



## Building Better Relationships? Exploring responsiveness in a probation-based domestic violence perpetrator programme

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Between 2018 and 2019, I undertook fieldwork for PhD related research at a Community Rehabilitation Company where the accredited domestic violence perpetrator programme (DVPP), Building Better Relationships (BBR), was being delivered prior to the unification of Probation Services. BBR is a cognitive behavioral, strengths and skills-based programme which aims to teach male participants non-violent alternatives to resolve relationship conflicts through emotion regulation, and by targeting attitudes that are pro-violence and abuse. BBR departed from the gendered underpinnings of its predecessor programme (IDAP)<sup>1</sup>, adopting a more individualised approach that prompts male participants to explore what they think has happened in their lives to shape their offending.

My research explored the lives and experiences of facilitators responsible for delivering BBR and those of a cohort of male participants who had been mandated to attend. I wanted to understand how and whether BBR worked, for whom and under what circumstances it did work, what role facilitators played in this process, and how practice had been impacted by Transforming Rehabilitation. To do so, I conducted in-depth interviews with all research participants, which were complemented by five months of on-site observations (usually two days a week) during which I observed pre-sentence reports and male participants' programme reviews.

Below I provide a summary of my research findings<sup>2</sup> with a specific focus on emotions and responsiveness because being attentive to troubling feelings emerged as an important but neglected aspect of practice. In my study, being responsive was not just about diverse learning styles but being attuned to the emotional antecedents that can be implicated in domestic abuse; difficult feelings that many of the men in this study brought to the delivery room.



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## Who was in the room?

### *Male participants*

Firstly, in the room, were the male participants, many of whom presented as defensive and aggrieved at having to attend a DVPP. Most had been incarcerated for the current or previous domestic abuse offences, while others had been to prison for robbery, drugs, and/or other violent crimes. Two of the men in my interview sample were homeless, several were struggling with drug and/or alcohol addictions, and others had (prospective) diagnoses of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism, personality disorder, depression and/or psychosis.

<sup>1</sup> Hughes, W. (2017) [Lessons from IDAP for the implementation of BBR](#)

<sup>2</sup> Renehan, N. (2021) Building Better relationships? Interrogating the 'black box' of a statutory domestic violence perpetrator programme. [Summary report](#)

In terms of motive, the men's violence and abuse narratives elicited during my interviews were rigidly gendered and coercively controlling. To varying degrees, the men admitted to violent, emotionally abusive, and stalking behaviours. These were often rationalised as out of character, in self-defense, alcohol-instigated, or 'not real domestic violence' like some of them had observed in childhood. Some talked of the fear of witnessing serious incidents as children, shielding their siblings, and being subjected to assault if they intervened. Some had been singled out amongst their siblings for violence by their fathers or stepfathers while others expressed unresolved pain of growing up in emotionally neglectful households.

It was evident that these difficult experiences had created insecurities that played out in gendered ways within their intimate relationships but were masked and expressed in ways that positioned them as reasonable in their violence and abuse. For example, 'Dale' presented as self-loathing and emotionally dependent upon his partners to make him feel loved. Afraid they might cheat on and leave him, Dale attempted to control his partners' movements and physically assaulted them when these tactics failed. In the aftermath of violence, such behaviour was justified by investing in traditional gender norms and expectations, ultimately externalising blame onto his partners.

Despite eliciting such difficult experiences, these were simply translated into cognitive distortions and targeted for restructuring in line with cognitive behavioural principles. I shall return to the consequences of this for the male participants later.

### Facilitators

Facilitators were also in the room and played a key role in supporting desistance. The facilitators interviewed for this study were motivated to make a difference in people's lives and attuned to the fact that they were often working with *traumatising* and *traumatised* men. Nevertheless, some felt unable to deliver on their own values given BBR (and its loosely cognitive behavioural underpinning model) does not seek to address the emotional and psychological suffering that they elicited during the initial one-to-one sessions. They were also aware of the ethical implications of such practice and were concerned that men were left without adequate follow-on support:

*There's a lot of vulnerabilities and I think, like I said, a lot of them do form this relationship, erm and this trust, and then we just cut that off.*

In a recent *Probation Journal*<sup>3</sup> article I highlighted that the limits of facilitators' responsiveness were compounded by a lack of emotional and practical support on offer to them as professionals. This was exacerbated within the context of Transforming Rehabilitation, where training structures, time for shadowing, and gaining vital experience on 'less complex', non-domestic abuse related programmes was compromised by staffing and the sheer quantity of referrals. This is not a criticism of facilitators but of the policy constraints and scarce resources within which they had to work.

<sup>3</sup> Renehan, N. (2021) [Facilitators of probation-based domestic violence perpetrator programmes: who's in the room?](#)

A further important finding was that facilitators brought their own personal experiences to the room. For example, some of the facilitators had been motivated to do this work because of their own difficult lived experiences but this had both positive and negative effects. On the one hand, these experiences sometimes resulted in overidentifications which led to collusive practice. On the other, facilitators' identifications were used to bridge differences and humanise male participants. Indeed, one facilitator was able to use their own experiences to make sense of and relay complex material and concepts:

*So sometimes I can get a little bit wrapped up in oh, God, I've got to do what the manual says...but if I don't overthink that and try and just relate, er, to where they're [men] coming from, I think I can just talk to them on a level that helps them to kind of understand what it is that we're talking about or, you know, make things a little bit more simple for them.*

This shows the need to harness the lived experiences and personal qualities that facilitators embody. But it is equally crucial to provide them with emotional support, supportive supervision, and opportunities for reflective practice to ensure their own feelings are disentangled from those of male participants and to promote their own wellbeing.

## Responsiveness, emotion management and the limits of 'thinking skills'

Through my research, it was evident that neither the male participants nor the facilitators were a blank canvas. Both brought their experiences and vulnerabilities to the room. Such feelings are not simply erased or subdued in probation practice<sup>4</sup>. Rather, they are key to understanding how people relate to others and the world around them. Nevertheless, facilitators often masked their own feelings to meet organisational goals<sup>5</sup>. Similarly, male participants were encouraged to manage their emotions, rather than understand and work through the specific meaning of these and the purpose their violence holds. This resulted in what I called a two-way performance.

A rigid and premature preoccupation with cognitive restructuring appeared to contribute to some men *physically* disengaging from the programme, with one man leaving after his initial one-to-one session:

*She [facilitator] was sort of trying to – it was like she was trying to get me to say, well, no, we want you to think that you would have done something differently and, do you know, try and change the way I'm thinking. It's like, well, no, no matter what – how much course I do, how much time goes on, I'd have done things exactly the same...I did every-thing I could to not react in the way I did but it come to that (Richard, interview one).*

<sup>4</sup> See Knight, C., Phillips, J. & Chapman, T. (2016) [Bringing the feelings back](#)

<sup>5</sup> See Westaby, C., Fowler, A. & Phillips, J. (2020) [Managing emotion in probation practice](#)

For another male participant, a rigid focus on 'thinking' and taking responsibility contributed to him *emotionally* disengaging. While Tim had initially felt listened to and able to tell 'his story' without feeling judged, there was an increased defensiveness towards his ex-partner ('Nel') in his narratives six weeks into the programme when he no longer felt heard:

*She [facilitator] said, "Well, it sounds like you feel like you shouldn't be here?". It doesn't matter what I feel. The law sent me here, didn't it? If you want to know the fucking bloody truth, that's the truth. Know what I mean?...I fucking hate it. I hate it but there's no go— I absolutely fucking hate it. I hate it...hate Nel and all the shit she's done at the end of the relationship...and making me fucking homeless (Tim, interview two).*

These findings do not suggest that challenging problematic thinking or owning one's violence are not laudable programme aims. They do, however, highlight that such *troubling* and *troubled* men should be encouraged to develop other psychological resources such as emotional learning and coping with vulnerable feelings that come with being in intimate relationships. Without such acknowledgements (and experienced and supported facilitators) emotion management and cognitive skills are likely to be short lived when situations arise in which old fears and insecurities resurface.

Engagement was further complicated for men with neurodivergent conditions which interested practitioners can read about in my summary report. I have now launched a [new research project](#) into neurodiversity and DVPPs to explore this in more depth.

Overall, the findings for my research suggest that facilitators need (and want) more specific therapeutic and domestic abuse training, time to work with male participants in more responsive ways, and to be supported and valued for the challenging but important work that they do.