers to 12 children ranging in ages from 5 to 39 years, and are grandmothers to 5 grandchildren. The staff members are well experienced: five workers have between 2-5 years of experience, five have between 7-10 years, and one worker has over 20 years of experience at the shelter. They pride themselves on their cultural diversity with workers from Italian, South Asian, Haitian and Greek descent; they are also able to communicate in 12 languages. When asked to describe themselves in terms of culture, ethnicity or religion, their responses ranged: “I am Italian Canadian, not a visible minority”; “with a father from the Islands and a Canadian born mother, I am […] in search of my identity”; “I don’t really have any ethnic identity. I am Canadian, Irish Catholic”; and, “I have Irish and British ancestry. Does that count? Does ‘WASP’ count?” When this last worker was pressed to answer her own questions, she stated “I’m white sauce, I suppose.” For some workers, being white seemed to be “cultureless” as Frankenberg (1993) put it. For others, their own cultural identity was considered to provide a lens through which to understand residents of assumed like identity, and being “black” was thought to be helpful to connect with visible minority residents for one of the workers.

The shelter clientele is drawn through a central crisis line, referrals from police and hospitals, as well as women who had been residents in the past. Services are open to adult women 18 years and over, and their children from newborns to 16 years of age. Typically, over 200 women and children received emergency shelter annually (Annual Reports). Invariably the shelter is filled to capacity, housing up to 15 persons with at least 50% of residents at any given moment in time comprised of children. Admission criteria are non-restrictive. Although this shelter does not keep specific demographic data on residents, the coordinator indicated that its residents are typically an ethnically diverse population with visible minority and immigrant women with children consistently over-represented. For this case study, purposive
sampling was used to identify residents to participate in the interviews. The resident participants included women for whom the issues of “race,” religion, culture or ethnicity might be important as determined by the shelter workers. Eight women identified themselves as visible ethnoracial minority women, and four were Caucasian women all of whom were involved with a visible ethnoracial minority partner. Their ages ranged from 19 to 49 years. Ten women were mothers to 22 children from 18 months to 26 years. Of the 12 residents only two were employed at the time of interview. Most came to the shelter through the police; two were mandated by Youth Protection, and one was self-referred.

In this case study, 37 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted by the co-authors with 11 staff and 12 women residents at the shelter. Some participants were interviewed more than once. The interview process began with a series of questions about self-identity: age, marital status, and number of children, education, income, employment, religion, cultural and ethnic identity and the like. Then, each worker was asked to:

- describe her responsibilities at the shelter;
- detail her understandings of abuse, of how women come to view themselves as having been abused, and of how women seek help in response to their situations;
- discuss a case that stood out for her as well as a case wherein she considered that she had engaged in particularly effective culturally sensitive and anti-racist practice.

Similarly, each resident was asked to:

- describe her understandings of abuse and how she came to view herself as having been abused;
- talk about her experiences of disclosure and help-seeking and her experiences as a resident in the shelter.

Throughout the interviews, workers and residents were queried about culture, “race,” ethnicity, and religion vis-à-vis various aspects of intimate partner violence. Each interview lasted approximately two hours. Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim, creating over 300 pages of typewritten text. The interview data were analyzed according to accepted qualitative research methods (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Lofland and Lofland, 1995). The analysis entailed reading individual interviews vertically and coding them to enable horizontal comparison across sources of data (across interviews and alongside organizational documents) without detaching the material from its particular context. From this preliminary reduction of data, emergent themes and their variations across the interview and organizational data sets were identified.
EXPERIENCING “RACE,” CULTURE AND ETHNICITY: ZOHREEN AND EUNICE

To highlight the complex and intersecting facets of identity and social location that intersect with women’s experiences of and responses to intimate partner violence, two residents, Zohreen and Eunice, are introduced. Zohreen was a 49-year-old mother of four children. She was originally from Southeast Asia and lived in a large metropolitan city for over 20 years. Her husband came to Canada and sponsored her to join him four years after his arrival. She described herself as Sikh. Her first language is Punjabi; she struggled with English. Zohreen experienced physical and verbal abuse by her husband prior to his immigration to Canada but, as she stated, “I didn’t call the police… I wasn’t scared because then I was working, I had [my] own money. I run the house, everything.” When she came to Canada, he “has the job, money, and Canadian citizenship… I don’t have the paper, I am not working.” When asked about how she came to the shelter, Zohreen hinted about problems to a hospital social worker who was helping her with her chronically ill child. She said that she had “nowhere to turn,” no family or friends. She ended up in the shelter due to a report made to the police by hospital personnel.

Zohreen’s shelter stay was short. She did not participate in much counselling or discussion because of language barriers and a desire to protect the family reputation. “People will think the family is bad, the [family is] no good.” Despite the support given by workers at the shelter, she met obstacle after obstacle in relation to welfare, immigration, and housing and so she could not establish independence if she had chosen to do so. She was terribly upset to be separated from her children since entering the shelter, which coincided with her ill child having surgery. Following surgery, medical staff refused to send the child home to be under the care of the father and siblings. With a fear of placement by Youth Protection, Zohreen returned home, an outcome that left her shelter worker feeling distraught for fears of Zohreen’s well-being and safety as she returned to a known violent home life. The worker was overcome with hopelessness in that her interventions with Zohreen to access welfare, housing, legal representation for immigration, as well as connect her to local support services for South Asian women and respite services related to caring for an ill child, came to a halt upon Zohreen’s departure. While at home, Zohreen’s husband demanded that she pay rent to him. With no income, she was falling into depression. She was socially isolated, responsible for the care of an ill child, and she had no access to welfare or housing due to her citizenship status.
Eunice, a 23-year-old woman with no children, was born and raised in Canada. Both her birth mother and her adoptive parents were from the Caribbean Islands. At the time of the interview, Eunice had applied for welfare and was taking night courses at the high-school level. She identified herself as a devout Catholic, “African before anything else” and “black.” Eunice called a violence crisis line many times in response to her live-in boyfriend’s physical assaults on her. She saw both herself and her boyfriend as “victims.” “Where we were living was very poor. We had no furniture and hardly any food […] I had no income. And I was thankful that he let me stay there because he didn’t have a lot of room for himself.”

She made several calls before actually getting to the shelter because she feared racism and she needed to “know this before I waste my time or bus tickets.” She was afraid “that the workers wouldn’t like me… because I am black. I was afraid the counsellor would say ‘here’s another black girl being beaten up by a black man’. This is bashing my brothers and I hate it.” Eunice anticipated racism at the shelter because “I see it all the time. People cross the street at night when I was walking by myself or with my boyfriend… This was not a surprise to me, it was a normal thing.” When Eunice finally sought refuge, she recalls “and then I told them I was black, just in case. The worker said ‘okay, so what?’ and I felt stupid.” At the same time, Eunice also “got the sense that [the worker] knew what [I] meant” because she told Eunice that there were two black women already staying at the shelter and this put Eunice “more at ease.” Eunice ended her relationship with her abusive mate, but not without struggle:

There is a different frame of mind being a black woman. When you’re in an abusive relationship, when you get help, you’re still there by yourself.

You always try, and as women, never mind black or white, you’re always hopeful. But from the same race, by leaving, I feel I was giving up on him…

In a sense, when you give up on one [black man], it’s like maybe you are giving up on them all.

Zohreen and Eunice exemplify the different ways in which “race,” culture, ethnicity and the like intersect with their experiences of help-seeking in relation to intimate partner violence. Whereas Zohreen’s account suggests that her economic vulnerability, immigration status and maternal responsibilities take a central position in her social location and identity at this moment in time, experiences of racial oppression are at the forefront of Eunice’ account. As such, we appreciate the challenges posed to workers in their efforts to translate cultural sensitivity and anti-racism from theory to practice. This challenge is all the more demanding in an environment in which women’s accounts of and struggles with intimate partner violence are the raison d’être for the daily practice. To these themes we now turn.
Workers are daily faced with disturbing and graphic accounts of violence experienced by women at the hands of their intimate partners (Tutty and Rothery, 2002). At this particular shelter, residents disclosed actual and threatened physical beatings, verbal assaults and emotional denigration directed at themselves as well as their children: “he threatened my daughter with a knife,” “he call me maid… and bitch,” “he beat me in the belly to kill the baby,” “I refused sex with him [so he] started punching me and ended up hurting my ear,” and, “he refused to give me a key to the apartment.” Hearing these kinds of accounts regularly, it makes sense that workers held firm to a shared and universal experience of intimate partner violence and its unacceptability:

We recognize that women are part of a patriarchal society that enables men to be violent toward women.

Abuse is abuse… Every single woman feels awful when she is hit… Hitting her is the same as hitting me, culture has nothing to do with it.

There are universal values like “you really don’t deserve to be treated like that” and this makes sense to women, intuitively, no matter what her cultural perspective is.

Residents at the shelter similarly spoke of a universalized vision of shared victimization at the hands of “men’s abusiveness”:

Abuse is the same for everyone.

In all cultures women are mothers and in all cultures, there is inequality in the relationship and there is male domination.

Even though this man came from this country and that one from another […] I think violence is all the same. I don’t think there is anything different.

While the focus of practice is on understanding and responding to women’s experiences of intimate partner violence, this shelter is deeply committed to doing so while recognizing and confronting discrimination related but not limited to “race,” culture, religion and ethnicity. As will be suggested next, workers made many efforts to open dialogue on the workings of “race,” culture/ethnicity and religion. Arising from their reflections on these efforts with women residents, workers spoke of their uncertainty about matters of diversity. Alongside their uncertainties, workers expressed certainty around their knowledge of specific cultures, revealing an understanding of culture as fixed, static and homogeneous. This conceptualization was also espoused by the resident participants. Whether certain or not about “race,” culture, ethnicity or religion, workers spoke of responding to such
issues by bridging differences through food or casting differences aside to privilege women’s common experience of intimate partner violence. To these themes we now turn.

OPENING DIALOGUE: RENDERING DIFFERENCES VISIBLE

Workers attended to facets of women’s identities that they related to culture, religion, country of origin and the like. This attention emerged in their efforts to open up dialogue with women residents:

Women who work here… adapt to any culture… by caring, by asking women to share their cultures and talk about them.

We have to try to explore the issue as much as possible so that we don’t come up with a cursory explanation. Or, we need to say that we don’t know. But if we don’t know, we sit down with the women and talk.

It requires more conversation, more talking, and to remind myself not to assume.

My challenge is to really understand their perspectives on violence and factor in a lot of variables, such as their hopes and expectations when they come to a new country, their fears of authority, the way they view Canadian society, how the laws work, how immigration works, how you even get a telephone. All these things come together to form her perspective on the violence in the new life that she is living here, the choices that she is making. [Interviewer: Describe how you try to understand.] By talking to the women. There’s one woman who we spent a long time talking about differences in culture. She had only been here for six months before coming to the shelter, she was articulate, and we spent a lot of time talking to each other and I learned so much. I try to learn from the women. “You’re from Fiji. I never met anyone from Fiji. Tell me about it.”

A devout Muslim woman was carrying out this fast of Ramadan. There is a whole tradition of extended families coming together at sun down… and the reward is companionship with your family, in breaking the fast together. She was alone here and she ate at the table by herself each day… She shared with me that it was difficult for her. I wish I could have done something to support her, maybe eat with her, but I didn’t have that comfort level to explore that with her at the time. I learned that when in doubt, ask, i.e., “is this an important holiday?” and ask rather than feel intimidated because you don’t know.

UNCERTAINTY

As workers opened up dialogue on “race,” culture, ethnicity or religion in order to respond in anti-racist and culturally sensitive ways, their own uncertainties about these issues came to the fore.
I am sure there are cultural norms that influence how she perceives a hit, or even religious beliefs, but I don’t know them all. Do you?

We need more formal discussion, maybe training, to learn about cultures and when to look at commonalities or differences.

My understanding of [the woman from Sri Lanka] is so minimal that it is very difficult for me to try to imagine how it’s going to impact on her experience. So I find it’s hard to say it’s because she’s from a certain group because it’s hard to know what that means because there’s a lack of knowledge. I think there are just a lot of common experiences amongst women. But there are differences. Cultural differences certainly.

If I knew more about the Islamic religion, maybe I could help her better […]

I don’t know the religious arguments that are there to promote her independence or promote her right to live a dignified life.

I may talk about my own religious perspective. But she definitely may see me as someone who doesn’t understand her religion and therefore as someone who doesn’t understand her perspective. Like, what if she quotes specific passages [from the Koran] of the woman being subservient to the man or that he must be the decision maker and that this is a huge responsibility and weight to bear and that she must respect this? I would not be familiar with these passages.

I think that it’s important that if religion plays a role in a woman’s decision to stay or return to a partner, then it’s important for her to be able to talk to somebody about those religious values. Now, if I’m not familiar with her religion, then I am not able to do that. Suppose she is Muslim, I don’t know the religious arguments that are there to promote her independence or promote her right to live a dignified life.

I stumble along with all of this.

CULTURAL CERTAINTY

Alongside their uncertainties, workers also expressed tangible and certain knowledge. For the most part, it reflected a conceptualization of culture as fixed, static and homogeneous:

In certain cultures the severity is “natural”… one woman from Jamaica put up with a lot of abuse… it wasn’t until she was nearly killed that she did anything.

North American women because of our culture are far more willing to discuss things. They put their feelings on the table but most other cultures are not like that.

Muslim women, because they live in a segregated society, don’t have so much trouble opening up to women because they are used to it, same with Indian Hindu women.
Russian women don’t talk about anything.

Chinese women keep things very much in the family... We rarely get Chinese women here and they don’t stay very long.

For Muslim women, divorce is not acceptable, so for them, separation is really BIG.

With Caribbean women there’s “Okay, I left him, now let’s get on with it. I don’t need to discuss this or that. I need shelter. I need a lawyer... let’s get down to work.” No tears. They are pretty determined to take care of themselves and their children.

My father lives in Italy, I know the culture. I lived in Israel; I know the culture... so I can jump in and identify with certain women.

This conceptualization of culture as fixed and homogeneous was echoed by some of the residents as well:

In Fiji, violence is a daily routine... it’s common... so they don’t take it seriously.

Black people [from the Caribbean] are very proud, private, don’t like to share and tell people what is happening.

There is still a lot of prejudice. People think that Jamaican men are like this, or black men are violent, it is a lot of stereotyping.

In the West Indies, there is a lot of verbal abuse in families that people don’t consider violence. I think it’s the white that kill their partner, I never remember hearing a black kill the partner, maybe in the States, but I never heard a black man killing the partner.

Muslim women don’t share personal things, Caribbean women are direct and are clear about their boundaries and “their” men seem to expect that, some Greek women are more “traditional” and struggle living without a man.

And there are certain things a black woman will never feel understood by a white worker, only when she talks to another black woman they will understand each other.

**BRIDGING DIFFERENCES THROUGH FOOD**

In giving attention to diversity in practice, workers identified the complexities of day-to-day living in the shelter. They spoke of bridging differences through food. This tangible medium was noted by the workers as a way to “honour” differences between women, facilitate comfort with communal living, and establish relationships with women:
When [women] come here, and they are from different cultures, we work with that. We say “while you’re here, this is your house”… If you’re Chinese we don’t have Chinese food here, but we can give you the money and you buy your own food.

It’s not that we have found a cure for racism but what we do try to say is that this is a community, make yourself at home and be comfortable and we will accommodate [you]. If [a woman] wants basmati rice, we will get her that.

One good way to gain trust is to eat with women… So she made traditional Ghanaian food and she bought all these funky ingredients… It’s like you accept my food, you accept me. There was a barrier broken down and she said to me that I was the first white woman she spent time with… I said “so we’re not all so bad, eh!” I know that there is racism in this country but here in this house, we don’t tolerate racism.

When asked how to translate this dedication to anti-racism into direct interventions, one worker explained that, “in a group, you try to include people and show how they are similar. Yes, there are differences here and we tolerate those differences and we like those differences. We like the fact that there are different cultures here. We think that this is enriching and it makes us all better people but beyond that, and here I’ll go the other extreme and say, ‘you are all in the same boat regardless of race, colour, whatever.’” This worker’s statement reveals the tension between honouring differences while embracing women’s common experience of intimate partner violence and its unacceptability as elaborated next.

**Privileging Women’s Common Experience of Intimate Partner Violence**

When workers were asked to describe a woman’s account that stood out for them, typically they presented women’s stories without any mention of “race” or ethnicity. As one worker put it, “I don’t see how it would [matter to be a woman of color].” Another worker held firm, “I don’t see culture or race when working with a woman… but I know that race and culture – her background – are there.” When elicited, attention to matters of culture, “race,” religion or ethnicity was given, but it seemed that women’s common experiences of intimate partner violence took precedence:

*Being a female or a woman of colour or a religion that doesn’t respect women, which plays a larger role? It is really difficult to say. Or if she is lesbian or Jewish or disabled, I mean, if you had to put all those elements into one person, which element would play the larger role?… There are experiences that women share that transcend all cultural differences, so let’s not lose sight of those.*
I never see race or color when I work with women...never, never, never. When
a woman is abused, it’s the woman in the abusive relationship that I am
dealing with.

I am constantly saying to women, “You are no different from anyone else
here. You don’t have it worse or better, and we view you equally.”

So when we meet about the tasks, I give a little speech on how difficult it is
to live under one roof and how we need to be tolerant and how we need to
talk about it to each other. It comes out in the kitchen and it comes out in
disciplining children. But I always come back to it that there is a shared
experience here, you are all living here in this house and your stories are so
similar and the basic experience is the same.

I give a talk at the weekly house meetings about different perspectives, dif-
ferent cultural perspectives but at the end of it all, they are here for conjugal
violence and their experiences are similar.

Before coming to the shelter, [Eunice] was uncomfortable with white people.
After being in the house and being in discussion groups, I think she began
to see the commonalities, to see how similar all their experiences were.

DISCUSSION

Much like the recent trends in feminist scholarship (Kline, 1991; Leah,
1991; Mohanty, 1991; Ng, 1991; Peterson and Runyan, 1993), practice in
the shelter setting revealed a beginning foray into recognizing important
differences between women that took into account facets of social location
and identity. In this case study, a commitment to cultural sensitivity and
anti-racist practice was enunciated in organizational documents and training
materials. At this shelter, workers pursued this commitment by opening up
dialogue around issues of “race,” ethnicity, religion or culture and by making
efforts to “honour” differences between women in the day-to-day lives of
residents. They expressed tangible and certain knowledge about specific
cultures, ethnicities, etc., while at the same time reflected on their discom-
fort with uncertainty and lack of knowledge. Ultimately, gender oppression
in relation to, and reproduced by, intimate partner violence remained
central in practice. As noted by both Crenshaw (1995) and Grillo (1995),
as long as the common experience of gender oppression in intimate partner
relationships is emphasized, the particular experiences of women subject
to “racial” and other forms of oppression are at risk of being obscured. So,
how might we step back and look at the potential multiple sites of women’s
oppression including, but not limited to, intimate partner violence?
According to Tania Das Gupta (1991), slippage into commonalities should be no surprise because, while individuals may be committed to the elimination of racism for example, practices and structures make the task extremely difficult. Ng (1991, p. 22) says “we must pay attention to the manner in which our own practices create, sustain and reinforce racism, sexism and class oppression.” In this study, the deep commitment to emancipate women to establish violence-free lives for themselves and their children in the context of urgency understandably took precedence over examinations of and challenges to multiple and at times competing sites of oppression. However, recognizing that shelters are an essential and central resource available to often the most marginalized and oppressed women experiencing intimate partner violence, efforts to pursue this path of contemporary feminist projects are worthy of exploration.

When workers were asked for suggestions on how to enhance practice inclusive of “race,” religion, culture or ethnicity, they recommended a need for further knowledge and training around these topics in relation to specific “cultural communities” or religions. This approach might be problematic in a number of ways, not the least of which was the workers’ own realization that they couldn’t possibly know every culture and religion, including the diversity and nuances within and between cultures and religions. Theoretically, to borrow Razack’s ideas (1998), if we aim to only navigate our way through differences, then such differences remain viewed as unchanging essences or innate characteristics. Thus, the power relations that keep dominant cultural norms in place remain invisible. To pursue knowledge and training in specific “cultural communities” or religions may also be problematic in that these activities seemingly add the experiences of women of colour, for example, into an already existing framework for understanding and responding to intimate partner violence. Kanuha (1990) calls this the all too familiar “tag line”; Razack (1998) speaks of this additive approach that renders some women doubly or more vulnerable, which maintains vulnerability related to culture or immigrant status as a pre-given condition thought to reside in the person. What is missing is an understanding of the complexities of women’s identities and social locations. Put differently, we ought to complicate understandings of oppression and recognize that not all women are oppressed in the same way (Razack, 1998).

According to Grillo (1995, p. 22), intersectionality compels us to define multifaceted experiences “as closely to their full complexity as possible” and to refrain from ignoring “voices at the margin.” She suggests that we explore the “complex ways that race, gender, sexual orientation, and class […] are related” (1995, p. 27). Grillo suggests that we help women’s voices to be heard not by presuming to speak for them, but rather by doing what we can “to put a microphone in front of them” (1995, p. 28). This
approach recognizes that “as long as we see ourselves as not implicated in relations of power, as innocent, we cannot begin to walk the path of social justice and to thread our way through the complexities of power relationships” (Razack, 1998, p. 22).

How might we locate ourselves, as helping professionals, in relations of oppression? Razack suggests that we abandon “the idea of differences as pre-given, knowable and existing in a social and historical vacuum” (1998, p. 10). She continues:

This does not mean that we abandon sensitivity, that we can throw up our hands in despair at the complexity of it all, nor reduce this complexity to the lament so often heard that “since I can never know what it feels like to be Black, I need not think about race.” Instead, we need to direct our efforts to the conditions of communication and knowledge production that prevail, calculating not only who can speak and how they are likely to be heard but also how we know what we know and the interest we protect through our knowing (1998, p. 10).

Developing an awareness of our own social locations, experiences of oppression, privilege and subordination is one place to start in rethinking helping professionals’ interventions into intimate partner violence. Clinical supervision in shelter settings might provide organizational permission and support to develop this kind of awareness alongside workers’ assessments of and intervention plans with the women residents. Interrogating how our own social locations and identities shape our assessments, inform our conceptions of help and healing, and direct our interventions may offer a different kind of guidance to workers in their efforts to translate anti-racism and cultural sensitivity into practice. The tendency to search for points of connection between workers and residents, based on assumptions of shared culture, “race” or religion, can be safely interrogated in clinical supervision and open to question.

Clinical supervision might also provide a forum for expressing uncertainty. According to Pozatek (1994), adopting a position of uncertainty might be a respectful alternative approach to responding to the complexities of women’s diversity:

The acknowledgement of uncertainty is an essential element of the postmodern practice of social work. The worker needs to hold open a space in his or her mind for uncertainty, to question how his or her subjective cultural experience may be causing the worker to privilege some aspects of the client’s story and marginalize or disqualify others (p. 399).
Rather than aspiring to achieve the unachievable – that is, certainty vis-à-vis knowing about “race,” culture, religion, or ethnicity – we suggest that uncertainty offers an opportunity to embrace the complexities of women’s experiences in seeking and securing help in the shelter setting. This endeavour might offer a way for workers to shake up their privileging of one facet of a woman’s oppression over others including a rethinking of the centrality of the intimate partner violence for the particular woman at a particular moment in time.

How might we enter into understanding a particular woman at a particular moment in time? Grillo’s suggestion (1995) to put a microphone in front of a woman might offer direction for feminist practice in shelter settings. A more adaptable and variable approach that embraces a woman’s account of the intimate partner violence in her life and its meaning to her is taken alongside each woman’s own understanding of her identity and social location. This process intends to provide women with opportunities to give voice to their own self-defined experiences of oppression and thus it aims to further feminist efforts towards the emancipation of women from multiple oppressive relations.

This attention to the concrete life of each woman suggests accepting uncertainty regarding the best option for any particular woman and encouraging the woman’s full participation in defining her circumstances and identifying solutions. As Parton (1998, p. 23) noted in the context of child protection practice, “a commitment to uncertainty opens up creativity and novel ways of thinking which are in danger of being lost in a climate obsessed with concerns about risk, its assessment, monitoring, and management.” In the context of shelter practice, uncertainty allows for the possibility that different facets of women’s identities take precedence over others at particular moments in time, and that such facets are not static or fixed but rather fluid and flexible (Anderson, 1996; Grillo, 1995). This approach begins to move away from pre-determined conceptions of victimization and survival, and might offer further insights to workers in their practices with women with diverse social locations and identities. Holding a microphone to Eunice might have given rise to a deeper understanding of the centrality of racial oppression and worries about her collusion with stereotypical images of black men’s violence towards women; it might have, uncomfortably, shifted the issue of intimate partner violence to the periphery at that particular moment in help-seeking time. Passing the microphone to Zohreen, her experiences of caring for her chronically ill child, her lack of citizenship, money, and employment, would surely come to the fore and possibly cast a clearer light on her return home. Passing a microphone to either woman may allow us entry to understanding their experiences in all their complexity.
While intersectionality theory may be helpful in further developing a feminist approach to intimate partner violence, in the trenches of frontline practice we appreciate that workers are all too familiar with the small window of opportunity to inform, equip, and protect women. While it makes sense that practice in this arena has largely been guided by assumed commonalities of oppression between women and the wish for their escape and liberation from intimate partner violence, the considerable focus on women healing themselves and freeing themselves of intimate partner violence emerges as essentialist and may well deny various, at times competing, and complex facets of women’s identities and social locations. We might advocate for a “both/and” rather than “either/or” approach. In reflecting upon early feminist debates around essentialism and difference, Martin (1994, p. 631) argued:

In overcompensating for our failure to acknowledge the differences of race, class and ethnicity, we tended a priori to give privileged status to a predetermined set of analytic categories and to affirm the existence of nothing but difference... In other words, in trying to avoid the pitfall of false unity, we walked straight into the trap of false difference.

Martin’s insights tell us to be wary of replacing the emphasis on a false universality of women’s experience of intimate partner violence with an emphasis on the equally false and infinite spiral of difference. We are not proposing razing existing feminist philosophy or practice in shelter settings, rather we suggest including intervention efforts that explicitly take into account the social location of the woman and give rise to options within her context. Weaving together experiential and practice knowledge and wisdom about intimate partner violence with comprehensive understandings of facets of identity and social location – worker and resident – allows for the recognition both of the prevalence of gender-based oppression and of the multiple and complex experiences of women.

**Bibliography**


