

20 practice tips for responding to adults who use ethnocultural identity to justify attitudes and beliefs that condone violence, control and male power



It is important to respect every person's culture, and to understand how a person engages with the values, traditions and collective meanings held by their culture. However, the use of culture to justify domestic, family and sexual violence is a smokescreen to avoid responsibility for harmful behaviour. The adult person using violence might be heavily invested in that smokescreen, but there are always choices they can make to be non-violent and non-controlling in ways that are entirely consistent with their culture.

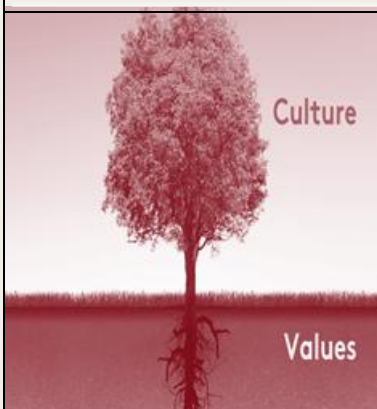


In most cultures, men have found ways to influence community norms, collective stories and institutional structures to enhance their social, economic and political power. Cultures differ, however, in what aspects of these patriarchal stories, and what types of gendered behaviours, are highly visible in a range of societal spaces, versus kept behind closed doors within more private realms. Cultures differ in how men's rights and the rules set for women & gender queer people are enacted, and the extent of visible support that men have to enforce them.



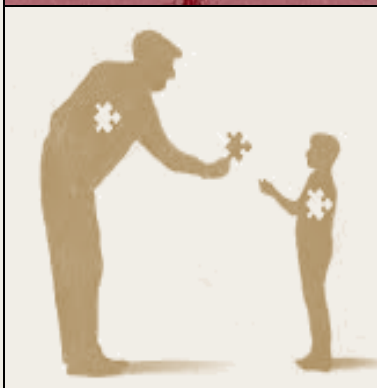
A person's ethnoculture is only one aspect of their identity: everyone has multiple aspects. The particular combination of those aspects most salient to the person can depend on their circumstances and the current moment, and can shift fluidly.

Do not automatically assume that a person's ethnic culture is the most or only important aspect of their identity. Remember to see them in multiple ways. Try finding aspects of their identity that are potentially aligned with values inconsistent with the use of violent and controlling behaviour. Relate to them in terms of those aspects of their identity in addition to as a member of a particular ethnocultural community.



Find collective values in the adult's ethnic culture inconsistent with harmful behaviour, and consistent with safety. Take time to understand the adult's view about what is important about their culture and community – collectively held values, and what their community strives for. Find values and strivings that appear to exist, at least in part, outside or beyond the realm of the adult's patriarchal interpretation of power relations between men, women and (if relevant to the context) gender queer or same-sex attracted people.

Create a space of genuine curiosity for the adult to identify and elaborate on collectively held values and pillars to their community & culture that promote safety, empathy and other-centredness.



Invite the adult to express how these cultural values, ethics and pillars are incongruent with his harmful behaviour, and are more aligned with empathy, respect and non-controlling ways of relating:

"I can see that family means everything in your community, in ways that are perhaps richer or different to how families operate in my culture. Families living through harmony. I wonder whether your [harmful behaviour that the adult is willing to admit to] towards your wife is making it harder for your family to live in harmony...?"

"You and your family have sacrificed so much to come to Australia and make a new life, despite all that you've suffered. Sacrifice sounds important to you, listening to what your family needs from you?..."



Enquire about the genuinely positive aspects of how women are viewed through the adult's culture, the *diverse* roles that women play in their communities. Focus on how women are viewed positively by different people in the community, to go beyond gender stereotypes. Link this to safety, and to community expectations about how girls and women should be treated. Encourage the adult to articulate this in as much depth as possible, focusing on community values and pillars. "Could you help me understand how women are respected and valued in your community – what does this look like...? What if we were to ask this question to...? How are women supported to be leaders...?" "How do children in your community want their mothers to be treated...? How about grandmothers, what are their hopes for their daughters...? What are their hopes for women's safety and well-being...?"



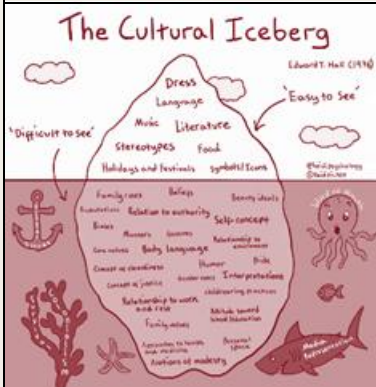
If it is clear that the adult adopts manosphere-type views that 'gender equality has gone too far and now men are the ones disadvantaged', or if he is very strong in claiming that 'in my culture, men have the right to... women know that their roles should be to ...', respectfully and non-shamingly contrast the absoluteness of these views with what he has said about how women are valued in his culture. "You're saying that women have a central & vital role in your families and community. I'm also hearing a belief that women have rules they must follow, limiting their options. Could you help me make sense of this?" Try not to do so with a judgmental tone in your voice. Focus the adult on the contradictions, rather than him feeling attacked for the views he's expressing. Externalise problematic beliefs if this might be helpful: "express a belief" rather than "you believe that" as this might make it easier for the adult to view the belief from different angles.



Demonstrate genuine and sensitive curiosity about the adult's culture, without exoticising it. Acknowledge you know little about their culture (if that's the case). Locate yourself in terms of your own cultural identity – don't pretend to know what you don't really know outside of your cultural lane. Ask what's important to know about their culture that might impact how you work together. Admit that you might make assumptions and mistakes, but that you hope to learn along the way. Don't however set him up as the 'sole expert' of his culture – this will marginalise different views and the voices of women and children.



If appropriate, listen to the adult's concerns about how their culture isn't understood by dominant others. Recognise the racism they and their community is facing. The adult's and their community's experiences of racism is no excuse for the adult's use of violence, but if you ignore it, your ability to affect change might be limited. Some men who use violence fossilise hardline views about women's roles, rules for their behaviour and men's rights, as part of defending their 'culture' against assimilationist and colonialist pressures.



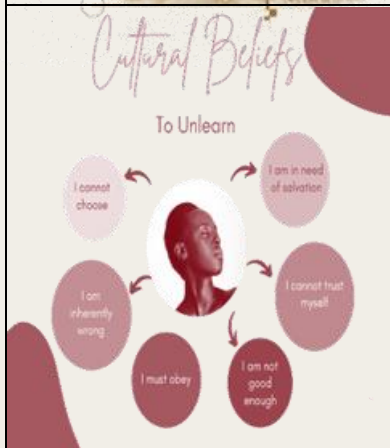
Anchor your engagement in cultural humility. Particularly if you are of Anglo-Celtic background, you might need to remember that *you have a culture too*. Understanding your own culture – the lenses through which you view the world and things you might not see as a result – will help you to not 'other' the adult's culture. Rethink your assumptions about kinship, parenting, monogamy, gender – if you are part of a dominant culture, learn about the weaknesses and challenges your culture faces from the perspectives of marginalised cultures. Acknowledge the struggles and failures of your community to address violence against women and children, and the long history of dominant cultural institutions & structures that have victimised them.



Assume there are different views about gendered roles within every culture, and encourage him to talk about different perspectives. Ask him what other views exist in his community about the beliefs he is expressing. What might be the views of some of the younger men in his community? Younger women? What are they grappling with and learning that's of value to their culture and community?

Frame it as given that a diversity of views exist about these beliefs and issues in every community. Assume that culture is dynamic, attempting to hold on to traditions, pillars and values while also continuing to evolve and adjust to new circumstances.

You could invite the adult to consider how others in his community are trying to navigate the beliefs and ways of being a man, woman or gender queer person inherited from their parents and grandparents, with how they are grappling with these issues and new influences in the country they now live in.



If appropriate, ask how their community is grappling with an issue facing all communities: progressing women's, children's and (if relevant to the context) gender queer people's choices and opportunities when historically they have been disadvantaged. Link this to safety and well-being. The adult might have strong views, and possibly draw upon religious texts or other 'cultural truths' to defend them. Manage yourself to focus calmly on safety and well-being.

"I can hear that there are some strong views about this, that you and some or maybe many others in the community hold. I am not here to judge. I am here to help you be the best father and role model you can be, and am concerned about how these beliefs might be getting in the way of that. I wonder if these beliefs are dominating so much that you are hurting those who you love in your family?"



Try not, however, to frame the issue as gender equality, unless the adult seems comfortable with this. Some men in some cultural contexts can become defensive and animated in pushing back against the goal of gender equality. You might need to work very hard to not be seen as trying to 'impose Western values' onto his culture. Rather, focus on opportunities for girls, women and (if relevant to the context) gender queer people to be safe, thrive and lead fulfilling lives – a focus on expanding opportunities for all in the community.



Invite him to describe what it looks like in his community when men stand with their family members, rather than stand over them. What it looks like when men engage respectfully with their family members in ways that honour their dignity and safety. What it looks like to work hard to ensure the safety of his family.

Use this as a springboard towards a focus on what he might be doing now that is not consistent with community expectations to ensure safety. If he is a refugee or supported his family to migrate under difficult circumstances, what he is doing now that contradicts the actions he took previously to build safety for his family.



Children are at the centre of many communities, with cultural expectations that they will be nurtured and cherished by all kin. Fathers might embody a genuine desire to help their children expand their opportunities and have a better life than they did. Being a good role model and providing guidance can be important not only to their biological children, but to others in the community. Helping violent fathers to be accountable to community and their own expectations in this respect can be a behaviour change motivator for some.



Focus on what behaviour is not acceptable within the community when a man disagrees with his partner or family members over their decisions or actions. Ask what is not acceptable for a man or father to do in these situations – what crossing the line looks like. What does it look like when someone in their community crosses the line from having an argument, into using violence and abuse? What does it look like when the adult behaves respectfully according to community values and expectations, and does not cross this line?

If the adult strongly believes that violence is justified (or even expected) under certain circumstances, be transparent with him that you assume there are different opinions about this within his community, and ask him what those different viewpoints might be. If he falls back on 'everyone in my community knows that hitting is OK when a wife harms a man's honour and humiliates him and his family', focus on the illegality of that violent behaviour where they now live, and how that behaviour will be responded to by police and the courts.



Learn about the culture from cultural consultants. Develop relationships with cultural advisors in migrant resource centres, ethnocultural services, international settlement services, and in centres for survivors of torture and trauma. Learn from women's associations within the culture or community, to help you discern which aspects of the perpetrator's narratives about his culture are patriarchal interpretations that serve male entitlement, and that are not universally held within the community.

While you are unlikely to develop enough knowledge to argue the specifics of any religious texts or spiritual teachings that the adult might use to 'justify' his harmful behaviours and beliefs about gender, if you do your research, you can acknowledge the existence of different interpretations and views with some degree of confidence.



Humiliation can be dangerous for users of violence to experience – when they feel shamed or perceive they've been 'reduced' or made to feel 'less of a man' in front of or in the eyes of others, or if they've been reminded of felt inadequacy. If we confront too hard too soon, some might not only double down on their violence-supporting beliefs and narratives, but also escalate their harmful behaviour due to felt humiliation. Even if their felt experience of humiliation occurred in the session with you, they might blame their ex/partner for 'causing' them to be in the situation where they felt humiliated. In some communities, adult users of violence can perceive that their whole family has been humiliated by the victim-survivor, adding to risk.



Extended families and natural networks within the community can be highly important in either exacerbating, or (to a degree) helping to protect against risk. Consider their role in safety planning and in building accountability supports. Think beyond the nuclear family, and identify communal responses. Remember also that extended family members can also condone and join in with the violence and abuse.



There are some unique risk considerations in adult use of violent and controlling behaviours in some cultural community contexts. Ensure that you are familiar with indicators of, and risk factors for, visa abuse, dowry abuse, honour-based violence, forced marriage, cultural isolation and entrapment, female genital mutilation/cutting, and modern slavery. You might need to look outside of your own particular cultural lens to understand the contexts in which these forms of violence and entrapment operate, and so that you do not collude with overculture/white supremacy and racism towards non-Anglo cultures.