Full length article

Understanding and utilising 'rapport' in work with men who use violence in intimate relationships: The challenge of creating a 'safe space' that holds men to account

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Abstract

This article explores the role of 'rapport' in enhancing the effectiveness of probation domestic abuse perpetrator programmes, drawing on practitioner led research. While there has been a growing awareness of the importance of relational factors, discussion of relationships between staff and group members lacks clarity. This article, and the research underpinning it, utilises the concept of 'rapport' to explore how relational issues operate within perpetrator groups. Findings demonstrated that participants need a sense of safety, space to explore their experiences, thoughts and emotions, without judgement or collusion. The paper concludes that facilitators are not used as much as they could be to inform practice developments.

Keywords

Domestic abuse perpetrator programmes, domestic abuse, perpetration, building better relationships, rapport

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Introduction

This article explores the role of 'rapport' in enhancing the effectiveness of probation domestic abuse perpetrator programmes (DAPPs). It draws on practitioner led research, funded by a Sir Graham Smith bursary.

Although there have been disagreements about their effectiveness, DAPPs have become a central strategy in attempts to reduce domestic abuse. There has, however, been significant debate about which factors are likely to optimise their impact. While much discussion has revolved around which criminogenic factors perpetrator programmes should address, there is a growing body of evidence indicating that 'how' programmes are delivered is as important as 'what' is delivered. The engagement of participants and relational factors seem to be at least as significant as content (Hughes, 2025; Renehan and Gadd, 2024a).

Research has emphasised the specific salience of establishing a therapeutic alliance in obtaining treatment outcomes and maintaining engagement, across a variety of interventions which aim to promote change (Ardito and Rabellino, 2011; Nahouli et al. 2022). There is emerging evidence indicating that this is also important for DAPPs (Renehan and Gadd, 2024b). However, perpetrator voices regarding the relational dynamics between perpetrators and facilitators of DAPPs have not been given enough attention in research and policy (Renehan and Gadd, 2024b). Additionally, while there has been a growing awareness of the importance of relational factors in enhancing perpetrator group effectiveness, discussion of working relationships between staff and group members has lacked specificity. It is not always clear what a positive relationship between service users and staff should look like, or which ingredients it should involve. In response to this ambiguity, this research utilises the concept of 'rapport' to develop an understanding of how relational issues operate within perpetrator groups and how the development of a therapeutic alliance can be supported within perpetrator programmes. In view of the exploratory nature of this research, 'rapport' is operationalised as a rich concept involving interrelated aspects. These are understood to include positive relationships, a sense of connection, and a sense of ease between participants and groups facilitators. Reflecting a growth of attention to the role of emotions in probation practice (Westaby et al., 2019), a sense of emotional safety is also regarded as being central (Nahouli et al., 2022; Travelbee, 1963).

Domestic abuse perpetrator programmes: From *what* works to *how* it works

Programmes specifically for domestic abuse perpetrators are generally acknowledged to have emerged in North America during the 1980s (Hughes, 2024). Perhaps the most influential of these programmes is the men's education group associated with the wider 'Duluth' model of intervention (Pence and Paymar, 1993). Importantly, the creators of the Duluth domestic abuse programme stressed that perpetrator interventions should be situated within a wider set of responses, where the safety of victims is central. It was argued that responses should include support for victims and agreements with local police

departments and courts, to ensure swift and robust responses to violence, abuse, or failures by men convicted of intimate partner violence to comply with court requirements. The Duluth perpetrator intervention programme is informed by feminist understandings of male violence. The curriculum was designed to challenge patriarchal beliefs and male entitlement, which were perceived to be associated with violence against women. Specifically, this involved encouraging the participants to examine previous instances of violence and recognise it as intentional and motivated by a desire for control (Dobash et al., 2000; John et al., 2020; Pence and Paymar, 1993). Importantly, accounts commonly given by perpetrators for their violence, such as alcohol intoxication, external circumstances or anger, were understood within the Duluth programme as attempts to refute responsibility, and not seen as primary targets for intervention (Hughes, 2017).

The Duluth model's influence extended to the probation service, where it was the basis for the Integrated Domestic Abuse Perpetrator programme (IDAP), first rolled out in 2005[1]. Following a process of accreditation, IDAP soon became the lead intervention for men convicted of offences of violence towards intimate partners in England and Wales (Hughes, 2024). IDAP was developed within the wider influence of the 'What works' or 'effective practice' initiative, which was a defining influence on probation practice in England and Wales during the first decade of the 21st century (Raynor and Robinson, 2009). This was prompted by a body of research that indicated that the effectiveness of criminal justice interventions was dependent on the presence of several key ingredients. In particular, the proponents of the 'what works' initiative argued that effective programmes were underpinned by cognitive behavioural psychology, targeted factors which were evidentially related to offending (as opposed to issues which participants themselves perceived as most pressing); and that content was delivered consistently – in accordance with the programme design – without digressions based on the perceived needs of participants, or the preferences of those who were delivering the interventions (Canton and Dominey, 2018; Hughes, 2024). Notably however, the influence of Duluth made IDAP distinct from other programmes developed within the initial what works era. IDAP was informed by wider cultural ideas about gender, rather than just cognitive behavioural theory, and had a relatively flexible design which required interpretation by facilitators (Hughes, 2017). The impact of these differences on the staff delivering IDAP, who typically delivered it within a portfolio of 'what works' approved interventions (and often did not have previous experience of work with domestic abuse perpetrators) was perhaps not fully considered at the time.

Despite the influence of Duluth, and some indications of its potential to reduce violence and abuse among participants (Kelly and Westmarland, 2015), both IDAP and the wider Duluth model were subjected to a growing body of criticism, based on their theoretical design and concerns about their effectiveness. In particular, Duluth was characterised as fostering a counterproductive and confrontational approach to work with violent men (Dutton, 2006). Other criticisms suggested that the focus of Duluth programmes on patriarchal beliefs and male entitlement led to a neglect of the diverse factors underpinning domestic violence (Dutton and Nicholls, 2005). Although some commentators refuted some of these characterisations (Hughes, 2024), these criticisms contributed to a sense of pessimism about the effectiveness of Duluth style programmes. Partly as a

result of this pessimism, IDAP was replaced with the Building Better Relationships pro-gramme (BBR)[2]. However, this was also part of a wider revision of probation pro-grammes developed within the initial what works era, which aimed to make them more responsive to participants (Travers, 2012). BBR reflected an attempt to incorporate ideas associated with desistance theory which at the time of its development had become influential in understanding effective probation practice (Rex, 2012). Instead of focussing on causes, desistance theory focusses on the individual's journey away from offending, and which factors facilitate and encourage this (Maruna, 2004; Maruna and King, 2009). Much of the desistance literature stresses the importance of the service user establishing a non-offending identity, where he or she no longer sees themselves as an 'offender', and where destructive or harmful behaviour does not have a place within their lives. Desistance literature also places emphasis on allowing service users to take the lead in discussions about their future and, importantly, attaches importance to relational factors between professional staff and service users. Although there was a lack of explicit evi-dence regarding the applicability of desistance theory to domestic abuse, BBR was pre-mised on several of its key principles (Hughes, 2017). It focused on the strengths of the individual, rather than deficits, and there is significantly less of an expectation on participants to examine instances of previous violence than there was in IDAP. BBR was also a response to the criticism of Duluth, that suggested it was too focussed on control as a target of intervention, at the expense of other factors. BBR, unlike, IDAP, operated within a biopsychosocial model (Walton et al., 2017). This model is pre-mised on the understanding that a range of interplaying social and individual factors com-bine to create conditions that encourage domestic abuse, acknowledging the heterogeneity of men who engage in abusive behaviours (Renehan, 2023; Walton et al., 2017).

IDAP and BBR have tended to be presented as polarised in their approaches: the for-mer positioned as adversarial and feminist, the latter therapeutic, responsive and psycho-logically informed (Hughes, 2017). However, this dichotomy has led to a neglect of the ways in which perpetrator programmes are experienced. The research findings from inter-views conducted within this research suggest that the theoretical underpinning or content of interventions are not as influential as the style of facilitators, or relational factors. This is consistent with other research which has explored the experiences of men attending DAPPs (Hughes, 2017, 2025; Morran, 2013; Renehan and Gadd, 2024a).

Rapport and relationships within probation

As mentioned above, there is considerable evidence that programmes promoting change are heavily reliant on the quality of the relationship between professional staff and their clients. This is often associated with the term 'therapeutic alliance' (Renehan and Gadd, 2024a). A 'therapeutic alliance' consists of mutual trust, respect, collaboration, and 'rap-port' (Nahouli et al. 2022). Specifically, 'rapport' has been centralised in treatment out-comes in psychotherapy (Ardito and Rabellino, 2011; Nahouli et al. 2022) and is understood here as referring to the emotional connection, or sense of emotional safety, between the facilitator and participant (Travelbee, 1963).

There has been a breadth of reflection about the importance of rapport with diverse client groups, including resistant forensic cases (Youssef, 2017), people with substance abuse difficulties (Joe et al., 2001) and those who score highly in psychopathy assessments, whose engagement and change is particularly challenging to engender (Polaschek and Ross, 2010). Nahouli et al. (2022) used focus groups and thematic analysis to collect practitioner perspectives on the process of building and maintaining rapport. They stressed the importance of verbal and non-verbal behaviours, seemingly casual interactions such as personal conversation, handshaking, and being responsive to the progress and current circumstances of individuals. Rapport has also been found to be of value in enhancing investigative interviews where emotional safety facilitates the exchange of information (Abbe and Brandon, 2013).

Though its role in supporting desistance and positive treatment outcomes in a range of contexts is evident, the mechanisms via which rapport operate are not clear. Some historic discussion has understood the relationship between supervisee and worker as reflecting a child–parent relationship where healthy attachment is modelled (Freud, 1913; Garfield, 1998; Holmes, 1996). Other research has highlighted biological factors as being important in understanding how rapport develops and is experienced. For example, 'neuroception' refers to the process where people make rapid assessments of risk and safety based on responses in their autonomic nervous systems (Porges, 2004: 19). In this understanding, cues such as facial expressions, body language, voice tone and room layout (Flores and Porges, 2017; Geller, 2018) impact people's physiological responses to a situation. This framework can help inform how 'emotional safety' is established. This sense of safety is likely to be vital in DAPPs, where participants are required to share their vulnerabilities and discuss challenging material and past behaviours associated with shame (Hughes, 2025).

Research has additionally highlighted ingredients such as programme flexibility (Holdsworth et al. 2016), active listening, respectful communication, reducing interruptions and gentle challenging as important in the development of rapport (Garfield, 2007).

While not always explicit, 'rapport' has been central in probation practice in England and Wales throughout its history. The 1907 Probation Act championed 'assisting, advising, and befriending' as a mechanism of preventing re-offending (Healy, 2012). However, some commentators have noted that the role of relational factors and rapport have been challenged and undermined (Farrall, 2022). Barry (2007) refers specifically to the dominance of the 'What Works' initiative, which emphasised content and standardisation at the expense of individualised and relationship-centred work. This led to service users receiving standardised interventions, with an arguably dehumanising effect. However, as described above there has been a resurgence of recognition about of the importance of relational factors, or what Dominey has referred to as the need for 'thick supervision' (2019: 283).

While there is not explicit guidance that promotes the building of rapport within the CJS, there are strategies widely employed by probation staff which are relevant. For example, 'motivational interviewing' focuses on listening, understanding, empathy and collaboration (Collins and Carthy, 2019; Miller and Rollnick, 2004, 2012; Westra and Aviram, 2013).

Although the importance of relational factors in fostering change has a growing evidence base, there is evidence that they are not developed consistently in work with domestic abuse perpetrators (Lømo, 2018). Renehan (2021a) found that BBR participants often did not experience a sense of connection with facilitators. Instead, they often felt misunderstood, judged and unheard. Renehan (2021b) argued that this was exacerbated by an expectation on facilitators to adhere to programme material, at the expense of dynamic interactions. Similarly, Hughes (2017) found that some facilitators and participants of BBR struggled with what they perceived as the rigidity of the session structures. Fox (1999) discussed the alienation of DAPP participants who felt their explanations of aggression were reframed solely as mechanisms of denial and blame – the invalidation of their experiences generating 'bitterness' (Gadd and Jefferson, 2007: 10).

Building relationships and establishing rapport in work with domestic abuse perpetrators is a complex task requiring professional skill and reflection. There are specific challenges with domestic abusers due to the importance of balancing the creation and maintenance of rapport on the one hand and avoiding collusion on the other (Philip and Bell, 2017). Unconditional positive regard, without supportive, consistent boundaries and challenging, risks being collusive and harmful by undermining accountability.

Similarly, the role of humour has been given specific attention within group-based criminal justice programmes, with research indicating the need for care in managing it (Fowler et al., 2021; Laursen, 2017). Humour has been identified as having the potential to support relational aspects of practice and ease tensions. However, it also can have insidious impacts involving a reduction of emotional safety and collusion (Hughes, 2025).

The impact of gender in facilitation, relational dynamics and specifically rapport, requires further consideration. DAPPs involve implicit and explicit references to gendered relations between participants, between participants and facilitators and between participants and the other people in their lives. Men are encouraged to give thought to their sense of masculinity, and how their gendered identity impacts how they interact with others (Morran, 2022). How rapport is demonstrated is inevitably informed by understandings of gender (Hughes, 2025). These issues are largely beyond the scope of this paper but require further consideration to develop a nuanced understanding of how group-based programmes are experienced, and how rapport can be developed.

Method

The research was conducted while the lead researcher was employed as a group facilitator, within a semi-rural region in England and Wales. The paper draws on semi-structured interviews – which lasted between 35 min and 1 h – with men convicted of an offence of domestic abuse, who were required to attend BBR as a condition of their supervision. Questions were formulated to elicit what rapport meant to participants, what impacted rapport – both positively and negatively – how it was established, and how it was maintained.

The research required particular attention to the navigation of challenges involved in occupying a dual role as both a researcher and group facilitator (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009;

Hendy, 2020). There was a risk that the participants would not speak freely, given the researcher's role as an employee of probation service, which has requirements associated with risk management and enforcement. Care was taken to explain to participants that the interviews were not part of their probation supervision, and that their involvement was entirely voluntary. Similarly, care was taken to ensure that participants understood that data would be held confidentially, unless specific risks were disclosed. Pseudonyms have been used in the analysis that follows and in all associated reports.

Attention and reflection were required to ensure that the researcher avoided drifting into a facilitator role during the interviews: for example, refraining from 'challenging' statements or perspectives that were inconsistent with the goals of DAPPs.

Undertaking research with men who have been violent in relationships also requires a critical approach to their accounts. It is well established that men who have been abusive often seek to minimise their behaviour and give distorted accounts (Kelly and Westmarland, 2016; Morran, 2013). The lead researcher was careful to employ the skills developed as a group facilitator to balance an avoidance of collusionthe one hand, with an interest in the men's accounts on the other.

To navigate some of the challenges, participants were recruited from a different area to the researcher's workplace, to ensure that existing relationships did not influence results, and there was regular reflective discussion with an academic supervisor.

Participants were recruited from an area with limited social and ethnic diversity. They were required to have completed at least one of the four modules of BBR. Participants' ages ranged from 20s to 60s.

Given the small sample involved (n = 5), it is not possible to make generalised claims, and the participants are not regarded as representative of all those who have attended programmes. Nevertheless, important themes were identified during application of Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2019) reflexive thematic analysis and were reflective of the researcher's broader experiences of work with men during DAPPs.

The study was submitted for approval via His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service National Research Committee and ethical approval was granted by the supervising probation area in conjunction with the Probation Institute.

Findings

Data analysis generated three main themes: feeling safe, having space to explore and communication style. Communication style itself was experienced by participants as involving two important aspects: firstly; tone of challenging; secondly, use of humour. These themes can be used to understand the rapport-building journey at three main points: the signs of safety subconsciously noticed upon entering a room, the listening space created when a participant is sharing their thoughts and experiences, and finally the response and development of conversation after the participant has spoken. All of these themes connect with the growing attention given to emotions in criminological literature (Jacobsen and Walklate, 2019). Specifically, there has been an increasing awareness of the significance of emotions in understanding how criminal justice practice is experienced (Knight et al. 2016). Emotions are evident throughout the accounts of the research

participants, where they refer implicitly to rapport revolving around an absence of tension, a sense of calmness, positivity, and personal connection.

Feeling safe

'Feeling safe' was understood as being fostered by facial expressions, body language and the physical environment, including seating and group size.

Sam illustrated this when he spoke about the importance of the verbal and non-verbal cues exhibited by facilitators and how this positively impacts rapport:

> *Their body language... smiling and making you feel calm and at ease... it makes for a calmer atmosphere and environment and an easier place to feel that you want to talk and open up.....obviously you pick up on their body language and how they are doing things and it's quite often a smile or a calm voice.*

Dennis shared this sentiment, highlighting the impact of the mood of the facilitator and how this manifests physically. He also spoke about the impact of the room and the number of people in it, and how this influences the likelihood of his open and active engagement in BBR:

> *The smile, their attitude you know, they're not like grumpy, you know I don't know how to explain, it's the faces you know the smile... I feel really comfortable that's why I've been open talking.*

Chris expressed similar themes, highlighting how the facial expressions of facilitators impact the environment. Chris expressed that the physical layout of the room, such as the seating arrangement and number of participants influenced the degree of comfort in the room:

> *We sit in a circle; we don't sit behind desks... It would make it feel more intrusive.... you would destroy the whole purpose because... if they thought they were in a teacher-pupil relationship... I think they would tend to be more cagey about what they're going to say...*

Participants' attribution of 'comfort' and 'calm' to warm facial features and body language appear central. Signs such as facial expressions, body language, voice tone and room layout subconsciously operate on a physiological level where a physical feeling of safety is experienced (Porges, 2009).

A non-judgemental space for exploration

Another factor which participants found important in developing rapport was creating a safe space for exploring experiences (Fowler et al., 2021; Garfield 2007). Dennis spoke about facilitators being present and attuned to the conversation, allowing uninterrupted space for participants to share:

They always concentrate on the group, you know, the conversation. What we talk about the scenarios you know and pay attention to what we are saying

Similarly, Chris spoke about the value of the group space being empathetic and non-judgemental.

Well I think the most important one is empathy so they can actually try to put themselves in the place of the people they are dealing with no matter what it is they have done... they do listen without interruption... it's non-judgmental so people are allowed to say exactly what it is they feel, even if you don't agree with them you are allowing them to tell it the way they feel it.... [if] they're talking to someone who is at least prepared to listen... then they are likely to get more out of them...

Levi added to this by identifying ways that facilitators can show that they are listening, and allowing time to explore the bigger picture:

When you're speaking to someone, they tend to have eye contact with you or show that they're listening, they'll be like "mmhmm" ... and then if they've got any questions about it they can ask .... not just OK you've finished talking we're going to move on... brushing it underneath the carpet...

Participants' perspectives aligned with literature by Hughes (2017) and Renehan (2021a) regarding the importance of a safe space in DAPPs. Participants acknowledged feeling shut down if this space was not created, adding depth to previous literature by considering the impact on the relationship between facilitator and participant when the latter do not feel heard. This consolidates Renehan's (2021a: 205) championing of 'time and space for the unthinkable to be said', to process and share challenging and pivotal emotions such as shame. Offering a space which accepts and humanises men as whole individuals rather than reducing them to the stigmatising label of their offending behaviour (Barry, 2007), was important to participants in building and maintaining rapport.

Communication style

Another rapport-influencing factor highlighted by participants was the communication style of the facilitators (Garfield, 2007; Hughes, 2017). To help, this section is split into two parts: firstly, the tone of challenging, and secondly, the use of humour.

Tone of challenging

Being challenged was identified as key in supporting introspection and change within BBR (NOMs, 2015). Participants in this study recognised the importance of being challenged but emphasized that how challenging was done was important for maintaining

rapport. Specifically, participants referred to the 'tone' of the challenge. Sam identified helpful characteristics in challenging:

> *It's done in a calm way that's not patronising or condescending. It's honest and open and you can see the thought that goes into the questioning and you can see the person thinking about what they want to say and see them listen to you prior to answering that question.*

Similarly, Leonard noticed a non-confrontational 'seed-planting' which he said was easier to engage with than a confrontational approach:

> *It's so well-mannered that you kind of have no other opportunity but to take it on…they put a little slant on it and it does open up a lot of sort of theories in my head about how, you know, I could have gone about life a little bit differently.*

These accounts support literature by Garfield (2007), and Hughes (2017) which position challenging as integral to programmes whose motivational frameworks are based on developing discrepancy while rolling with resistance, to encourage participants' critical introspection about their thinking and behaviours (NOMS, 2015), whilst avoiding accusatory or hostile tones which can create defensiveness and damage rapport. The success of this with the project participants can be discerned from participants' reference to 'questioning' rather than explicit or confrontational 'challenging'. Interestingly, while the responses in this piece of research draw attention to the importance of gentle challenging, Fowler et al. (2021) highlight that a strong bond can set a foundation for more direct challenging without eroding rapport. This reflects other discussions which have considered the interaction between masculinity and challenges, as well as the need for being clear and open with client groups (Hughes, 2024).

Use of humour

Humour was generally understood as playing an important role in reducing tension and increasing rapport with facilitators and between group members (Fowler et al., 2021; Laursen 2017), although in some instances there was a sense of ambiguity.

Chris spoke about humour reducing tension but recognised a boundary of not directing humour at anyone:

> *They (the facilitators) are prepared to have a laugh and a joke while they are doing it… it just helps to lighten the atmosphere … if someone is getting a little bit wound up and maybe feels stressed, then if you can make a joke… as long as it's not a joke aimed at him, then obviously if he can laugh along with it, it will help him to de-stress…*

Sam also referred to humour as reducing tension, while also noting the importance of clear and consistent boundaries. He also reflected how 'recommitments'[3] – which are formal agreements for participants to re-engage with the programme conditions if facilitators

feel they have not been met (NOMs, 2015) – can adversely impact rapport, especially when not used with care:

> Well, I think it can help relax each other … it's not getting too personal and you've got to remember that you are not in a group of close friends and so you can't have that same sense of humour… We had that recently with jokes we have made in group me and another guy in a group made a couple of jokes and we had to do a re-commit… having to re-commit for it felt very difficult but I understand to a point that they want to keep things a certain way, so that was fine it was just that then in that same group session they went and did a joke of the similar nature and it's like where are the boundaries?…

Leonard's views mirrored Sam's, highlighting the positive impact humour has on rapport but the opposite effect of unclear boundaries around this and the impact of recommitments on rapport.

> There has to be a little bit of a breakup of it and everyone is entitled to a laugh… you know that's how people deal with things… I just think, just have a quiet word with us instead of making us recommit, like guys, I understand that you love a bit of banter and love a joke and I understand it's very light hearted and not personal… a little word in private and that would have been the end of it… it creates distance, isn't it, you're gonna distance yourself away from the facilitator which is a shame because we've worked so hard on being honest and being you know upfront and respectful so it just kind of diminishes that little bit of that relationship you've got with that facilitator.

Participants' positioning of humour to diffuse tension adds to existing literature such as Laursen (2017) and Fowler et al., (2021), alongside ambivalence regarding its appropriateness – linked to its potential for subversiveness – to undermine serious topics or assert power (Laursen, 2017). However, perspectives which consider humour unprofessional or trivial overlook its utility in permeating the rigidity of formal conversation to cultivate deeper bonds and humanise professional connections, even in critical situations (Dean and Major, 2008), yet this was clearly evident to participants.

The overall impact of rapport

When asked what role rapport plays in BBR, Sam credited it for building an environment conducive to openness and engagement.

> So it's a big bit, because they need to be able to obviously relax the group and things like that to be able to be more open and you want people to when they are in the group to be able to communicate as best they can and talk as much about quite often personal things, and to be able to do that you've got to make people feel relaxed … so I would say the rapport for that is one of the most important things for the group is to be able to build that environment…

Similarly, Leonard volunteered its utility in engaging men to be open to sharing and receiving information.

> To sit in a room like I said and open up... took a massive, massive effort but what I will say about the facilitators is that they do make you feel at ease and they do try and sort of connect with you... I wouldn't have learned half the information that I have if it wasn't for them and I will always be thankful for that

These sentiments reflect myriad literature such as Maruna (2004), McNeill (2006) and Hughes (2017) who position the significance of the practitioner-participant relationship as no less than parallel to the content of an intervention.

Conclusions

It is hoped that this paper has allowed the reader to follow a journey of participants' perspectives of rapport with their facilitators, from upon entering a room to the space for their voices and then the responses given by facilitators. It explored how factors within this journey impacted rapport and categorised these factors into themes: feeling safe, space for exploration, and communication style such as tone of challenging and use of humour. Findings demonstrated that participants need a sense of safety, then space to explore their experiences, thoughts and emotions (Garfield, 1998) without judgement or collusion (Philip and Bell, 2017). Challenges are important but must be facilitated in a way which feels inquisitive rather than interrogatory. Within these themes ran continuous threads of creating emotional safety through verbal and non-verbal cues, coupled with clear boundaries. The recurrence of words and phrases such as 'relaxed', 'positive', 'feel', 'calm' and 'stressed' indicate the emotional aspects of group facilitation, as with probation practice more widely (Westaby et al., 2019). The centrality of emotional safety to rapport-building highlights the importance of understanding what helps facilitators feel able to create this environment, particularly considering the emotional labour inherent to the role (Knight, 2014). This paper calls for further investigation and exploration of the specific mechanisms of rapport, and the way in which it is mediated by gender, as well as more specific consideration of how 'emotional safety' can be understood and developed. Efficacy studies which focus excessively on 'what' is delivered, rather 'how' programmes are delivered and by 'whom', will lead to programmes which are limited in their effectiveness (Renehan, 2021a). Failing to give careful consideration to how facilitation can enhance programme effectiveness is also likely to result in a neglect of attention to the training needs of facilitators.

This practitioner led research has taken place at a time when the delivery of BBR is coming to an end. It is important to reflect on the key learning points at this juncture. Acknowledging the small sample size, the voices of the participants (which are consistent with the researcher's wider experience) add to a growing body of literature indicating that the effectiveness of DAPPs is dependent on factors which transcend their content. Engaging men convicted of offences involving violence against intimate partners requires considerable skill and reflexivity. Sustaining a non-judgemental and empathic approach

with men who have caused substantial harm, while still holding them to account for their behaviour, will continue to be an enormous challenge. Facilitators who work with DAPPs have arguably not been given the support required to optimise their skills in responding to the challenges involved. Notably, the Home Office has commissioned standards for domestic abuse perpetrator interventions, which emphasise the need for staff who are skilled in working with the complexities surrounding domestic abuse perpetrators. Specifically, the standards indicate that facilitators should receive effective line management as well as external clinical supervision (Gov.UK, 2023). It is not clear if and how this is currently provided. The skills and approach needed for domestic abuse perpetrators are distinct from work with the wider offending population. This is important at a time when the direction of travel is towards a standardised intervention for people subject to probation supervision, including domestic abuse offenders (Renehan and Gadd, 2024a). Specifically, this raises questions about the limitations of mixed-cohort groups, where offence diversity may impact participants' emotional safety. This is especially relevant if the recent sentencing review recommendation to promote non-custodial interventions increases programme uptake (Ministry of Justice, 2025).

His Majesty's Inspectorate has, at the time of writing, recently considered the progress of the probation service against recommendations made in a 2023 thematic inspection of its management of individuals with histories of domestic abuse. While this report indicated that some positive changes have been achieved, concerns remain about current practice (HMIP, 2025). Notably however, reflecting the themes of this article, the HMIP report did not give significant consideration to the complexities of programme interventions, or how they are experienced, instead focussing on whether or not they had been delivered in a timely manner.

The perspectives of group participants are rarely at the centre of practice developments. Similarly, the experiences of facilitators, who have weekly contact with perpetrators are not used as much as they could be to inform practice developments. This is especially important given the scale impact of violence against women.

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Notes

1. IDAP, reflecting the Duluth perpetrator programme, consisted of nine core modules each consisting of three sessions. Each module focussed on a different aspect of controlling behaviour. In each module, the first session would involve an introduction to the type of control in focus. The second session would require the participants to identify a time when they had demonstrated this behaviour, recognise it as intentional, and consider its impact. In the third session the men would be introduced to a non-controlling skill such as taking 'time outs', 'acknowledging women's fear' or 'coping with jealousy' (Hughes, 2024).
2. BBR involves 33-session programme, consisting of 24 group sessions, six 1-1 sessions and a final handover meeting including their probation officer (National Offender Management Service (NOMS), 2015). Group sessions are split into four modules: Foundation Module, My Thinking, My Emotions, and My Relationships, which can be undertaken in any order after the Foundation Module (NOMS, 2015).
3. BBR participants are required to agree to Conditions of Success (Active, Open, Respectful and Supportive participation). Failure to agree to these (or consistent failure to adhere to them) means potential removal from BBR. Signing a recommitment to these conditions offers an opportunity to re-engage with the programme.

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