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Professor Linda Coates shares her research at third South West Sydney Domestic Violence Conference

Chris Boulous



Dr Linda Coates from the Centre for Response-Based Practice Canada. Picture: Chris Lane

When is an argument not an argument? When it is violence, says Professor Linda Coates from the Centre for Response-Based Practice Canada.

Dr Coates was one of two keynote speakers at the third South West Sydney Domestic Violence conference on Wednesday at Fairfield RSL.

She has pioneered the term “mutualising” to describe how violent actions are misrepresented as mutual. It’s part of her extensive studies that demonstrate how language can be used to conceal violence, mitigate perpetrators’ responsibility and blame victims.

“A very common way we misrepresent violence is we mutilise it,” she said.

“So we present violence as something that two people are doing together. For example a child is raped and we call it sex – when very clearly legally and morally and in terms of a social interaction this is not something the child did with the perpetrator, it’s something the perpetrator did to and against the child

“If you start calling that sex, then you start excusing the perpetrator. You start hiding the violence and when we come to intervene we start doing the wrong things.”

<https://www.fairfieldchampion.com.au/story/5786279/language-can-be-used-to-conceal-violence/>

Dr Coates said language and violence is “tricky” as for a long period there hasn’t been a focus on describing violence accurately because people have investments in disguising violence.

Recency, Fairfield City Detective Superintendent Peter Lennon said he feared domestic violence remains “underreported” in the community despite more than fifty percent of all assaults reported being domestic violence related.

“Perpetrators have investments to misrepresent violence so they don’t face the social consequences and victims misrepresent violence to protect themselves and other people,” she said.

“We need to really pay attention to our language to represent and describe violence or what happens is you produce accounts that benefit perpetrators and hurt victims – and then your interventions are based on faulty information so you’re doing the wrong things.

“In terms of family violence it comes up all the time, rapes are described as sex, violence is described as they argued. When we encounter those things, we will say tell me what you mean by they argued. What were you doing in the argument? What was he doing in the argument? When he did that, what did you do next? And we start tracking and get a sequential description of who did what do who and in what social context.

“That begins to give you an accurate account of violence. So this wasn’t an argument, he was actually threatening you, he was calling you names. So then you’re dealing with something different. If they argued, your intervention would be for something for both of them –maybe some anger management programs. Where is if you have an accurate description and find out it is something that one person was doing against the another person we can say what we need to do is intervene over here. We don’t need to do something to the victim.”

The South West Sydney Domestic Violence Conference featured 19 guest speakers with service providers engaging in conversation on the latest discoveries, research and also explore best practices.

The South West Sydney Domestic Violence Conference Committee consists of: CORE Community Services, NSW Justice, Fairfield Council, Department of Human Services, Bonnie Support Services, DAMEC and Women’s Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Services.

- If you or someone you know is experiencing violence, call 1800 RESPECT on 1800 737 732 for advice or support. This free service providing confidential advice is open 24/7. In an emergency, call the police on triple zero. All incidents of violence should be reported to the police.