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Working with men who use violence: the problem of reporting ‘progress’

by Darian Shephard-Bayly, Northern Violence Intervention Program

Introduction

Within the Northern Violence Intervention Program (NVIP) and, we suspect, many similar programs, there is considerable discussion around whether there is evidence that participants in the Men Stopping Violence Group (MSVG) are ceasing their violence and abuse. Such discussion might include informal practice reflection or involve processes of formal risk assessment and reporting to other agencies. In particular, we are often asked to comment on how much ‘progress’ men have made in the group. Our assessments may in turn inform important decisions such as: where the offender resides; whether contact with the partner or children is permitted; and sentencing outcomes.

However, our experience suggests that using the notion of men’s ‘progress’ as the basis of these decisions can be problematic and potentially dangerous. This article explores some of the dangers and difficulties we have identified in relation to an overutilisation of the notion of men’s ‘progress’ in providing therapeutic and statutory interventions to men who use violence. I argue that risk, along with the acknowledgement of past and ongoing violence, should take priority over and above any ‘progress’ men may demonstrate.

From the outset, it is important to make clear that it is not my argument that change is not a possible or worthwhile pursuit in work with men who use violence. This discussion is not a critique of the work of professionals, services and agencies working with men. To the contrary, this article seeks to support this work in the interests of women and children’s safety by further contextualising the notion of men’s ‘progress’ within a domestic violence-aware framework.

Problems with the notion of ‘progress’ within the context of domestic violence

There are a number of reasons why using the notion of ‘progress’ may be misleading in domestic violence situations. At NVIP, our main concerns are that ‘progress’ is not adequately contextualised, quantified or monitored; and that insufficient attention is paid to the risks arising out of the ongoing relationships offenders might have with victims.

Contextualising the violence

One of the main challenges we face is to report men’s ‘progress’ within a context that acknowledges the history of violence towards their partners and/or children. The reporting of ‘progress’ can be extremely problematic due to underreporting of domestic violence within the

criminal justice system. Even when reported to police, the evidence required for conviction tends to lead to both a low conviction rate and convictions primarily for physical acts of violence and abuse. As a result, the starting point from which a man may make any 'progress' is often a more extensive use of violence and abuse than is apparent at face value.

In addition, men's use of violence is often minimised by individuals, services and community attitudes. It can also be common for the woman to be blamed directly or indirectly for the man's use of violence. Men can and often do seek to minimise and deny their own behaviour, while creating stories around how they believe their partner and/or children is to blame for their use of violence. Again, these factors suggest that even where domestic violence is identified, the incidents and effects are more severe than initially reported, and are a pattern of long term behaviours.

Quantifying the violence

One of the assumptions underlying the notion of 'progress' is that the man is less likely to offend in the future. Importantly, there is evidence to support the efficacy of integrated therapeutic and criminal justice interventions in supporting men to cease their violence, including evidence of reductions in both the severity and frequency of incidents of violence (Gondolf 2004). However, quantifying these changes in behaviour is problematic, especially if and when the most valid and reliable measure – feedback from victims – is not available.

To be frank, in the absence of women and/or children's feedback, any reporting of 'progress' focused only upon a man's favourable attendance, group interaction, understanding and application of the MSVG concepts is vastly inadequate. Such reporting cannot claim to reflect levels or occurrence of violence. Even where feedback from partners is available, including this information within formal reports without further endangering victims may be extremely difficult.

External monitoring of the violence

Another factor to consider is that during the time when men attend stopping violence programs, they are usually subjected to significant monitoring, for example by police, courts, correctional services, domestic violence services, child protection services and possibly their partner. Program attendees may face serious criminal, statutory and/or social sanctions for further acts of violence or non-compliance, including incarceration, child protection orders, family law orders or separation. Because of this monitoring, the man may be on his 'best behaviour'. In fact, proponents of multi-agency domestic violence programs would argue that system level monitoring actually demonstrates the effectiveness of integrated approaches which, crucially, include criminal justice sanctions.

It is often counterproductive to violence reduction goals to assume that men's 'progress' can be ascribed to the men's group program. Ironically, if the complex array of factors that enable 'progress' to be made in relation to men's violence (including criminal justice responses, support for women and children, monitoring and intervention) are not formally acknowledged, then this may lead to decisions that discontinue these very measures, on the basis of the presumed 'success' of the men's group. The significance of all the variables which may lead to 'progress' must be recognised, rather than simply assuming that it is the behaviour change program that causes the desired outcome of reductions of violence.

Reporting 'progress' in the context of an ongoing relationship

The reporting of 'progress' for most of the men who attend stopping violence interventions for domestic violence occurs in the context of an ongoing relationship between the violent offender and their victim. This is vastly different to progress reporting for other offenders attending similar interventions relating to violence, such as generic violent offender programs, where there is no ongoing contact with the victim, much less an intimate relationship. Moreover, as has long been recognised with respect to domestic violence, any ongoing relationship is likely to be characterised by the man's ongoing pursuit, the woman's fear of leaving, financial insecurity, risks associated with shared parenting and family law arrangements, as well as the long term effects on victims of trauma, disempowerment and control.

Not only is there potentially ongoing contact between the offender and the woman (even if this is unwanted on her part), this ongoing contact occurs within a context of unequal power, as is characteristic of relationships where there is domestic violence. In addition to women's and children's experiences of violence, this power imbalance is further entrenched by the social, economic, legal and cultural forces that disempower women.

These factors significantly impact upon the potential vulnerability of victims and must be acknowledged in any consideration of men's 'progress'. Regardless of the effectiveness of interventions and the relative degree of 'progress' demonstrated, his potential ongoing contact and interaction with the victim of his violence, as well as the historical and socialised characteristics of this relationship, markedly increases his risk of re-offending.

Alternatives to reporting 'progress'

Overreliance on reporting men's 'progress' has the potential to minimise the experiences of women and children, jeopardise their safety and lead to possible systems abuse. At the NVIP, we have identified a number of strategies that serve as effective alternatives to 'progress' reporting, discussed below.

Prioritising safety and accountability in reports

One of our main responses has been to ensure that the principles of safety and accountability are prioritised within 'progress' reports for men attending the MSVG. These principles have shaped a number of practices. Men's reports are qualified with clear statements if and when men's demonstrated behaviour within intervention sessions is not correlated with actual behaviour change outside of the group. Where available and when safe, the feedback from men's partners, former partners or children is included within the report. Men's self-disclosure around additional, unreported acts of violence and/or abuse and patterns of power and control are included.

At a systems level, the implementation of risk and safety reports for women has been a vital component in documenting women's experiences and highlighting domestic violence risk factors within the criminal justice system. Risk and safety reports are linked to formalised domestic violence risk assessments (Felus, Kaye & Lloyd 2007). Similarly at NVIP, where 'progress' reports are requested by other statutory agencies, concurrent women's and children's risk and safety reports may be submitted by women's or children and young people's advocates. Both of these practices serve to challenge the often minimised, blaming and manipulative accounts offered by men who use violence.

Public acknowledgement of violence

Another practice of NVIP workers has been to support men to publicly acknowledge their use of violence and abuse. An example of this practice has occurred where a Men's Worker has attended a review meeting with other statutory agencies and effectively interviewed the man to facilitate his acknowledgement of his use of violence and abuse towards his partner. This involved asking the man to outline and summarise his discussions from the MSVG, giving the man the opportunity to outline the position and understanding he'd developed within the MSVG in ways that could be witnessed by both workers from another agency and the man's own family.

This process of the man publicly naming his responsibility for violence clearly states the extent of men's use of violence and works towards breaking the secrecy, blame and minimisation that often surround domestic violence. More broadly, it is hoped that this approach will also serve to provide other service providers within statutory agencies, such as courts, correctional services and the child protection system, a means by which to make safe and just decisions when they work with families, using practices which ensure that men take responsibility for their violence.

Extended monitoring and suspended sanctions

Another alternative to 'progress' reporting that is arguably underutilised is the practice of extended monitoring and suspended sanctions within the criminal justice systems, which is independent of any degree of 'progress' that is, or is not, deemed to result from group work. That is, men are sentenced based on the offence but provided with the opportunity to address their behaviour whilst still in the community under statutory supervision with correctional services. The effectiveness of integrating therapeutic interventions to men who use violence within a criminal justice response cannot be underestimated.

Our anecdotal experience at NVIP is that men attending the MSVG clearly and frequently identify the value of combined MSVG interventions along with criminal justice responses, such as arrest, remand, conviction, monitoring and potential sentencing options in sanctioning their violence.¹ Likewise, the evidence base for this approach is supported by international research, such as Gondolf (2004). While no cure all, the combined response of stopping violence interventions, case management and monitoring of men, support for women, along with deterrent sentencing responses is undoubtedly effective in enhancing the safety of women and children.

Conclusion

When we ask about men's 'progress' as a result of attending stopping violence interventions, we are asking the wrong question. All too often, we make the mistake of ignoring women and children's experiences, ignoring the man's history of using violence and abuse, ignoring the vulnerability of victims and ignoring the way interagency system responses may contribute to a reduction in men's violence and abuse.

The alternatives to using reports of men's progress that we have identified at NVIP are all achievable, accessible measures. Most importantly, they are centred clearly upon our primary objective: responding to risk and enhancing the safety of women and the protection of children.

NORTHERN VIOLENCE INTERVENTION PROGRAM

The Northern Violence Intervention Program (NVIP) is a multi-agency criminal justice program jointly funded by Central Northern Adelaide Health Service and the Attorney-General's Department, working in partnership with South Australia Police, the Elizabeth Magistrate's Family Violence Court and the Department of Correctional Services – Community Corrections.

NVIP offers a 26 week Men Stopping Violence Group. Intervention with men is informed and enhanced by concurrent services provided to support women and children. The guiding principles of the intervention are: accountability to the experiences of women and children; prioritising safety; and men taking responsibility for their behaviour and respect.

The author can be contacted at:

Darian.Shephard-Bayly@aus.salvationarmy.org

References

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Gondolf E W 2004, 'Evaluating batterer counseling programs: a difficult task showing some effects and implications', *Aggression and Violent Behaviour*, vol. 9, pp. 605-631

¹ Editor's note: Most men attending the NVIP group have been charged or convicted with an offence, so injunctive sanctions are applied through mechanisms such as bail or probation. It was not common practice in South Australia at the time of writing for courts to concurrently issue protection orders with a conviction, hence these are not discussed in this list.