

Invitations to Collusion: A Case for Greater Scrutiny of Men's Behaviour Change Programs

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Men's behaviour change groups have been operating in Victoria since the early 1980s. Unlike their criminal justice-based counterparts in the USA, Canada and the UK, groups in Victoria arose as stand alone voluntary programs within the community health and family support sectors. Their focus on therapeutic engagement, education and invitations to responsibility has at times failed to include consequences for men who continue to use violence and abuse while attending the group. This article argues that unless facilitators build in consequences for men whose violence continues, they can inadvertently collude with the violent behaviour. Including women partners in ongoing evaluation is one means of reducing this collusion. This view is drawn from research into behaviour change groups in Melbourne over the last decade.

As part of a training session for a regional group of practitioners who run men's groups and other domestic violence services, I ran a role-play where the men's group facilitators played the 'violent men' and the women's services workers played the men's partners, having been briefed by the men beforehand on couple scenarios. The women sat around the men's group and afterwards reversed positions and gave their reflections on the experience. I played the female co-facilitator with one of the men's group facilitators.

The male workers, well versed in the behaviours of men who attend men's groups, acted their parts well. One 'man' spoke derogatively about his partner, minimising his abuse to her. The male facilitator did a role reversal where he played the man and the man played his partner, a technique similar to 'internalised other' questioning (Wirtz & Schweitzer, 2000: 94). The aim is to give the man insight into his partner's experience. It was quite frightening, to the point that I felt compelled to acknowledge some of the man's positive behaviours to soften the incident.

Afterwards, in the reflection time, the 'man' indicated how effective the process was for him in understanding the woman's fear. His 'partner' felt that he had been let off lightly, given his behaviour to her. The male facilitator was quite shaken at his ability to intimidate the man and I was appalled that I, a feminist practitioner and advocate of challenging men who use violence, had jumped so quickly to his rescue.

The experience heightened for me the complexities of facilitating men's groups. This paper explores some of the theoretical, practical and evaluative dilemmas facing workers in the field of male violence to women and offers suggestions for future practices.

Men's Groups in Victoria

In Victoria, groups for men who are violent to their women partners began in the 1980s. Programs developed in response to the identification of men's health as a social problem, based on the high rate of male youth and adult homelessness, alcohol-related problems, suicide and car accidents (Frances, 1996). Victorian group programs for 'violent men' developed alongside generalist groups as stand-alone programs in community or mental health centres, correctional services or men's collectives (Pease, 1991). In contrast to the majority of refuge-initiated, court diversion programs in USA and Canada, Australian groups were, and still are, conducted mainly outside the criminal



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justice system. Some were initiated by women's services in response to women not wanting to leave their violent partners but wanting something to stop the man's violence.

The programs were often described as 'anger management' groups, a term considered contentious because of its focus on changing the *emotion* of anger rather than on the *behaviour* of violence. 'Men's behaviour change' groups is the term that is used by No to Violence (NTV), the Victorian peak body for men's groups, and despite its euphemistic omission of what behaviour needs changing, the term will be used in this article.

Behaviour change groups can be categorised according to the level of choice participants have in attending. 'Mandated' groups are those which men attend as part of a prison sentence, prison diversion program or following a court directive. 'Voluntary' groups generally are run on a community health model of voluntary attendance and participation, but can include men who have been directed (mandated) to attend by the courts or child protection services.

Then there are the 'unofficial mandates' (Blay, 2005), such as an ultimatum from a partner, family, or boss; or the man's own determination to restore the relationship or to see his children. For some men, their experience of shame, loss of self-respect, and desire to understand and change their behaviour is sufficient motivation for attending a program. The Victorian government sees choice as a stronger and longer lasting incentive than a magistrate's directive, and is sceptical about the impact of mandated programs (Keys Young, 1998).

Evaluating Men's Behaviour Change Groups

To date, there is scant published research on the effectiveness of voluntary men's groups in Victoria (Russell & Jory, 1997). The demands of direct practice usually preclude all but the most basic forms of outcome evaluation such as questionnaires asking the men what they gained from the group, what aspects of the group they found useful and what changes they think they have made. However, men are known to under-report their violence, making self-reports an unreliable form of measurement (Laing, 2002; Gondolf, 2002a, Nankervis & Donne, 1993).

DHS uses men's participation and attendance as the key measurement in the men's groups that they fund. Attendance does not, however, indicate attitude or behavioural changes and is insufficient as a measurement of the group's effectiveness in stopping men's violence.

Mandated groups in the USA and the UK use incidence of re-assault as a key measure of outcome. While this provides quantifiable data, it ignores the possibility of ongoing verbal, emotional, sexual, financial and social abuses that accompany physical assault. Using criminal offences as a measure reveals just the tip of the iceberg of violence and is only relevant in situations where criminal assault has been legally identified. Measuring changes in non-physical violence is more complex as the indicators are difficult to define and quantify. Women are in the best position to comment on changes in their partner or ex-partner's attitude or behaviour but may not be available, feel safe to do so, or want to.

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There is a lack of agreement about what constitutes adequate follow up; about how, when and how often evaluation should occur; about how long is enough to know that the program was effective and the changes sustained; about who should do the evaluation, an insider or outsider; about who pays; about who the evaluation is for, and about practicalities such as small sample sizes, and low follow-up response rates due to high drop-out rates (Laing, 2002).

Funnell's (1997) Program Logic model builds evaluation into the program from the outset so that the outcomes (the changes for participants and others as a result of the program) are measured against carefully developed goals. Where the goals are men's behaviour change *and* an increase in women's and children's safety, as stipulated in the NTV's standards, evaluation would measure these as outcomes, drawing on women's and children's responses. This data, if collated across Victoria, could be used to compare men's behaviour change programs to other domestic violence interventions. Few agencies, however, have the resources, time or motivation to take on a coordinated evaluative framework.

Without coordinated evaluation, the effectiveness of men's groups remains unclear. Despite this, the Victorian government has recently increased funding for behaviour change programs, possibly extrapolating from data derived from mandated groups overseas (Dobash & Dobash (2000) in the UK, and Gondolf (2002a; 2002b) in the USA).

Overseas Research

Dobash & Dobash (2000) compared outcomes for men mandated to attend men's groups with other forms of sanctions. They used women's reports of re-assault as the primary measure of success. They found that only 33% of men who attended men's groups had re-assaulted, compared with 75% of men who received other sanctions. Dobash & Dobash advocate evaluating mandated groups because the built-in monitoring and sanctions reduce the drop-out rate that occurs in voluntary groups (Laing, 2002).

In the United States, Gondolf's (2002a) longitudinal study of 840 men who attended court mandated programs also used re-assault based on women's reports as the outcome measure. Gondolf's study found that the risk of re-assault is highest when men are first in the program (Laing, 2002). Four years after attending the group, almost 90 % had not re-assaulted *in the previous year*. These figures indicated that after four years, however, 48% of men had re-assaulted at some time in the four years since the group, and two men had murdered their partners.

Do we interpret the 52% who did not re-assault as an indication of the program's success? Laing (2002) attributes re-assault to the system's failure to respond: there were no consequences for their assault.

Bob Foster runs one of the programs researched by Gondolf (2002a; 2002b) in Pittsburgh, USA (www.dacc.net). Men who are charged with criminal assault against their partners can choose the group program instead of a prison sentence. Attendance at the group three nights a week for 16 weeks is compulsory. An automatic warrant for arrest is initiated if a man does not attend. This mandate and its consequences, Foster says, are core to the changes the men make:

The important aspect of our program is that the men have to come, they have to come for every meeting, they have to be there on time and there are real consequences if they don't (Foster, 2001).

As part of Pittsburgh's integrated response to violence, men's behaviour is monitored and consequences kept consistent between the court, the police, women's services and the program evaluator.

Bennett and Williams provide a strong argument for this level of coordination and accountability as essential for systemic change:

The most effective reduction in partner violence will occur in those communities with the strongest combination of coordinated, accountable elements. The challenge to BIP (Batterer Intervention Programs) practitioners is to make sure their practice extends

beyond the level of the individual to the level of the community. Practitioners should work to educate and support all elements of a coordinated community response (2004: 8).

It is under *these* conditions that the Pittsburgh model is achieving its acclaimed success in response to criminal forms of violence. This differs from the local context in two significant ways: the voluntary nature of most men's groups in Victoria, and their operation in this state as stand-alone programs without the coordination of an integrated system of court, police and women's services. Without compulsory attendance, there is a high drop-out rate and erratic attendance in the Victorian groups, for which there are consequences in their mandated counterparts (Laing 2002; Pease & Fisher, 2001). Facilitators of volunteer groups have no legal mandate to report a man who fails to attend regularly, and have unclear guidelines about facilitators' responsibilities when a man is violent.

Victorian Research

Ruth Frances' (1996) research on eight Victorian programs for men who were violent in the home reported that 92% of men changed their behaviour and 66% of women partners claimed the programs were worthwhile. Frances used men's and women's reporting of men's violence and noted the discrepancy between them. She also noted discrepancies in some groups between the extant philosophy and actually making women's safety the priority. This is of concern: if leaders are able to espouse the 'right line' without practising it, they may well be teaching the same inconsistency to the men in the group. Frances recommended more effort in liaising with women to inform them of their entitlement to safety.

Howard's (1998) research on the Southern Collective Against Violence and Abuse (SCAVA)'s Men's Responsibility Group (MRG) evaluated the views of 20 women whose partners attended the MRG between 1992 and 1997. Of those, 11 were still in relationship with the partner who attended the group. The evaluation concluded that the groups were effective in reducing violence towards women through changing men's attitude and behaviour, and that women also benefited from their related contact with services and other women. Howard states that the women saw the groups as only a part of the solution. She reiterates Frances' (1996) recommendation that women be given more opportunity to participate in the process, content and evaluation of men's groups.

Russell & Jory (1997) evaluated 45 male participants in six behaviour change programs in the Melbourne metropolitan region. The evaluation used the men's self-reports of change to measure effectiveness. Thirty-nine per cent of the men had court orders against them but none were mandated to attend. Their results indicated that the programs were effective in reducing physical and psychological abuse to the same level as a non-abusive comparison group of 16 men.

Of the six groups involved, only two sought the views of the women partners, one via a questionnaire, the other anecdotally. Russell and Jory dismissed the anecdotal reports of victim partners as empirically unreliable because of the possibility of the victim denying reality or reporting a false degree of satisfaction due to fear of reprisals. However, they state that '(t)he facilitators of the programs were in contact with the partners of the male participants, as a check on the truthfulness of the men's reports' (1997: 127), without describing the nature of the contact. Despite its quantitative rigour, the absence of women's views renders this well structured evaluation less convincing.

Who should conduct men's group evaluation? Gondolf (2002a), the appointed evaluator for Pittsburgh programs, recommends using a neutral outsider to avoid staff bias towards demonstrating success. This was not the case with Nankervis and Donne's (1993) report on the Copelen Family Resource Centre Men's group program between 1990 and 1993. This evaluation drew on the views of the men and their partners as well as facilitator's records. The findings were ambiguous. Although physical violence in some of the men was reduced, the change was not always sustained. It was unclear if similar changes had occurred in the men's controlling or coercive behaviour towards the women. In consultation with DHS, the Centre redirected the DHS funding for the men's group to active liaison with, and training of, police and magistrates in the region. These efforts at local coordination aimed at influencing statutory institutions towards a strong stance against violence (Nankervis & Donne, 1993).

Within women's services, there have been varying levels of scepticism about men's groups, ranging from total rejection of the concept, to a belief in the need for standards about how they are run. Some express concern that the men's groups may use funding that should go to services for women and children. They are seen to let men 'off the hook' legally because magistrates accept attendance at a group as sufficient response to violence. Groups can convey the message that male violence is due to individual pathology, and

ignore the issue of 'male power surplus', which contributes to the structural oppression of women. Finally, they can be seen as offering support for men without addressing the safety needs of women (Frances, 1996). Further research is needed into the long term effectiveness of groups in stopping men's violence to women and children *as it is reported by women and children*, as advocated by Dobash & Dobash (2000) and Gondolf (2002a, 2002b).

My Research Into Melbourne Men's Groups

In 1997, as part of a master's program in social policy, I conducted a qualitative research project with women whose partners had attended six men's behaviour change groups in Melbourne (Costello, 1997). I wanted to know what women thought about the programs. Did they think the groups stopped or reduced the violence? Did they address the women's safety needs? Did these women think the groups were worthwhile and why, or why not?

I used a variety of research methods to gather quantitative and qualitative data, including consultation with key policy organisations, contact with men's and women's group facilitators, attendance at NTV facilitators' meeting and training sessions, attendance at men's group sessions, analysis of mailed questionnaires and focus group discussions with women, and participation in a women partners' feedback session. Overall, I received 51 completed questionnaires from women in six different groups and spoke with 12 women in focus groups at three different agencies. The research was planned as an intervention in itself, so facilitators were exposed to women's stories about their experiences.

The narrative data was post-coded and analysed according to the following themes:

Reduction of violence: Sixty-three per cent of women reported that their partners or ex-partners had not been physically violent to them since attending the group; 40% reported ongoing abuse.

Women's safety: Sixty-eight percent of women reported feeling safer because of their partner's involvement in a men's group, although 86% reported still feeling scared of their partners or ex-partners. Sixty-eight percent of women agreed that the group helped their partner admit his violent behaviour to them, indicating that he was able to take responsibility in this way. I was struck by how much abuse women were prepared to tolerate to maintain the relationship. Many women appeared to simply want their partner to talk more, and overlooked other unacceptable behaviour.

Benefits of the group: Women's positive feedback was more about the benefits for their partners than about what they themselves had gained from their partners being in the group. This is consistent with Goldner et al.'s (1990) theory of women's role as the caretakers of relationships. Some women wanted more therapeutic responses to their partners' past traumas.

Contact with facilitators: Women appreciated the contact they had with group facilitators, yet 12% of the women had had no contact with anyone in relation to the men's group until I spoke with them. One woman's story indicates the significance of facilitators' role:

What [the facilitator] told me ... helped me to understand the reality of my position in relation to my partner; he told me that ... [my spouse] didn't get much out of the men's group because he just sat there every session saying that *he* didn't have any problems and that it was his *wife* who had all the problems ... I felt *validated* and I realised what an impossible/difficult case I was up against ... I am really thankful for this facilitator.

Such accountability to women partners is not the norm. While 71% of women reported that the group leader had talked to them, in only 29% of cases had group leaders talked about the men's behaviour in the group. Some women were angry that this did not happen. They wanted to know what was being talked about in the groups as a way of anticipating their partner's mood on return. Some said they would have liked the opportunity to tell their side of the story to the group facilitators. Some women reported increased blame and abuse from partners after the group. Others reported that the men expected them to be more trusting and appreciative of them because they had attended the group.

Women's groups: Significantly, women partners who had attended a women's group reported receiving support, information and strengthening from the women facilitators.

Overall, women in this study felt that their partner's or ex-partner's involvement in the group offered them some sense of security. Women were relieved that their partner had someone else with whom to share the burden and disappointment of their life. Several women said they felt validated and empowered when supported by a group facilitator who confronted their partner about his unacceptable behaviour. Group facilitators providing honest appraisals of men's likelihood of changing enable women to make informed choices about their future. Women felt strongly about the need for a method of follow-up and accountability.

Follow Up Evaluation, 2004

In 2004, I conducted a follow-up evaluation of one of the men's groups involved in my 1997 study. The agency wanted to evaluate long-term outcomes of their program by re-interviewing women who had participated in their agency-driven evaluation six years earlier.

Only three women from the earlier group were able to participate in the 2004 study, so another five who attended groups in 1999–2004 were also interviewed. The sample of eight was typical of women partners of men who attended the group, in that half of them still lived with their partners, all but one had children, and most had attended partner contact groups. One woman's partner was mandated by court to attend. Data were collected via individual phone or face-to-face semi-structured individual interviews, focus groups, questionnaires and participation as an observer at a men's group session (Costello & Nazzari, 2005).

The three women who were part of the 1998 evaluation said that although there had been improvement in their situations since the group (one was separated), they felt that their partner *could* become physically abusive again. One woman said her partner seemed worse now; one said he was only slightly less abusive, and both these women wished they'd left 'back then'. These women from the earlier group reported dissatisfaction with the lack of meaningful contact they had had with the group facilitators.

Interviews with the five women who attended groups in later years (1999–2004) indicated positive program changes in response to the earlier research: men could attend for as long as they chose; a concurrent women's group was initiated; partner contact groups and parenting groups for fathers who had completed the MRG were established; more time was spent on follow-up of women and men participants, and more opportunities for counselling for women and children were provided.

These women indicated that they would like their needs, and their children's, to be more of a focus in the program:

The problems that are arising now seem to be connected to the trauma when their father was violent ... I think the kids would love to be contacted or have some group meeting.

Consistent with the previous research, women from the recent groups appreciated facilitators' holding men accountable for their behaviour. Two women spoke of the strong impact of mandatory consequences for men's violence. One woman said that the thing that changed her partner most was being sent to gaol.

Another whose partner was mandated by a magistrate to attend the group as part of the intervention order said: 'The best thing about the group was that he *had* to attend'.

Overall, these eight women's views affirmed that this men's group program reduced men's physical violence and increased women's and children's safety, mainly by providing a supportive way for women to leave a physically abusive man. Although none of their partners currently physically assaults them, the men remain abusive in other ways. All but one woman (from the earlier program) indicated that the abuse had lessened.

This follow-up review indicated the significant work the facilitators and other local workers were doing in supporting women whose partners attended the group. The workers and facilitators had argued for four years for a concurrent women's group, which proved impossible due to a lack of resources.

The next section will discuss some issues raised by the research.

Discussion

This overview of research into men's groups indicates insufficient consistent, coordinated monitoring or evaluation in Victorian men's group programs. Without women's feedback about their partners' behaviour, program coordinators cannot know how effective their groups are, or if they are effective at all. In the absence of consistently monitored and evaluated standards, men's groups can blur their responses to criminal and non-criminal violence, emphasising therapy over accountability.

Therapy Versus Accountability

In general, men's groups' facilitators focus on gender dynamics and a sociopolitical construction of violence. Many groups declare that their approach is about behaviour change, not therapy, yet is it possible *not* to use therapeutic techniques when running a group? Anderson and Goolishian (1984) identified 'two hats' required by men's group facilitators. The role of one hat, the 'helper', is to protect, support, counsel and advocate. The other hat, worn simultaneously, belongs to the 'law enforcer', whose role is to investigate, monitor and hold accountable. While this somewhat dated view can be criticised for its dual rather than multiple analysis of roles, it clearly identifies two of the 'ideological divisions' that Goldner (2001: 07) describes as stifling the richness of multiple discourses in domestic violence policy and research.

Goldner et al.'s earlier (1990) 'both/and' statements provide a useful framework for thinking through the competing ideologies that pervade community and professional understandings of violence. For example:

- Violence is a crime and requires social control *and* there are therapeutic interventions that can change men's violent behaviour.
- Men choose to be violent as a means of dominating and controlling women *and* some men experience their violence as impulsive and describe feeling out of control and powerless:
- Men's violence to women can be understood within the construction of patriarchy *and* men's violence to women is a choice made by individual men.

Watson challenges the single-minded feminist (patriarchal) analysis of domestic violence research and policy recommended in the *Keys Young Report on Perpetrators* (1999). He posits alternative explanations of domestic violence, including psychological, attachment, transgenerational, 'universal risk' theories and capitalist class oppression. While these theories may *explain* why a man would physically, emotionally, sexually, financially, or socially abuse a woman, none can *excuse* the violence and only some women can ever forgive it (Goldner et al., 1990). I believe that without a feminist analysis, workers can overlook the need for men's accountability and public consequences and group therapy can be reduced to:

... all this psychobabble about [the man], trying to understand why he does it. But it's not normal behaviour. The focus should be on 'Don't do it' rather than 'Why did you do it?' (woman from a 2004 focus group, discussing a group her partner had attended).

For example, although Jenkins' (1991) 'invitation to responsibility' approach is located within a social constructionist analysis of power and gender, some interpretations of this sound approach in practice privilege therapy (the helper role) over accountability and culpability (taking the consequences). To demonstrate 'responsibility', Jenkins states, an abusive man must acknowledge

... fully the existence and significance of the abuse and understand the potential impact of his abusive behaviour upon the victim and others. He must accept his culpability for his actions and bear the full onus for ceasing his abuse and changing his behaviour ... This includes responsibility ... for contributing to relationships in a sensitive, respectful and equitable manner (Jenkins, 1991: 187).

Jenkins adds that to be effective, the therapeutic experience needs to 'disrupt the context for abuse' (Jenkins, 1991: 187) and make the man deal with the uncertainty and confrontation of the criminal justice system. Yet, men's group facilitators seldom initiate police action in response to assault as the following example from a 2004 focus groups illustrates.

One of the women said the men's group had helped because in the last four years he'd 'only assaulted me very badly twice', once while he was attending the program. When he revealed the behaviour in the group, the facilitators used 'internalised other' questioning to give the man an insight into his partner's experience (Wirtz & Schweitzer, 2000: 94).

From this woman's perspective, internalised other questioning did not make her partner take responsibility or stop his assault:

No wonder he enjoys going to the group — he can confess and get empathy from the men and do some role-playing without really having to take any responsibility. He came home still not understanding what it's like for me and still abuses me.

The facilitators later told me that at the time they offered to support the woman but she did not want to take legal action against her partner's assault, so they felt unable to intervene. Accountability is not a matter of individual facilitator choice, however:

The law now obliges therapists to override the abuser's right to confidentiality in favour of the rights of his partner or children, when necessary ... Failure to warn or failure to control a dangerous client could result in a malpractice suit (Hunter, 2001: 86).

With appropriate organisational processes for accountability in place, facilitators can respond to men's admissions of assault. For example, an organisation can establish consequences at the group intake by expecting men to sign a contract along the following lines: 'If I disclose violent behaviour and refuse to report myself to the police, I authorise the facilitators to take action against me' (Nankervis & Donne, 1993; Gardiner & McGrath, 1995). The contract invites men and facilitators to be accountable for prioritising women's physical safety.

To do this, facilitators must be in close and regular contact with women partners to develop safety plans and pursue legal options in the case of criminal assault. The burden of having to prosecute currently lies with the woman and, in the ten years of my research, I have not heard many stories of group facilitators taking action against men's violent or abusive behaviour outside the group, despite women acknowledging that

this would be helpful. I would welcome a spate of responses to this article, demonstrating evidence to the contrary. In situations of violence against children, mandatory reporting legislation removes the choice in reporting abuse, although even child protection workers, blinded by fear of violent men (the 'hostage syndrome') tend to blame mothers and remove children, rather than confront or report men whose violence affects children (Stanley & Goddard, 2002).

A similar process of fear and denial can be seen in the view (argued by facilitators of men's groups) that police intervention is ineffective. In these cases, as in reports to child protection services that are not assessed as warranting investigation, workers have the option to follow up with police supervisors. With experience, workers become familiar with how to gather evidence and make a case that will alert the police or child protection workers to the need to intervene in the situation.

In Kentucky, USA, a unique mandatory reporting law requires *any* person, not just health care professionals, to report suspected intimate partner violence to designated social service agencies (Bledsoe et al., 2004). This has led to increased availability of services to the victims rather than greater arrest rates of men, an outcome that makes the safety of women and children a priority.

In Victoria, we do not know how men's group facilitators respond to admissions of criminal assault by men in their groups as there is no coordinated research to inform us.

Partnership Accountability

Rob Hall in Adelaide describes 'partnership accountability', where men's groups have established partnerships with women's advocacy groups in attempts to address issues such as non-obligatory contact for women and children, women's input into men's group programs, follow-up, and abuse subsequent to attendance. Additionally, the groups have structured processes to enable male and female workers to develop more equitable and accountable working relationships. This has significant bearing on processes and practices within the men's groups (Hall, 1994).

Accountability constitutes an intrinsic part of the program approach of the Family Centre in Lower Hutt, in New Zealand. Tamasese & Waldegrave (1994: 59) describe their work as 'Just Therapy', reflecting the deep commitment to all aspects of social justice:

(T)he best judges of injustice are the groups that have been unjustly treated ... thus, the women are accorded the role of guardians of gender equity ...

the agency is absolutely committed to seeking a solution that satisfies the guardians to whom the rest of the agency is accountable (1994: 59).

From this perspective, male facilitators are accountable to women and non-Maori people are accountable to Maori people through gender and cultural caucuses.

An example from rural Australia exemplifies the power of an organisation's commitment to social consequences for violence. A group of Indigenous men promoted the local footy club as non-violent. Players wore T-shirts declaring their non-violent stance. Men found to have assaulted their partners were disqualified from playing in the team, as part of the cultural idea of 'shaming'. This campaign was effective in creating community awareness of violence, and exclusion proved to be a relevant and effective sanction (Hunt, 2004).

This idea of partnership accountability goes beyond the idea of obtaining feedback from the men, observers or colleagues. Partnership accountability creates a commitment to seeking the least powerful people to inform and critique our practices. Such approaches could enhance the standards and practices of men's groups.

Organisational Accountability and Consequences

In 1995 the Victorian Network for the Prevention of Male Family Violence (V-NET, now known as NTV), established a set of standards for running behaviour change programs for violent men (Younger, 1995). The standards require member organisations to commit to addressing the safety of women and children as a priority. Some groups currently are not meeting these standards; for example, not all groups have systematic partner contact processes, an aspect that is strongly recommended by research to date (Gondolf, 2000a; 2002b; Dobash & Dobash, 2000; Howard, 1998; Costello, 1997; Younger, 1995).

DHS contributes funds to 15 of the 32 men's behaviour change programs in Victoria (Blay, 2005) but there is currently no monitoring and no consequences for failing to comply with the NTV guidelines. It seems ironic that services such as Family Support and the Supported Accommodation Assistance Programs (SAAP), which work with women and child victims of men's violence, are compelled by DHS to provide exhaustive quarterly statistics as part of service agreements, while men's groups are not.

Does the lack of funded evaluation infer that men's groups are considered sufficiently effective not to warrant research? Is evaluation too costly, so they hope for the best? While the State Government can be seen to be 'doing something' about male violence with

these programs, evaluation can be avoided if their effectiveness is not challenged.

Some programs demonstrate a strong organisational commitment to women's safety and men's accountability. Relationships Australia (NSW)'s wholistic Family Safety Model believes that men's group programs need to consider whether:

- the 'psychological' nature of the service model (such as anger management, cognitive behaviour, couple or individual therapy) detracts from the agency's response to violence as a criminal act
- funding the program reduces services to women
- providing men's programs detracts from the agency's commitment to lobbying for increased legal sanctions
- such programs encourage women to remain and be hopeful in violent relationships rather than consider other options (Shaw, Bouris & Pye, 1996: 129).

During 2004 and 2005, DHS initiated a process to review and update the NTV Standards for Men's Behaviour Change programs. The resultant quality assurance measures will hopefully become part of service agreements with funded programs. Without additional funding to resource and evaluate them, however, programs will struggle to meet the standards.

Societal Accountability

To be accountable to society, men's programs need to be an integral part of a co-ordinated institutional response to violence against women. Funding and work pressures may make this difficult but as Bennett & Williams report:

Batterer programs are critical elements in an overall violence prevention effort. The effect of any of the elements in this effort — education, arrest, prosecution, probation, victim services, adjunct services, and BIP (Batterer Intervention Programs) is diminished by the removal of any of the other effort (2001: 8).

Men's groups are no panacea for men's violence to women. If they operate alone, they run the risk of inadvertent collusion with patriarchal male power and miss opportunities to assist women and children who are the victims.

Conclusions

Multiple explanations of men's violence to women do not lessen the effect of violence on women and children and no explanation excuses it. The men's groups I studied articulated feminist philosophy and principles. Their translation in practice, however, at times prioritised men's behavioural change over the safety of

women and children, as if it were legitimate to do the first without paying attention to the second. Whilst these two principles appear to be aligned, they differ in practice around issues of reporting violence to police, instigating consequences for men who are violent, and support and follow-up for women and children affected by violence. Practitioners need to use caution in translating theories that explain violence into practice in men's behaviour change groups, to avoid therapeutic responses to criminal or abusive behaviour that damages and terrifies women and children.

Men's groups meet a need from men, women and community workers who want programs for men to make changes to their violent behaviour. They are well attended, and women partners appreciate their benefits. Tentative evidence implies that some men reduce physical violence to their partners while they attend the groups (sometimes only because the woman has left them and is less accessible) but there is insufficient evidence to determine the sustainability of this change. The evidence in relation to changes in men's abuse of women and children as a result of men's groups is less convincing, with some examples demonstrating little significant change.

Limited research to date in Victoria, including my own, indicates the importance of regular, ongoing contact with women partners, both as evaluative methodology and as a practice priority. Women report feeling safer while their partners are attending men's group programs, but want contact with the facilitators, information about the program, the opportunity to tell their side of the story, support and assistance, and the assurance that facilitators will, in consultation with them, confront and take action against their partners when they are violent. The major contribution of voluntary men's behaviour change groups in Victoria is, I suggest, their opportunity to provide information, support and assistance to women and their children.

Overseas longitudinal research uses women's reports of re-assault as the measure of effectiveness of court-mandated groups, and indicates that these groups are most effective when located as part of an integrated accountable community response. These approaches are recommended for Australian men's groups.

Men's group facilitators struggle with limited resources and time, and the pressure to meet organisational service agreement requirements. It is difficult to juggle the two hats of helper and law enforcer and Alan Jenkins' model that invites men to be responsible seems a legitimate way to address both. However, I suggest facilitators re-read Jenkins' writings, as his strong pro-feminist analysis and goal of systemic change can be lost in

workers' responses to the immediate therapeutic needs of the group. I contend that in focusing on the group needs and the men's stories, without regular contact with their women partners and children, even the best intentioned worker can lose sight of the seriousness of men's violence and its impact on women and children. This can happen in any form of counselling or therapy where one individual is seen in isolation from significant others, and beliefs about confidentiality prevent workers from accessing any point of view other than that of their client.

“... even the best-intentioned worker can lose sight of the seriousness of men's violence and its impact on women and children.”

Some suggestions for future practice follow.

- The host organisation needs to establish consequences and evaluative measures before the group commences. Contracts with group participants, stating the organisation's commitment to act when there is violent behaviour, can be signed before the group commences.
- Contact with women partners to inform them about the group's aims, purpose and process is important as a form of partnership accountability, as well as establishing links with support for her and her family. Women's views about the effect of the group on their safety seem the most relevant measures of the group's effectiveness (Given that workers often do not have time to analyse completed questionnaires, I remind practitioners of the skills of social work students who often seek research projects for evaluation.)
- Men's programs can demonstrate accountability by their active collaboration with community domestic violence networks, including police, courts, women's services, schools, child protection, women's refuges, family support agencies, Centrelink and the media.

Several initiatives offer hope for systemic change in Victoria: new police codes of practice, the intervention order court and a proposal for funding of an integrated response to violence and mandated groups. NTV's recently updated standards provide guidelines for men's groups, but unless DHS establishes processes, incentives and resources for monitoring and evaluating the groups' adherence to the standards, there is no guarantee of effectiveness or accountability at the individual, group or societal level.

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