

THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX: LOOKING BEYOND PROGRAMME INTEGRITY: THE EXPERIENCE OF A DOMESTIC VIOLENCE OFFENDERS PROGRAMME

David Morran, Department of Applied Social Science, University of Sterling

Introduction

The initial surge of enthusiasm for cognitive behavioural programmes that developed within the probation service in the wake of the What Works literature has recently been somewhat curbed by a number of cautionary findings from research and practice. As early as 1997, Hedderman and Sugg's survey of probation services in England and Wales found that cognitive behavioural techniques were not always well understood by probation staff and that programmes in which they were delivered were inconsistently monitored. Discussing the implementation of Glamorgan's STOP Programme, Vanstone (2000) commented that staff enthusiasm for innovative group programmes might result in marginalisation and lack of attention to practice outside the programme, thereby undermining overall effectiveness. While formal accreditation of programmes aims to overcome such shortcomings, scepticism persists among practitioners and researchers alike that pre-occupation with the minutiae of programme detail deflects attention from the significance of good practice beyond the programme itself, (Gorman, 2001; McIvor, 2004). Although accreditation criteria do emphasise the importance of proper 'case management', an increasing body of research stresses the importance of a 'quality supervisory relationship' and how it too contributes to reducing offending and other changes in behaviour (Rex, 1999; Trotter, 1999; 2000).

Such general concerns about over reliance on programmes are heightened when applied to interventions with sexual or violent offenders and those who are violent in relationships. A significant finding in a recent major study of domestic violence offender programmes in the USA suggests that 'programme effectiveness' seems less related to programme format and 'dosage', and more on whether agencies within the criminal justice system communicate with each other, and respond promptly and consistently to men's offending behaviour (Gondolf, 2002). Work with male domestic violence offenders is increasingly an activity in which probation officers are engaged, particularly through the spread of

structured 'Duluth model' programmes. These are based on a feminist theoretical framework on the nature and purpose of men's 'domestic violence', and employ a range of cognitive behavioural (and other) methods in working with men. In view of the contested evidence about the effectiveness of such programmes, (see for example, Dobash et al 1996; Mullender and Burton, 2000; 2001; Gondolf, 2002), and in the wake of the recent accreditation of a model programme in England and Wales, it seems timely to examine whether, as with structured programmes more generally, the significance of individual case-work, and indeed the wider social context of offenders' lives, ought to be more fully incorporated into their evaluation, (Bottoms et al., 2001; Smith, 2004).

In 2003 a small study was carried out which examined the implementation of one such domestic violence offenders' programme in Scotland. This was conducted in a large authority where almost a quarter of the criminal justice workforce had received four days training on the programme's theory, structure and method¹. The authority's strategy was that the programme would initially be 'delivered' by workers from a specialist Probation Support Team, (PST). Thereafter each cohort would comprise one or more 'programme trained' workers from patch-based teams in the authority (Area Teams). This model, whereby programmes would increasingly be delivered by workers from outside the PST was aimed at disseminating knowledge about the theory and context of the programme throughout the organisation, thus promoting good practice. One possible disadvantage of the model for the programme itself however was that its 'integrity' might be jeopardised and its effectiveness diluted as a more diffuse group of workers, with minimal levels of programme experience became involved in its delivery.

Integrity and Integration

A major concern of management and key staff in preliminary discussions was whether the programme 'worked' i.e. to what extent it impacted on men's violent and abusive behaviour. However eighteen months after inception it was evident that the impact of the programme itself would be well nigh impossible to pin down. This had been a period of considerable adaptation and refinement, with successive cohorts of the programme involving combinations of workers with different levels of experience in and approaches to programme delivery. There were clearly major methodological limitations around a study which focused solely on outcomes at this early stage². (For a fuller examination of the difficulties of implementing programmes more generally within the probation service, see Underdown, (2001).

Demand for places on the programme had initially ranged widely across the authority. (More recently this had changed; referrals tending to come mainly from a few specific teams, an issue that is pursued further below). This early surge in volume and the pressure to provide a service promptly had meant, despite attempts to ensure consistency, that groups varied considerably in style and atmosphere, providing qualitatively different experiences for the men attending them. While replicability may be neither achievable nor necessarily desirable, and while each group inevitably creates its own dynamic (Smith

2004), it has certainly been argued that programme instability impacts negatively on effectiveness (Gondolf, 2002).

Two research themes were therefore agreed upon. Management needed to know what factors required to be in place in order to ensure that programmes were delivered as consistently as possible, and could be said to be approaching what Hollin (1995) terms 'programme integrity' i.e. that, 'the programme is conducted in practice as intended in theory and design' (Hollin 1995, p196).

Given the ongoing potential for instability during a pilot phase or at times of considerable organisational pressure, the role of case workers seemed clearly to be crucial in supporting or augmenting the work of the programme itself. The other key research theme therefore would look beyond programme integrity to what might be termed programme integration. As men's attendance on the programme was a requirement of a probation order, how were programme themes, concepts and values integrated into wider probation practice within the agency? To what extent might that practice enhance or undermine the programme's potential effectiveness?

Interviews were conducted with five PST workers closely associated with the programme's early implementation, and with ten Area Team staff who had also run the programme. A further ten Area Team workers who currently supervised men who had been on the programme were approached to discuss their experiences. A preliminary examination of the PST database³ coupled with the comments and observations of the workers interviewed, revealed that there was considerable inconsistency in the extent to which the new resource was made use of across the authority. The possible consequences of this inconsistency in contributing to, or detracting from, the potential effectiveness of the programme are explored below.

(Particular attention was paid to those phases where programme and one-to-one work interfaced; before and during men's actual attendance on the programme, and finally after men had completed the programme but still remained on a probation order.)

Workers' experiences of domestic violence offenders

Work with men who are violent in relationships is stressful and demanding. All who had worked directly on the programme commented that engaging with this client group was 'substantially different' from their experience of group-work with other offending clients. For some this experience had been professionally stimulating and represented an area of practice to which they were now completely committed or 'hooked'. For others it had been a draining experience from which they now wished to move on. The levels of denial and resistance to engagement that many men presented were exceptional and their negative attitudes to women partners deeply entrenched. Work within the groups seemed to be less about encouraging people to 'develop skills to overcome offending' and more about confronting men's ingrained attitudes and beliefs.

'They're very difficult clients who... at the beginning of the programme were very much, defences up, denying a lot of behaviour, or minimising it, and to begin to break that down was so hard. The first probably eight weeks of the programme was really, really tough.'
(Programme Worker: Female)

Pre-group experiences

Gondolf's longitudinal study of four domestic violence programmes in the USA examined the role which the wider criminal justice system plays in enhancing the effectiveness of domestic violence programmes. He emphasises the necessity of men entering programmes promptly following conviction, and of being swiftly sanctioned where they fail to comply (Gondolf, 2002). In this Scottish study despite an agency 'intention' that men should commence programmes 'as soon as feasible' after being placed on probation, the PST database recorded a fairly consistent interlude of three months between men being placed on a probation order and commencing the programme!

There were several reasons for this, including factors in the men's own circumstances:

'Well, this guy's life was a mess generally. He had a real bad drinking problem. He wasn't blaming the violence on the drink exactly... but before we could get him to look at anything he needed to get stabilised in some way... Then he had been put out of the house, so he was at his brother's then out of there... eventually he got a room. So there were all these pressing issues to address, ... and that was in the first... say eight weeks before we could finally get him on the programme.'
(Area Team Worker, Male)

Mainly though, delays seemed to be due to organisational issues, factors of time and resource with which many probation officers can readily identify. While management were attempting to tackle this problem by increasing the frequency with which cohorts ran, or by (unsuccessfully) attempting to run 'pre-programme groups', the prevailing view within the workforce suggested that these pressures were both longstanding and likely to continue. If this was so then what did this mean for men who were waiting to go onto the programme?

Programme workers and case-workers were asked about what work was going on with men during this period. Was this seen as a 'waiting period' before attention to the man's use of violence could begin, an opportunity for important preparatory work to be commenced, or a time in which other issues and problems might be addressed? The answers to these questions were often less than clear.

Programme workers' views (pre-programme)

Programme group workers commonly felt that men often turned up 'totally unprepared' for engaging in a programme, uneasy and anxious about coming to a group, which as one participant feared would 'put me in the spotlight'. Such anxiety was a significant inhibitor in terms of men's engagement:

'When men come in they're in a very high level of denial. You very rarely get one that will admit to anything... Their anxiety levels are so high... and I think that stops us doing the job we need to be doing. They're so anxious about having to sit in a group and talk about violence that for the first couple of weeks you're having to do basic group-work stuff.'
(Programme Worker: Female)

Dealing with men's denial was a constant refrain in programme workers' accounts. While they sympathised that their Area Team colleagues had many priorities to balance there was a feeling that much more could be done to prepare men for the programme. If for example they could focus more on men's motivation, so that men had begun to accept *some* degree of personal responsibility for their actions when they entered the programme, its early impact might be enhanced.

Case workers' views pre-programme: risk and resistance

Case workers' experiences of engaging with men prior to entry into the programme were of working with complexity, sometimes dealing with a number of apparently incompatible tasks. At the same time as they might be determining the risk which men presented to their partners they might also be trying to engage with men who presented as angry, blaming of others and highly resistant to the idea that they were 'wife batterers'.

The confidence and clarity which case workers brought to pre-programme engagement seemed to vary considerably. Some wondered whether confronting men too robustly might heighten their resistance, as Miller and Rollnick (1991) have suggested elsewhere, or worse, aggravate men's risk to partners. They had to manage a balancing act of confronting men with the seriousness of their behaviour and stipulating the consequences while at the same time encouraging men to see the programme as an experience from which *they* might benefit.

Some stated that while they felt more confident about challenging men's *denial*, they were hesitant about issues they would pursue thereafter, such as the 'association' between alcohol and violence, or other 'stress factors' in the man's life, lest this be seen as a form of collusion with men's 'excuses'! Others worried that their efforts might overlap with, but more particularly undermine, the work of the programme:

'Because I'm quite familiar with the content of the Programme, I'm not wanting to give men a half measure you know?... a half idea about what it's

all about but not getting into it in any depth. I worry if you give them too much of a flavour of what's gonna be on the Programme that they're going along to and, ... 'Oh I know all this!' kind of attitude!

(Area Team Worker/Programme Worker: Female)

Thus while programme staff looked for men to arrive 'prepared' for the experience, their Area Team colleagues were faced with the complex situations of men's individual circumstances. The degree of risk they presented to their partners, or to themselves, was often the most pressing concern at this time. For the most part they also were dealing with highly resistant clients who were not yet at the 'stage of contemplation' defined by Prochaska and Di Clemente (1992) as being necessary for any personal change to take place.

Such complexity highlights the difficulties of attempting to discuss programme effectiveness in such a way that excludes or ignores other factors in the lives of the participants themselves. To do so certainly discounts the extent to which individual workers need to contribute to men's motivation, engagement, and participation, a contribution which in turn is influenced by the worker's own familiarity with the programme as well as the other skills and knowledge which each brings to their task.

Integrated working during the period of programme attendance

Inconsistent practice was again noticeable during the time men actually attended the programme. Certain Area Teams seemed to be less engaged with the programme than others. Unfortunately attempts to follow this up with some of those teams concerned were protracted and unsatisfactory, and further research is presently being pursued to shed more light on this issue.

Those programme staff and case workers who were regularly engaged with the programme however described having being involved in a 'steep learning curve' not only about the programme, but also about the prevalence of male violence and the extent to which it had featured in their caseloads over the years, (sometimes recognised, sometimes not). Their burgeoning awareness led them to question instances where casework colleagues' practice seemed to be minimally connected to the aims of the programme. Could this all be put down to workload pressure? Were workers simply unaware or poorly informed about the dynamics of the violent behaviour of men on their caseloads? Did some have particular difficulties in addressing this issue? Were some denying the seriousness or even tacitly colluding with the men's behaviour and attitudes? There was a general perception that there seemed to be less evidence of male workers either referring men or subsequently engaging with the programme. There was also a feeling among some programme and case-workers alike that there might in fact be some *resistance* to the programme.

If this was so it was not possible in this study to determine whether or why there may be an unwillingness by male workers to engage with the issue of male violence on their

caseloads, or to what extent there was a certain weariness with 'programmes' as a panacea for all ills. Nevertheless the questions workers were asking raise fundamental issues about the complexity of adopting an agency wide approach to an issue such as men's domestic violence, behaviour which until recently was regularly diverted away from the official scrutiny of probation officers' attention. No matter how strongly the goal of programme integrity was pursued, the integrity, and therefore the effectiveness, of the wider probation response was affected and arguably undermined by inconsistency of workers' practices and attitudes across the authority, which in turn impacted upon the probation experience on clients' lives.

Examples of positive practice

If there were 'pockets of resistance' then it had been clear from the outset of the study that there were particular teams where more positive practice was evident and where workers were enthusiastic in using the programme as a resource to assist their own work with men. Interviews were undertaken with staff in four of these teams to explore why this might be so. Ten probation staff had undergone training in the programme; the other six who responded had not, but were nominated case workers for men who had recently been on the programme. There is of course a bias in this sample inasmuch as only 'engaged' workers responded to my approaches. Nevertheless, their responses concerning good practice are worthy of note.

Interestingly the factor that was most commonly referred to in these teams was the presence of a manager or senior worker who was responsive and enthusiastic and who encouraged their staff to engage with the programme. (This seemed to be related not only to domestic violence programmes, but to a willingness to embrace innovative ways of working more generally).

'Our senior here is good. I think that people are more aware about what works and what doesn't. And if you've got that in the team...and someone who'll let you try out new ways...it helps. I think if you look at our team we're like that. There's a kinda buzz ...which is good.'
(Area Team Worker: Male)

Problem recognition and *awareness of how to engage* with it seemed to be crucially important. In one team with a large proportion of women workers, there was already an established awareness of, and willingness to respond to men's domestic violence where it routinely appeared. It was evident too that the workers shared the feminist theoretical approach to men's violence endorsed by the programme. Consequently the programme was seen as a *resource* that further enabled them to work with these men on their caseloads, and which allowed for the regular sharing of advice, information and good practice.

Not surprisingly either, the presence of 'programme trained' workers in teams also generated and influenced discussion about the prevalence of male violence on caseloads, and had an influence in refining practice:

'Well, it has an effect on day to day stuff ... I mean there are workers who come and say, 'Look I'm not sure about this guy... (I'm assessing for court)', or, 'Look, this guy, it's a one-off, he's never done it before and he's no' gonna do it again...erm, so we talk about ... our experience of that story and how familiar it sounds, (laughs). So aye, they're using us as a resource...'
(Area Team Worker: Male)

After the programme

While it was beyond the scope of this study to follow up in detail the nature of the post-programme work carried out with men, interviews with programme and case workers highlighted their concerns both about maintaining the momentum begun in the programme and dealing with the wider problems and issues in the participants' lives. While the findings again apply to this particular authority they are nevertheless recognisable and relevant to many probation settings.

Although procedures for reviewing men's participation in the programme were in place, it was difficult to establish how effectively these had been implemented, and how programme recommendations were actually taken forward in one to one work. Indicators were that both quantity and quality of work carried out with men after they left the programme depended on the inevitable issues *of time, worker's knowledge about the programme's principles, worker commitment and, significantly, understanding of the nature of male violence.*

A consistent concern was expressed that men's experiences on the programme had meant that 'work had only just begun', or 'things were just beginning to sink in' at around the time they were completing their requirement to attend the programme:

'I had two guys who went through it and... with one it was quite clear what I needed to work with him on afterwards and I got that information from the programme worker. I did that work with him... maybe because I had done the programme as well, maybe it was easier for me because I knew he's done it and I knew what areas to work with him. It was like... he just couldn't get empathy! He just couldn't understand things from his partner's point of view... We kind of worked away at that. The... last time there was a domestic incident was six months ago which considering it used to be every two weeks, it's you know... an improvement!'
(Area Team Worker: Female)

Another worker pointed to the need to locate the learning from the programme into the wider context of men's lives:

'You have to realise that there's all this other stuff going on for (the man). I mean he might come through the programme but there's... (still)... big issues going on as well. Is he working? You want to know if he's dealing with his anger and so on better more generally. If he's still with his partner or not and what that means. His drinking. All this kind of stuff'
(Area Team Worker: Male)

Examples like these provided some evidence that case workers in teams were able to utilise the advice of programme colleagues or of programme methods and materials in their practice with men over the duration of the remaining probation order. They also suggest that they were engaged with ongoing issues and problems in their clients' lives in such a way that looked beyond the immediate focus of the programme. The comparative lack of positive illustrative examples however was worrying. Even after men had completed the programme, workers were often explicitly concerned about the *risk* which some of them still presented to their partners, and of how their concerns were being taken on board while the men remained on probation orders, (and thereafter!):

'Some clients don't require that high level of intervention, some require serious fortnightly contact at the very least. They need structured work to continue the process, structured co-gendered work. Again we can prioritise high risk because some of these guys are so incredibly dangerous they should not be worked with alone. So that's good practice, that's what should be happening.'
(Programme Worker: Male)

Integrity, Integration, Drift and Resistance

Although based on an examination of practice within one authority, the evidence from this small study is nevertheless relevant for many probation and social work settings. The extent to which the local domestic violence offenders programme was being delivered according to principles of 'programme integrity', (i.e. conducted in practice in accordance with theory and design, well managed and staffed by skilled practitioners), was fraught with many of the practical and design difficulties noted in other studies, (e.g. Vanstone, 2000; Underdown, 2001).

It follows from this that attempts to gauge the 'effectiveness' of any programme, (which as Smith (2004) has argued is inherently problematic anyway), need to acknowledge the wider intervention of which the programme itself is but a part, (Pawson and Tilley, 1997; Bottoms et al., 2001).

Evaluations need to take account of the re-emerging research (e.g. Rex, 1999) on the importance of the relationship which clients have with case workers, (*and* programme

workers). They also need to reflect more on the issue of context, i.e. the extent to which any programme may be 'over ridden' depending on other factors in clients' lives.

Taking these points into consideration therefore the present study went on to look 'outside the box', focusing more on wider aspects of practice, looking particularly at how case work and case management had considerable potential both to enhance or undermine the effectiveness of that programme.

The study revealed variations and gaps in practice in this authority that were at times concerning. In several instances caseworkers seemed unsure of their role in relation to the programme, particularly during the worryingly protracted pre-programme period. It was hugely apparent that the presence or absence of informed pre-programme and post-programme case work was crucial in either supporting or undermining both the work of the programme itself as well as the quality of the overall probation experience more generally. There seemed for example to be a real need for skilled motivational work to be put in place prior to programme entry.

Programmes such as the one discussed here are undoubtedly valuable however. Domestic violence programmes have had a significant effect upon the way in which this issue has come to be responded to by the probation and criminal justice social work services. It is necessary however to look beyond programmes being the flag carrier of 'what works' practice, as Mair (2004) and others have argued. It is vital in the quest for 'programme integrity' to question what at times appears as an almost obsessive concern with the minutiae of their sequence, detail and structure; a narrowness of focus that has been described by one Chief Inspector of Probation as 'programme fetishism', (HMIP 2002:8).

Examining the emerging findings from research into the processes of desistance from offending for example, McNeill (2002) has suggested that this pre-occupation with 'dosage' in much 'what works' literature has overlooked the 'complex personal, inter-personal and social contexts' of *why* change occurs and *why* people stop offending.

Studies of desistance have led us to consider the complexity of the processes and circumstances in which people may move between states of resistance, of vacillation, or persistence in offending, and of the complexity of maintaining personal behavioural change more generally, (Rex 1999, Maruna 2002, Farrall 2002). In the case of men who commonly resist the intrusion of the criminal justice system into the 'private business' of their relationship with their partners, (whom usually they see as being responsible for 'causing' them to be violent), the process of change is indeed complex and is daily influenced by the patriarchal society in which they / we live. For men such as these to begin and sustain change it is clear that a programme will play only one part in this process and that much is yet to be learned in terms of how, whether and in what combination of circumstances the possibility of desistance is achievable.

The effectiveness of domestic violence programmes and of offending behaviour programmes generally depends on wider systemic factors to reinforce the criminality or harmfulness of that behaviour and the need for change to take place. In order for the 'complex personal and interpersonal contexts' of behaviour change to be more fully addressed however, any programme effect can only be bolstered by informed work on motivation, the development of trust, engagement and participation, and of modelling behaviour and values that have proven to be so significant elsewhere in work with offenders (see Burnett, 2000; Rex, 1999; Trotter, 1999:2000). Where case workers exhibit these skills in their one-to-one work with offenders, they surely enhance the potential effectiveness of any programme, just as a programme may complement the skills of that individual worker. This is the essence of a truly integrated approach.

Endnotes

- ¹ Subsequently a further twenty workers underwent training on programme delivery.
- ² Additionally the fact that in the past the author had been involved in the development of the original programme adopted by the agency raised legitimate questions and concerns about the 'researcher objectivity' which he would bring to a study of whether the programme was 'effective'. Despite this it was agreed that his 'insider' knowledge could be advantageous in terms of understanding programme content and process, as well as the demands of working with domestic violence offenders. Consequently a research agenda that satisfied both the objectives of the authority and the author's own interests as a researcher / practitioner was established.
- ³ At the time of the study seven cohorts of the programme had been completed comprising a total of 120 men who had actually been on a programme at any one time.

References

- Blunkett, D. (2003) 'Criminal Justice and the Community', in *Criminal Justice Serving the Community*. Conference Report, 7th July.
- Bottoms, A., Gelsthorpe, L. and rex, S. (2001) 'Concluding reflections', in A. Bottoms et al. (eds) *Community Penalties: Change and Challenges*, Cullompton: Willan, 226-40.
- Dobash, R.E, Dobash, R.P, Cavanagh, K and Lewis, R (1996) *Research Evaluation of Programmes for Violent Men*. Edinburgh: The Scottish Office Central Research Unit.
- Gorman, K. (2001) Cognitive Behaviouralism and the Holy Grail: the quest for a universal means of managing offender risk', *Probation Journal*, 48 (1): 3-9
- Hollin, C. (1995) The meaning and Implications of 'Programme Integrity' In J McGuire (ed.) *What Works: Reducing Reoffending*. Chichester, Wiley
- Home Office Development and Practice Report (2002) *Probation Offending Behaviour Programmes – Effective Practice Guide*. London: Home Office
- Farrall, S. (2002) Rethinking What Works with Offenders: Probation, social context and desistance from crime. Cullompton, Willan
- Gondolf. E.W. (2002) *Batterer Intervention Systems. Issues, outcomes and recommendations*. London, Sage
- Maruna, S. (2001) *Making Good: How Ex-Convicts Reform and Rebuild Their Lives* American Psychological Association, Washington DC.
- Miller, W.R. and Rollnick, S. (1991) *Motivational Interviewing: Preparing People to Change Addictive Behaviour*. London, The Guilford Press
- Mullender, A and Burton, S (2000) *Reducing domestic violence... what works? Perpetrator programmes*. Home Office Briefing Note. London; Home Office.

- Mullender, A and Burton, S (2001) Dealing with perpetrators, In J Taylor-Browne (ed.) *What Works in Reducing Domestic Violence*. London, Whiting and Birch.
- McIvor, G (2004) Getting personal: developments in policy and practice in Scotland, In G. Mair (ed) *What Matters in Probation*. Cullompton, Willan
- McNeill, F (2002) 'Beyond 'What Works': How and why people stop offending' Briefing Paper 5: August 2002. Criminal Justice Social Work Development Centre for Scotland
- Pawson, R and Tilley, N (1997) *Realistic Evaluation*. London, Sage.
- Prochaska, J.O. and Di Clemente, C.C. (1992). Stages of change in the modification of problem behaviour, In M Hersen, R Eisler, & PM Miller (eds) *Progress in Behaviour Modification* Vol 28, pp 184-214). Sycamore Ill. USA
- Rex, S (1999) 'Desistance from Offending: Experiences of Probation' *Howard Journal of Criminal Justice* Vol 38, No. 4, 366-383
- Trotter, C (1999) *Working with Involuntary Clients: A guide to practice*. London, Sage
- Trotter, C (2000) 'Social Work Education, Pro-Social Orientation and Effective Probation Practice, *Probation Journal* Vol 47, No 4, 256-261
- Underdown, A (2001) 'Making 'What Works' work: challenges in the delivery of community penalties', in A. Bottoms et al. (eds) *Community Penalties: Change and Challenges*. Cullompton, Willan.
- Vanstone, M (2000) Cognitive Behavioural Work with Offenders in the UK: A history of Influential Endeavour'. *Howard Journal*, 39 (2) 171 - 183