

Desisting from Domestic Abuse: Influences, Patterns and Processes in the Lives of Formerly Abusive Men

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Abstract: This article argues that domestic violence perpetrator programmes in the UK have paid insufficient attention to how perpetrators actually desist from abusive behaviour in the long term. It draws on evidence from a 2010 study which investigated how a sample of men accomplished desistance from abusive behaviour. It reveals that even men committed to desistance may require programmes to support them over a period of several years, and confirms that desistance is best understood as a process and not an outcome. The article concludes that these men's experiences underline the need for interventions to be substantially more desistance-focused than they are at present.

Keywords: domestic violence; domestic abuse; domestic violence perpetrator; perpetrator programmes; desistance; desistance-focused intervention; behaviour change

The most comprehensive investigation conducted thus far into the outcomes of men's domestic violence perpetrator programmes (Gondolf 2002), followed 840 male participants and their partners over a four-year period (a substantially longer time frame than other evaluations). While Gondolf's study focused on whether men's violent behaviour stopped or decreased as a consequence of programme participation, it shed little light on the wider dynamics in men's lives which impacted positively or negatively on their behaviour and capacity to change. While several studies have considered what men have actually learned in programmes (Dobash *et al.* 1996; Bowen, Gilchrist and Beech 2005), little attention has been paid to the wider context of their lives and the 'journeys' by which men desist from violent or abusive behaviour once formal completion of the programme has been achieved.

The effectiveness of perpetrator programmes remains contentious. Researchers have, nevertheless, often concurred in being sceptical about

the extent to which one particular source of evidence, perpetrators' own accounts of behaviour and attitude change, can be considered reliable. By contrast, the observations of men's partners, it has been argued, provide a more 'accurate' picture of whether, or how, men have changed as a consequence of participating in programmes (Dutton and Hemphill 1992; Dobash and Dobash 1998). Indeed, some have suggested that men's testimonies of positive personal change may even constitute ongoing tactics of abuse, characterised as they seem to be, by denial, minimisation and self-justification (Cavanagh *et al.* 2001).

Caution is necessary when listening to men who have been abusive (and deceitful) in the past. They may have a self-interest in presenting themselves as 'reformed', and a tendency to portray themselves in a more favourable light than is justified. However, while men's accounts may sometimes, indeed, be evasive, if these are simply dismissed as innately spurious or misleading, opportunities will also be missed in understanding how men actually make sense to themselves and others of why they have behaved abusively in the past, and of how they think, feel and act in the present. Moreover, important information may be lost as to why, and how, those men who *are* engaging in genuine processes of personal change do so, and what helps motivate and sustain them. Through listening to men's narratives it may also be possible to discern, not merely their deficits but their strengths, and crucially, learn more about what men need, not simply to desist from negative, harmful behaviour, but to live more positive lives which sustain personal change and growth.

By paying increased attention to men's perceptions, the potential is established for interventions with abusive men to be more personalised, compared with the somewhat standardised 'Duluth model' programmes which have largely prevailed in the UK thus far (Bowen 2011). This model utilises a feminist perspective on men's violence against women. The core ethos of such 'pro-feminist cognitive behavioural' programmes (Gadd 2004), focuses on men's skills deficits, but primarily 'educate(s) and challenge(s) men regarding . . . sexist expectations and controlling behaviour' (Stordeur and Stille 1989, p.32). In brief, the Duluth model programme regards men's violence and oppression largely as a consequence of patriarchal conditioning. It is not greatly concerned with men's underlying issues; indeed, its protagonists are, arguably, at loggerheads with those (particularly in the USA) who advocate the need for more therapeutic interventions with men (see, for example, Wallace and Nosko (2003); Dutton and Sonkin (2003)).

Increasingly, a number of practitioners and researchers have argued that the questionable effectiveness of Duluth model programmes may be a consequence of failing to engage meaningfully with men by discounting the complexities of their lives (Milner 2004; Lehmann and Simmons 2009), dismissing the meaning that violence holds for men themselves (Gadd 2004) and, as with offender programmes more generally, overlooking the wider social contexts of people's lives (Farrall 2002; McCulloch 2005).

The Study

Previous research exploring the experiences of criminal justice social workers delivering perpetrator programmes in Scotland (Morran 2006), concluded that many programme participants had only minimally absorbed elements of the programme by the time they had completed court orders requiring them to attend. They frequently lived in communities where few, if any, networks existed to support them in implementing even the more basic lessons from programmes. It was also apparent that many faced substantial personal and social problems, which, while they did not excuse their responsibility for their violence, certainly impacted upon their ability to sustain behaviour conducive to personal stability, responsibility and personal change.

Consequently, the present study focused on what processes and experiences might be involved for men who had completed programmes, acknowledged their violence and abuse, and could be described as ‘non-violent’. Interviews were conducted with eleven men who had ‘voluntarily’ attended and ‘successfully completed’ one of two UK domestic violence perpetrator programmes, one in the north of England and one in the south. They ranged in age from 37 to 59 years, most being in their 30s and early 40s. One man was of Afro-Caribbean origin, the rest were white. Nine were in employment and all described themselves as ‘working class’. All had children to present or previous partners; two currently lived alone. The men had completed programmes between two and seven years previously; five years being the average period since ‘completion’.

The aim of the study was to speak to men ‘who have attended programmes . . . and have made substantial changes to their behaviour, namely that they can be described as non-violent’ (taken from the letter which was sent to agencies, seeking access and stating the purpose of the research). Sources of supportive evidence included worker knowledge of the men, recent or ongoing contact with men’s partners by an agency representative, or direct contact with partners (if appropriate). Participants were recommended by key programme personnel as ‘a successful completer’ of the programme. In addition to the eleven men interviewed, I spoke directly to four women partners, three by telephone. However the data analysed here draw almost entirely on the accounts provided by the men themselves. It is also important to acknowledge that the findings of the study are limited, inasmuch as they concentrate on a small sample of men who have ‘successfully completed’ perpetrator programmes, and given the absence of comparable accounts by non-completers, cannot be generalised to draw conclusions about the effectiveness of perpetrator programmes *per se*.

The study was influenced both by wider theoretical and research literature on recovery/desistance from alcohol and substance misuse (for example, O’Reilly 1997) and on desistance from offending more generally. I wished to explore how the development of personal maturity (Jamieson, McIvor and Murray 1999), responsibility or ‘agency’ (Sampson and Laub 1993), consequent or associated changes in social bonds and networks

(Biernacki 1986; Farrall 2002), and the narratives by which ‘offenders’ made sense of past and present behaviour (Maruna 2001), applied to men who had perpetrated violence and abuse in the past.

I was specifically interested in what these men’s experiences had been of attending a programme, of the techniques and concepts they had found useful, of what they had learned about themselves, and why they believed they had been violent or abusive. I wanted to explore what other problems men had faced in their lives, and whether they considered that these had played some part in their violence and abuse. I was interested in the personal and social context of men’s lives, how they defined personal priorities previously and presently, about networks and supports available to them, and of how they dealt with everyday experiences and challenges.

What Men Thought was at the Root of their Violence

The men had attended perpetrator programme(s) which adhered broadly to a feminist perspective on the nature and purpose of violence and abusive behaviour, namely that men receive socially-endorsed messages as to their entitlement to control and chastise women. I was aware, though, that programme workers here, as elsewhere (for example, Macrae and Andrew 2000; Rees and Rivett 2005), researchers (for example, Holtzworth-Munroe and Stuart 1994; Gondolf 2002; Bowen, Gilchrist and Beech 2005) and other informed commentators (for example, Gadd 2002, 2003; Fisher 2011), had acknowledged that such men often experienced other problems which might manifest themselves in behaviour harmful to themselves and/or their partners and families. It was crucial, therefore, to ask those in this sample what they themselves thought lay at the root of their violence.

All referred to the influence of powerful patriarchal attitudes and beliefs which they had absorbed, or been subjected to, when growing up, and of the part these played in terms of learning ‘how to be a man’, of this being ‘the way things were’. The significance of violence being a currency to resolve problems or enacted to achieve ‘masculinity’ (for example, Newburn and Stanko 1994; Collier 1998), seemed evident in many of their lives. Unquestioning attitudes such as these, often extended (Dobash and Dobash 1979; Bancroft and Silverman 2002) into expectations which they brought into their relationships with partners.

Experiencing ‘anger’, or ‘anger and resentment’ was specifically referred to by ten men. However, it was difficult not to interpret anger as the presenting emotion arising from other troubles in their lives (see, for example, Real 1997). Referring to himself as a ‘walking time-bomb in the past’, Derek¹ seemed to be experiencing grief when he spoke of being undervalued by his parents, and a loss of purpose when he ‘agreed’ to come out of the Army – which ‘had meant everything’ to him. Unfeeling parents and childhoods characterised by abuse, emotional coldness and cruelty, featured consistently in several of these men’s recollections. Alan

struggled to make sense of the anger he continued to feel, mostly in his workplace, although he now recognised that he could ‘exercise choice’ as to how he behaved when angry, and could ‘defuse situations, before they get out of hand’.

What emerged consistently in the men’s reflections was the extent to which they acknowledged that their behaviour had been underpinned by a ‘need’ to control their partners. While coercive control of partners is a widely-recognised phenomenon in the literature on domestic violence (for example, Pence and Paymar 1993; Stark 2007), it seemed important to explore what this ‘need’ meant for these men themselves, and the function it served in their lives.

As with anger, it was evident that some men still grappled with why the need for control seemed so important. For some, it seemed sufficient simply to recognise this as an ongoing issue in their lives, be alert to its recurring presence, and have a series of tools and supports to draw on when necessary. They relied heavily on ‘interruptive techniques’, such as taking a ‘time out’ from situations where they may become aggressive, which Gondolf (2002) noted, was often the principal learning achieved by men on programmes. In terms of the desistance process, these men appeared to be negotiating what Maruna (2001) has termed ‘primary desistance’, that is, a gap or lull in their pattern of abuse (even of several years in some cases), but were still very much engaged in work-in-progress as far as ‘secondary desistance’, the ‘assumption of the role or identity of a “changed person”’ (McNeill and Maruna 2007, p.226) was concerned.

Over half the sample reflected upon their experiences as children where ‘witnessing abuse, being shamed as a child and experiencing either cruelty or unpredictable emotional availability’ – the basis of what Dutton (1998, p.viii) has termed ‘the abusive personality’ – came through consistently. Low self-worth, indeed self-loathing, was frequently a significant factor in their sense of themselves as men.

Terms like ‘being scared of my own feelings’ and ‘insecurity’ characterised the narratives men employed to make sense of their past abusive behaviour. The controlling of others (exacerbated by assumed social expectations as to a gendered sense of entitlement) (for example, Connell 1987, p.183), seemed to offset a sense of fear, vulnerability and inadequacy in their own lives, a point recurrently made by practitioners and commentators in the field of perpetrator work (see, for example, Wolf-Light 2009; Macrae and Andrew 2000; Wallace and Nosko 2003; Dutton and Sonkin 2003):

I think that my violence . . . sustained an inflated version of myself. Otherwise I would feel worthless . . . where I’m rotten to the core, you know, [the programme] enabled me to look at what I was doing and my behaviour and say ‘yeah, this needs to change’, . . . (and enabled) . . . me to look at other areas in . . . life which are functioning okay as a basis for self esteem, which is something I felt I never had, I felt rotten to the core, deep down that’s what I felt. Does that make sense? (Andrew: eight years after commencing a programme)

Learning about Oneself

All the men had learned more about themselves *as men* through participating in the programmes. As commentators on masculinities have noted (for example, Busfield 1996; Pease 2001), and as these men confirmed, a significant area of learning was that they had been closed off to their internal lives and had struggled to realise that they were human beings with feelings. Many seemed to have been a mystery to themselves before entering the programmes. Mark 'felt that everyone else was to blame for his problems', and that he wasn't aware of how his emotions impacted upon his behaviour. A turning point for him had involved the development of a sense of personal 'agency' – that is, becoming more active in taking responsibility for (his) life (see, for example, Maruna 2001) when he 'stopped looking at *situations*, and started looking at *me* and discovered who I am'.

This recognition and need to engage with feelings and their consequences constituted for all the men an ongoing, daily activity, in which potential stressors had to be monitored, new skills constantly applied and old beliefs and fears addressed. Its application took various forms, depended on how men thought and spoke about themselves and possibly reflected concepts used in the different programmes. Mick, Alan and Derek, who saw their problem as 'anger' (which was enacted in areas of their lives other than their relationships with partners) spoke instrumentally about 'keeping on top of feelings', keeping their 'toe dipped in', or 'coming back for a top-up'.

For Mark, Andrew and Robert this need to remain consistently focused on their daily routines meant that they now practised living 'transformed lives'. Each had studied relevant literature, attended counselling at some point in addition to a men's programme, and had, to varying degrees, absorbed some of the language and concepts of therapy. They seemed committed to understanding themselves more fully and to questioning in depth what had underpinned their desire for control and 'order' in the past. Each had undertaken counselling training, and was either volunteering or working in the programme which they had previously attended. The decision to live as a 'changed person' (McNeill and Maruna 2007) seemed evident, and was reflected in their attempts to develop or nurture an 'internal locus of control', whereas in the past each had been preoccupied with the controlling of others.

Yet even these three men discussed constantly needing to be aware of their emotions, and of spaces or situations in which they felt 'threatened' or 'vulnerable'. For them, as with everyone in the sample, negotiating the present meant navigating new emotionally-packed, territory, recognising that every day presented challenges to a recently-acquired, sometimes uncertain, equilibrium. While it is not being suggested here that the violent, abusive behaviour formerly enacted by the men in this sample could be compared to an addictive behaviour, there are consistent similarities between the strategies adopted to sustain 'recovery' from substance abuse (for example, Fagan 1989; Yates and Malloch 2010) and the constant

attention and self-nurturing required to maintain 'secondary desistance'. As McNeill and Maruna (2007) have argued: 'desistance should not be seen so much as an ongoing event or state, but rather as . . . an ongoing work in progress, . . . the going is the thing' (p.225):

I've had an instance today of my sons, I get it all the time. I've got twin boys and they misbehave, they push the boundaries and so the worst it gets these days is that I get verbally abusive. But if I can stay connected with that care for them then I'm not going to hit them. . . . It's a recognition of how inconsistent I can be, and . . . trying to stay above myself . . . to be objectively, consciously aware of how I am, that's important to me because I've still got the potential to be abusive, and fortunately or unfortunately the worst it gets these days is verbal, but I'm working on that . . . I don't like that, but the primary goal has certainly been achieved, I mean, I don't see myself as a threat to women and children any more. (Mark: three years after commencing a programme)

Continuing Contact with the Programme/Agency

I explored what else kept men 'going'. An earlier study (Morran 2006) noted the scarcity of resources or post-programme support networks for men. How had they sustained themselves or found support once they 'completed' their programme curriculum? From their answers, it was apparent that for all of them, programme contact remained ongoing. All had been in touch with programme agencies on a fairly regular basis over the years. None felt that they had actually finished the programme as such. As Mick succinctly put it: 'I'm a lifer here!'. Again, similarities with findings from research on recovery from substance misuse are apparent (for example, Best 2010).

Remaining in contact served various purposes. As has been suggested, some men seemed to be in different stages along a continuum of 'primary and secondary desistance'. For Richard and Alan, for example, the question of when they 'finished' seemed almost superfluous. Both had come along regularly, for over two years and five years respectively. Richard struggled with pressures in his life, apparently related to stresses at work which 'spill over to arguments at home'. Aware of the pain he had 'put [his] partner through', he seemed committed to doing something about his behaviour, but appeared to be on something of a 'white-knuckle ride' as far as keeping on top of the 'anger' he felt.

Alan had 'never really stopped coming' and was going in for a 'top up' on the day he was interviewed. Several others spoke of the value of coming back periodically, of the importance of the group experience, of listening to others. Both programmes ran an open-group policy. Charlie, Derek and Roy, who had attended over long periods of time, had been encouraged to remain involved because they were seen as having 'got it'. They served as models for other men, an experience which each found gratifying and worthwhile.

The men expressed loyalty to their programme and programme workers, a factor known to be important in enhancing commitment to

desistance (Burnett and McNeill 2005; Farrall 2002; McNeill 2009; Rex 1999; Trotter 1999, 2000). Programme staff fulfilled an important function as a source of support in men's lives. Seven years after beginning a programme, Tony still felt 'scared to go back into the world' and was a regular presence around the office, checking things out with the project worker (whom, according to his partner, 'he idolises'). He comes back when he feels 'in over my head at times', had recently sought assurances that he handled a dispute with his neighbour appropriately, and on another occasion, whether he was 'being a good enough father'. His experiences of his own father were, apparently, extremely negative.

Developing New Interests

Men referred to other processes which seemed important in keeping them committed to maintaining changes they had made; these included attending a gym, joining a band, or in one example, switching from attending football matches to rugby league matches, because of past involvement in football hooliganism.

Several had made conscious efforts in their lives to shift from functional work to engage in employment which allowed them to engage with and connect with other people in a more caring capacity, and, arguably, reflected a desire to invest in developing a changing male identity (Hearn 1987). Five were involved in counselling or voluntary activities, and Alan, a former construction worker, now taught building skills to people with learning difficulties:

I worked in the building industry . . . it's a very rough and ready industry . . . very sarcastic . . . the name calling and swearing . . . I started to look at my job and the behaviour of people in and around my job and everyone was behaving, . . . as bad as me (laughs). I got very frustrated. Somebody suggested that perhaps I should look elsewhere . . . I've always enjoyed the thought of caring for people, . . . and then the job came up in the day centre which is where I am now. I've got my building industry background so I can continue to use it but I'm also working in the care industry, helping people who need help . . . so I get the best of both worlds. (Alan: commenced a programme five years previously; still attends regularly)

'Giving Something Back'

The importance of generativity, of 'giving something back' to others, has been observed in desistance research more generally (Maruna 2001; McNeill and Maruna 2007), and similarly in research on recovery from drug or alcohol misuse (for example, Yates and Malloch 2010). Such a desire was expressed by the majority of this sample. Being supportive to men new to groups by 'being there' and 'encouraging them' was important. For two men who also attended Alcoholics Anonymous, giving back meant sharing one's story, finding time to engage with others, and pursuing a more worthwhile, fulfilling life. Robert who 'left . . . [his] drinking

pals behind long ago’, wanted to live a more spiritual life which involved ‘making time for and helping others’.

Mark saw his development as a ‘caring, thoughtful human being, partner and father’ not just a way of making amends but also about acknowledging and respecting the trajectory of change which had brought him to a place of some contentment in his life. Andrew, who ‘felt a huge sense of loss when he left the programme’ had undergone groupwork training, carried out facilitation in the programme he had previously attended, worked daily with young people, and stressed self-care as a way of valuing his still recently-discovered sense of ease with himself.

The ability to develop and undertake such redemptive interests and activities seemed an important, possibly even essential, activity in terms of these men committing to a new, more positive, identity which contrasted with a negative past self.

Priorities

I explored with the men how their lives differed from before, whether their activities, interests and priorities had changed, and if so, what seemed to be significant for them. A common refrain running through men’s reflections on the priorities in their lives, ‘then’ and ‘now’, was that previously they had primarily been preoccupied with meeting their own needs, without giving much, if any, consideration to their partners, or other people generally – a disdain for the world in general was evident as the following exchange illustrates:

Alan: The programme . . . also taught me the . . . biggest word . . . that I didn’t even know before I came to [programme] and that is . . . ‘empathy’. I didn’t know . . . never heard of the word and I certainly didn’t know what it meant.

Interviewer: So you had no idea how other people might feel . . . ?

Alan: No.

Interviewer: Couldn’t put yourself in other people’s shoes?

Alan: Didn’t know how other people saw me.

(Alan: Commenced programme five years previously; still attends regularly for a ‘top-up’)

Maturity

To varying extents these men saw themselves as having changed, of having developed a greater understanding of themselves and of looking back on the people they were before as being somehow reduced compared with how they were now. The development of personal maturity, that is, the extent to which, or processes *by* which, someone develops new responsibilities or ideas about how one should behave and which enhances or reinforces the desistance process, recurs, of course, within relevant literature and research (for example, Sampson and Laub 1993; Maruna 2001).

The men in this sample, however, were mostly in their thirties and forties, married or in relationships, had children and/or step-children and (noticeably) mostly held down jobs. In short, they had been preoccupied with conforming to a ‘traditional’ set of masculine identities at home and work (Willis 1977; Morgan 2001), which superficially appeared robust, but in reality was characterised by ambiguity and anxiety (Brittan 1989; Pleck 1995).

They spoke of having lived out prescribed, unquestioned scripts of how they should think, and act as men; unemotional, indeed wary of emotions, continuously alert to challenges, from partners, but also from other men, to what they perceived as their authority, and were unthinking and unfeeling about the effects of their violent or controlling behaviour over their partners. The process of maturation thus represented an awakening of knowledge of self, but specifically involved a rejection of some of the sexist, aggressive, boorish behaviour which they had previously either embraced or gone along with. Maturation involved a process of reflecting upon previously unquestioned ways of thinking and acting *as a man*:

I don't keep any of the same company to be truthful with you, don't hang round any of the lads I used . . . plus, don't get me wrong, you know, . . . I'll be honest, I think what it's [the programme] made is a *man*, but a *proper man* which may sound a bit dramatic, you know, but I'm a man now with a heart, I'm a man with feelings and concerned for other people's feelings. That's what it's made me . . . (Tony: commenced programme seven years previously; still comes around occasionally)

Desistance Processes and the Appropriateness of Current Approaches/Programmes

As can be seen, therefore, the processes by which these men ‘desist’ from violent and abusive behaviour requires continual attention to self-monitoring and regulation, a developing sense of self-awareness, the availability of opportunities, as well as a desire for engagement in alternative activities, priorities and networks, and crucially, the ability to seek and receive support and guidance to sustain the desisting process. In this respect, the processes through which those in this (admittedly small) sample negotiate or navigate their desistance journeys are similar to those undertaken both by desisting property or ‘street’ offenders, as well as those involved in overcoming addictive behaviours (Maruna 2001, p.34).

One conclusion to be drawn from these accounts is that if men who are violent and abusive are to be engaged with meaningfully, and interventions are to be desistance-focused, there needs to be a reassessment of current interventions which have largely prevailed in the UK thus far, and greater consideration given to what might need to support men in negotiating the desistance journey.

Several men in this study acknowledged their ‘need’ to control both other people and situations in which they find themselves. While some struggled to understand why this need was so overpowering, it may be that interventions ought to engage more with deeper psychological and

emotional issues than they do at present. While ‘patriarchy’ might entitle and endorse men’s use of violence and abuse, and while ‘power and control’ interventions might apply to a proportion of domestic violence offenders (see, for example, Young *et al.* 2005), there is also a compelling body of research and practice evidence which attests to the fact that interventions must address the ‘lived experiences of men’s lives’. The lived experiences of this present sample suggest that interventions may need to consider issues of disrupted attachment – resulting in a consequent fear of abandonment and consequent need to control (Dutton and Sonkin 2003), experiences of childhood trauma (Dutton 1998) and the presence of alcohol or substance misuse in men’s lives (Bowen 2011). It might also be useful, if men’s motivation and engagement is to be enhanced, to acknowledge what Gadd (2004) has termed: ‘the uniqueness many programme attendees associate with their “problems”; the mixture of love, envy and vulnerability that violent men often implicate in their behaviour’ (p.18).

To date, the majority of perpetrator programmes have encountered difficulty in addressing either the complexity or uniqueness of the men who come before them. They have also been dogged by the ideological and managerial climate in which they have been developed. Within the probation service, for example, ‘accredited’ programmes were established throughout the last decade to address a range of criminalised or problematic behaviours (Mair 2004). The original version of the Integrated Domestic Abuse Programme (IDAP), accredited by the Home Office in 2003, was criticised (not least by many practitioners involved in programme delivery) for adopting a somewhat inflexible and simplistic approach to the way practice with perpetrators was carried out, while paying less attention to how the complexities of personal change among domestic violence offenders should be understood (Gadd 2004; Bowen 2011; Morran 2011).

Fortunately a number of these criticisms recently appear to have been heeded by those involved in an internal re-evaluation of the IDAP, and continuing revisions to the model seem to pay substantially more attention than before to approaches aimed at recognising heterogeneity among perpetrators, and of motivating programme participants by incorporating more strengths-based and desistance-focused practices, which, as Farrall (2002) has observed, must pay attention to a desisting future and not merely an offending past.

As McNeill has asserted in reflecting on a ‘desistance paradigm’ for probation practice, ‘what works’ approaches ‘begin in the wrong place, . . . they begin by thinking about how *practice* (whether “treatment”, “help”, or “programme”), should be constructed without first thinking about how *change* should be understood’ (McNeill 2006, p.45, italics in original). There is a compelling argument, therefore, that those engaged in the further development, delivery, refinement and evaluation of perpetrator programmes, whether in the statutory (or indeed the voluntary) sector should pay more attention than has often been the case, to those processes which seem to characterise behaviour change, and acknowledge the complexities of the desistance process. This must include

attention, not only to the individual, but also to the social context of the perpetrator's world.

This is a demanding task. Those who deliver interventions with violent and abusive men must rightly be concerned with the safety of victims/partners. They need to acknowledge the fact that any meaningful processes of change which perpetrators accomplish (which may take considerable time), have to be weighed against the everyday consequences for men's partners and children. Currently, programmes for perpetrators (in both statutory and non-statutory settings) generally adhere to a minimum length of approximately 26 sessions, usually supported by ongoing 'case management' or supervision. There is an undercurrent of unease, however, (expressed anecdotally by many practitioners) that management in some Probation Trusts has drastically reduced the time frames in which contact occurs in order to accommodate matters of costs and resources (personal communications received by the author).

It is suggested here that if the interventions and practices with men who perpetrate abuse are to be meaningful (and thus, arguably, more effective) they may need to be reconfigured in such a way that they are more readily available to men than current provision allows or encourages. The desisting men in this study all drew on the support of their programme workers or, indeed, the programme itself over a period of many years. Some continued to live lives characterised by doubt, vulnerability, and the fear of a return to a negative, troubled and harmful self. If provision for men is to continue to progress it will benefit from being open to a developing body of theory and research as to the various roots of violence, and to the emerging trends in constructive, strengths-based practices (for example, Gorman *et al.* 2006; Ward, Mann and Gannon 2007; Lehmann and Simmons 2009). Moreover, it might usefully take account of the fact that provision should be available at those times in people's lives when, as is inevitable, problems and challenges recur. Much of the evaluative literature concerning perpetrator programmes has been concerned thus far with 'outcomes'. It is time for greater attention to be paid to process, and, indeed, to understanding the person who desists as someone involved in continual 'work in progress'.

Note

1 To preserve the anonymity of the participants their names have been changed throughout.

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