

Building Better Relationships? The Need for Quality Over Quantity in Statutory Domestic Violence Perpetrator Programmes

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Introduction

Building Better Relationships (BBR) is a cognitive-behavioural, domestic violence perpetrator programme (DVPP) for men who have been convicted of a domestic violence in England and Wales. This programme is delivered by teams located within private Community Rehabilitation Companies. In 2018, HM Inspectorate for Probation (HMIP) undertook a thematic inspection to assess domestic abuse work undertaken within these establishments. The report concluded that too few men were undertaking BBR and the practice of protecting victims and children was 'poor' (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2018). A joint action plan was agreed in November 2018 which recommended (i) increasing the number of men referred to BBR (ii) developing a robust design to evaluate the effectiveness of BBR and (iii) ensure Women's Safety Workers had sufficient time to effectively support victims (HMPPS/MoJ, 2018).



(ONS, 2018)

Aims and Research Questions

Whilst it is vital that all perpetrators are held to account, it is also important to understand why so few men complete BBR and whether the programme is working for those who do. Increasing referrals is only likely to increase the burden on staff. And outcome evaluations that rely solely on recidivism as an indicator of programme effectiveness ignores the context of delivery, facilitator skill, programmatic content and individual differences in how men did, or did not, respond. Understanding how and why DVPPs apparently work for some men, some of the time, and not for others, is an important question which informed and underpinned my research design and question. I wanted to know how do

facilitator skill, programme philosophy and individual receptivity come together to produce programme integrity? What are the experiences of facilitators who deliver BBR and how does it impact on them personally? What are men's experiences of attending BBR and has it helped them to 'Build Better Relationships'?

Methods

In September 2018, I began a five-month period of fieldwork within a Community Rehabilitation Company where BBR was delivered. I conducted qualitative interviews with facilitators, Partner Link Workers, the Practice Manager and domestically violent men who attended the programme. These consisted both of men who completed the programme and those who dropped out. I used the Free Association Narrative Interview Method developed by Hollway and Jefferson (2000) which invites participants to tell their stories with minimum facilitation.

Interviews: Facilitator Skills and Well-being

Since the part-privatisation, facilitators said that they now undertook BBR training within the first six months of their employment and were expected to deliver this as soon as they were trained. Many said they didn't feel ready and were not allowed time to develop their skills. Additionally, facilitators were now expected to take on one-to-one offender work purchased by the National Probation Service which put increasing pressure on their schedule. Many felt they were working with men on a 'conveyor belt' that compromised quality of over quantity in their work. These pressures had recently led to experienced staff leaving the profession with others planning to follow suit. Facilitators also felt undervalued and received no financial incentive to stay. Those deemed to be more experienced said they felt overwhelmed as they were expected to facilitate too many BBR programmes. One facilitator expressed the personal impact this had on them:

"...I think I'd been drafted in very last minute... There was catch-ups, there was no time to prep. I'd not done BBR for months and months and it was still a programme I wasn't confident in. My stress levels and the impact on my emotional wellbeing was absolutely shocking. I felt aw', I just felt awful. You just— I was stressed all the time, verge of tears all the time. There was— At one point I did cry. I did have a breakdown..."

Programme Content: Not 'user friendly'

Facilitators also pointed out that the BBR manual alone is over 400 pages long. They said there was not enough time in each two-hour session to complete all the points which often meant rushing or missing out important material such as 'time out' techniques which teach men to control their violence. Facilitators said the content was repetitive and examples were not relationship specific. The manual was often described as not 'user friendly' and consisted complex material that they did not fully comprehend. Less experienced facilitators said they delivered sessions they didn't understand and had little time to prepare or make them individually responsive to men. Even experienced staff found the material conceptually challenging and admitted that men did too:

"Um, the [Q tool] is probably one of the harder ones to deliver. Um, they [men] get quite confused by it. I get confused by it sometimes though do you know what I mean, so it's not just – it's not just them like? It – it can sometimes be a bit confusing, some of the stuff you do, but..."

Interviews: Partner Link Workers

The two PLWs were knowledgeable about the kind of support that women needed. They had also built good links with external organisations to ensure victims were signposted to the relevant support. Since the public/private 'split', however, they felt they had been unable to maintain these multi-agency relationships. The PLW resource had reduced to one full time and one three-day post whilst the geographical area to be covered had increased. At the same time, PLWs were expected to deliver offender programmes. This included non-accredited domestic abuse interventions which created a 'conflict' as they may also be working with the victim's partner. PLWs had tried to raise their concerns about working with offenders or covering reception when they should be devoting their time to supporting victims:

"Why are you not listening to us when we say you know? Pfft. But I just feel, at the minute, that that much focus is on programmes. Obviously it generates money, you know. I don't think I'm speaking out of turn there, cos it does. That generates a helluva lot of money for [CRC] and I think they're just thinking pounds signs and not actually putting the victims first"

Interviews with men: Eliciting Painful Memories

In BBR, men's treatment is individualised which means asking them about events in their lives that might have influenced their behaviour. After opening up about traumatic childhood experiences, men were then expected to 'own' their anger and any attempt to deflect responsibility was seen as incongruent with programme aims. This created defensiveness in one man who felt unheard and was 'stressed out' talking about 'all this shit from the past' that he would rather forget:

"...sitting here, talking about it, it hasn't done much to me like. I'd say it's made me more depressed tell you the truth" (Tim')

Another man was relieved at finally being able to talk about things he had 'bottled up' and said he felt 'a bit taller' every time he spoke to his Designated Facilitator. However, the end of the programme coincided with the break up of his relationship after he had been abusive. Left with no one to talk, he was 'scared' he would reoffend:

"I'm on a bit of a downer... because it's just like, pfft, right, last one...see ya later, bye, whoosh, and off they toddle. You know what I mean? It's like...Well, I'm left in, in, in world on me own now and what, what am I gonna do?"

Unfortunately, facilitators did not have the skills or qualifications to address the issues men raised, nor does BBR purport to do so.

Conclusion

This study found that there is much to be done before any increase in referrals can be considered. The well-being of practitioners, victims and the men attending BBR should be the starting point. A key message is that it is unethical to elicit painful stories from men if there is no intention, or skill, to address these once they are revealed. This requires urgent attention from programme developers, practitioners and policy makers.

References

- Hollway, W. & Jefferson, T. (2000) Doing Qualitative Research Differently
HMIP (2018). Domestic abuse: The work undertaken by Community Rehabilitation Companies (online)
HMPPS/MoJ (2018) Action plan: Domestic abuse thematic report (online) ONS (2018) Domestic abuse in England and Wales: year ending March 2018 (online)