



Men's Understanding Of Their Violence Towards Women

This briefing reports on a study in Australia that explored men's experience and understanding of their violence towards their female partners. The study aimed to gain a fuller understanding of men's perspectives with a view to tailoring services to engage men in a change project, as well as to gather information for a primary prevention study. The researchers interviewed a number of men who had been violent in their relationships and were now attending a perpetrators programme.

Key Points

- Some men saw their violence in instrumental terms, as something they employed to get their own way, whilst others experienced their violence in expressive terms, as outside their control
- A common theme among the men was one of being treated unfairly by their partner
- Some men experienced their partner as making demands they could not meet, and they came to see themselves as victims. They saw themselves as using violence when they felt criticised or abused
- Other men saw themselves as dominant, and their violence as punishment of their partners who were either insufficiently submissive or whom they saw as deliberately breaking the rules
- The most severely abusive men in this sample were witnesses and/or victims of severe abuse as children
- Three quarters of the 24 men in this sample said they experienced abuse and violence in their family of origin. Many of the men were involved in their parents' conflicts
- Two thirds of the men interviewed reported significant experiences of violence in relation to their involvement in peer groups - half as perpetrators of peer violence and half as victims of peer violence
- More men than might be expected for this age group described their own parents' relationship as traditional, with fathers as boss and breadwinner
- Some of the men viewed themselves as loners and reported that they found it difficult to express their feelings.

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The Study Context

In Australia, there is now recognition of the complexity of the issues involved in domestic violence and the need for multiple responses at both the macro and micro level. Perpetrator programmes for men are one response that fit within a wider system of domestic violence intervention. Programmes for men are mandatory or voluntary, with some programmes taking both voluntary and mandated clients. The prioritising of women's and children's safety, holding men accountable for their abuse and violence, and the criminality of violence has been the basis of policy development in Australia since the late 1980's. This perspective is taken as a given in the work reported here.

The starting point for this study was that understanding the meanings men give to their behaviour is a critical dimension for effective intervention. Many programmes have difficulty in engaging perpetrators and many programmes do not achieve a consistent rate of success. Many men do not pursue help of any kind. Part of the difficulty in engaging men may be due to the fact that the programmes have tended to be a 'one size fits all' approach, which have stressed education and confrontation. A component missing from these programmes is the engagement of men around the meanings they attach to their violence and how they experience it.

The Study Method

The study involved both a quantitative and qualitative component. The quantitative component considered the interrelationships between a range of psychological characteristics of 123 men participating in a group programme because of their violence towards women. These included family of origin issues and attitudes towards women. The qualitative component involved lengthy interviews with 24 men who also participated in the quantitative study. It is the qualitative component of the study that is reported on in this briefing.

The men were between 24 and 60 years of age. The majority were of Anglo-Saxon background, with about half the men middle class, white-collar workers, while the other half were working class. This reflected the local population profiles of the area in which the group programme was run. To be eligible for the programme, men had to have acknowledged their violence and be requesting help. Most of the men were voluntary attendees at the programme.

A total of 24 qualitative interviews were transcribed and analysed according to grounded theory principles and thematic analysis. There were two clear questions:

- How do men who use violence understand and account for their violence?
- How do men experience their own violence?

Areas explored included family of origin; the impact of peer groups; men's understandings of their current and previous relationships with partners; and their relationships with their own children. The men's contact with legal, health and welfare services, their use of alcohol and drugs, their responses to intervention including domestic violence orders, and their history of mental and physical illness were also tracked. This briefing addresses the findings in relation to four themes.

Theme 1: Men's construction and experience of their own violence

There was a difference between men who saw their violence in more instrumental terms, as something they employed to get their own way, versus men who experienced their violence in expressive terms,

as outside their control. This distinction between 'in control' and 'out of control', while not accounting for patterns of severity, reflected a difference in the style of violence perpetrated and a man's conscious intentions. We refer to these differences as tyrannical and exploder violence respectively.

Tyrannical Violence

These men (14) used aggression, intimidation, verbal abuse and physical assault to assert domination and control over their partner. They were more likely to progress from verbal abuse to physical assault if their partner did not comply with their wishes. From their descriptions, it seemed that they intended to frighten, intimidate and punish. They were conscious of what they were doing.

"I know exactly what I am doing, but fuck you woman – I'll grab you and make you listen"

"My body language says to her I am going to get abusive – you can see it (fear) in her eyes"

"I kicked her in both knees, kicked her up the arse while she was on the floor and put my foot on her head... did it in a terrorising manner"

Despite these descriptions, many of the men in this group distinguished between physical and non-physical violence and were less likely to describe themselves as physically violent. However it could be argued that this distinction might have been learnt from their counsellors or the group programme and seemed to serve the purpose of 'owning up' to a lesser misdeed.

Exploder Violence

These men (10), experienced their violence as sudden and explosive, both verbal and physical. They experienced it as a response to their partner's criticism, challenge or continued pursuit. The violence seemed to serve the purpose of allowing the man to get distance from his partner, to silence her, to bring an unpleasant situation to an end.

"She would go on and on, I would try to get away; I'd push her"

"It (anger) would cross over and then it was too late – and you reach a point where you know that you are going out of control"

"I try to walk away, she comes after me and keeps pushing"

Although these men did not experience their violence as premeditated, it should not be assumed that their partner would experience it in this way. To the partners the violence may appear a deliberate act of silencing. The end effect of the violence, whether explosive or tyrannical, is the same. Partners feel both controlled and fearful.

Theme 2: Style of violence and relationship with partner

A common theme among the men was one of being treated unfairly by their partner. We therefore looked at whether the men saw themselves as victims or rescuers, and how this related to their style of violence.

Martyrs in relationships

Seven men saw themselves as both rescuers and victims of their partners. All of them used exploder violence, and we called this group the martyrs. They saw themselves as having saved their partners from dangerous situations, such as drug and alcohol

problems, prostitution, abuse from other men. However, over time, they experienced their partner making demands that they could not meet, and they came to see themselves as victims. They experienced their partners as opposing them, in that they would argue and participate in escalating fights.

These relationships were also characterised by a pursue/distance dynamic. The woman seemed to pursue for intimacy, communication and involvement and the man would distance from what he perceived as criticism or attack. These partners were also described as having mental health or drug and alcohol problems. The men believed they were violent because this was the only way they could stop their partner doing what she was doing. They used violence when they felt criticised or abused. In our view, the violence was possibly an attempt to assert dominance over a partner who had ceased showing gratitude, something they felt she should show.

“I got involved with someone that had a history of problems, had suffered physical violence previously, had suffered a lot of problems.....and then she followed me into the study and started ripping into me and tearing the place apart and I pushed her and dragged her you’re always in the wrong”

“One of my mechanisms was to try and leave. She would physically grab me and prevent me from going anywhere”

“But she will keep going on and on about it, and on and on. And it is like get the fuck out of my head; you know just leave me alone. I am going to the room. I am going to watch telly. And she will follow me in”

Patriarchs in relationships

We use the term ‘patriarch’ to refer to the type of relationship characteristic of eight of the men who used tyrant type violence. These men did not see themselves as either rescuers or victims. They did, however, blame their partners and see them as ‘deserving’ the violence they received. They saw themselves as dominant and their violence as punishment of their partners who were either insufficiently submissive or who had stepped outside the patriarch’s expectations. For these men it was almost as though they experienced their partner as deliberately breaking the rules.

“When I start getting angry, its all her fault – she is not thinking about what she is doing; she is not paying attention to what she is doing. She is not taking anyone else into consideration – and that makes me angry. I can almost feel the heat rising in me, now thinking about it”

It was also clear that the threat of physical violence was often enough to maintain dominance.

“There was no physical violence in our relationship. My wife is intimidated by my displays of emotion and I would get angry and those sorts of things”

These ‘patriarchs’ were more likely to be the pursuer in their relationships, being jealous of their partner’s other relationships and interests.

“in actual fact what is happening is, I am chasing, she is running away I pursue, what are you doing? How are you doing it? Why are you doing it? Um...who is that? Why are you talking to them?”

Rescuers in relationships

Three men saw themselves as rescuers, but did not see themselves as victims. These men all used tyrant type violence. They saw themselves as offering help and guidance and demonstrating leadership and decision-making, for example:

“I had her like a part of my life that I had worked out rather like one puts an investment in a blue chip stock and suddenly the accountant rings you one day and says ‘you have lost the lot’. She did some good work with ‘inner child’ stuff with me”

Victims in relationships

Six men saw themselves only as victims. Three of these men used tyrant type violence and three used exploder type violence. The partners of the men who used tyrant violence seemed to adopt a strategic, submissive position. One of these men felt continually let down by his partner:

“(my partner) always looked after her needs and I’ll always accommodate her needs, but she will never recognise my needs sort of thing. She could never walk in your moccasins”.

The exploder victims seemed perplexed about their partners treatment of them. One man felt that he was “seriously put upon and unfairly treated”.

If the two victim categories, martyr and victim, are combined, we see that the majority used exploder type violence. They saw themselves as innocent victims of their partner’s attacks or criticisms. These men seemed to have a massive sense of self-entitlement with regard to their current partners.

Theme 3: Family of origin experiences

The most severely abusive men in this sample reported that they were witnesses and/or victims of severe abuse as children. 18 out of the 24 men in this sample said they experienced significant abuse and violence in their family of origin. Many of the men were triangulated into their parents’ conflicts. Some of the men minimised the abuse they had experienced. They saw it as normal and deserved. Others were enraged by it and blamed their parents for their present difficulties.

A man’s accounts of behaviour toward his partner was similar to his description of his father’s behaviour towards his mother. The research suggested that a man was less likely to be abusive as an adult if he experienced a close protective relationship with his mother.

“He dealt with you by using violence. I often got punched. I have a broken cheek. Mum bought us up but if ever I was a bad boy, I would get to go into the bedroom and ‘wait until your father comes home’ and there would be a flogging, - a belt round the bum, a punch in the head”

“Oh, a few times a week like nearly every day. I remember thinking if I could get through a day without a smacking it was pretty good”

“I remember going to school with wet pants... I was terrified when I was a kid. I was really scared of him, until I was about 18, when I was physically strong enough... when I took him on”

The family of origin experiences of these men confirm other findings that many abusive men have experienced abuse or witnessed violence within their families of origin, though not all boys who are abused grow up to be abusive. Many of the men in this study were also exposed to on-going conflict and divided loyalties, as well as their mother’s depression as a consequence of their father’s violence. It appears therefore that not only do boys learn directly from their fathers that women deserve to be abused, but also witnessing violence towards their mothers is a severe trauma for children.

Theme 4: The influence of traditional masculinity: family and peer influences

Many men described their parents' relationship as traditional. Their fathers were the boss and the breadwinner, even when mothers also worked outside the home. This traditional division of their parents' roles is not unexpected in a sample of this age. However, it seems to provide a foundation for these men to develop a sense of entitlement over women.

Two thirds of the men interviewed reported significant experiences of violence in relation to their involvement in peer groups - half as perpetrators of peer violence and half as victims of peer violence.

All the men who were perpetrators of peer violence reported having had fathers who were physically abusive and aggressive. Almost all experienced physical punishment.

There was a strong tendency for men who had older brothers to be involved as perpetrators in peer violence. The interviews revealed that their brothers had been violent toward them and they learned the rules of survival in a masculine culture from an early age.

Some of the men viewed themselves as 'loners', 'invulnerable' and 'isolated'. They adhered to values that prescribed they be strong, in-control and independent. They found it difficult to express vulnerability or emotions such as fear or sadness. Many men described their shame when they showed feelings or vulnerability as children. They were told to act tough and felt humiliated. They learnt to deny feelings that made them vulnerable.

"There was a little bullying at our school, I did it sometimes. I would not say it was always, I wasn't a bully. But when I was a child, it was important to know how to fight. And physically fight, and you resolved disputes that way with those boys"

"You have to test your limits and work out where you fit into the pecking order at school, so that's all it was"

"It is not a man of a thing, going to some bloody woman counsellor and saying I have got problems. It is like, fuck man, you have turned into a softy. But other times I know I have to do it or I will end up killing someone, or killing myself."

Implications for intervention

Although domination and control are always inevitable outcomes of violence, this study suggests that the path to achieving these outcomes varies. It points to the need to:

- Engage men in perpetrator programmes around their perceived control or lack of control. The violence of the exploder group points to the limitations of only educationally based interventions.
- Denials and deflections of responsibility might be more usefully challenged if the style of the violence and the positioning of the man in relation to his partner were taken into account
- Given that some of the men described their violence in the context of a pursuer/distancer dynamic, this supports interventions that assist some men to address attachment issues in relationships. In the companion quantitative study, anxiety about attachment was the main predictor of violence.
- The majority of men in the qualitative study talked about considerable childhood abuse. However in the quantitative only one third identified significant violence. Our interpretation is that many of the men did not relate to their childhood abuse as violence but saw it as normal and deserved. This raises the issue of how they perceive violence. If they do not relate to their own abuse as violence, they are unlikely to see their own actions towards their partners and children as violence.

Implications for intervention at a social level

- Given the number of men who were witnesses of their father's violence towards their mother and/or victims of their father's abuse, early intervention and services for children affected by violence should be given priority.
- The study supported other research that suggests there is an intergenerational transmission of violence. This is possibly supported by witnessing and experiencing abuse and violence, feeling trapped by divided loyalties, poor relationships with their mothers due to their mothers' depression as a result of being beaten, and the inability of some mothers to protect their children from their fathers' violence. There may also be an adherence to a masculine culture which resulted in feelings of shame if feelings of vulnerability or sadness were experienced in these families.
- Consideration should also be given to awareness campaigns that address the consequences of bullying and other negative aspects of male culture as a matter of priority.

This Briefing was written by Beth Seddon, Honorary Research Fellow at CRFR, and edited by Sarah Morton and Kathryn Backett-Milburn. It is a summary of the paper titled 'Using it' or 'Losing it': Men's Constructions of their Violence Towards Female Partners published as an issues paper by The Australian Domestic Violence and Family Violence Clearing House in Early 2003. It can be accessed on <http://www.austdvclearinghouse.unsw.edu.au>. A paper discussing the quantitative part of the research has been accepted for publication by The Family Violence and Sexual Abuse Bulletin.

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