

**Final Report
'Mutual Respect'
Focus Group
Conducted
January 2010
Kathleen Rosic**

Focus Group – Report

Mutual Respect

BACKGROUND

This report shares information provided by participants of a focus group designed to identify and discuss what respect and in particular mutual respect means and how one has a relationship that is built on mutual respect. Providing an adequate and effective definition of mutual respect in relationships has proved quite challenging and complicated. Respect is the core element of a mutually respectful relationship therefore, gaining consistency of mutual respect through generations and in particular towards the elderly promises to be a long and complex journey. Much more research and many conversations are required to help the elderly know what it is like to feel part of a mutually respected relationship and to be able to treat and be treated with mutual respect. It is hoped that the journey toward mutual respect will raise awareness and empowerment for older people and hopefully a positive outcome of societal change.

There has been very little research conducted on the topic of domestic violence in a domestic or home environment. The World Health Organisation conducted a comprehensive study with elderly people that addressed the views of elder persons through focus groups, surrounding abuse in domestic situations and emphasized it as a worldwide problem.¹ The report provides hope and also scope for research because it would appear that the world is suffering from a lack of mutual respect. According to the Australian Government, Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, community awareness campaigns surrounding domestic violence, abuse and neglect have been promoted in the media and by local communities but the campaigns fall short on addressing domestic violence towards the elderly.² Ageism is another area that needs further exploration to address if it is a new trend or rather something that has been emerging overtime. Research relating to whether it is getting worse, whether it is based on socio economic status or cultural background would also be worthwhile to identify patterns of mutual respect or the lack of it.

¹ WHO – Missing voices: views of older persons on elder abuse (2002) Geneva, Switzerland, http://www.who.int/ageing/projects/elder_abuse/missing_voices/en/

² *Time for Action* The National Council's Plan for Australia to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children. 2009-2012. A *Snapshot* March 2009 http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/women/pubs/violence/np_time_for_action/snapshot_summary/Documents/A_Snapshot.pdf

METHOD

The purpose of the focus group was to explore and understand the definition of mutual respect and also mutual respect in relationships. Only one focus group was conducted specifically for this purpose to enable some insight into the participants meaning and perception of the topic. The sample was not representative of the Australian population; it was a Caucasian group of participants from a reasonably privileged area, with a high socio economic background. All participants lived locally and were invited to participate in the beginning stages of what may become a much larger project. It was however a random sample of people from this group brought together for the purpose of the focus group. The group had an even gender representation and were all over 50 years of age. All members were aware of the broader research project that is exploring the quality of life for seniors and to ensure that seniors do not experience elderly abuse. Approval was sought from all participants to tape the discussion with excerpts to form the report. There was no evidence to suggest that any participants of the group had been victims of elder abuse, the group was selected purely for discussion purposes. Scenarios had been prepared for the discussion but were not required as the group was able to conduct a very fruitful discussion with minimal prompting. The report is written in the voice of the focus group so that it may be used as a resource for further research.

RESULTS

The report is based on findings from a focus group conducted in January 2010. The group comprised 17 people made up of 8 men and 9 women, also present were the host and facilitator. The group were reminded about the current project that was underway into exploring the quality of life for seniors which included one dimension to ensure that seniors do not experience elderly abuse. One vital element of the project being respect for seniors as a positive approach to ensuring that ageism does not influence the quality of life for people as they age, allowing for ageing with dignity and respect. The aim of the discussion was to explore the concept of respect firstly then to move onto mutual respect. The reason for this was to begin with a concept that the group could relate to more easily, then expand one's thinking around what mutual respect meant for them as individuals. It was clear from the discussion that respect was something that could be identified, felt and experienced although it was much more difficult to define.

During the focus group a number of responses highlighted the difficulty found in defining 'respect' and 'mutual respect'. Respect can be earned, based around knowledge and/or judgment. There are different elements of respect such as a special kind for the elderly. People can feel respected by another person's tone of voice, their consideration in different circumstances. Individuals have

different acceptability levels of respect. Respect can be based on a person's specific agenda at the time; it can be all about power and business. Respect can be based around sport and competition. Respect is something that should be accorded at birth, it is an internal characteristic, a type of social skill to be encouraged and nurtured over time.

The following excerpts are explanations of respect from the focus group when asked to define respect?

Valuing each other, for who they are, where they are, and how they are! Understanding and trying to respect an individual's needs, feelings etc. Treating someone as important and as an individual, even if the edges become a bit blurry with age and they have forgotten things; they are still an individual who has a whole life of experience, a whole character, who has wisdom and value, and is very important.

Another element of respect is for someone who holds an important position; for example the Prime Minister. One may not like or even agree with that person but respect is shown for their position. There should also be some form of trust around this type of respect so that it is mutual, because one would like to trust that the Prime Minister would have everyone's best interests at heart. Some elderly people are accorded respect because of their former position although this was not generally agreed upon by the group. Some participants expressed the view that respect should be earned presently and not retrospectively and should not be related to previous occupation or position.

Children for example need to respect their teachers. Although it would appear that some believed that respect for teachers has been lost. The discussion then moved to an earned respect and whether respect can be earned and therefore deserved. Some teachers for example command respect whilst others receive no respect. This caused some questioning as to why some teachers are given respect and others receive disrespect. Some teachers also show more respect than others. The question was then raised as to whether it is really respect or fear that teachers instil. Children are also receptive and can pick up on those that respect them and those who do not.

It was suggested that elderly people need to receive dignity which is another element of respect, they do not need to be dominated or patronised. It was also suggested that the essence of respect is that it should be mutual because everyone can receive benefits from mutual respect.

Respect accorded to the elderly should be different to others because sometimes they are suffering with dementia or other memory problems and their mental faculties are not as good as they were, and so they should therefore be treated with a type of continuation of respect, they should have a special class accorded to them, where people make allowances for them because of their age. This stage of respect is not something that should be earned it should be granted purely on reaching a certain stage of life.

Respect can also be bound up with knowledge and judgment for other people no matter what age. There are different kinds of respect. The tone or way one speaks to another can be respect or disrespect, the context of how something is said or an action is performed can be respectful or disrespectful.

What is acceptable to one individual is different for another. People have varying agendas and power plays, different angles that they are trying to promote. One's own position particularly in business or in the sporting world takes place in a highly competitive environment. Respect can be lost amongst those who are driven by their own agenda. In business it can be difficult to treat all staff the same even with the best of intentions. Individuals have different emotions, ambitions, drive, fears, inferiority complexes and it can be difficult to know how to deal with these differences. However having the ability to apologise for behaviour that was out of line, was considered a respectful quality.

Respect should be something that is accorded at birth. However with multiculturalism and so many cultural morays to be aware of it can become difficult not to offend. Consideration for the general public could be a better term. Respect should be in a personal relationship or close friendship and if the respect vanishes the relationship is rendered worthless.

Respect is an internal characteristic sociologically, something that everyone has some component of; some people develop it more than others but it starts with the individual person. It is a social skill that is developed over time and forms part of a whole set of other characteristics that one learns through interactions with others. Respect can be encouraged and nurtured over time.

Respect in relationships is tied up to empathy because one needs to be thinking of the reactions of a person as the focus of their attention. One also needs to be thinking about how they would feel to be treated in the same manner.

The term respect is used for objects as well, such as having a healthy respect for something that is dangerous.

The group identified that many people in years gone by have lived through very difficult times, such as war and had become very bitter and difficult to live with. Consequently their families had been put through very tough times and been subjected to disrespectful and abusive environments. Counselling was rarely offered as assistance or treatment in comparison to today.

The group were then asked the question of what mutual respect meant for them. This question was posed to try to move the discussion to a more personal level of respect.

‘White/grey hair’ was used as a personal example to identify an age distinction. The colour of one’s hair changed the way that people treated you. You were considered old to have white/grey hair and may even experience being called ‘dear’ which was considered disrespectful and gave a feeling of not being treated with mutual respect. It was definitely considered to be tied up with age as it was thought that young girls in their twenties would not be called ‘dear’. This was not necessarily agreed with by the group, as others thought they would call younger people ‘love’ and ‘dear’. On the flip side looking older sometimes made people respect you more, for example – when catching the bus. The driver may help some elderly people on and off the bus and this was considered showing an obvious outward sign of respect. The act was not condescending, it was acknowledging that you had a specific need and was received as displaying mutual respect for the older passengers. Although it was pointed out that in another sense the individual doesn’t really know what the driver was thinking. The driver could be cursing the old people for all the extra hassle that they cause.

White hair can also cause disrespect between elders. It was discussed that some people didn’t want to associate with older people because it made them feel old and they discriminate against people of similar age because of hair colour, as well as mental and physical ability.

The discussion then moved towards context and the manner in which something was said. The term ‘dear’ may be acceptable and respectful depending upon the way that it was used. It can be used as a kind word; a friendly gesture. The way it is perceived therefore forms part of the respecting. What is being said has to be contextualised in order to say that it is respectful or disrespectful. The term ‘bastard’ can be a term of endearment or it can be the opposite, just like the word ‘bugger’ or ‘silly old bugger’. The terminology when used can be rude, but not necessarily meant that way. It can also

depend on the situation, as some forms of language are considered acceptable and others in different situations unacceptable for example the boardroom compared to the football field.

Offering older people a voice was considered offering mutual respect. Many families speak for older people and do not give them the opportunity to have input into their choices. Giving people a voice to express their opinion shows respect and allows for mutual respect to be fostered. This flows onto some members of the medical profession who often do not show respect to their elderly patients and talk to carers and family members without making the patient feel part of the discussion.

Some members of the group felt respect was a problem at a community level because there was no window of opportunity to teach respect. The question was raised as to how one learned respect, because it was not something that was part of the education curriculum or taught at university.

Respect should be something that is learned as a child, however parents and schools were considered to be failing in their teaching of it. Respect was also considered instinctive by nature, and a skill that like other skills could remain dormant unless pointed in the right direction. It was thought that respect should be learned when young because it was much harder to learn later in life. There was considered to be a gap in society concerning respect, it was something that you either have and are very aware of, or something that you just ignore and blunder through life hurting people. Society had no formula, there was no training and respect was considered to be something that was not being taught as a major issue. Some thought respect should be modelled through life, starting at home and then continuing through the education system. It was agreed that this was true but many also believed, that too many children were missing out on training because their parents were busy working, and children were not getting the right instruction at home, which left them growing up not knowing how to respect others. Schools were also encouraging individuality with some children not giving a hoot about anybody else, only concentrating on their own needs. One commented that we all learned respect in the home but that was generations ago. This statement highlighted that some people believe that respect over time had changed.

The statements concerning learning respect at home were strongly disputed because not all children will learn respect in the home. Those who come from abusive families do not learn it at home. It is a generalisation to suggest that everyone will learn respect at home. There are millions of people our age (50 and over) who did not learn respect at home. They may have been brought up by Father's who came home from the war and bashed their wives and their children. The discussion so far has surrounded respect in an ideal society. Whether you are old or not how can a 75 year old man who

has raped his grandchild be given respect. How can one respect a 70 year old who bashes his wife or who is a drunk and has alienated his children. There are millions of people who were not brought up to know and learn respect 'correctly'. The rule of '*do unto others as you would have them do unto you*' (which is based on a Christian ethic) should be implied to ensure a society which might know respect. Respect should be for people who have earned respect to the best of their ability and have tried to be considerate, courteous, kind, loving, and good. There are millions of people that are not, the mere fact that someone is 75 or 80 does not necessarily give them respect. It was however, granted that people give respect to people on face value not knowing their background and by pure virtue that they exhibit respect to others. Respect should not be for someone who is old; it should be for any age and everyone.

Respect should be given to those who are learning another language because if one had to learn another language they would come to understand the difficulty that people who are new to a culture face, and then they may have more patience, empathy and respect for migrant populations.

The question was then put to the group about the kind of relationship where mutual respect could be found. This proved quite a challenging question because the answers hardly touched on intimate relationships, which is a place where mutual respect is essential.

Mutual respect should firstly be found in a happy marriage. It can also be found in everything – in the way that people are treated. Peers in a workplace obtain respect for and from one another and their positions.

To discuss the teacher pupil situation again, it has to be earned in this type of relationship, respect is not something that is just given; it must be earned. Although in the past others thought this was different, teachers were treated like Gods, parents would never have complained the way they do today. There was a respect for the position of teacher. People's authority was respected.

Respect can be shown between male and female such as opening the door to a female. There was disagreement to this example because it was considered a courtesy not a showing of respect. It was even considered frowned upon these days for men to open the door for women, although many men still partake in the practice.

Respect can come with dependence such as a surgical team that depend on each other. It can also be the same for a platoon in the army, or a sporting team where people depend on each other.

Dependence was considered an absolute for respect because it created part of the bonding that enabled various chemistries to come together, which include respect.

The question was then posed to the group about mutual respect being earned or whether it should just be granted.

Respect was not necessarily just given to people, it depended on the circumstances and it could be displayed in the most simple of example to the most complicated. Opening a door for a woman was originally considered showing a form of respect. The group were now beginning to be a little perplexed by the concept, because this was also considered by some to be more of a courtesy, or a display of good manners rather than actually showing respect. Therefore the concepts were actually beginning to get blurred and much more complicated and confusing for the participants.

It was thought that mutual respect must be earned, definitely in a relationship. It was like a check list of the qualities that individuals displayed. This evoked disagreement by the group because some believed that the simplest encounter could be offering mutual respect. There was now uncertainty within the discussion about mutual respect and what was considered to be just a courtesy or whether it could be considered as actually displaying mutual respect

Any relationship should start with mutual respect, because both people are human and should be accorded with mutual respect, although it was believed that frequently this was not the case. From that point on it could be either continued improved or discarded.

Mutual respect versus respect was then briefly discussed. Respect being for someone met in a quick encounter and mutual respect being a much deeper form of respect that could be found in a personal relationship with someone.

It was observed by a member of the group that mutual respect was on different levels and that the members of the focus group were actually showing mutual respect for each other as they respectfully allowed each other to speak. But this raised the question of was it just good manners or an actual display of mutual respect? It was then acknowledged that there was a complimentary factor to respect and that good manners helped lead the way to respect. Good manners and respect were considered to

go hand in hand and the sorts of people that perhaps had learnt to be civilised were also the people who displayed respect. It proved quite a complex issue because there were casual relationships where courtesy prevailed and courtesy was simply treating somebody reasonably and not pushing them out of the way. Then there were deeper relationships such as a team of surgeons that were working on highly complex medical procedures, where one needed to have mutual respect to achieve the required objective. However, this could be considered just a mechanical concept; the team may not even like each other. The respect could actually only be for the skill of the surgeons. This concept proved very tricky because the team was an important element of the procedure whatever the team, it could be a team in a factory for example, that are just doing their job. The team concept still operated because each individual was doing their job regardless of respect. This opened up another dimension to respect the dimension of skill and ability, but one that would not be considered as mutual respect but rather respect for a skill or of the person doing the job.

The group were asked to focus on elders and think of examples when mutual respect for one another may be thrown off balance. This was a difficult concept to grapple with but could be a strong link to elder abuse in a caring role. The carer could neglect themselves if the person being cared for took advantage of them. It could either become a situation where the carer is the victim of abuse, or sometimes the resentment could build up to the point where the carer became abusive.

Dependence was one example of mutual respect being off balance, when one person became dependant on the other. Another example was when people just help others without giving them the freedom to express themselves in the form of co-dependency. A relationship was not considered respectful if it became co-dependent.

Some participants of the group expressed a lost respect for the famous golfer Tiger Woods who had been reported in the media for cheating several times on his wife. This brought up a curious type of loss of respect and change in balance of a relationship, because no one in the room actually had a personal relationship with him, but still felt a great loss of respect invoked by his behaviour. He was considered an all round good guy and was held in high esteem by his fans, but his behaviour had caused great disappointed and lack of respect.

It was expressed that if ill health came into a relationship it should not destroy the balance of a mutually respectful relationship. However it was acknowledged that it could change the relationship.

An example was given to highlight that the elderly do not always show mutual respect towards younger people and this can be very hurtful particularly if their children or relatives are called upon to help. Some elderly people just expect others to do things for them and don't consider the consequences that the help may place on individuals. Family members can provide love, help and devotion that is not appropriately received and in fact taken for granted by older relatives. Mutual respect must be a two way street, it must be acknowledged from both sides. Every person must have a sense of value not in monetary terms, but value in the relationship, each member must give and receive and be appreciated. The elderly must also show mutual respect towards others and in particular the young.

The group was asked if there were any triggers that they could identify where respect had changed over the years. Did they think that older people were valued more or less now, or people showed more respect in years gone by and that something had actually changed in society?

The group did not believe that anything significant had changed. Some husbands disrespected their wives fifty years ago and that was still the same. The discussion turned back to teachers and the fact that earlier some members of the group thought that respect for teachers had waned, however most agreed that teachers had been subjected to all sorts of taunts and problems for years and that some teachers demanded respect and others didn't. It was also questioned whether it was actually respect or the capacity to instil fear into children!

It was also agreed that the group represented was primarily an Anglo-Saxon product and that Mediterranean, Asian and other nationalities would have different opinions. It was expressed that in most societies respect for the aged was extremely wonderful and more continuing and connected than it was believed to be generally in Anglo-Saxon communities such as Sydney today. However, in general terms Asian societies displayed a general lack of respect toward women which was considered absolutely shocking.

The group was asked to address the issue of self respect as it had not been covered in the discussion so far and what the concept of self respect might mean?

Self respect should come out of nurturing at the beginning of life. It links very closely with self esteem and how one sees themselves amongst their peers or amongst other social contacts. It was believed very important that children had self respect and were able to build on their self respect

because it was considered very difficult to obtain in later life. It was essential that adults had self respect but it should start as children or it was very difficult to have a healthy self respect as an adult. Self respect was considered extremely important!

A lack of self respect could lead to poor morale and depression. Self respect could be difficult to maintain in the elderly because a lot of self worth may dissipate as people grew older. They could start to feel useless and unwanted and their self respect could take a heck of a beating and end in deep depression. A vital thing for older people was some means by which they could maintain their ability to keep their self respect even though they were no longer working. Many older people could lose their sense of being needed, which could be of particular importance for men who see themselves as their job and when the job goes it becomes very difficult for them. Women can involve themselves in the family and generally have been doing so for a long time, so it is not quite as difficult for them in retirement. It is of crucial importance for both men and women but some men have more difficulty when they finish work or if they are forced to end work early.

Self respect should also include being able to ask for help particularly if one is no longer able to do something. This also involves individual pride. Men consider that they are strong and capable and when they reach an age or stage in their life that they are no longer able to do heavy work they should be able to ask for help and not lose their self respect. This however, can become a very difficult situation.

The last question that was asked was how does one know when someone has been disrespected?

It was thought they would display a behavioural change, become subdued, withdrawn and show signs of being depressed. This comment was questioned because for anyone's behaviour to be identified as different they would need to be part of some sort of group. Otherwise they could be withdrawing from society but nobody would notice. If anyone identifies a change in a person they should begin to question that change and wonder if something is underlying the change. It could be very difficult to discover the problem because it could turn out that it is a relative that is doing the abusing and they will not tell anyone because it exposed their loved one. It was agreed that you would have to have long term contact with someone to be able to easily identify a problem. Bullying and exclusion happen at all ages of life and not just in the school playground.

CONCLUSION

The participants of the focus group provided a very lively and fruitful discussion which highlighted the difficulty and complexity that the concepts of respect and mutual respect instil. Definitions do help people to be able to identify with a concept but should not be relied upon in isolation because everyone has a different perception when it comes to the concept of respect. Every individual has the right to request respect and should be granted such respect. For a relationship to include mutual respect is it crucial that it is a reciprocal process, with dialogue, actions and feelings of respect that flow both ways.

There are many areas for future exploration into mutual respect and it is important to keep the communications lines open for discussion and interpretation which might invoke a positive change for all. People need to feel part of a mutually respected relationship and be able to treat and be treated with mutual respect. The perception of a lack of mutual respect for the elderly is shocking and saddening in equal measures. One must hope that the journey toward mutual respect will raise awareness and empowerment for older people and a positive outcome of societal change. Everyone should be able to live in dignity and free of all forms of abuse and the core element for this commences with respectful relationships.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks go to the participants of the focus group for offering their time and valuable input into the discussion. Their display of openness, honesty and respect for each other and their opinions was appreciated. My personal thanks also go to Julie Matthews, the coordinator of the research project, for her support and encouragement throughout the project.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Time for Action: The National Council's Plan for Australia to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2009–2021 - A Snapshot. Australian Government, Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs website.

http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/women/pubs/violence/np_time_for_action/snapshot_summary/Pages/p2.aspx#4

WHO – Missing voices: views of older persons on elder abuse (2002) Geneva, Switzerland

www.who.ageing/projects/elder_abuse/missing_voices/en/ - 20k