Compartments

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The title of my piece is “Compartments”. It is an interactive piece comprised of two larger boxes, one representing the service user, and the other representing myself, the service provider. Each of the boxes have smaller boxes inside, and nearly every box can be opened and engaged with. This piece was inspired by an encounter I had with a service user at a sexual assault centre. She repeatedly asked me if I had, myself, ever experienced sexual violence. Personal disclosures of service providers was not only an agency violation, but also a personal boundary of mine that I am continuously learning to navigate as a social work student. I, however, have experienced sexual violence as a child, and these experiences are represented by various boxes.

In the first box, which is the service provider box, there are smaller boxes that include the following items. One box represents my education and knowledge of social work theory. Another box represents my knowledge of available local resources. In the box that represents my own coping mechanisms, there are loose images that can be removed of various self-care techniques that I employ as a service provider, as well as a person who has experienced sexual violence. In a small box that is painted white on the outside, there are clouds in a blue sky on the inside, as well as a feather and a scroll. This box represents hope that I have for service users to

heal from their experiences, and the scroll includes a stanza from the poem, “Hope is the thing with feathers” by Emily Dickinson. All of these boxes are able to be opened and explored, as are the various tools available to me as a service provider. The one box that is unable to be opened is a small, long, coffin-shaped box. This box is glued shut and has barbed wire around it. A small amount of brownish-red liquid oozes slightly from the corner. This box represents my personal experience, the liquid being contained, for the most part, but with the ability to leak out and touch the rest of the pieces.

The service user box is comprised of similar boxes. The largest box represents her coping mechanisms, which she discussed during the session I facilitated. Inside this box were a razor and small bottle of rum, representing her self-harm and alcohol use as coping mechanisms. In a clear box appeared a police car and court room. The reason this was clear was that this individual was going through the court process, and worried that if it was reported in the media, there would be concerns about people knowing all about her personal experiences. In her living experiences box, there was a collage of a small, dingy, run-down apartment, but on the lid of the box was a photo of a cat, which she loved dearly. Her box representing her personal experience of sexual violence was completely open, a long, coffin-shaped box, but larger than mine and with the same brownish-red liquid flicked all over the rest of the smaller boxes. This represents not only the magnitude of her experience, but how it impacts virtually every aspect of her life.

While I recognized that this service user wanted to know about my experience due to a deep longing to be understood, I did not disclose my personal experience to ensure the focus of the session remained on her and her experience. This, in and of itself, is a privilege that I have as a person who is not only further along in the process of reconciling trauma, but also because my experience happened as a child. This particular individual experienced multiple instances of sexual violence, both as a child and an adult. In the attempt to neutralize the power imbalance between the service provider and service user, I had to acknowledge that, while having the ability to keep this experience to myself and not reciprocate the disclosure indeed perpetuated a power imbalance, it also helped to neutralize one. If I had made a disclosure of my own experience, then it would highlight to the service user the vast difference in coping mechanisms that we both utilized, as well as the difference between our processing of trauma. By keeping this knowledge to myself, I not only minimized the power imbalance to the best of my ability, but also prevented further harm to the service user.