

What Counts as Success in Men's Behaviour Change Work?

Rodney Vlaai
Policy & Practice Co-ordinator
No To Violence Male Family Violence
Prevention Association (NTV) Inc



NTV's equivalent organisation in the UK, Respect, recently published a thought-provoking briefing note titled *Domestic violence perpetrator programmes: What counts as success?* (downloadable at www.respect.uk.net/pages/briefing-papers.html).

This briefing note commences with the important question: "What does it mean for a programme to 'work', to 'be successful', to have 'positive outcomes', and whose perspectives on these questions should we be mindful of?" To further explain the purpose of the briefing note, the authors state "It is our contention that both the lack of evidence on, and narrow approaches to, whether domestic violence perpetrator programmes 'work' has contributed to their restricted, short term funding and stilted development in the UK. Opening up the field through a research exploration of what counts as success has the potential to move the field on."

To investigate what counts as success, the authors interviewed, across five programs, 18 female partners / former partners, 22 men who were participating in or had completed a program, 6 program funders and 27 practitioners. Each person interviewed was asked questions concerning what success in the program meant to them.

Rather than reproduce the results here, I encourage readers to download the briefing note which is succinct and easy to read. However, what stood out for me were the priorities identified by the partners / former partners in terms of what counted as success, listed below in decreasing order of frequency mentioned:

- respectful / improved relationships
- expanded space for action
- support / decreased isolation
- enhanced parenting
- reduction or cessation of violence and abuse
- the man understanding the impact of domestic violence.

The authors commented how the reduction or cessation of violence and abuse was mentioned less frequently than four other themes. While the reduction / cessation of violence is a necessary requirement for and underpins these four themes, the finding that these women wanted more than the violence to stop is important for program providers to consider.

The theme of an expanded space for action, for example, was described as follows:

"Being able enter the house without being scared, stay out late without feeling she would have to 'walk on egg-shells' the next day, spend time with family and friends are all examples of what we term **expanded space for action**."

One of the impacts of living with domestic violence, and especially coercive control, is that women and children adapt their behaviour in an effort to prevent further outbursts: they narrow their space for action and live within the parameters the perpetrator sets. Being able to stretch this space was important to women, reflecting a sense of greater safety. Again the examples focused on mundane everyday eventualities which had previously terrorised them, for example, no longer feeling scared about making a 'mistake', such as breaking something or getting a bank charge. A decrease in tension created a better atmosphere, which in turn meant women felt safer and more comfortable. It is easy to underestimate the importance of such shifts, but one woman described this as getting her life back and others that they felt able to move forward in life ..."

Through merging the perspectives of all interviewed, the authors concluded that "Success', then, means far more than just 'ending the violence'. It would be quite possible for the physical violence to stop but at the same time for women and children to continue to live in unhealthy atmospheres which are laden with tension and threat. Instead, we propose this more nuanced understanding of success in which the more subtle, though ultimately life enhancing, changes are recognised."

There are a number of other informative resources and inspiring innovations outlined on the Respect website. For example, via the same URL listed previously, a briefing paper on the evidence of domestic violence perpetrator programs can be downloaded. While this paper omits a number of U.S. studies (most or all with significant methodological limitations, it must be noted) that cast doubt on the effectiveness of these programs, it outlines some U.K studies that point to more promising results. This briefing paper also mentions a current large U.K multi-site study into program effectiveness which is outlined in more detail in the research section of the website www.respect.uk.net/pages/evaluation-project.html. This section also contains some useful research and evaluation bits and pieces including an outcome assessment tool.

Rodney Vlasis
2010
