

Embracing complexity:
group and individual responses with
men who were subjected to
childhood sexual abuse





Overview

- **Orientation towards complexity**
- **Working with men in context of a feminist service**
- **What does safety mean? (cultural safety, gender expectations)**
- **Groupwork and individual counselling**
- **Responding to the victim-to-offender discourse**

Contributors

- Men who took part in the group
- Anne Riggs, PhD Artist

<http://anneriggs.com/2013/10/12/mens-group-pictures-poems-reflections/>

<http://artistsincommunity.me/2013/09/08/men-s-group-in-the-shadows/>

- NCASA colleagues



Complexity

Holding open, rather
than foreclosing

Resisting move towards
certainty



Alice Walker, 'We are the ones we've been waiting for: Alice Walker and Archie Roach'. Radio National, in Conversation with Caroline Baum, Sydney Writers' Festival, 2014.

<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/awaye/alice-walker/5471250>

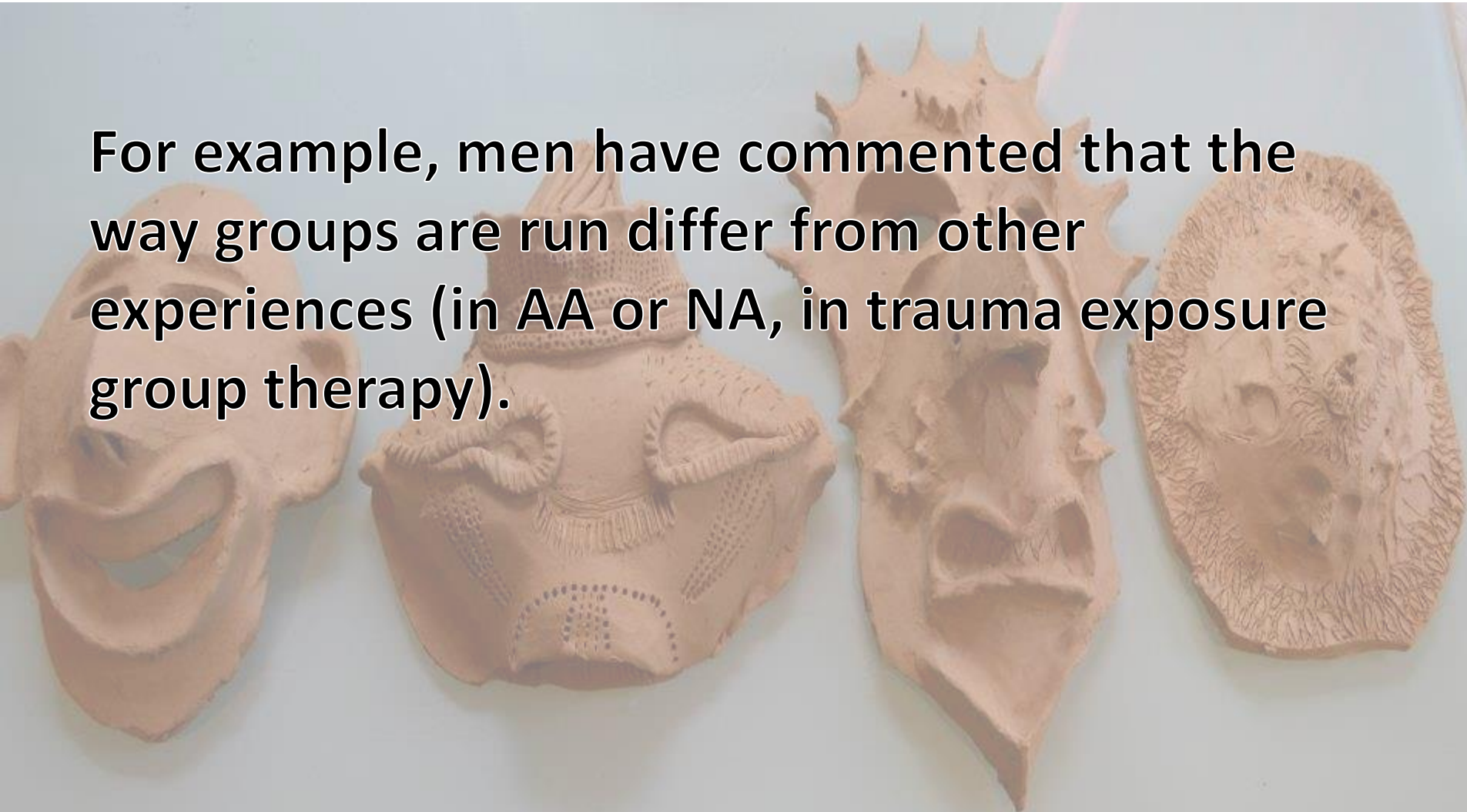


Working with men in context of a feminist service

- Three main benefits:
 - History of naming, politicising and acting on the problem of sexual abuse
 - Thorough, detailed examination of masculinity and the power dynamics of gender
 - An ongoing critical stance towards dominant practices

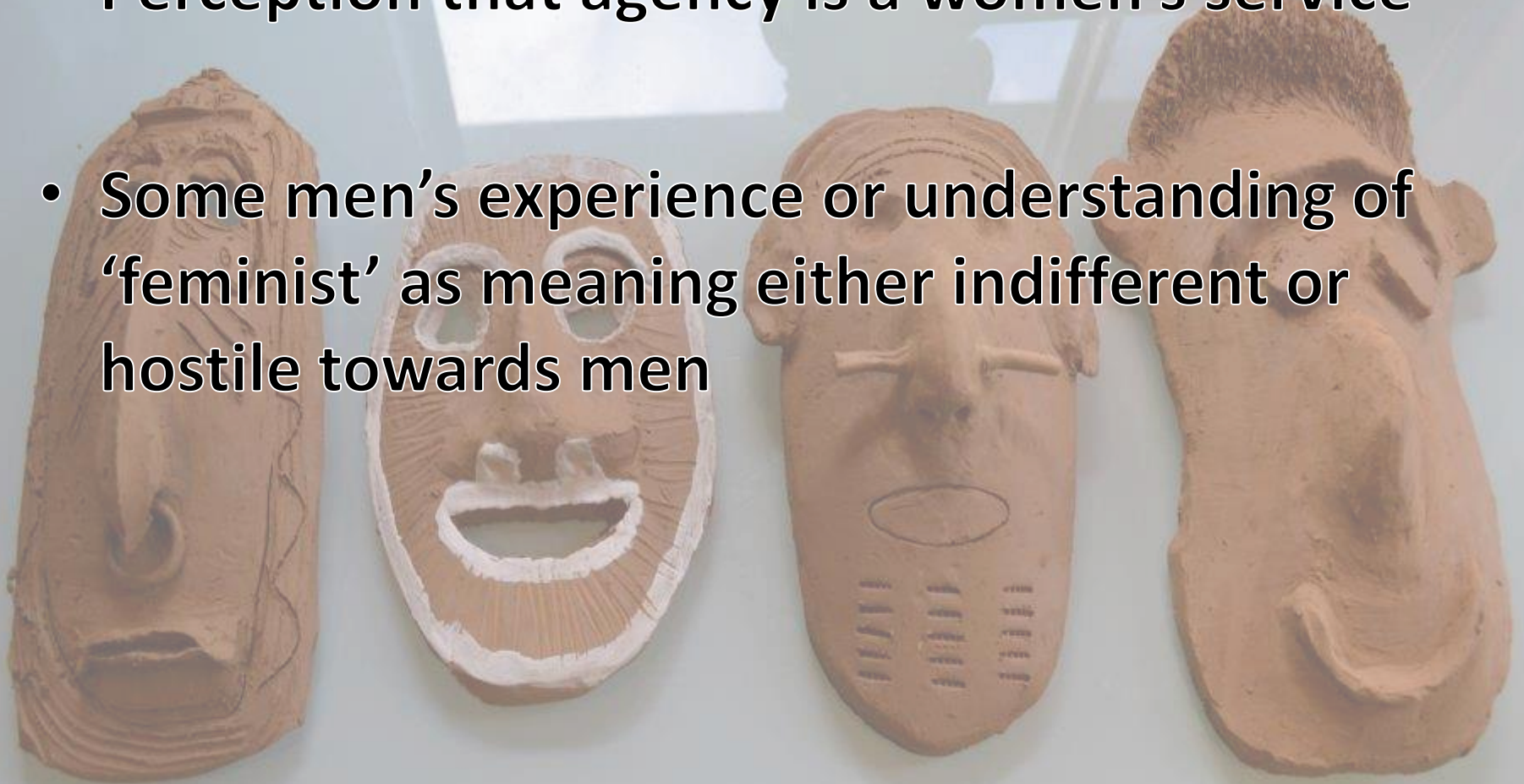
- Doing this work with men in a feminist organisation can shape practice.

For example, men have commented that the way groups are run differ from other experiences (in AA or NA, in trauma exposure group therapy).



Some potential limitations

- Perception that agency is a women's service
- Some men's experience or understanding of 'feminist' as meaning either indifferent or hostile towards men



“I hope to show areas of potential coalition between (pro)feminist activism and males who have been sexually abused. Such men are still expected to grow up according to the code of hegemonic masculinity and might, therefore, understand the effects of compulsory compliance to a gender order based on hegemonic masculinity.

They might also understand the silencing of difference, for speaking out about having been abused means admitting that one is a potential abuser or, in the words of a therapist ...“a time bomb.” It is my hope that men who have been abused can be powerful allies to the feminist cause”

Ouellette, 2009, pp. 68-69

Safety

- Trauma
- Gender
- Sexuality
- Culture
- Language
- Class
- Shame

- Past experience of institutions, including the 'care' system and prison
- Interactions with mental health systems- confidentiality, feeling disrespected

- Long way to go to addressing safety with Indigenous men in this country. We know a lot of Indigenous men have been subjected to sexual abuse. We don't know enough about how to provide accessible, meaningful and safe support.



Safety

“Logic doesn’t play a big part in surviving, healing, things like that. There’s a lot of what if’s, a lot of conjecture...this is what happened in this sort of circumstance in the past so it *will* happen again, and it’s through people... pointing out the differences in the environment – where we are doing it, the people around- pointing out the cold hard logic of the fact that sort of thing isn’t going to happen and if it does there’s all these people here that are going to take very strong exception to it”

“You don’t have to talk about the abuse or anything like that, you can just talk knowing if it comes up, people understand...so especially for me, you don’t have to actively hide it. That to me is really important because I have to actively hide everything all of the time”



Complexity of gender identity



“(another group member) mentioned he was gay, I felt encouragement from that. I thought I could tell everyone, yep, I lived sort of as a woman for 5 years. It was mucking about before. Then I basically changed my gender back. And I thought, well you know, I felt reasonably safe. . .”

(Con't from previous slide)

“Getting into that area of gender and identity and sexuality, that can be a really intense area, because once you start talking about that you’re dealing with...it ties back into the abuse because of the sexual nature...”



“I find it so hard...I went so extreme at times, living as a man, back to how I was before I changed my gender....there were things I went over the top, ‘cos there was this constant belief that I wasn’t a man enough, wasn’t a real man, because- the abuse. So that can be confronting dealing with those ideas and concepts. I don’t know how you’d go about it. That gets fundamentally down to defining who and what you are”



Gender in context



- On the one hand is a sense that gender is up for discussion in our culture, that the 'tyranny of singularity' is not as restrictive when it comes to hegemonic masculinity
- At the same time, men are keenly aware of the expectations, demands and constraints demanded by masculinity

Gender and cultural privilege is part of the bigger picture



<http://www.theage.com.au/comment/tony-abbott-minister-for-women-no-thanks-20130919-2u179.html>

Photo: *Andrew Meares*

Genders

Transgender woman

Transgender man

Genderqueer

Genderfluid

Questioning

Intersex

Male

Female

Gender-nonconforming

Trans feminine

Trans masculine

MTF

FTM

Transsexual man

Transsexual woman

Trans*

Two Spirit

Third Gender

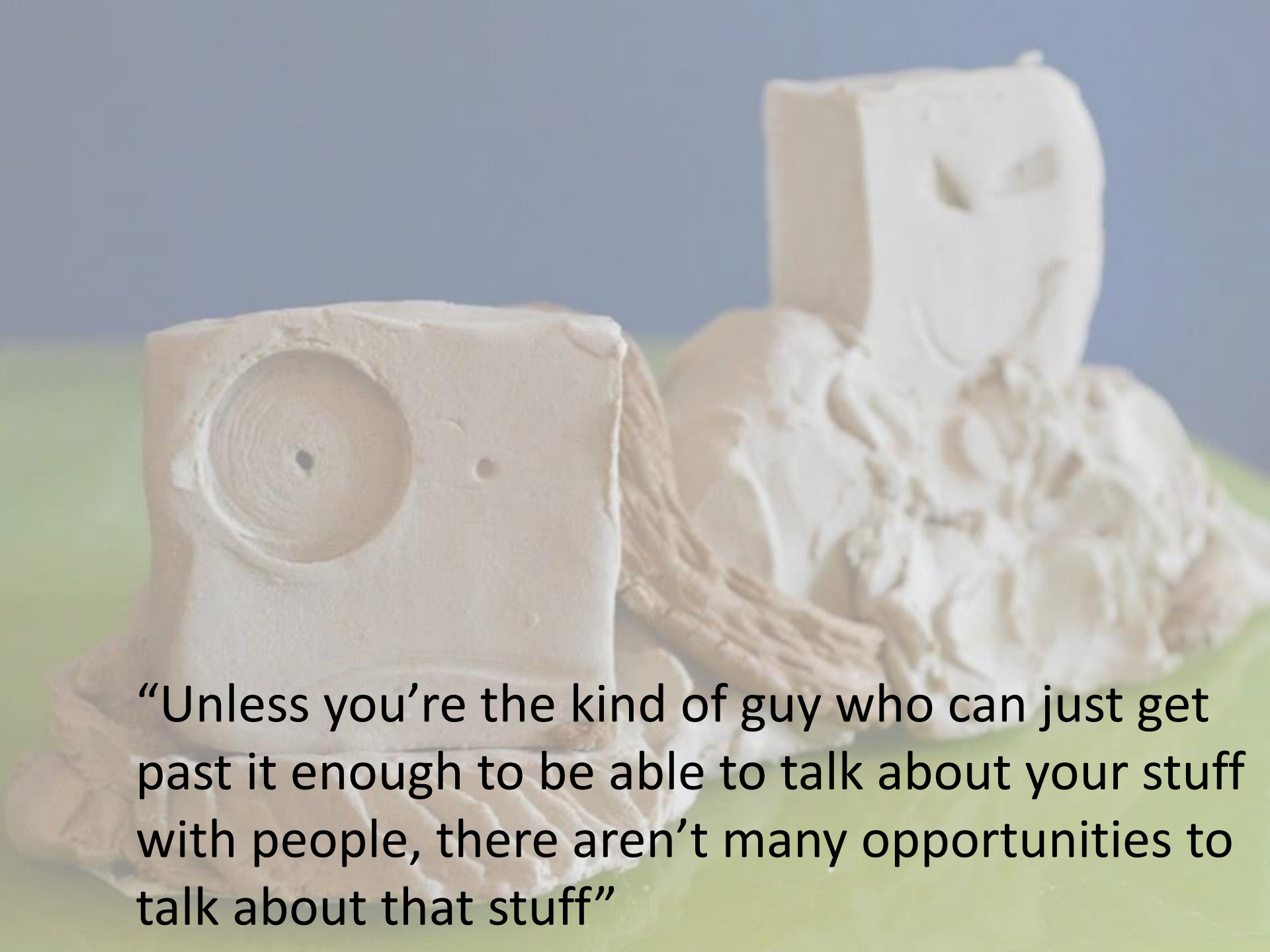
No identification

Other

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/summerskyephoto/13999575083/>

“I didn’t realise people were going to have so much to say, it’s a bit unpredictable...you (Anne) had made the comment that when you’ve done similar women’s groups they haven’t talked about their personal issues at all...for us it would appear that it’s the only chance we’ve ever had, and there was almost a real urgency to make that happen”





“Unless you’re the kind of guy who can just get past it enough to be able to talk about your stuff with people, there aren’t many opportunities to talk about that stuff”

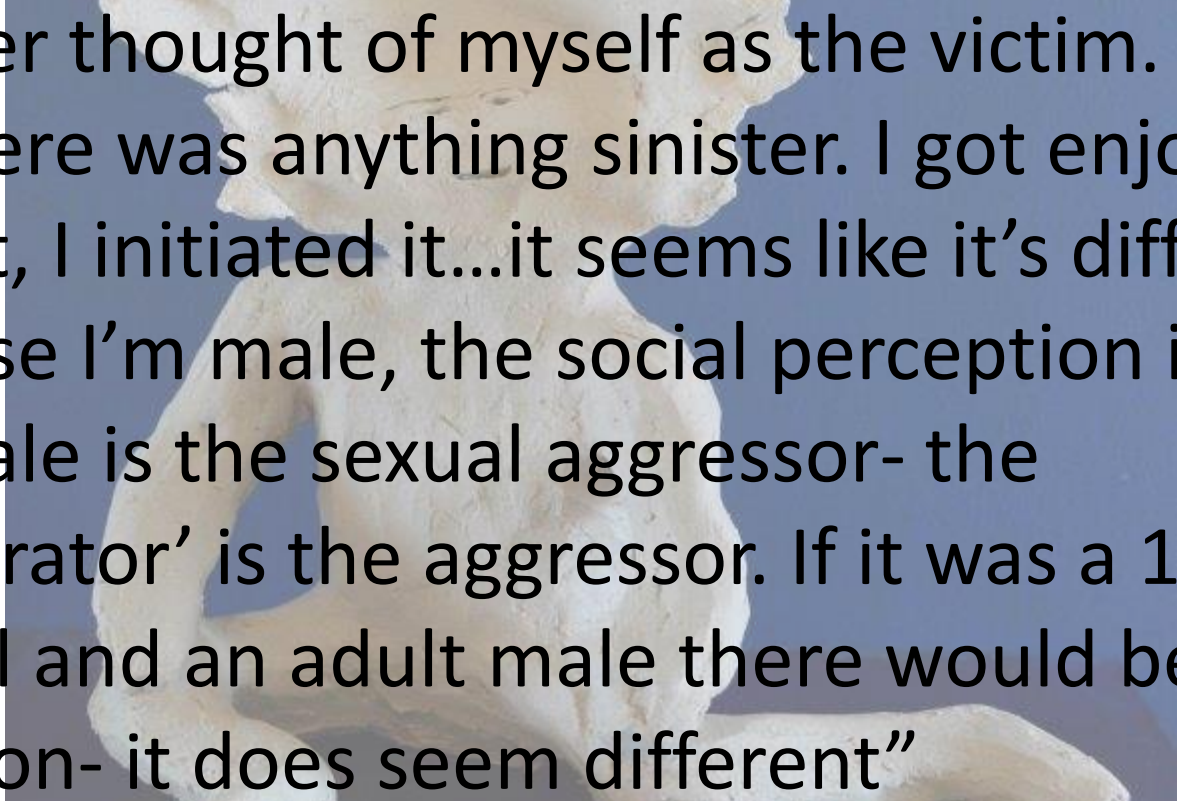


Beyond my awareness

“I think the opportunity to be in a group was very useful, in and of itself. It’s the first time I’ve come across the opportunity to be in a men’s group, full stop. An abuse group, second. And third, having someone facilitate that, so that was beyond my experience, beyond my awareness”

“You see people and you see they’ve been hurt too...it’s very hard to look at yourself and say ‘that’s reasonable that you feel this way after what happened’. There’s all this pressure and expectation, self-pressure, that I could have really avoided it (the abuse) if I’d wanted to, a lot of unreasonable stuff that goes in there”



A white, irregularly shaped object, possibly a piece of coral or a sculpture, is positioned in the center of the frame. It has a jagged, organic top and a more defined, somewhat humanoid base. The object is set against a dark blue background that features a vertical white stripe on the left side. The lighting is soft, creating subtle shadows and highlights on the object's surface.

“I never thought of myself as the victim. I never felt there was anything sinister. I got enjoyment from it, I initiated it...it seems like it’s different because I’m male, the social perception is that the male is the sexual aggressor- the ‘penetrator’ is the aggressor. If it was a 14 year old girl and an adult male there would be no question- it does seem different”

Connection and community

Making sense of sexual abuse can be done in a range of contexts:

“The couple of times I did talk in the group, it feels good, a big weight off my shoulders. It needs to happen more”



‘The stare’- oh, keep away

“It was a nice space where I was actually able to sit with people and not worry about what I say after the fact. And actually just talk, and talk about issues of the same nature. Not getting the stare- ‘oh, keep away’- you know”



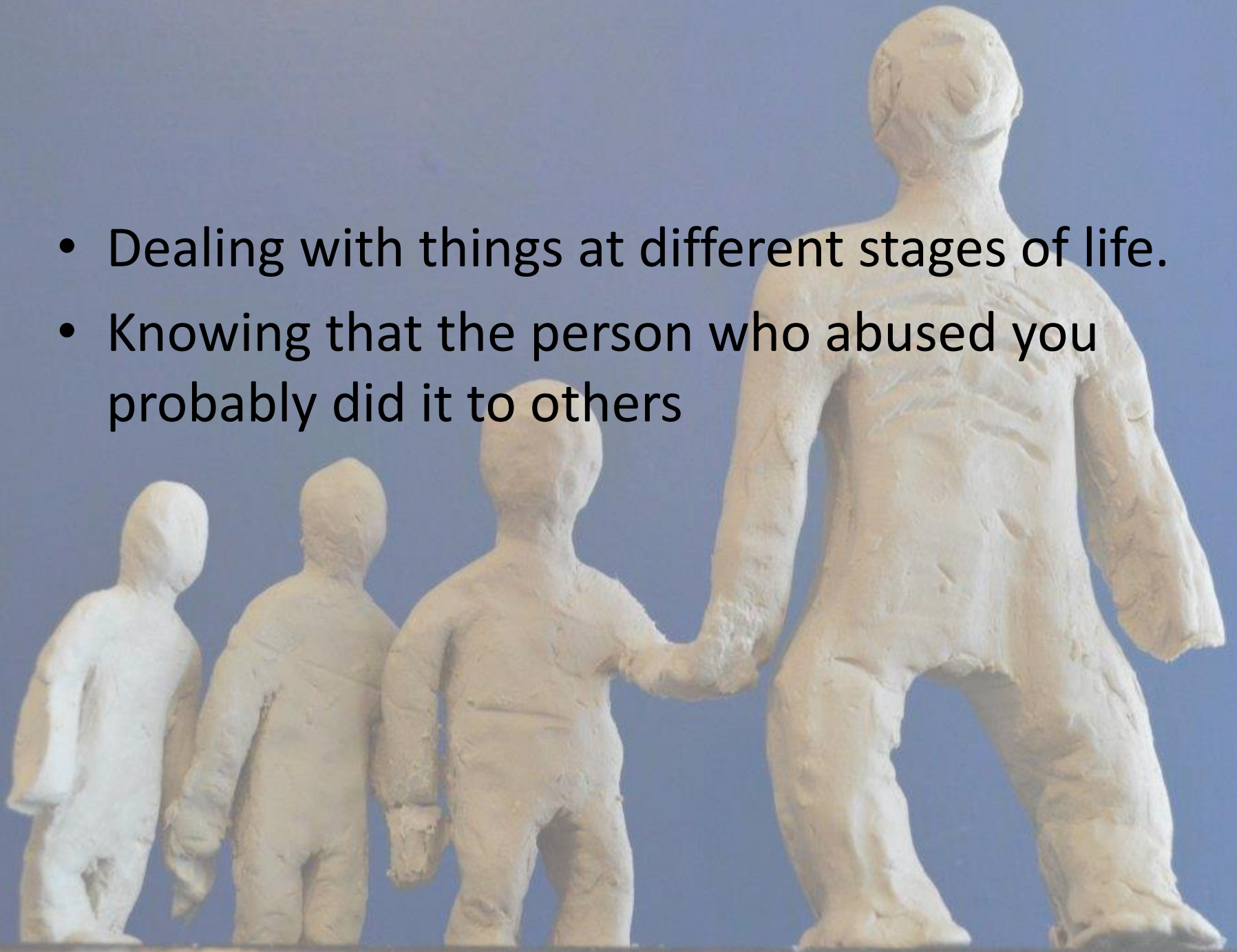
Discourses of therapy

- Either through personal research or experience of therapy, men sometimes understand themselves in ways that present dilemmas for counsellors
- How do we honour men's understanding of themselves while offering a critique of some of the dominant understandings around sexual abuse?

“When’d I get diagnosed? About this time last year. Did my rehab in November, and disclosed my...the incest sort of thing and then that was reframed as abuse, and so my journey probably started November, December last year in terms of it being abuse. That has enabled me to grasp, to re-process because it wasn’t something that was consciously in my mind. It was a bit of a blank space to be honest”



- Dealing with things at different stages of life.
- Knowing that the person who abused you probably did it to others

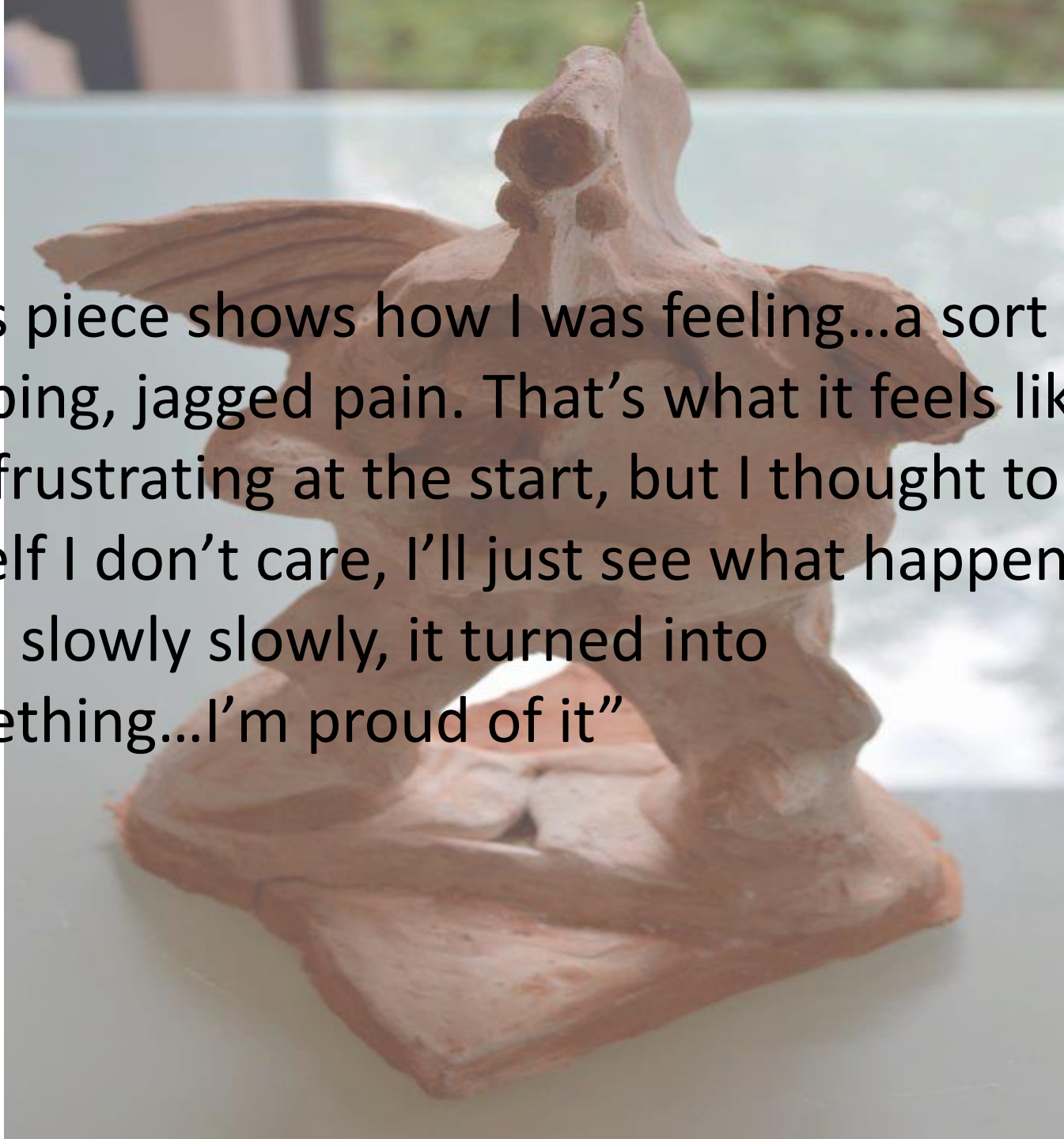


Fear of abusing

“My fear is that, if I get Alzheimer’s disease or something, I will forget all these things that are important to me. Maybe then ‘it’ will come out and I’ll hurt or abuse someone”

Other men have spoken about feeling ‘contaminated’ or a ‘vampire effect’.

“This piece shows how I was feeling...a sort of stabbing, jagged pain. That’s what it feels like...it was frustrating at the start, but I thought to myself I don’t care, I’ll just see what happens. Then slowly slowly, it turned into something...I’m proud of it”





Control



“Being in an environment where I’m able to create and whatever I created is whatever I created...there’s no pressure to do good, bad, mediocre, it didn’t matter what level of skill was shown, how good or bad the piece was...”



“Particularly for me that’s been really important, something that was really hard... The fostering of the ‘let’s just have a go’, and who cares what the final piece is. If it turns out like you wanted it to turn out like, yeah good, but if not...so?!”





“I just did bits of things, and I kept doing bits and all of a sudden those bits turned into something. That was a real revelation for me. And fairly significant cognitively, to go ‘oh, so if I just do this thing easily and then just do that thing easily, if I get to the end of 2 hours, something will be there. As opposed to trying to decide what to do and then try and manifest it, which is typically what I do and that’s much harder, more cognitive. It’s a struggle...such a struggle”

Rose and Abi-Ached

- Point out that the those involved in scientific research into neurobiology are far more cautious about their findings than those who popularise these findings.

Humour





Questions?



Contact: Cameron.boyd@austin.org.au

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