

What is the work with men all about?

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Objectives of engaging men

This article was intended to be a book review of *Domestic violence – Working with men: Research, practice experiences and integrated responses* by Andrew Day, Patrick O’Leary, Donna Chung and Donna Justo (Federation Press, 2009). It is not often that a whole book is published on engaging men who perpetrate family violence, let alone an Australian one, and I rushed to order the book as soon as I could.

This article is not a review of the book, for reasons I’ll outline below. However, I can’t resist mentioning that it does contain a number of very useful chapters covering issues ranging from the coordination and management of integrated family violence service systems through to particular practice initiatives at various points within these systems, and as such I’d recommend it to program providers and others interested in work with men.

Two of the several chapters that stood out for me included Chapter 5 by Tony Fletcher which outlined several innovative and invitational men’s behaviour change group activities focusing on responsibility facing, naming violence, exploring the impact of violence, men’s gendered entitlement, other-centredness and moving towards not-blaming and caring – some of which I’m looking forward to trying out in my own co-facilitation work – and Chapter 13 by Andrew Day and others which reported the outcomes of a Gold Coast men’s behaviour change program. Of note regarding the latter, the researchers found that men’s self-reports of changes in their use of violence and in relevant attitudes and awareness was not supported by partner reports, which showed that men’s use of both physical and verbal violence / controlling behaviours decreased in the middle of the program only to increase again towards the end.

But I must remind myself – this article is not a review of the book, as I recently discovered that it has already been reviewed. This article is more like a review of the review, rather than a review of the book (I hope this isn’t a ‘no no’ in literary circles). This review, by Michael Salter, a PhD candidate at the University of New South Wales, is featured in the latest newsletter (number 41) of the Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse (see http://www.adfvc.unsw.edu.au/PDF%20files/Newsletter_41.pdf).

I found the review quite informative, and similar to my own thoughts recommended the book as a useful addition to the family violence literature. What most interested me was his comments on engaging men, which I found thought-provoking and timely given current integrated family violence service system reforms. To quote from the review:

“Contributors to the book argue persuasively that perpetrator programs provide workers with an important opportunity to connect with victimised women and children. The book acknowledges that the evidence that perpetrator programs effect lasting behaviour change and violence cessation in abusive men is not strong. In their opening and closing chapters, the book’s editors emphasise that behaviour change should be a secondary objective of perpetrator programs. They argue that offender programs should aim primarily, to scrutinise the level of men’s current violence and seek to provide their female partners and children with the opportunity to access care and support.”

I would have to agree with Michael's understanding of the literature that the evidence for long-term behavioural change associated with men's behaviour change programs is not overwhelming. Gondolf's substantial multi-site study is a shining light, and there has been some promising research in the U.K (see the Respect briefing paper on domestic violence perpetrator programs at www.respect.uk.net/pages/evaluation-project.html). These positive research outcomes are balanced, however, by a significant number of U.S. studies that show little or no effect from what is termed "Batterer Intervention Programs" in that country (which share some similarities and differences to Australian programs). The dominating theme in all of this research, however, concerns the major methodological difficulties and limitations in making a true assessment of long-term behavioural change, particularly (and understandably) in obtaining long-term feedback from partners. These methodological difficulties make it very difficult to draw any definitive conclusions about the long-term effectiveness or otherwise of this work (feel free to contact me if you would like references for relevant specific studies and meta-analyses, but for one example see www.campbellcollaboration.org/lib/download/218/).

Thinking about Michael's review, and the ways in which integrated family violence service systems are evolving in Victoria, has led me to ask myself a rather challenging question: *Do we need to know for sure (or even that it is very likely) that this work results in long-term behavioural change to feel confident that it is worth doing?* Pondering this question, I've personally come up with what might be the surprising answer of "no".

My answer – and I stress it is just my own personal response made at this particular point of time – in part reflects what I already know as a practitioner doing this work ... that some men do significantly reduce their use of violence in the long-term, and do develop ways of nonviolent being and relating that are perhaps deeper than many men who don't perpetrate violence but who do not participate in programs. How many men, and what proportion of those who complete a program achieve such deep and long-term changes, I cannot say.

But my answer of "no" stems more from my engagement with the idea that long-term behavioural change is only one strategic objective of male family violence work ... and in some circumstances, possibly not the most important one.

The fundamental aim of male family violence work, of course, is to improve the safety of women and children. Achieving long-term behavioural change is an important objective that works towards this aim. However, this objective is not synonymous with the fundamental aim, as there are other objectives that we strive for in this work.

A second key objective is to provide partners of men who participate in programs with access to safety planning, referrals, direct support and other outcomes or processes that stem through partner contact work. As we know, many women who engage with a partner contact service have not previously accessed a family violence service, and the work with women in this context can be at least as important as the work with men.

Sometimes work with men who do not or are not likely to make long-term changes can still support the work with women. Some of these men might make some temporary changes to some aspects of their behaviour through participation in the program, which might provide their partners with a degree of 'breathing space' through which to discover more of her own agency, find small but important opportunities to regain a sense of dignity, revise safety plans, make decisions, etc. Furthermore, her partner's unsuccessful or partly successful participation in the program might help her to face the reality of the likely future use of his violence. In scenarios such as these, the work with men is secondary to but potentially quite supportive of the work with their partners through the partner contact service and specialist women's family violence services.

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Third, working with men can assist in monitoring men's behaviour and providing some means of scrutiny in terms of their multiple accountabilities to women and children (and other affected family members), themselves, the integrated family violence service system, the criminal justice system and to society at large. Working with men to invite and encourage steps towards responsibility, while also monitoring their behaviour in terms of accountability to the criminal justice system, can in particular be difficult hats for male family violence workers to jointly wear. However, these hats can be mutually supportive. This tension invites us to consider that while criminal justice system sanctions might not necessarily assist a particular man to change his behaviour, police and court responses to men's use of family violence is a determinant of relevant social norms and community attitudes.

Fourth, and probably not finally, men's family violence programs can in a coordinated way engage with men who come into contact with one or more elements of an integrated family violence service system such as police, child protection or the courts. As we are seeing now with the establishment and consolidation of enhanced intake services and the MRS After Hours Service, this work is as much about identifying and responding to immediate and near risk indicators, short-term safety planning and encouraging men to take small steps towards responsibility, as it is about recruiting men immediately into men's behaviour change programs. Indeed, the latter is only a moderate aspect of this work.

I hope I am not engaging with these ideas of the multiplicity of why we do this work so that I can justify, after the fact, why I am indeed doing this work. This is a possibility that I feel would be dangerous to dismiss without reflection. But I am grateful to Michael for assisting and deepening my engagement with the ideas I've presented here. Bring on more book reviews, I say!

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