

Problematising Effectiveness: The Inclusion of Victim Advocacy Services in Living Without Violence Programme Provision and Evaluation

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Abstract

Advocacy services in collaboration with living without violence programmes have the potential to increase experiences of safety and well-being for the victims of domestic violence. However, advocacy services are not always offered within programmes and the influence of advocacy is often over-looked when evaluating the 'effectiveness' of programme provision. An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of semi-structured interviews with five (ex) partners of men who had completed a living without violence programme found that advocacy services meaningfully increased victims' feelings of safety and well-being independent from changes, or lack of change, in the men's violent behaviour. Therefore, victim advocacy may be a valuable addition to living without violence programmes and can potentially offer a broader, multidimensional understanding of 'effectiveness' in evaluations of programme success.

Keywords: Domestic violence, Living without violence programmes, Victim advocacy, Evaluation research

Introduction

With an estimated 1 in 3 New Zealand women experiencing domestic violence in their lifetime (Contesse & Fenrich, 2008; Families Commission, 2009; Fanslow & Robinson, 2004), this continues to be an area that demands our urgent redress and attention. The experience of living with continued violence has been linked to various health concerns, both physical and psychological (Cascardi & O'Leary, 1992; Fanslow & Robinson, 2004; Lacey, McPherson, Samuel, Sears & Head, 2012), and can damage the educational, economic and employment opportunities of victims (UN Women, 2012). It has been argued that domestic violence denies women and children the right to live without fear (UN Women, 2012), and therefore can be understood as a human rights issue in which the state has an obligation to intervene (Contesse

& Fenrich, 2008; Dobash, Dobash, Cavanagh, & Lewis, 1999; UN Women, 2012).

As part of a coordinated and systematic response to domestic violence, living without violence programmes offer treatment and intervention for offenders in order to reduce and eliminate domestic violence in the community. The New Zealand Domestic Violence Act (1995) created a framework for providing access to living without violence programmes for those who commit a family violence offence, supporting men who are violent to receive help for their issues (Coombes, Morgan & McGray, 2007). In 2006¹, the New Zealand Government, under the Domestic Violence Act (1995), offered funded placements in living without violence programmes for approximately 2,930 men, with the Family Court referring 2,715. The number of men who completed living without violence programmes, however, is much lower, with only approximately 990 men (or 37% of those admitted) completing a programme in the same year (Families Commission, 2009).

Women's Involvement with Living Without Violence Programmes

Victim advocacy work is not new to our understandings of a coordinated community response to domestic violence. However, it is not widely discussed in relation to the provision of living without violence programmes. Whilst some programme standards include monitoring women's safety issues and needs (Dankwort & Austin, 1999), contact with victims more often involves information sharing relating to important events (such as admission or completion of programme), or verification of the men's accounts and understandings concerning processes of engagement and change (Dankwort & Austin, 1999; Healey, Smith & O'Sullivan, 2009). However, Healey et al. (2009) argue that

¹ 2006 is the most recent year for which official figures are available at time of publication.

validating men's progress and behaviour should not be prioritised over discussing issues of safety and educating women about domestic violence.

The opportunity for delivering educational and safety support for victims is problematic given the barriers to service provision for women living with domestic violence. Women affected by domestic violence are often unaware of the various services on offer to them (Healey et al., 2009), and only seek help as a last resort when they can no longer endure the abuse (Stubbs, 2002), or when fear for their own, or their children's, safety escalates (Fanslow & Robinson, 2010). DePrince, Labus, Belknap, Buckingham and Gover (2012) discuss the many barriers to help-seeking behaviour for victims of domestic violence, such as limited money and time, isolation and feelings of disconnection, and the stress of having to tell their stories to various agencies multiple times in order to navigate the range of support and response organisations available. Therefore, including victim advocacy outreach within a living without violence programme may enable more women to access and engage with support without needing to spend time and energy retelling their circumstances to various service personnel and sectors. Indeed, Arias, Dankwort, Douglas and Dutton (2002) found that when advocacy outreach services are initiated by living without violence programmes, it is often the first time many women had the opportunity to discuss their experiences of abuse with others. Furthermore, given that the optimal programme length is 16 weeks (McMaster, Maxwell & Anderson, 2000), programme providers are in an ideal position to offer ongoing and consistent support and assistance to women, as well as safety monitoring.

Advocacy services as a component of living without violence programme provision, when offered, have shown to be highly valuable for victims of domestic violence. In addition to enabling an advanced and continued method for monitoring safety (Healey et al., 2009), and providing education in regards to the men's programme (Austin & Dankwort, 1999; Healey et al., 2009), research indicates that programme advocacy services can increase women's feelings of safety and well-being independent of their (ex) partners progress or engagement. Advocacy can enable women to feel heard, to have their experiences, thoughts and feelings affirmed, to increase their education and understandings

of domestic violence and can sometimes even help develop the confidence to leave abusive relationships (Austin & Dankwort, 1999; Healey et al., 2009). Therefore, advocacy outreach can provide a contextualised response to the effects of domestic violence that educate and support women, increasing well-being and decreasing isolation whilst attending to the victims' specific and complex needs and concerns.

Evaluating Living Without Violence Programmes

Men's attendance at a living without violence programme, or the belief that the men can change their behaviour, is a strong factor for women returning to, or remaining with their partner (Contesse & Fenrich, 2008; Dobash et al., 1999; Fanslow & Robinson, 2010; Gondolf, 1997; Walters, 2010). Therefore, it is vital to know if, and how, these programmes work in order to ensure we are meeting our goals of increasing women and children's safety. Unfortunately, previous programme evaluation research has often reported mixed results and small effect sizes (Akoensi, Koehler, Lösel & Humphreys, 2012; Babcock, Green & Robie, 2004; Davis & Taylor, 1999; Furness, 1994; Gondolf, 2004; Klein & Tobin, 2008; Robertson, 1999; Walters, 2010), and there appears to be little-to-no consensus, or documented evidence, of what mode of service delivery is most effective or, indeed, how 'effectiveness' can, or should, be measured (Akoensi et al., 2012).

When we talk about the 'effectiveness' of living without violence programmes, we are often referring to the reduction, or elimination, of acts of abuse (Babcock & Steiner, 1999), with recidivism data considered the preferable form of evidence to tell us whether victim safety has improved or been achieved (Bennett & Williams, 2001). However, there are concerns that recidivism data cannot give us a complete or accurate picture of 'effectiveness' because the majority of domestic violence goes unreported (Fanslow & Robinson, 2010; Stringer, 2010). Furthermore, reported police data may struggle to account for emotional and psychological abuse, privileging the presence or threat of physical violence (Gulliver & Fanslow, 2012; Shepard & Pence, 1999). Whilst offender and victim self-report measures are sometimes utilised in programme evaluation (Bennett & Williams, 2001), if we still conceptualise 'effectiveness' as the reduction or elimination of acts of abuse, we

may be overlooking valuable insights as to how programmes may be experienced as ‘effective’.

‘Victim safety’ is an underpinning standard or goal of living without violence programmes (Bennett & Williams, 2001; Dankwort & Austin, 1999). However, given that knowledge of effectiveness and victim safety are tightly entwined with recidivism, our understandings of whether programmes achieve the goal of ‘victim safety’ may not reflect the nuanced and context-specific understandings of the victims. The risk here is that by continuing to focus on recidivism, we may be subjugating women’s needs and concerns in relation to programme effectiveness, positioning them as existing in the periphery of, or only in relation to, the violence acted upon them. Furthermore, if our understandings of effectiveness rely solely on offender behaviour and change processes, we will be unable to account for, or respond to, the safety of women who leave the violent relationship in question, but enter new abusive relationships in the future (DePrince et al., 2012). Indeed, Austin and Dankwort (1999) lament the limited input of women’s understandings of safety and effectiveness in living without violence programme evaluation research and recommend that:

future research should strive to include fuller and richer reports from battered women, allowing them to relate what is meaningful in their view, so as to provide a more complete and accurate picture of the use and effectiveness of such interventions. (p. 40)

In light of these concerns, the current study explored women’s accounts of safety and well-being in relation to their (ex) partner’s engagement with a New Zealand community-based living without violence programme, where victim advocacy services were included as a part of core service provision.² The larger evaluation project integrated a statistical analysis of recidivism with semi-structured interviews conducted with programme completers (men) and women whose (ex) partner had completed the programme. The inclusion of women’s voices in a semi-structured and open interview forum was employed to allow the women to articulate how they understood the provision of domestic violence services to have influenced their experiences of safety and well-being without being constrained by pre-set

² In addition to victim advocacy, the community organisation also offered a women’s living without violence programme and a youth and parenting programme.

or narrow definitions of ‘effectiveness’. It was envisaged that the inclusion of participant-led discussions would open up opportunities for the researchers to explore avenues and areas that may not have been anticipated, but were meaningful to how the women understood ‘effectiveness’ in relation to the men’s living without violence programme.

The Current Study

The following section explores women’s accounts relating to the effects of victim advocacy service provision in relation to men’s engagement with a community-based living without violence programme in New Zealand. Although 20 women were interviewed for the larger evaluation project, the selection of five women’s accounts was utilised to facilitate a more refined and focused discussion of the victim advocacy services given the constrictions of space allowed in the present publication. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), within a hermeneutic phenomenological approach was utilised to analyse the qualitative data and the subsequent discussion draws from the identified theme of ‘Partner / Family Services’, specifically focusing on accounts of victim advocacy services. The advantage of IPA for this study is that it allows a focus on the meaning that participants’ ascribe to the events they experience; broadly explores areas of concern to participants; and represents interactions, experiences, points and patterns of meanings that thematically emerge from participants’ accounts. IPA is also sensitive to diversity in participants’ accounts, allowing us to consider cultural and social differences as well as the complexity of specific experiences (Eatough & Smith, 2008; Smith & Eatough, 2007).

Women’s Accounts

In relation to their (ex) partners engagement with the living without violence programme, the women communicated the positive effects of being able to discuss with programme staff issues of safety, their experiences of the men’s behaviour and attitudes, and processes of information sharing that enabled them to understand what their (ex) partners were learning in the programme. However, one of the most surprising findings from talking with the women was that many of them chose to devote the majority of the interview to discussing services offered that did not directly relate to their (ex) partners’ programme engagement. It became

increasing apparent, that victim advocacy services were extremely important to the women when discussing ‘effectiveness’ and ‘victim safety’, and were sometimes more valuable and meaningful to them than the change, or lack of change, in their (ex) partners’ behaviour.

The women discussed how victim advocacy enabled them to feel less alone, less isolated and more connected to a network of help and support. This facilitated feelings of hope for the future – that others not only shared their experiences, but, with assistance, had ‘gotten through’ them.

They really helped me to realise that this isn't just me and there is a lot of other people going through the same stuff. So many that they've written modules about it and it's textbook and it's fine, you know, it's going to be alright – Lucy

The women discussed how there was the potential for them to feel excluded, or their needs subjugated, when they were contextualised only in relation to their (ex) partners’ engagement with the programme. Therefore, they appreciated the inclusion of a victim advocacy service because it provided the opportunity to feel recognised as being affected by, and involved in, addressing issues of abuse and violence, minimising the processes of marginalisation and subjugation that may occur when the sole focus of the response is on the offender.

Where someone like me could be lost in another service, another system, I might not have got any support...they just rang one day out of the blue, they just said ‘It's such and such from [Programme Provider], your husband's booked in on the course. We're wondering if you'd like to come in and have a meeting. Would you like a bit of a support? There is support available for partners, would you like to come in and see us?’, and I said ‘Oh, that would be great’. Just went in and that's where it started – Kirsty

Victim advocacy increased the women’s emotional well-being through processes of investment. There was a sense of value and worth attached to professionals investing in, and caring about, how they were dealing and coping with the abuse they had experienced. It was powerful for the women to have the permission and opportunity to place their own happiness and well-being as a priority in their lives (often for the first time), and they found it meaningful to be given a voice within a process that appears to revolve around supporting men’s issues.

She was trying to think of-, ‘Look after number one and you don't have to put up with that, you don't have to put up with that’ and, yeah, she was just amazing. And if we were having a bad day, we wouldn't even go through the book work, she just concentrated on what was happening for that day. You walked out of there and felt like you've achieved something, every time I went there. She was just amazing – Kirsty

The personal investment of staff in the women’s stories, thoughts and feelings, enabled strong emotional connections with the victim advocates to be formed. The women often referred to their advocate as a friend, and this helped them feel connected, valued and cared for. The healing potential of such human relationships and connections were extremely important for the women.

They are very supportive. They care about how you're feeling and they listen. That's what I found, one thing, they listen – Anna

Some women had previous involvement with other service agencies, such as mental health services, and discussed how, instead of being viewed through the lens of deficiency and treatment, the assistance and support provided by advocate staff was more strengths-based and situated in their immediate context. Here, they were provided useful assistance that did not focus on their pathology or ‘deficit’, but instead contextualised their needs as the effects and difficulties of living with domestic violence.

She was just a neutral person, didn't matter what medication you were on or whatever, she wasn't looking into that....she just cared about how... how you were getting through on a day-to-day basis and how you were going to get through and how you were going to help [him] and you – Kirsty

The victim advocates in the current study also co-facilitated the group sessions in the men’s living without violence programme, therefore had a broader understanding of the women’s context, ‘story’ and their (ex) partners’ engagement with the programme. Although unable to share confidential information regarding the men’s progress or participation in group sessions, the women felt a sense of security and confidence that came from knowing advocate staff were familiar with their (ex) partners. Offering victim advocacy within the same organisation that provided the living without violence programme enabled the women to feel contextualised, understood and facilitated greater trust in the services offered.

That's another thing with this course, she was counselling me and she knew him. Not that they probably match up people, but I guess she deals with men on there and the ladies later, but the other ladies [at a mental health organisation] had never met [him], so they were just going on what I was telling them and with my mental health I could have been telling them-, When I look back now I'm sure most of it was pretty truthful, but some people they must think 'Oh my god, what are they saying' because they'd never met him and they couldn't relate – Kirsty

Within the advocacy relationship, the women worked through the processes of identifying and labelling their experiences as 'domestic violence', and having those experiences affirmed by the advocate. This facilitated a changing understanding of violence, especially in relation to non-physical acts of abuse, increasing awareness and understanding of what is, and what is not, acceptable in relationships. The women discussed how this process of articulation and affirmation empowered them to resist normalising, and tolerating, any form of domestic violence, motivating them to challenge the presence of abuse in their lives.

I think it's just confirming that it's not ok, like you probably know deep down 'It's not really ok to live like this. I don't like what's happening to me', but for someone else to say 'This is not normal, this is not ok, you don't have to put up with it' it just makes you stronger because it brings your own beliefs right out there, yeah – Mary

The inclusion of family support services³ in the context of the men's living without violence programme was so meaningful for the women that even those who reported little to no change in their (ex) partners' behaviour still highly recommended the community organisation. They discussed how, regardless of the men's processes of change, their safety and well-being was increased significantly as a result of the spectrum of services and support offered to their families.

Interviewer: And it worked so well for you, despite the fact that things didn't improve with [the ex]-

Kirsty: But frankly I don't care-, Well, I do care, but I got so much of value out of it that it was amazing, you know

The impact of victim advocacy on women's experiences of safety and well-being is poignantly illustrated in Karen's account, where the support

and assistance she received as a result of her (ex) partner's admission to the living without violence programme literally saved her life:

I'd never heard of anything like [this organisation] before. It has saved my life. It really has. I don't know if I'd even be here today if it wasn't for [the organisation] because I've been suicidal. You just feel like you can't go on anymore. You can't do this anymore – Karen

Advocacy was a service that the women did not expect to receive from a men's living without violence programme and were pleasantly surprised at the level of support and assistance offered to them by the programme providers. The women implied that offering victim advocacy as part of core service provision could potentially encourage more community members to engage with domestic violence service agencies in the future. Here, integrated advocacy services may motivate those in the community living with the effects of domestic violence, whether they are the offender or the victim, to seek out assistance actively to challenge the presence of abuse and violence in their lives.

Actually I was overwhelmed and I didn't even expect it. It was something that maybe definitely they should put in their brochures more, that the women are going to get support more and they might get more guys go I think and more of the women might go with the guys if she knows – Kirsty

Discussion

The women's accounts of victim advocacy in the current study suggest there is a need to broaden our understandings of 'effectiveness' when evaluating living without violence programme provision to incorporate services that directly attend to victims' experiences of safety and well-being. Regardless of whether their (ex) partners experienced reductions in levels of abuse and violence, the women's feelings of safety and well-being increased as a result of partner and family support services. The women were not dependant on the men's processes of change, but instead were enabled to nurture their own well-being independently. The advocacy services offered were context-specific, strengths-based and educational, providing realistic and idiographic assistance that supported the women to strengthen their resources in order to produce sustainable responses to domestic violence.

³ Victim advocacy, the women's living without violence programme and the youth and parenting programme.

Furthermore, the women's emotional and mental well-being was increased through the provision of genuine caring and support, timely and professional advice, and the legitimisation of the women's experiences and voice. In an area of service provision that often focuses on men's recovery and personal development, the inclusion of attention and assistance for the victims of abuse should not be under-estimated. The inclusion of women's voices, and the investment in their well-being and safety decreased their sense of marginalisation and subjugation.

The advantages and positive effects of including advocacy services within living without violence programmes supports previous literature on the affirming, strengthening and protective elements advocacy can offer to increase and enhance the safety and well-being of victims (Austin & Dankwort, 1999; Healey et al., 2009). Furthermore, the power of including advocacy services within programme provision may lie in the multidimensional approach to 'safety', an approach that is not reliant solely on men's ability to change, but is also understood as producing a 'safety net' of victim support and assistance that simultaneously works to maximise increases in victim safety and well-being. Indeed, Bennett and Williams (2001) suggest that the small effect sizes observed in evaluations of living without violence programmes may be an artefact of the constrictive focus on offence reduction/prevention indicators that, whilst of great significance, can be understood as embedded within a larger network of possible factors and effects to be examined. They argue that reduction and elimination of domestic violence is not a simple, isolated and easily definable concept and suggest the strongest effect may be seen in programmes that provide various elements of response in coordination/combination.

Therefore, the ability of living without violence programmes to meet women's needs, specifically in relation to advocacy, may offer one indicator of 'effectiveness' when evaluating living without violence programmes. The findings from the current study urge us to problematise narrow definitions of effectiveness that rely heavily on constricted understandings of 'effect'. What would it mean for us to expand our constructions of 'safety' in evaluation research to include elements independent of men's behaviour? What would it look like if we were to assess programmes on their ability to provide multifaceted responses that

approach the reduction of violence from a victim-centred, strengths-based platform? What would it mean if the 'gold standard' of the evaluation of living without violence programmes included ensuring that women's rights to attention, help and support were as privileged as men's needs for education and behavioural change?

The current study suggests we need to start problematising myopic definitions of 'effectiveness', broadening our potential evaluation research questions and areas of interest to include understandings of effectiveness and safety that are more responsive to women's understandings of living with the effects of domestic violence. 'Effectiveness' may come to be understood not only as the sole domain of men's behaviour change, but also in the strengthening, healing and empowering of women and children, developing sustainable and strength-based responses to domestic violence for all members of the community.

Stephanie Denne is in her second year of her PhD research at Massey University, Palmerston North. Having recently completed an evaluation of a men's living without violence programme in the local community, she is now exploring how understandings of domestic violence influence effective responses, with a focus on psychological and emotional forms of abuse.

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