Reflections on AVP/HIP in Sydney

These thoughts shared here come after only a few short years in the AVP (NSW) community, and represent my attempts to come to terms with how to apply the insights of AVP in other areas of life, and to understand the distinction between an AVP approach, and an approach which owes a debt to AVP, but is something else. I choose to share these thoughts in this forum, as the community in NSW explores these questions in earnest, to understand what innovations contribute to the growth of this process which we share, and what changes are better understood as changes which lead us into derivative or related systems of conflict resolution or transformation.

In doing this I hope to explore, by example, the innovations of the HIP program in NSW in recent years, to bring to life the core principles of these closely related systems, the later of which owes clear inspiration to the former. In exploring the differences and similarities, some of the core principles, and philosophical assumptions of these two systems, I hope to shed some light on AVP's philosophical heart. It is in understanding the philosophical core of these systems which will give us the wisdom to continue to be open to change and growth without losing the core values that make it AVP.

In my explorations here I am deeply indebted to the thoughts shared over the last few months with AVP and HIP practitioners in NSW, in particular Julei Korner and Malcolm and Katherine Smith, though this final synthesis and interpretation is my own. It is Julei's innovative practice of HIP in NSW which forms the core inspiration for much of what follows here. Julei made it clear during our discussions that much of her practice is personal and subtle, and involves a quality of judgement which is relative, dependent and contextual. My own summary of some of these practices takes ideas out of this context and shares them as non-experiential intellectual constructs; as such they can not hope to convey the depth of Julei's work. It is my hope that the distillation I present here may inspire others in our community, as Julei's original thoughts have inspired me. Following the exploration of Julei's work, I have used these ideas as a springboard for speculating and deepening some of the issues which these techniques raise. Here I have drawn on my own research on mutual recognition which forms the backdrop of my current PhD research project. These thoughts also reflect my own experiences in community workshops, and may or may not be useful insights for those working with AVP in the prison system.

Assumptions:

Central to AVP is the concept of transforming power. Transforming power occurs when power moves *through* us, as a consequence of constructive and cooperative community oriented behaviour, rather than being used *by* us as an act of coercion *upon* others. Transforming power is less an act and more an attitude of openness, an offering, a creation of opportunity. Another way of looking at transforming power is through the lens of French philosopher Michel Foucault, and it sees transforming power as an unblocking of relations of power that are stuck. For Foucault the fact that human beings are in power relations with each other is not the major problem. Power relations, he claims, are inevitable and may be good, bad or neutral. What Foucault has a problem with is what he calls relations of domination; this where power gets stuck, and systematically embedded so that certain people are always subject to the power of others. Where power keeps moving, all people have an opportunity to reap the rewards of empowerment. In this light transforming power can be seen as the thing which intervenes when power is becoming fixed. It may be an act of personal reflection which provides the grounds for radical reorientation in the moment or simply something surprising,

humorous or absurd which can be the agent which releases us from a situation where we are becoming stuck. Transforming Power as an idea sits in the centre of the AVP mandala, surrounded by the concepts of Respect for Self, Respect for Others, Expect the Best, Ask For a Nonviolent Solution, and Think Before Reacting. The Mandala visually suggests that when all the elements exist in balance, Transforming Power becomes possible.

The experience of HIP was that the concept of Transforming Power was too difficult for young people to grasp, and instead the idea of Keys is used. Keys give visual and metaphoric representation of the elements of the mandala as physical keys to open possibilities for nonviolent solutions. As objects that can be held, touched, felt and played with, and as an easy metaphor for a device which unlocks, keys become a light hearted and simple way for young people to experience the inter-relationship of the ideas contained in the mandala, as tools for opening up the possibilities of change. Instead of power being transformed, HIP participants use the expression 'HIP happens' to encapsulate the movement from conflict to possibility.

The possibility of transforming power is built in conjunction with AVP's wider workshop strategies, and is best understood in this context.

AVP believes that violence is usually damaging, avoidable and unproductive.

A core AVP belief is that violence is often perpetrated by people at the point where they no longer have the communicative tools to meet their legitimate needs.

Nonviolence is possible – we all have within us the capacity to solve conflict nonviolently.

AVP workshops are geared to awakening the communicative potentials within us all to meet our needs communicatively and cooperatively.

In making the change, and creating the conditions for nonviolence, transformation begins with the self.

AVP views conflict as a natural condition of life and product of social experience.

Conflict is not necessarily good or bad, but it always an opportunity to be creative and seek positive change and growth.

The HIP project grew out of the experience of AVP in the early 1990's, and represents an attempt to apply its insights and techniques for young people, particularly in school environments. HIP shares the core belief that conflict is not inherently bad, and can be, and perhaps should be, seen as an opportunity for positive change and growth. In addition to this HIP, at least in its original American manifestation, believes that much of the roots of violence can be found in the experience of societal injustice.

Methodologies:

Both AVP and HIP use communication as the fundamental tool with which to share its insights and practices. Workshops are geared to experiential learning, and emphasis is on practicing communication, cooperation and community building. Participants learn by taking part in activities, rather than being given information by a 'teacher' or 'expert'.

Listening is the most powerful communication tool experienced; it is the basis of beginning to understand the needs of others. Participants are offered activities which open up the possibility of experiencing the practice of listening as a means of understanding and giving recognition to their communicative partners, rather than listening with ones mind actively using the information gained to formulate riposte or counter argument.

Both AVP and HIP workshops, after grounding participants in listening experiences, move when participants are ready, to the communicative skills of Assertion and Problem Solving.

Communication is the primary skill in conflict transformation, but AVP lays great importance in establishing community as a context for all communication, and cooperation as a guiding principle for achieving goals within a community.

Volunteering, Personal Responsibility

Voluntarism is considered a vital part of AVP. However, with AVP in prison, and HIP in schools, this is not completely possible, as participants are necessarily subject to an authoritative and even perhaps authoritarian culture, within which the workshop occurs. There appear to be a few different reasons underpinning the concept of volunteerism which are worth exploring here in relation to AVP and HIP.

Originally, particularly in a prison context, it was vital to establish as much equality as could be mustered. Vital to the success of AVP is that all participants are teachers and learners, and there on equal footing. To be at an AVP workshop out of external expectation or in receipt of profit or outcomes not shared by all is antithetical to the concepts of community, in which the equal fundamental value of all participants is sovereign.

In addition to this, taking responsibility for initiating ones own process of change, by making a free decision to embark on an AVP journey is vital to experiencing that transformation must begin with self. It is my feeling that if the effort is made to be as un-coercive as possible, and if the culture of the workshop remains committed to helping participants experience the relationship between taking personal responsibility and personal change, then it remains faithful to volunteering ethic at the heart of AVP.

Restorative Practices

Restorative practices are based upon the idea of restorative justice. Restorative justice maintains that the practice of judging and blaming perceived wrongdoers is of limited value. Instead, as the name suggests, restoration of relationships damaged by the events in question, to as close as possible to the pre-relationship state, is the goal of intervention in the post violent scenario. In situations where the pre-conflict relationship was poor, and possibly part of the reason why conflict has become violent or coercive, working out what may be a healthy post conflict relationship may be part of the goal. To this end, Restorative Practices in AVP (NSW) is built around three questions designed to locate all actors in reflecting on what has happened in terms of needs. The first question is: "What happened for you?" It is hoped that this will facilitate personal reflection at the feeling level. The encouragement to use "I Statements" in answering this is however the only direction given. The second question is "What was the hardest part for you?" Again this is hoped to explore a deeper reflection into what may be at the heart of the feelings generated and the possible unmet needs which AVP believes lie underneath most 'negative' feelings. The third question; "What would you do differently next time?" moves the participant to another level of reflection into the beginning

of the problem solving phase. By considering alternatives to what they have done after reflecting on what has been difficult it is hoped participants may make the leap of recognition which links needs (their own or other parties) to feelings and actions. In beginning to trace the relationship between feelings and needs and the things we do, we can move towards more conscious actions possibly linked to the idea of meeting needs.

These three restorative questions are used to process activities in the workshop situation, and constitute training to use these skills moment by moment in our actual lives outside the workshop situation. These questions can be used for working through issues that have arisen at the personal level or in an interpersonal conflict situation. The application of these questions in a group setting is more complex, with the facilitator being mindful of the answers to these questions being open to use as part of an ongoing unhealthy relation between parties who are still trapped in a coercive rather than collaborative trajectory. In general facilitators should use an ethic of care or harm minimisation seeking to place the more disempowered (the 'victim' of the coercive or violent behaviour) in a situation where they are less likely to sustain further emotional damage. This may mean allowing them to go first in the cycle of questions (to give them a sense of validation via primacy) I would tend to suggest this only when participants have themselves freely accepted the labels of victim or perpetrator, and even then making the invitation to begin only a nod or eye contact, so that it remains invitation not expectation. The categories of victim and perpetrator may be deeply problematic, and a facilitator's attempt to sort out which is which, and take measures to address the power imbalances or injustices involved may be also problematic. My own view would be, in most cases, to let speaking order determine itself – inviting participants to begin the process with a reminder to use 'I statements', and a reminder that the exercise is one of personal reflection, not of analysis or power plays attempting to continue the struggle to position oneself as right or the other as wrong. The philosophy of shining a light would suggest where we find conflict remanifesting in the processing, that we draw attention to what is happening with a neutral description of events, perhaps inviting a pause for reflection before attempting to begin the process again. In such circumstances I would think the listening attitude of open, generous but non-affirming attention would be the most appropriate.

In some activities, it may be appropriate to make use of the fourth restorative question; "What do you think needs to happen for relationships to be restored?" This is clearly a question which invites the participants out of reflection and into the problem solving phase, and should only be done when the personal reflective exercises have been deeply understood. Participants who are still not comfortable or confident with the reflection and the linking of feelings needs and actions that this entails, should perhaps stay with the three question processing until reflective skills are sufficient to move to the more analytical part of conflict resolution. How AVP structures its activities and conducts its facilitation, with emphasis on leading participants towards reflection on feelings and their relation to needs as opposed to analysis and problem solving raises important questions. This approach clearly prioritises experiential learning. Participants learn by reflection on self, and by experiencing the reflections of others on circumstances which all have shared. Using the question 'what was the hardest part' clearly seeks to locate participants in their emotional experience; this begins the journey of understanding the link between these feelings and our needs. Witnessing the personal emotional reflection of others creates an opportunity for the building of empathy – the act of imagining that others may feel as we do – which is a step towards the key nonviolent strategy of understanding and validating the needs of others.

It is worth noting that the relationship between feelings and cognition is not easy to distinguish and separate as AVP's methodology may lead us to believe. Experiences of emotional *affect* are processed by the brain into a series of personal narratives about what feelings mean. Ultimately these narratives become the unconscious lens through which our brain interprets events. What we feel is likely to be governed by a complex layering of interweaving stories relating to our previous experience. Thus a person may have a 'knee jerk' response to certain words, ideas or categories of people, relating to a lifetime of experiences which have been given meaning, and associated with strong feelings Often these personal narratives and belief systems are neither coherent, fair or useful. Thoughts and feelings blur in a complex relationship which defies easy separation, and poor cognitive understanding of self can contribute to diminishing our nonviolent options for dealing with conflict, as surely as poorly understood and articulated feeling and needs. My own feeling is that ultimately the 'heart and mind' must come together at some point, if we are to pursue ethical and nonviolent ways of relating to the fullest level. Both require attention and need to exist together in balance. Any strategy which develops one to the exclusion of the other should be mindful of the possible consequences. I bring this up not to undermine the good work we do, or to place the unrealistic expectations on us, that a workshop can address the full scope of the perils and problems of interpersonal communication, but to open up a debate about deepening our understanding of what we do – its virtues and its drawbacks.

The 'Shining of a Light'

I would like to focus on the philosophy of 'shining a light', developed by Deb Thompson and Julei Korner, as an example of how taking personal responsibility for personal change can be modelled in a workshop situation.

I would like to look at the practice of 'shining a light' particularly as it applies during Restorative Practices, which forms the backbone of the actual process of conflict resolution in AVP and HIP in NSW. Restorative Practices is used widely in counselling and conflict resolution as a way those involved in the conflict can be guided through a process which explores people's feelings about what happened and ultimately, as the name suggests, hopes to restore relationships to a healthy state. The role of facilitator in Restorative Practices is to hold the space open to allow the participants to go through the process of 'listening to' and understanding each other's feelings and needs, asserting those needs, and finding ways of accommodating each others needs in a win/win scenario. The skill in facilitating is to use the minimum of intervention to steer, allowing the participants to use their own skills and understanding to achieve their ends. A HIP facilitator will happily sit with silence, or intransigence, rather than simply tell participants what they think they should do. But there comes a time to intervene, and steer through word or example. This is where the 'shining of a light' appears as the subtlest of movement in this direction.

Suppose for example one is facilitating a workshop and one participant begins to raise their voice and make judgemental remarks at another participant. 'Shining a light' refers to the process where the facilitator would bring attention to what is happening. But the bringing of attention is all the action taken by the facilitator and may only take the form of describing what has taken place. For example; "Person A has just raised their voice and called Person B stupid" "How does the group feel about that?" If for example the group has no strong feelings about what has happened and does not wish to explore the matter further, the facilitator would leave the matter to rest based on the presumption that, only when the group as a collective or as individuals personally experience such events as worthy of further exploration, can the next step be taken. The innovation of the 'shining of a light' philosophy is that even a question like

"how did you feel when 'A' raised their voice and called you stupid?" is a leading question. This question from a facilitator, almost presupposes there is a problem with the action in question. Even in such a case where most of us would indeed have a problem with this kind of behaviour in a workshop, it is not for us, in any way shape or form, to tell this to others. Our task as facilitators is to create the maximum opportunity for people to experience the problems with this behaviour themselves and to move through their own feelings understandings and eventually, possible solutions.

At the point where the group, or part thereof does express a desire to explore what has happened in the circle, this is where we can use the idea of restorative practices to move participants into a space where it is possible to transform conflict into a possibility for personal transformation. Restorative Practices involves the asking of a number of simple questions. In the group setting a facilitator would ask each participant in turn the following questions; What happened? What was the most difficult part of this experience for you? What did you do that you would now do differently? What do you think needs to happen to restore any relationships that have been damaged? Restorative Practices as adapted by HIP and AVP in NSW is pitched at a level that doesn't necessarily need high level cognitive skills, and is designed to open up the possibility of personal transformation experientially. Restorative Practices are usually used as part of a larger workshop situation and are delivered with a complex series of exercises for building community, group security, and a set of communicative conventions which seek to establish respect, recognition and judgement free communication.

If the exercises we run in workshops successfully build communication, cooperation and community we have established the conditions in which nonviolence can flourish as an option. But until people personally experience the problems with violent and coercive communication strategies, and experience listening, cooperation and community as effective strategies for simultaneously meeting their own needs and the needs of others, we can not move them forward. Our task is to create groups and exercises within them which create the possibilities for experiencing personal insight.

I would also like to look at the role of the concepts of shame and praise as used by HIP in NSW to maximise the possibilities for personal transformation through the experience of the workshop.

Many of us experience the concept of shame as a negative. Who remembers feeling ashamed as a positive thing? So my first response to hearing the expression 'shame is the gateway to heaven' in a HIP workshop was surprise. The logic behind this positive conception of shame is simple. When we experience shame, this is the personal recognition of the possibility that our actions or object of interest may be a problem in terms of our own authentic relationship to self or in relation to the wider social context. Some definitions of shame include any event that occurs to break our attention from our object of concentration, not necessarily just those where our own actions may be problematic (Sylvan Tomkins). It is however those events which involve some problem relating to the self in a social context which should be of particular interest to those of us working with skilled communication as an alternative to violence and coercion in our social lives. At the moment of recognition that there may be a problem with what we are doing, almost by definition, the possibility of positive change is opened. In understanding or perhaps accepting that our behaviour may be out of integrity with our positive conception of self or social circumstance we have taken the first step towards improvement, or even transformation. The negativity associated with shame may come from the fact that we often experience it in unsupported environments, or it is 'put on us' by others.

A HIP or AVP workshop offers us the opportunity to experience shame, amongst a community which sees mistakes as part of a learning experience, rather than ammunition to impugn our humanity. Simply by sharing our feelings, without anyone judging us or attempting to make us feel ashamed, we can experience shame as an opportunity instead of an indelible stain on our character.

Many shame theorists see shame, particularly what is called bypassed shame as the principle cause of violence. Tony Webb points out that shame is a social emotion and its function is to monitor social bonds between people. When we feel shame, our mind is telling us that the social bond is under threat. When we acknowledge this by responding with interest to what our emotions are signalling, Webb calls this a positive or 'salutogenic' function of shame, which is thus rendered a tool for building and strengthening our social bonds. Unacknowledged, shame becomes a painful experience, one which can end up buried and unresolved. This bypassed shame can then turn to anger and blame of self or others to deal with the uncomfortable feeling within, and manifest as anti-social behaviour such physical or psychological violence. If in an AVP workshop we see the manifestations of the affect of shame: the lowering of the head, the flush of the face and aversion of the eyes, we can use AVP process to do what Webb calls 'working with shame'. Working with shame is acknowledging shame as an important emotion which needs to be reflected upon and 'mined' for the hidden store of information within about our feelings, needs and actions in a social context.

Praise, or the absence thereof, is another one of the key inspiration I have experienced in HIP. The idea was drawn by HIP practitioners from the work of Louise Porter, who in turn builds on the work of Alfie Kohn. Whilst Louise Porter's work is primarily aimed at children, HIP practitioners have found a wider application than just within workshops with children. The idea is seen as useful for adults, and in more than just workshop situations. I experienced this myself in a HIP workshop.

Praise is seen by Louise Porter as usually an act of coercion, one in which by the act of praising we seek to control behaviour by affirming the behaviours we like, and usually as a corollary, not praising actions which are a problem for us. Praise is not effective in building self esteem, as validation is attached to performance of the activity in question rather than to qualities experienced by the subject as intrinsic to their being. This validation of self should perhaps be seen as helping form accurate self appraisal rather than what is often called high or low self esteem. Whilst there is a high correlation with high self esteem and personal happiness and achievement and a similar correlation at the low end of these spectrums, high self esteem is also often associated with inaccurate self appraisal, delusion, and sometimes low empathy for others. Validation in healthy self esteem relates to accurate non judgemental appraisal of self.

Self esteem, which is a prerequisite to ethical agency, is established inter-subjectively. What this means is to be able to give esteem to others we have to have experienced the kinds of social recognition which validate us, to learn how to validate others, and that mutual recognition and respect are the foundations of ethical relationship. By experiencing, and re-experiencing healthy, non-coercive social esteem building in groups, we are learning to esteem ourselves and others, and the interdependence of feeling 'esteemed' and 'esteeming' others. In terms of the Mandala; it is respect for self and respect for others.

Acknowledgement, which is Porter's preferred tool of recognition, teaches us to take responsibility for our own creation of healthy sense of self. By receiving information that

values our contribution without telling us we are 'good' we are forced to self evaluate. It becomes us/ourselves who tell us we are good, and we build the skills of self evaluation. We are assisted by others who provide us with valuable feedback, but the responsibility for how we felt about ourselves is our own. Once again personal growth occurs through taking responsibility for ourselves.

HIP's techniques for affirming without praise, revolve around describing events rather than attaching value and judgement to the events themselves. Thus a facilitator who had just run a successful workshop might be affirmed by saying ; " Thank you for facilitating this weekend, I got a lot out of the workshop" as opposed to; 'Your facilitation this weekend was fantastic' The former validates with thanks and shares that the experience was positive. Thus the facilitator is aware that the work they have done that weekend was useful and appreciated – both vital for continuing to do, what can often be, difficult and tiring work. Most importantly this way of affirming leaves the responsibility for validation to the person themselves. We are given the information we need to make sense of ourselves as a valuable contributor to the community we are part of, and our part in a successful cooperative endeavour. Praise for our action separates us from the collective and cooperative nature of what we have experienced and reminds us that our competent performance is the attribute of value, rather than our self. Self esteem built on performance is inherently unstable; if we fail to perform, we no longer have the means to identify ourselves as valuable, and consequently are liable to fail to see the value in others when their performance may also falter.

Conclusion

Violence is, among other things, an act of coercion, and one of the many ways it damages people either as perpetrator or victim, is in removing from them the opportunity to use their own means to establish their physical and emotional needs. What it seems to me is at the core of AVP and HIP, and demonstrated (I hope) through this exploration of volunteering, shining of a light, the value of shame, and the limitations of praise, is creating opportunities for people to experience the possibilities of change (or transformation) and self actualisation, in a community orientated, cooperative environment. All of these processes described, model non-coercive communication. Responsibility is always left with participants to establish their own needs, and listen to and understand the needs of others. The emphasis in the practices elucidated here is in creating and sustaining of spaces conducive to this end. The deepest practice of AVP is one in which we create opportunities for others to experience their own transformative potential. AVP is unlikely to unlock transformative potentials if it does not allow or encourage people to take responsibility for their own transformation based on their own experience of working cooperatively in the intentional communities we create.

It is not my intention to say what is AVP and what is not. This is for us to work out cooperatively as a community What makes me return to AVP circles is the opportunity to be in a space where community oriented experiential learning is the key for each and every participant to make their own journey towards unlocking ways of relating to others where we meet our needs collectively, cooperatively and with the minimum of coercion.

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