

NTV Notes' Research Corner - Typologies of Men Who Present to MBCPs

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As a practitioner who has seen hundreds of men do at least some part of a men's behaviour change program, I have sometimes wondered about whether it is useful to think about different 'types' of men who present at programs. Questions that I am curious about here include:

Are there some men who require a more intensive or even somewhat different approach than the 'standard intervention' (note the inverted commas!), and could there be a way of predicting who these might be at assessment?

Although there are understandable and important critiques of the concepts of personality disorders, do those men who score relatively highly on particular personality disorder traits require somewhat of a variation to the 'standard treatment approach'?

How might our work be different for those men who have a history of significant use of violence outside the family context, in addition to within intimate partner and family settings?

Although men's use of family violence is a chosen tactic to maintain gender-based power, privilege and entitlements, do some men use violence in a less emotional, more 'cool' instrumental way than others?

Similar sorts of questions have led some U.S. researchers to investigate the construction of categories or types of men who present to batterer intervention programs. This research, based largely on court-mandated men who have been referred to a program as part of their probation conditions following criminal prosecution, has come up with three or four main categories that have been debated over the past fifteen or so years.

Some of the most recently published articles on this typology are referenced at the end of this column (Fowler & Westen, 2011; Huss & Ralston, 2008; Panchanadeswaran et al, 2010; Stoops et al, 2010). The following excerpts from Fowler and Westen (2011)'s article provides a typical example of how this typology is described:

"Subtype 1: Psychopathic Partner-Violent Men ... tend to use violence instrumentally, possibly to dominate their spouse. They tend to be generally violent, with a history of assaultive behavior across relationships that begins in childhood ... We chose to call this group psychopathic because of the features this group has in common with psychopathic personality as described by Cleckley (1941), such as impulsivity, remorselessness, and a lack of empathy." (p 627).

"Subtype 2: Hostile/Controlling Partner-Violent Men ... are angry and controlling and seem to have a "hair-trigger" propensity for rage ... They are suspicious, hypersensitive to perceived criticism, and tend to hold grudges. They tend to externalizing blame, and view themselves as misunderstood. These characteristics appear to alienate others, leaving them with few

friends. As a result, their spouse is likely to be one of the few individuals with whom they have a relationship and may be a frequent scapegoat for the problems they experience in other areas of life.” (p 629)

“Subtype 3: Borderline/Dependent Partner-Violent Men ... are unhappy, depressed, and prone to emotions that spiral out of control ... Whereas feelings of depression, particularly anxiety, might serve as a protective factor for men who more closely resemble the psychopathic subgroup prototype (by putting the “brakes” on impulsive violence), negative affect appears to be a clear risk factor for borderline/dependent partner-violent men. These men are likely very dependent on their partners to soothe their feelings of failure, anxiety, and emptiness. However, they also suffer from deep fears of abandonment and tend to lash out at the person they love and need the most. These men may tend to catastrophize, and when strong emotions are stirred up they may ‘lose control’ [inverted commas inserted] and become violent. They may engage in partner violence when feeling their lowest, creating a spiral in which they feel “bad,” unworthy of love, and abusive, fueling their fears of abandonment.” (p 630)

While this and similar typologies can appear to make clinical sense in some contexts, research has not (or at least not yet) consistently demonstrated typologies such as these to be useful in predicting treatment outcomes (Panchanadeswaran et al, 2010; Jones et al, 2010). Given this, the jury is still out about the applicability of personality-based typologies to clinical practice with men who use family violence. Research on the usefulness of these types of personality-based typologies is likely to continue for some years to come.

In the remainder of this column I'd like to draw attention to a different approach which focuses on complex behavioural patterns over time, to determine if there are different types of trajectories by which men, through and after participating in a program, come to reduce, relapse or increase their use of particular types of violence. This study (Jones et al, 2010) comes from Ed Gondolf's research team and presents a compelling case of the need to incorporate a complex trajectory analysis of violent and controlling behaviours in long-term outcome research assessing the effectiveness of batterer intervention programs / MBCPs.

Rather than relying solely on statistics referring to re-assaults and re-arrests, this study focused on multiple and complex indicators of violence and abusive tactics. The researchers cited studies which provide support for the recommendation that “evaluation of DV offender programs be based on outcomes that reflect the full constellation of violent or coercive behaviors that are manifested, often simultaneously, over time.” (p 6) Specifically, the study focused on perpetrators' behaviours across four domains: physical violence, controlling behavior, threatening behavior, and/or verbal–emotional abuse. Data was drawn from Gondolf's major multi-site evaluation of batterer intervention programs across four locations, using partner interviews as the major source, at three-month intervals.

The results are complex, but are perhaps best summarised in the following passage from the article:

“Four states characterized by distinct and complex patterns of abusive behavior were identified along with transition probabilities for those states. The state characterized by the least amount of violence has very high prevalence in each time period (between 50% and

60% of all offenders) and is relatively stable with a relatively high probability ($p = .77$) of remaining in it in any given time period rather than transitioning to a more severe state.

The most severe state has the lowest prevalence, with 10% or less of all offenders in it at any given duration, and it is also relatively stable ($p = .44$) although less so than the least severe state. Transitions out of the most severe state are always to the second most severe state ($p = .56$), which is characterized by a high probability of physical violence and controlling behavior.

The two intermediate states appear to be highly unstable, with very low probabilities of staying in these states from one time point to another ($p = .11$ in both cases). Estimated transition probabilities indicate that offenders who fall into one of the intermediate states in any given time period are highly likely to move out of it in the next. It is interesting that the second most severe state (State 2) never transition to the most severe state ($p = .00$) and is most likely to transition into the least severe state ($p = .56$), whereas the second least severe state (State 3) has a high probability of transitioning into the second most severe state ($p = .61$) and is the only state that is likely to transition into the most severe state ($p = .21$).” (p13)

While the results are based on only one (albeit very large and multi-site) U.S. study, they are intriguing for men’s behaviour change practitioners in our focus on trajectories across a wide range of facets of family violence over time. Although further studies of this ilk are required, the potential implications for risk management are significant.

The researchers concluded that “The results also have important implications for program evaluation, particularly interventions aimed at DV offenders, and for evidence-based practice generally. Realized patterns of abusive behavior are clearly more complex and dynamic than those currently used in evaluating program effectiveness. Consequently, current “evidence-based practice,” derived from evaluations that use simplistic dichotomous or cumulative physical violence outcomes instead of the entire constellation of abusive behaviors, may fail to capture accurately program effectiveness. In addition, complex, dynamic models may provide information that improves interventions. For example, at present offenders with more severe violent behavior patterns and trajectories that are unresponsive to intervention are included in programs with offenders who are highly likely to respond to intervention.” (p 14)

Further, the researchers concluded that “the results also suggest that DV offender profiles or typologies may need to be conceptualized as “states” that can change over time, rather than as static “traits” or dispositional characteristics. (p 14)

Remember that you can obtain free, electronic copies of any of the articles mentioned here – or of any other articles related to family violence – by emailing the Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse on clearinghouse@unsw.edu.au. They will be more than happy to email you a PDF copy, as increasing accessibility to relevant research literature for family violence practitioners is part of their core business.

References:

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