

Seeking the Voice of Experience: The Complexities of Researching Women's Accounts of Their (Ex-) Partner's Engagement with Living Free from Violence Programmes

Stephanie C. Denne^I, Leigh Coombes^{II} & Mandy Morgan^{III}
S.Denne@massey.ac.nz, L.Coombes@massey.ac.nz, C.A.Morgan@massey.ac.nz
^{I,II,III} School of Psychology, Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand

Abstract

Previous research into the effectiveness and impact of domestic violence programmes has often focused on recidivism and re-offence data or self-report measures. Such research is constrained by a reliance on incidences of violence being officially reported and by legal definitions of intimate violence, limiting our understandings of women's lived experiences of safety. Missing voice research is problematic because of the tensions between research processes and the prioritisation of maintaining women's safety. To be able to engage in the process of researching women's experiences of their (ex) partners' engagement with men's Living Free from Violence programmes requires an understanding of the complexities of developing relationships and processes that privilege and protect women's safety throughout the research journey, and necessitates an understanding of the barriers to participation. This involves a collaborative and supportive working partnership to be formed and developed between the researcher and the community, one that at all times maintains the awareness that women's safety must be the focus of research, both in outcome and process. This paper discusses the complexities involved in our attempts to understand how women experience issues of change and safety as a result of their partner's involvement in a local Living Free from Violence programme.

Keywords: Intimate partner violence; community collaboration; safety; living free from violence programmes

Background to Domestic Violence and Stopping Violence Programmes

Despite New Zealand having some of the best policies in place to respond to domestic violence, we are still struggling under the weight of some of the worst reported outcomes (Contesse & Fenrich, 2008). With an estimated 1 in 3 New Zealand women having experienced domestic violence (Contesse & Fenrich, 2008), and 1 in 4 of our children witnessing acts of abuse in the home (Lievore, Mayhew, & Mossman, 2007), this is an area that still demands our urgent attention. Not only are the social and financial costs of great concern (Ministry of Justice, 2007), with economic costs conservatively estimated at 8 billion dollars per year (Contesse &

Fenrich, 2008), but domestic violence is a pressing human rights issue, one in which the state has an obligation to intervene (Contesse & Fenrich, 2008; Dobash, Dobash, Cavanagh, & Lewis, 1999). The effects of domestic violence reach far further than the physical scars, with the psychological costs posing too great a risk to the wellbeing of women and children to ignore. Many women suffer from both physical and mental health problems (such as depression and attempted suicide) related to domestic violence (Cascardi & O'Leary, 1992; Fanslow & Robinson, 2004). For our children, domestic violence has been linked to a range of psychological, emotional, behavioural and social concerns (Wolfe, Crooks, Lee, McIntyre-Smith, & Jaffe, 2003; Zinzow et al., 2009), with links to youth suicide (Fantuzzo & Mohr, 1999; Lievore et al., 2007) and the risk of repeating the cycle of violence themselves (Ministry of Social Development, 2002).

One approach to address domestic violence in the community is through the provision of stopping violence programmes. Early forms of such programmes (emerging in the 1970s) tended to be individualistic in nature, focussing solely on the male offender and cognitive behavioural interventions, such as anger management (Shepard & Pence, 1999). This individualistic approach has been criticised for ignoring the social, contextual and cultural elements of abuse, and in the 1980s the Duluth Domestic Abuse Intervention Program framework emerged. This incorporated family systems therapy and concepts of gendered power and control, alongside the cognitive-behavioural elements of programme provision (Pence & Paymar, 1993; Shepard & Pence, 1999). A shift from the sole focus on the cessation of violence, this framework attempts to elicit an awareness, education and unravelling of the underlying gendered culture of fear, intimidation and psychological abuse, locating domestic violence as a technology of coercion and control (Shepard & Pence, 1999). Furthermore, this approach allows a broadening of understandings of 'violence' from purely physical acts to processes of psychological abuse and technologies of control (Robertson, 1999).

Because attending a stopping violence programme is a strong factor for women returning to, or remaining with their partner (Contesse & Fenrich, 2008; Dobash et al., 1999; Gondolf, 1997; Walters, 2010), it is imperative to explore whether such interventions actually increase the safety and wellbeing for women and children. Unfortunately, such evaluation research is lacking (Ministry of Social Development, 2002; New Zealand's Parliamentarians' Group on Population and Development, 2005). The research on the effectiveness of stopping violence programmes that *has* been conducted, has produced mixed results, with some programmes reporting positive outcomes, while others finding minimal to no benefits through attendance (Gondolf, 1997; Shepard & Pence, 1999). While programmes that focus only on cognitive-behavioural elements have been criticised as being ineffective at addressing the social, contextual and political elements of domestic violence (Day, Chung, O'Leary, & Carson, 2009; Robertson, 1999), some argue that a focus on the gendered issues of power and control contribute little to programme effectiveness (Dutton & Corvo, 2007). Despite the mixed results, Dobash et al. (1999) report that involvement in stopping violence programmes increases the likelihood of success over the use of state sanctions alone. What is clear is that the benefits of intervention programmes are contentious, and much more research is needed to unpack the underlying debates and issues of if, how and why programmes may or may not enhance women's safety.

Programme evaluation is also plagued by the complex nature of domestic violence. Research has noted that psychological and verbal abuse is more frequent than physical abuse (Lievore et al., 2007), yet much of the recidivism data relies on reported acts of physical violence, in particular acts serious enough to attract the attention of police and other professional organisations (Shepard & Pence, 1999). This privileges physical forms of violence and silences the recurrence and experiences of psychological forms of abuse. Lievore et al. (2007) note that little is known about non-physical forms of domestic violence, and without this knowledge it is often unclear how we can best respond to abuse divorced from violent acts (Contesse & Fenrich, 2008). Furthermore, as mentioned previously, relying on incidences of physical violence provides a description of the more serious events (for example, male assaults female) and ignores the patterned and insidious elements of domestic violence and the relational context in which it occurs (Coombes, Morgan, Blake & McGray, 2009; Lievore et al., 2007). This is of concern as research suggests that whilst stopping violence pro-

grammes may be effective in reducing physical acts of violence, other abusive behaviour, such as psychological abuse or control / intimidation, may in fact *increase* as a result of participation (Towsey, 1996).

Evaluation research can also be affected by limitations of design. Domestic violence research is notoriously plagued by low response rates (Gondolf, 1997). This may be a reflection of the complex social arrangements of those affected by domestic violence, with many potential participants having moved away and unable to be located (Ellsberg, Heise, Peña, Agurto, & Winkvist, 2001). Furthermore, due to the sensitive and personal nature of domestic violence, it is not uncommon for those contacted to decline to participate (Coombes et al., 2009; Ellsberg et al., 2001; Morgan et al., 2007). This may introduce sampling bias, with those who are able to be contacted, who pass safety and risk assessments, and who agree to participate representing certain 'types' or groups of offenders and victims. This may over-exaggerate programme effectiveness and under-report recurrence of abuse over time. In addition, studies that utilise men's self-report measures as an indication of recidivism may underestimate the amount and nature of further violence (Gondolf, 1997; Lievore et al., 2007; Robertson, 1999). Furthermore, the inclusion of follow-up periods can skew research data. Often, due to research constraints, follow-up periods are short (Dobash et al., 1999; Gondolf, 1997), and it has been argued that shorter follow-up periods may over-estimate programme effectiveness (Feder & Wilson, 2005). The structure of programmes and referral processes studied is also important, with those who self-refer for programmes and who participate in group-style sessions showing more favourable results than those mandated to attend or involved in a one-to-one session structure (Walters, 2010).

The Need for New Directions in Evaluation Research

Because the effects and benefits of programmes are unclear and subject to debate, many community programme providers may struggle to procure and maintain adequate funding and support from governmental organisations. The danger here is that community responses to domestic violence may become marginalised, returning the provision of services to the 'authorised professional', and ultimately the voice of protest and the call for respect and accountability in the community may be lost (Shepard & Pence, 1999). Such a 'loss' would be in direct conflict with the Te Rito: New Zealand Family Violence Strategy (Ministry of Social Development, 2002), which explicates that communities

have the right and responsibility to prevent domestic violence. Therefore, any endeavour to evaluate or develop stopping violence programmes has an obligation to do so through processes of community collaboration. In order to create a culture of change and non-acceptance of domestic violence, we need to maintain and support community initiatives, evaluating existing programme provision and feeding back to the community what is effective, how it is effective, and what areas for further improvement / development exist (Contesse & Fenrich, 2008; Ministry of Social Development, 2002; New Zealand's Parliamentarians' Group on Population and Development, 2005). In order to meet Te Rito's objectives of avoiding the duplication of services, and the resulting strain and competition of limited resources, a solid knowledge base of existing initiatives and interventions is needed to refine and solidify best practice concerning responses to domestic violence in the community.

In order to contribute to the body of knowledge regarding domestic violence programmes, and also to address some of the limitations noted regarding methodology and design, a 'missing voices' approach to evaluation needs to be taken. Walters (2010) notes that programme compliance does not necessarily equate with engagement and so hearing women's voices may provide a valuable understanding of the processes of change and effectiveness of intervention not accessible through recidivism and self-report measures alone. Although historically uncommon, evaluations need to include women's accounts of violence and safety (Coombes et al., 2009; Dobash et al., 1999; Feder & Wilson, 2005; Morgan, Coombes, Te Hiwi & McGray, 2007). If we are to embrace the Duluth approach with an emphasis on supporting and managing the safety of victims within the programmes offered (Shepard & Pence, 1999), it is imperative that women have the chance to share their experiences with us.

As previously discussed, much of the evidence gathered privileges physical violence, excluding and ignoring psychological abuse and the contextual elements of domestic violence. Qualitative methods that explore victims' experiences of change and safety can take into account context (Lievore et al., 2007; Shepard & Pence, 1999) and the underlying processes of change (Gondolf, 1997), while prioritising women's understandings and definitions of violence and safety (Coombes et al., 2009). Furthermore, qualitative methods, such as semi-structured interviewing, can also address the previously mentioned issue of underreporting abuse through producing multiple points of disclosure, investing time in the interview process to allow women to reflect on and

remember incidents (Ellsberg & Heise, 2002; Lievore et al., 2007) that is not available in tightly structured or survey-style methods of data generation. In addition, the process of relationship building between researcher and participant enabled through this methodology can contribute to more open and detailed accounts of experiences of violence (Lievore et al., 2007).

Missing voice research can place violence within a context of lived experience, looking at the dynamic nature of understandings of safety, change and support. It can explore concepts of protection and resilience (Lievore et al., 2007), and at all times authorises and privileges women's accounts of benefit and safety. As Towsey (1996) notes, women are the real clients of stopping violence programmes, as programmes aim to protect and increase their safety. Indeed, if we are to return to the inception of the highly influential Duluth approach for intervention, programme delivery itself was developed and guided by the experiences of women affected by domestic violence (Shepard & Pence, 1999). Therefore, it is their voices that should strongly guide our understandings as to whether such programmes achieve their goals of reducing and eliminating domestic violence in the community.

The Current Evaluation Research

The current research is an evaluation of the men's Living Free from Violence programme offered by a local community organisation in the Manawatu, Te Manawa Services. Established in 2000, Te Manawa Services emerged in reaction to an identified need for a localised response to domestic violence in the community. Working closely with local services, groups and organisations, the mission of Te Manawa Services was, and is, to create a 'heartful space' that prioritises safety, equality, respect and the cessation of violence for local families and the wider community. They endeavour to provide services that are empowering and adopt a systemic approach, inclusive of, and dedicated to developing, whanau and support systems for clients and families. In this vein, Te Manawa Services do not solely provide a men's stopping violence programme, but also a women's Living Free from Violence programme, Youth and Parenting courses, and Family Support services.

The men's Living Free from Violence programme is a 16 week course with frequent review sessions built in to the curriculum. The group is an open format, with new members of the group being inducted and supported by existing members. The modules incorporate cognitive-behavioural approaches, with the political-educational approach, informed by the Duluth model of

intervention. The sessions are co-gender facilitated, a process that Robertson (1999) argues is important to reduce the risk that male facilitators, located in their masculine social and political position, will collude with the men in the group. The underpinning concepts of all modules are accountability and responsibility, and privilege of the safety and interests of children. Family and whanau presence and support is included in review sessions, as well as the availability for women and children to engage with other services offered by the organisation. This is in keeping with the Duluth approach, where support for victims is integral to responses, allowing for the monitoring of safety and the provision of interventions that are not reliant on the offender being 'rehabilitated' (Shepard & Pence, 1999).

In accordance with honouring the rights and responsibilities of communities in preventing domestic violence, as outlined in the Te Rito strategy (Ministry of Social Development, 2002), the current research is a collaborative effort between Massey University and Te Manawa Services, with Te Manawa Services holding the funding contract for the evaluation project. Informed by the limitations of previous research surrounding intervention programmes, the current study sought to incorporate the 'missing voices' of women in an evaluative project, seeking their experiences and understandings of change and safety associated with the men's Living Free from Violence programme in the form of semi-structured interviews. It was decided that (ex) partners of men who have completed the full 16 week men's Living Free from violence programme were to be asked to participate. Following the recommendations of the Duluth approach (Shepard & Pence, 1999), women and children's safety was prioritised in every facet of the research design and process. In order to ensure no women or children were placed at risk as a result of participation, risk assessments were conducted to identify those women who were 'safe' to participate. This process involved utilising Te Manawa Services staff and their extensive knowledge of safety and risk assessment. Informed by research conducted by Coombes et al. (2009) an advocate system was established whereby an acting staff member adopted an advocate role in the recruitment process. This involved an initial safety check utilising Te Manawa's client file information to identify any previous or current safety concerns. Reasons for cessation of further recruitment processes at this stage were to be if client files revealed that women were still involved with men who posed a significant level of risk. If the files revealed no safety concerns, the advocate then made contact with women in the form of a phone call. During this phone call, any potential cur-

rent safety issues were explored and to date there has been no cessation of progress at the phone call stage of recruitment. However, this process has already highlighted areas for refinement. Whilst information may be gathered concerning the nature of relationship with the client (male completer) of Te Manawa Services, it is also imperative to establish the safety of newly formed relationships. As women may continue to experience domestic violence in subsequent relationships, safety checks must also seek to assess the nature of any new relationship with men unknown to the domestic violence organisation.

Due to previously discussed low-response rates in domestic violence research, these safety procedures severely limit an already limited pool of potential participants. This raises an inherent tension in domestic violence research –should the benefits of the research outweigh the potential safety of participants? By limiting the pool of participants, are we limiting our knowledge of the complexities of domestic violence and thereby potentially increasing the silence and risk for women living in abusive relationships. Ellsberg and Heise (2002) and Shepard and Pence (1999) both discuss that by talking with these women we may be placing them at risk of further abuse, but by not talking to them we are perpetuating the silence surrounding domestic violence and potentially putting them and others at further risk. This tension is very real, and Ellsberg et al. (2001) documented that towards the end of their research, due to time and financial restraints, initially developed safety procedures began to be compromised. Therefore, it is imperative that as researchers we must constantly remind ourselves that women and children's safety are the priority, the reason for this research. No process of the research design or implementation should put their safety at risk. The current research has indeed been affected by low response rates and the need to meet deadlines for funding, however, through negotiating and extending timeframes beyond those initially established we have enabled progression of the research without compromising participant safety. This points to the need for flexibility and the building of responsive relationships between service providers, researchers and funding authorities in order to allow for a negotiation between establishing safety and working within contractual frameworks.

Issues of confidentiality are also extremely vital to ensure safety processes in domestic violence research (Shepard & Pence, 1999). Women may be placed at risk of further harm if their (ex) partners discover they have been discussing issues of relational abuse and violence (Ellsberg & Heise, 2002). Therefore, the current re-

search sought to build mechanisms to ensure, as much as possible, confidentiality and anonymity in the research design and process of recruitment. After initial contact by the staff advocate, the researcher took over the contact process. Therefore, although the Te Manawa Services staff advocate was aware of the initial potential pool of participants they were provided no knowledge of which women accepted or declined to participate. However, there are issues that have emerged due to the local grass-roots nature of this research that must be addressed in order to inform future research practices. Given the small, local nature of the research, it was not possible to guarantee absolute anonymity. Relationships had often been strongly established between potential participants and Te Manawa Services, and so whilst endeavouring to protect the participants' identities, local knowledge and communication meant that some women's decision to participate was known to the organisation. Furthermore, there were tensions and misunderstandings concerning the privileging of confidentiality due to institutional and systemic understandings of the relationship between confidentiality and safety. As conducted through Massey University, and informed by university ethical philosophies, issues of privacy and confidentiality were paramount. However, the guiding principles of intervention in Te Manawa Services are accountability and responsibility. Openly discussing issues of domestic violence are important to meeting the goals of responsibility and accountability, but they are problematic when keeping within the university's requirements for anonymity and confidentiality. This may at times produce tensions in the relationships between stakeholders and researchers, highlighting the complexities of conducting research within organisations with philosophies and approaches outside of university research protocols, emphasising the need for processes of negotiation and communication within stakeholder relationships.

Furthermore, a separate component of the current research involved interviewing male clients of the stopping violence programme. Although no indication was provided to the male participants regarding the women's voice component, many women were still involved in relationships with potential male participants. It was beyond the researchers control to prevent (ex) partners who were still in contact from discussing their participation, however, the complexities of this situation highlight concerns. Firstly, it is known to the researcher that some women participants have discussed their intended participation with men prior to research interviews. Some of those men have either been contacted by the Te Manawa Staff advocate regarding participation or have

completed an interview themselves. This has caused concern that such communication has removed the ability for women to participate anonymously, and it is possible these women may have edited their stories and under-reported abuse, or over-reported the benefits of the programme. To address this, the researcher has emphasised during interviews the confidential nature of participation and that no identifying material will be kept, shared or reported. While the World Health Organisation guidelines for domestic violence research suggest that recruiting male and female participants from the same community should be avoided (Ellsberg & Heise, 2002), this is often not possible when conducting evaluation research of local community responses. This remains an area that needs further attention and development. The researcher believes that in cases such as this, those conducting the interview need to be aware and observant of whether this issue has occurred and if so to address it openly and honestly with the participant. On a related note, researchers should be aware of leaving materials concerning the study at the homes of participants. As is standard in research, information sheets concerning the nature and requirements of participation are given to all participants. There have been instances in the current research where women have consented to participate without their partner's knowledge, therefore researchers must always discuss the potential consequences of partners discovering information sheets and the risks associated. Participants should be informed of potential consequences of participation that they may not be aware of that have the potential to cause harm. As such, it was the researcher's duty in these instances to inform the participants that information sheets may be discovered by their partners and that this may cause distress or conflict.

It has been noted that the interview process itself may produce distress and discomfort for women, and should this happen the researcher must terminate the interview (Ellsberg & Heise, 2002). In the current research, the development of trusting relationships and rapport during the interview process was essential in ensuring that the process of talking about the abuse did not cause women further distress or harm. If the researcher 'sensed' that participants were distressed, the conversation was shifted to less distressing topics. Safety plans and avenues for further support were discussed, such as contacting Te Manawa Services or the researcher directly if needed. In one instance, a participant was contacted the day after the interview to check that a suspected level of distress was reduced and that the participant was in a safe place. While this process is mostly subjective, it is important that those researching in this

field remain observant and engaged personally with those they are interviewing in order to monitor and assess safety and distress levels. Furthermore, in order to maximise the benefits of the current study for the participants, the researcher ensured she invested time discussing why the women's input and experiences were unique, valuable and important. On cessation of the interview, participants were acknowledged and thanked for sharing their expertise and stories. The time invested in this exchange was hoped to provide a self-affirming process for the participants and to communicate that the research would be directly relevant to them (Coombes et al., 2009).

Distress in this field of research is not only of the domain of participants, but the researchers themselves are also at risk of distress (Ellsberg & Heise, 2002). It can be, and indeed the researcher of the current study has found it to be, distressing to hear stories of abuse and violence, and the emotional effects of this can be difficult to process. This can create tensions during the interview process itself, as in this study the researcher felt a personal tension when asking the women to share their stories. Namely, this tension involved whether to 'push' women to tell their stories and possibly re-open and re-live painful memories, or whether to avoid pushing for further detail and risk limiting the data gathered. This was addressed on a case-by-case basis, and again was subjective, but was aided by the development of a strong research relationship. In instances where the distress was indicated by the mannerisms or demeanour of the participant, the researcher often chose to discuss less distressing topics, reasoning that to push for further detail would compromise participants' safety. In such cases, the researcher would concentrate on the processes of the stopping violence programme more than experiences of abuse. For those women who exhibited low to moderate levels of distress, the researcher would follow the participant's lead in conversation and ensure that cessation of the interview occurred at an uplifting or inspirational point. At all times, the researcher made extensive use of debriefing with supervisors and developed personal systems for separating 'work' and 'home' in order to avoid the emotional toll of conducting such research.

Although researching domestic violence on a small and localised scale such as the current study contains tensions and limitations, the value of such work cannot be underestimated. Ellsberg and Heise (2002) note that in order for domestic violence research to contribute to processes of social change, networks and relationships need to be established that can facilitate the dissemination and utilisation of research findings. The aim of the

current study is to produce a final report of the effectiveness of a local community stopping violence programme, and to share the findings with other appropriate stakeholders, groups and organisations invested in reducing domestic violence in New Zealand. Furthermore, it will be an invaluable tool for directing the location and utilisation of funding opportunities for programme provision and development in the future. It will be informed by official records (police recidivism data), men's self-report measures and women's experiences of change and safety, and as such has much to offer in the way of increasing our understandings of where we are now and where we need to go in the future.

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