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**(En)gendering change. Understanding the gendered dynamics of domestic abuse  
perpetrator programmes**

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Biography

Will Hughes is a senior lecturer in criminology at London Metropolitan University and a former probation officer.

**Abstract**

*Drawing on extensive participant observation and interviews, this article considers the interactive dynamics of two group based, probation domestic abuse perpetrator programmes. Specifically, the Integrated Domestic Abuse Programme (IDAP) and the Building Better Relationships Programme (BBR). Perpetrator groups are understood as involving collective emotions and understandings, which are continuously constructed and reconstructed through interactions. These interactions are highly gendered; reflecting men's desires to present acceptable masculine identities and narratives, which they perceive as being threatened by their*

*presence on a perpetrator programme. This article considers how gendered interactions take place within perpetrator groups, and calls for consideration of how they can support or undermine programme efficacy, and narratives of desistance.*

## **Keywords**

Group dynamics, perpetrators, domestic abuse, probation, effective practice

## **Introduction**

The scale of harm caused by domestic violence has been well established over a substantial period of time and continues to be a pressing global concern (WHO, 2021). According to the Crime Survey of England and Wales, 2.3 million adults experienced domestic abuse in the year ending March 2020, with 1.6 million of these people being women (ONS, 2020).<sup>1</sup>

While not uncontested, research evidence indicates consistently that violence against women is quantitatively and qualitatively different from violence against men, with women more likely to be subjected to multiple forms of abuse and more likely to experience serious physical injury (Westmarland, 2015). Group based perpetrator programmes targeted at male abusers have become a central strategy in tackling domestic abuse, but their effectiveness remains unclear, with some observers suggesting that they may be very limited in their impact (Bobcock, Green and Robie, 2004), while other evaluations suggest that some programmes can lead to significant reductions in violence (Bloomfield and Dixon, 2015; Kelly and Westmarland, 2015).

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<sup>1</sup> At the time of writing, this is the latest crime survey data available, because the crime survey was suspended during the coronavirus pandemic. However, police recorded domestic incidents increased 6 percent in the year ending March 2021, and the national abuse helpline in England experienced a 22% increase in demand in the same period (ONS, 2021)

Discussions of perpetrator programmes have tended to be dominated by issues of 'what works', but there has been a neglect of 'how' they are experienced and understood by participants, or how dynamic factors associated with group based programmes can enhance or diminish their effectiveness (Hughes, 2017). While there has been considerable attention to specific forms of masculinity as a target of intervention, the way gender is played out within groups, and the implications of gendered interactions has not been subject to sufficient attention. Similarly, the role of emotions within perpetrator programmes has been neglected. Consequently, the detailed, intricate, and dynamic aspects of perpetrator programmes, as they are experienced, have not been subject to sufficient analysis. Instead, group facilitators and participants tend to be viewed as fixed variables who passively role out and consume the programme; the effectiveness of which tends to be viewed as being determined by design and content. The interpersonal skills and knowledge required of facilitators, and the understandings of participants is often overlooked (Hughes, 2017; Renehan, 2021a).

Drawing on research involving participant observation and interviews with perpetrators and facilitators, this article examines the interactions between men attending two probation domestic abuse perpetrator programmes; the Integrated Domestic Abuse Programme (IDAP), and the Building Better Relationships programme (BBR). While this focus of study has been neglected, this paper seeks to contribute to a growing body of analysis that has drawn attention to how interventions are experienced by participants, how abusive men understand masculinity, and how change can be promoted through the development of desistance narratives (Morran, 2022; Mullins and Kirkwood, 2021),

The research underpinning this paper suggests that the dynamics and interactions of group based programmes are central in how they are experienced. Effectiveness is dependent on men being able to engage in a process of reflection about their identities, beliefs, experiences and behaviours. This in turn is dependent on the overall culture of the group, which is understood as being constructed, expressed and interpreted through gendered emotional exchanges (Collins, 2004).

The following section sets out the theoretical framework that is employed to understand group interactions. After this there is a brief discussion of the research on which this article is based. The key aspects of group dynamics are then explored, where it is argued that perpetrator programmes show consistent and discernible themes, irrespective of changing memberships, or the specific programme being delivered.

### **A theoretical framework for understanding group interactions**

Randal Collins' work on interaction rituals and the emotional content of exchanges provides a fruitful framework for understanding how social interactions, within perpetrator programmes, can be understood (2004; 2008). Writing within a Durkheimian tradition, Collins explores how groups of people establish a collective identity and moral order through shared emotions. Collins' analysis also draws on a structural interpretivist perspective, and particularly that of Erving Goffman (1956), who describes the way in which people perform social identities, and attempt to encourage favourable interpretations among other social actors. Goffman describes how individuals actively present themselves to others in a performance, and move between front and backstage arenas, revealing certain aspects of themselves, and attempting to conceal others.

This framework is pertinent for understanding domestic abuse programmes. For example, the participants' performances may vary according to whether they are in the group room or in the waiting room, which will both differ from performances in other aspects of their lives. However, presentation management and social performances are challenging for men who attend domestic abuse programmes. Their presence on programmes for domestic abusers constitutes a threat to the identities that they wish to present. They are also aware that facilitators will have access to records and reports which contradict the presentations they wish to give (Hughes, 2019).

Collins (2004) emphasises that while Goffman's framework is useful, it misrepresents the individual actor as primarily rational, individual, and conscious. Collins argues that interactions are also emotional, and subconscious. Reflecting broader attention to the role of emotions within criminal justice and criminology (Canton, 2015; Knight, 2014; Jacobsen and Walklate, 2019), Collins draws on Durkheim's notion of 'collective effervescence' (Durkheim, 1972) to describe how emotions are infectious, and experienced collectively at a physiological level, where bodily rhythms become synchronised. As with music concerts, sports events, comedy shows and protests, groups of people will share a collective experience of excitement, anger, joy, humour or tranquillity, which is reflected in their bodies through changes in heart rate, breathing and physical states. While this might not seem an intuitive model for understanding domestic abuse groups, these themes are evident in the accounts of participants and observations of programmes (Hughes, 2019). More broadly, this understanding challenges dominant social science paradigms, which separate bodily senses from cognitive functions (Damasio, 1994).

The centrality of gender in tackling domestic abuse has been asserted by pioneering feminist work that has emphasised the relevance of dominant forms of masculinity as key in understanding male violence (Dobash et al, 2000; Harne and Radford, 2008; Stanko, 2001; Kelly, 1988). This understanding is evident in the Integrated Domestic Abuse Programme (IDAP), which drew on the feminist informed and highly influential Duluth model of intervention. As such IDAP primarily targeted patriarchal understandings of gender. Gender is less central in BBR, (Hughes, 2017) which replaced IDAP as a primary probation perpetrator programme in 2013 (Bloomfield and Dixon, 2015). This reflected a broader cynicism about the role of gender in explaining and addressing domestic abuse, along with an assertion that individual factors, including trauma (Morran, 2013; Renehan 2021b) and personality factors (Dutton, 2006) are equally important.

Debates about the relative importance of gender have continued to underpin discussion of effectiveness in domestic abuse interventions (Barney and Mohr Carney, 2015). However, irrespective of the importance of some forms of masculinity as targets of intervention, gender is central in understanding interactions between men within perpetrator programmes. Building on Connell (2005) and other influential examinations of masculinity (Messerschmidt, 2018; West and Zimmerman, 1987) this paper understands masculinity within male groups as being performed through interactions, where it is produced, reproduced and negotiated. This production of masculinity does not take place in an isolated context, but occurs against a backdrop of broader cultural beliefs about what it means to be male. Masculinity is not understood as static, but as a social practice involving interactions and performances between individuals.

Incorporating the theoretical strands described above, perpetrator programmes are, therefore, understood as involving dynamic and complex sets of interactions. Despite their messiness, the understandings, experiences and emotions within perpetrator programmes follow discernible patterns. These patterns can be understood through the lenses of interactive emotional exchanges and gendered performances. The following unpicks and scrutinises these patterns and emphasises that they are significant in understanding effectiveness.

### **Method**

The research on which this article is based was carried out as part of a PhD completed in 2019 (Hughes, 2019) Data was collected through participant observation, as a group facilitator, of 86 group sessions over a three- and a half-year period. This was supported by semi-structured interviews with 10 men who had attended the programme, and 8 facilitators who delivered them. The use of participant observation enabled me to observe and document the interactions within perpetrator groups, directly as they happened, rather than being reliant on retrospective accounts, which are invariably affected by issues of memory and the tendency for interviewees to provide a subjective version of events. The strategy adopted is open to criticism, because of the inevitable impact that I had on the research process (Webb et al, 1966). While participant observation inevitably leads to disruption, which is associated with all insider research (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019), my immersion in the social environment allowed for a substantial depth of understanding regarding the informal rules and processes of group interactions.

The approach to data collection employed several principles of ethnography; the aim was to undertake research through immersion in the social world being studied. However, the term

participant observation was adopted to reflect the limited level of immersion that I had in the everyday lives of participants (Bryman, 2012).

As a reflection of the area where the research took place, there was limited ethnic diversity among the men involved. The participant observation strand of the research brought me into contact with 35 men, of which 1 identified as Turkish, 2 identified as being Travellers, 2 identified as Black British, 1 identified as British Asian, and the others identified as White British. The ages of participants ranged from 21 to 70.

The semi-structured interviews enabled participants to provide further perspectives about their experiences of completing perpetrator programmes. Interestingly the data from the interviews and the participant observation were broadly consistent. For the interview strand of the research, I aimed to speak to participants who had known me as a facilitator, as well as those who completed programmes with other facilitators, and had no prior knowledge of me. I also aimed to ensure that the interviewees reflected (as far as possible) the diversity of identities that were present on the programmes. There was some reluctance to be interviewed among the men, especially for those who had no prior knowledge of me, so to a certain extent the participants self-selected. Of the ten men interviewed, one identified as being Turkish, one White Irish, and the others White British. The youngest interviewee was 27, and the oldest 70. Of those interviewed, 6 had prior experience of me as a facilitator, 4 did not. 5 had attended IDAP, and 5 had attended BBR.



There were significant on-going ethical and practical considerations associated with the research underpinning this article<sup>2</sup>. Specifically, a decision was made not to disclose to the men within the participant observation strand that data was being gathered for research purposes. This was a contentious approach that sits at odds with the principle of informed consent, which is widely accepted as a requirement for ethically informed research (Bryman, 2012). The decision to operate covertly was made on the basis of three key justifications. Firstly, if any of the participants had objected to the research, this would have made it unviable, even if all of the others provided consent, and believed the research to be of value. Secondly disclosing that research was taking place had the potential to impact on the relationships between facilitators and groups participants, thereby impacting adversely on the outcomes of the programmes, with potential risk implications for partners and children. Thirdly the decision to operate covertly was informed by the need to limit the impact of the research process on the data gathered. There was scope to consider obtaining consent retrospectively, after data had been collected, but prior using it in published material. However it was felt that there were persuasive reasons that justified not taking this course of action. Some of the group members were no longer reachable, and there were concerns that such contact could have an impact on the risk they posed.

I was mindful of ensuring that the requirements of being a facilitator took priority over my objectives as a researcher, especially in relation to monitoring risk and delivering programmes in accordance with their design. I was careful to reflect continuously on my practice, in consultation with co facilitators and academic colleagues, to ensure that I was meeting the demands of the facilitator role (Coy, 2006).

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<sup>2</sup> A fuller discussion of the ethical and practical issues can be accessed in Hughes (2019)

Ethics, in this instance, were primarily driven by an avoidance of harm rather than transparency. This was achieved by taking care to ensure that participants were treated with dignity and respect, and that the research process did not have adverse impacts on those involved. Considerable care was taken to ensure that all records were anonymised, through the use of pseudonyms and the avoidance of precise biographical details. My research practice was informed by others who have engaged in participant observation and insider research, who have highlighted that there are unavoidable limitations in the extent to which participants can ever be fully informed about the potential impact of research, when it takes place over a sustained period of time, as well as emphasising the disruption that seeking consent can cause (Lawton, 2001; Holdaway, 1983; Coy 2006).

Data was collected using written notes in the case of the groups, and transcribed audio recordings for the interviews. Typically I would write small aide-memoires during the groups sessions and breaks, and then write extensive notes from after the completion of each session (Ditton, 1977). Reflecting the inductive approach adopted, the data was analysed thematically, with related and recurring statements, behaviours and expressions categorised.

### **Gendering resistance**

Typically, men attending perpetrator programmes initially exhibited significant resistance. This is associated with a perception that programme attendance was emasculating, in several different respects, and therefore fostered a profound sense of gendered shame. Most significantly, shame emanated from the fact that the programmes were explicitly for men who had been violent towards women; behaviour which was understood as conferring a subordinate masculine status. While influential scholars have highlighted the relationship between domestic abuse and

culturally approved masculine values (Dobash and Dobash, 1992; 2000; Harne and Radford, 2008), this study suggests that culturally dominant forms of masculinity on the one hand, and violence towards women on the other, have an ambiguous and uncomfortable relationship. A capacity to engage in violence with other men was understood as consistent with broader cultural celebrations of masculinity (Connell, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2018), but violence towards women and intimate partners was associated with emasculation. Statements such as '*I am not going on a course with wife beaters*', and '*I shouldn't be on this course*' were recurring. These sentiments are expressed by 'Trevor', who was interviewed after completing IDAP:

*At least if you hit four or five blokes, and even if you got to court and even if you go to prison, the magistrate says: 'and you beat up four of them, that is impressive', and you think 'yeaah, score a goal' but.... hitting a partner; it is shameful (IDAP Participant interview, Trevor).*

While the reader might be sceptical of Trevor's belief that the magistrates were impressed with his success in male-to-male violence, he does reflect the understandings and emotions that men typically expressed at the early stages of the programmes.

As well as the identity threat and gendered shame posed by the group's association with violence against women, there were other features of the environment which provoked anxiety and fear of emasculation. The emphasis on sitting and talking, especially talking about feelings and emotions fed into the men's experiences of the programme sessions as a feminised arenas. The sentiment: '*women talk, and real men do*' was expressed in various ways by many of the men, perhaps most explicitly by Ryan, in the following:

*Is it going to be sitting around and talking like this every week, because this is like a fucking mothers meeting. (Extract from IDAP field notes)*

Being positioned in the role of learner was experienced as counter to the masculine identities of participants. To be a real man, is to 'know' (Connell, 2005; Willis, 1977). This emasculation was exacerbated by the perceived identities of the facilitators who, in the location where this study took place, were typically women, and often younger than the perpetrators. The physical similarities that group rooms had to classrooms further reinforced discomfort. The enclosed space, the presence of desks and chairs, the power difference between facilitators and participants, evoked memories of formal education, which was markedly different from many of the participants' work and leisure spaces. Men regularly made statements to resist the role of learner. Sometimes this would involve emphasising their knowledge and life experience through comments such as '*I should be teaching you*', '*I should be running this group*' or comments which suggested that the material was obvious. Often these sentiments were expressed through sarcasm, for example, on arrival, one participant would consistently say to the receptionist: '*I am here for the beat your bird up class*'. In addition to the aspects described above, there were rules about how to behave and which language could and could not be used, which further limited the scope to act out some expressions of masculine identity.

The experience of the programmes as shameful, humiliating, and emasculating, initially led the men to dissociate from each other, and from the facilitators. Participants expressed hostility through limited engagement, hostile body language and avoidance of eye contact. They would also emphasise their lack of suitability for the programmes through minimisation, denial and blame regarding their relationship violence, which is commonly associated with perpetrators

(Harne and Radford, 2008; Morran, 2013). In many instances, participants would simply not attend, despite the potential threat of being recalled to prison or to court.

### **From resistance to acceptance: emotional entrainment**

Despite the resistance and hostility described above, most participants developed a much more positive orientation to the programmes fairly quickly. Using language which seems at odds with a social science approach, and particularly one that is rooted in an interpretivist framework, Randall Collins (2004; 2008) refers to people as being fundamentally '*hardwired*' for cooperation. Sustaining conflict or hostility is draining; people brought together in groups therefore start to form bonds and develop collective strategies to deal with common problems (Cohen, 1955). They thus become 'entrained' within a shared set of perspectives (Collins, 2004). These frameworks are reflective of the interactions within the perpetrator programmes observed. The body language, emotions and style of interactions quickly became less hostile, evidenced through increased eye contact, occasional smiles and statements that indicated willingness to engage. This change tended to happen more quickly with IDAP. The structure of this programme meant that new members joined established groups in small numbers, every four weeks, at the start of a new module. This allowed experienced members to socialise the new arrivals into the culture of the group. Typically, participants shifted from demonstrating hostility and resistance, to making positive statements about the benefits of the programme within a period of three weeks. The phrases '*not what you think*'; '*these are a good bunch of guys*'; and the '*facilitators are sound*' were common in the data collected. BBR did not share this gradual change of group members, so the process was slower, but still apparent.

The socialisation of new members into a positive orientation towards the group is illustrated in the following extract from field notes. Ryan was a 21 year old who was struggling with many aspects of IDAP attendance, and demonstrating resistance. He was encouraged by other group members to interpret the programme in a positive way. Ryan emphasised that he experienced group attendance as frustrating, and in conflict with how he saw himself. Specifically, he was angry about the identity of a '*domestically violent man*' that the group conferred. However, the collective energy and mood of the group made it difficult for him to sustain resistance:

*Ryan: I can't be doing with this bollocks.*

*Fred: Yeah well, you've only just started, you have to give it a chance.*

*Simon: You have to think 'each one teach one'*

*George: Do you want to end up like me*

*Ryan: No [with laughter]*

*[others contribute with encouraging words and humour] (Extract from IDAP field notes)*

The significance of this exchange is less about the rational persuasion of Ryan of the benefits of the group, but more an emotional exchange where he is being encouraged to develop an emotional synchronisation with other members (Collins, 2004). He chuckled and laughed with each interjection from other group members, and as the programme progressed, he became increasingly positive in his mood and style of interaction. Ryan's interactions within the group were typical for new members. The context in which the interactions took place were unfamiliar, and prompted discomfort and resistance, but the 'feel' and collective energy carried them along and made hostility difficult to sustain (Collins, 2004; 2008).

A further example of the way in which the group promoted a particular interpretation of the programme is in evidence in the follow extract from field notes, from an IDAP session, where the group can be seen as reinforcing the emotional landscape:

*John was very talkative from the outset...When asked about the completion of out of session work, he immediately began relaying it. Facilitator interjected and said that he would like to hear from another group member first. John initially went quiet but then said: 'I can't be fucked with this tonight....I am pissed off with being mugged off. That is the third time someone has been rude to me at probation.' The group responded with mild giggles and smiles, and suggestions that John should 'calm down' and take a 'chill pill'. John paused and then began smiling appropriately to the others while they relayed their out of session work. (Extract from IDAP field notes)*

In evidence here is the assertion of the informal rules of the group. The men gently chastise John, reminding him that aggression to others, including facilitators is not appropriate, and the collective emotional energy is palpably steered towards calmness and comradery, and away from hostility. The motivations of the other men maybe diverse and ambiguous. They may have a genuine commitment to the group or may more cynically be trying to steer John away from possible negative repercussions. Either way, there is a process of rules being asserted and expressed, which has implications for the emotional energy of the room.

**From entrainment to 'collective effervescence' : male social bonds and positivity.**

As noted, the groups tended to move quickly from a position of hostility and defensiveness, towards an increasingly positive and collective orientation. The groups studied did not typically stop developing at the point of acceptance. Instead, the men increasingly demonstrated explicitly positive bonds towards each other, and to the programme itself. These bonds were evident in the ritualised greeting ceremonies, where men greeted each other at the start of each programme session, and expressed a positive collective energy, or 'buzz'. The Durkheimian notion of '*collective effervescence*' (Durkheim, 1972), where individuals are carried along with the collective emotional energy of a group, is evident in the field note extract below:

*On arrival at the probation office, the men report to the reception desk. They sit and wait to be called [as a group] into the group room...The first man arrives and takes a seat. When the second man arrives, the first man stands, and the two men greet each other and shake hands. The third man shakes hands with both men, and this ritual continues as each man arrives. No one is excluded from the handshaking ritual. As later men arrive the expressions of greetings escalate into cheers. I am not emersed in waiting room ceremonies but observe from the reception area. Specific words or phrases cannot be deciphered but laughing and teasing appear central (Extract from IDAP field notes)*

Rituals like the one described above, were on-going among groups of men attending IDAP, where, as noted above, men joined at the start of each module. For BBR, it took several sessions for similar rituals to develop, and these were created afresh within each new group, rather than continuously evolving. Nevertheless, bonds did develop and are expressed within the following extract:



*Adam: I feel like we are bonding as a group*

*W: Yeah. I see that there is lots of conversation in the waiting room now, which has previously been quiet*

*Mickey: [laughs] It is mainly just him [pointing to Adam]. The rest of us are quiet (Extract from BBR field notes)*

The bonds between men, and the positive feelings associated with the groups also featured significantly in the interviews with the participants:

*I can recall the first programme, because I was amazed, absolutely amazed... Because I came into the foyer there, and it might have been Greg who was there, but as soon as I walked in... the guy came up and shook my hand... And then everyone came up and shook my hand. They welcomed me. We were all in this boat together.... The comradeship on the course was excellent.... They weren't toe rags. I mean that was my mental concept. I couldn't believe it. And throughout the course, everyone that came in, we shook hands with them. So the previous course, passed it on to the next course.... And everyone was trying to help everyone else (IDAP Participant interview, Arthur)*

Trevor, who had attended a different IDAP group to Arthur, expressed overlapping sentiments during an interview:

*They were a great bunch of guys, and I was really fortunate that I was with those guys, because after the third month, everyone was really open and honest, and there would still be a bit of 'but*

*she did this, she did that' but there was an openness... I found myself in an environment where I thought, 'I like these people'. I feel comfortable with them' (IDAP Participant interview, Trevor)*

Later in the same interview, Trevor referred to the group explicitly as a collective unit with shared goals:

*If you are in a team sport, you help that guy, because you did it for me. Because we were a team (IDAP Participant interview, Trevor).*

Further evidence of the collective bonds, and positive emotional energy within the programmes was provided by Adam during his final session of BBR. He was eager to have a group photograph taken. The other participants enthusiastically agreed, albeit with teasing. Adam subsequently emailed the photograph to me and it captures the men smiling and leaning towards each other, with arms extended so that their bodies overlapped in physical space. The photograph looks like a group of friends who might be at a bar or on route to a football match, rather than individuals compelled to attend a domestic abuse programme.

The examples above illustrate the emotional energy that Collins (2004; 2008) refers to as occurring within positive group interactions. In evidence are reciprocal validation, teasing and play. Relevant here is the notion of *homosociality* (Hammeran and Johansenn, 2014). This refers to the tendency among men to enjoy the companionship of other men. The men found endorsement and validation from each other and demonstrated elevated emotional states in which their bodies and words suggested excitement and positivity. Within the arenas of

perpetrator programmes men were able to affirm, renegotiate and practice male identities, which they had previously perceived as under threat (Connell, 2005).

Significantly, the affirmation established through group interactions, enabled men to engage in discussions which they would have previously experienced as shaming, or an assault on their entire male identity. Within the environment of a positive and affirming group experience, men were able to understand criticism as focussed on specific behaviours or peripheral aspects of the self, rather than the self in its entirety. However, equally, there was the potential for reasserting destructive male narratives and identities.

#### **Unpicking the gendered microculture: masculinity revised or masculinity reasserted?**

There were several key themes which characterised groups where a collective understanding had been established. Central were swearing, humour, fooling around, violent potential, heterosexuality, mutual endorsement, being in control of one's self, and a revised understanding of 'manning up'. In many ways, these themes reflect long established explorations of the way men and boys behave in groups, when they perceive a threat to their status (Cohen, 1955; Willis, 1977). As well as affirming bonds, the rituals and behaviours of the groups embodied elements of resistance to the messages of the programmes, which continued to be expressed throughout the group process.

#### ***Swearing***

Swearing featured heavily in the groups, despite requests by facilitators to avoid it as much as possible. The interjection of profanities, seemed to neutralise the threat posed by engaging in

discussions and exchanges which were otherwise regarded as feminine. Swearing also served as a ritualistic way of expressing resistance towards aspects of the programmes, and as a method of expressing of emotion. Attempts to reduce swearing often led to increased hostility, with some men finding it very hard to express themselves at all without the inclusion of key swear words. As with other aspects of group behaviour, the social role, and gendered basis of swearing warrants further examination.

### ***Humour***

In accordance with other examinations of group-based interactions, humour played a central role in expressions of collective identity (Laurson, 2017). Humour is a complex and diverse phenomenon which is hard to define. Within the programmes it was expressed through verbal statements, physical performances, mocking of others and descriptions of past events or future possibilities. Humour was used as a key strategy in sustaining an acceptable masculine identity, while engaging with the programme requirements. By interjecting emotional and personal narratives with jokes, the men were able to demonstrate that they were not taking the emotional exchanges too seriously, or internalising them too much. Humour was also a means of managing negative emotions, enabling sensitive discussions, and enshrining social bonds. Occasionally humour was used more perniciously, with the expression of misogynistic sentiments. These instances were, however, rare. Nevertheless, humour is a challenging issue for facilitators to manage. The facilitators in this study tended to allow and to some extent encourage the use of humour, when it was used with positive intentions, however it was challenged when it was perceived as undermining the dignity of others or key values.

Collins' (2004) gives specific attention to the role of humour in the creation of shared emotional energy, social bonds and belonging, highlighting that when it takes hold, the individual is often unable to show restraint or self-control. He refers to laughter as the '*build-up of collective effervescence ..involving rhythmic repetitions of breath, caught and forcefully expelled*' (Collins, 2004: 65). This understanding is certainly reflective of the occurrence of humour within the group sessions studied here, where bonds were regularly expressed through shared laughter. On occasion members of the group, including facilitators, lost control, as illustrated in the following exchange within a BBR session, where the group was effectively derailed by collective humour performance, reflecting the involuntary aspect of laughter which Collin's (2004) describes:

*Adam: How do you know if you have broken your wrist?*

*[Hysterical laughter from Mickey who emphasises the randomness of the comment: it occurred during a serious conversation about sexual intimacy within relationships]*

*[pause]*

*Mickey: Go like this [making a twisting motion with his hand, while sustaining a serious face]. Go like this [making an inverse twist with the same hand]*

*[Adam copies the movements while listening intently. The group observe in silence]*

*Mickey: [with apparent sincerity]: Does that hurt?*

*Adam: Ow! (Contorted face) Yes*

*Mickey: [leaves a long pause]. Well don't go like that then [repeating the same gesture]*

*Caroline (Facilitator) loses composure and starts to cry with laughter, along with the rest of the group who find amusement in her laughter. (Extract from BBR field notes)*

There were multiple instances where humour helped to create positive emotional states among participants and created opportunities to express *homosociality* (Hammeran and Johansenn, 2014) and hegemonic forms of masculinity (Connell 2005). In the following, Shane recounted the importance of humour in the first sentence of his interview:

*[I]t's a bit daunting ya know, but you settle in really quickly. The guys, they settle you in really quickly, with humour. [laughter]. Humour is a big part. (IDAP Participant interview, Shane)*

Humour was a mechanism for reassurance, integration and approval at points of anxiety. The key phrase '*they settle you in*' indicates the way in which individuals are granted membership to the group, and given approval, through humour. Humour enabled affection to be expressed and reassurance to be provided without the breach of masculine expectations regarding vulnerability or emotional expression (Connell, 2005). Humour was central in promoting *collective effervescence*, and prevented the experience from being draining, or excessively challenging for participants. Statements about humour as a means of lifting the mood, and reducing the sense of threat were abundant in the interviews and in the programme sessions. It was this overall positivity of mood that participants referred to as enabling them to manage more challenging aspects of the programmes and reflections about their past behaviour.

Reflecting other work, humour was also used as a strategy of resistance (Laursen, 2017). The content of the programmes and the messages delivered were often mocked. A recurring approach was that men would perform an exaggerated performance of an imagined other, who holds explicitly misogynistic views. In doing so they were contesting assumptions that they believed were being made about their male identities.

During one session, men were asked what they had learnt about sexual respect. Ryan made the following contribution:

*I have learnt that you mustn't stick things up a woman's ass without permission (quoting from a list of abusive behaviours identified in the IDAP handbook) [Followed by raucous laughter from the other members] (Extract from IDAP field notes)*

In this instance, Ryan was communicating layers of emotion and meaning. He was seeking to display what he regarded as the obviousness of the messages he and the other men were being given, and his lack of conformity to the type of person who would need instruction on the issues being discussed. There was a desire to challenge perceived assumptions made about him. Ryan's response here is reflective of others who made similar challenges to the authority of the facilitators and the assumptions of the programmes. Participants often emphasised that the programmes reflected misplaced assumptions about men and masculinity. There were times when participants associated the programme with broader attempts to undermine dominant forms of working class masculinity, which underpinned the comment made below:

*Ryan participated actively in discussions. When asked how he was he replied that he was 'fantastic'. Others laughed. Fred replied [laughing] 'He is the legend' (Extract from IDAP field notes)*

Ryan went on to assert that he was 'a legend', because although he was being told he needed to change, he was eager to emphasise that there was nothing wrong with him. From this point

of the programme onwards, Ryan was affectionately referred to as 'the legend', at the start of each session when he was greeted by other members, and whenever he made contributions which were controversial, or seen as in opposition to the programme messages. Back slaps and '*here goes the legend*' followed many of his contributions. Ryan was therefore celebrated for pushing the boundaries of the programme, and resisting parts of it, while avoiding substantial disruption or fundamentally undermining the messages of the sessions.

***Violence and sex: reassertions of hegemonic masculinity through essentialist narratives.***

Essentialist understandings of maleness, associated with a tendency towards violence and desire for sex, were explicitly and implicitly asserted in many group sessions. At some stage, most participants told stories of their past experiences of violence and described their on-going need to manage violent impulses. The assertion of stories of violence enabled men to demonstrate their conformity with dominant understandings of masculinity (Connell, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2018) while showing engagement with the programmes through acknowledging the need to make changes, and to develop self-control. The programmes encouraged an understanding of violence and aggression which was associated with personal deficits, but the men tended to see aggression as triggered by external circumstances, and an inevitable feature of being male (Laursen and Henriksen, 2018). Commonly, the men were willing to commit to an endeavour of managing their aggression, but maintained a narrative which held that violent impulses are inevitable. The importance of violence and stories of violence are illustrated in the following account given by Arthur, during an IDAP group session:



*The men were asked to recall their first experiences of violence and consider how this impacted on them. Arthur was particularly active in the session, telling the group about the problems in his marriage because of his episodes of aggression. Arthur spoke seriously and expressed regret. The other men listened attentively with eye contact and nods. Arthur started to laugh and explained that his episodes of aggression frequently involved throwing his shoes at windows, which smashed and then had to be replaced. Arthur began laughing and added: I have to wear soft shoes now, so that they bounce off of windows. I have spent too much money replacing windows [Lots of laughter from Arthur and all the others] (Extract from IDAP field notes)*

Arthur's account of using soft shoes illustrates an attempt to reiterate violence and aggression as external forces which can be managed, but not eliminated. Other accounts involved the expression of similar beliefs about the impulsive nature of violence, and the importance of tough childhood experiences in the presentation of masculine identities. The on-going ability and occasional willingness to use violence featured in abundance throughout each programme, as the following extract illustrates:

*Alfie: If someone comes at me I'm going to take him down, it's my training, it is just going to kick in (Alfie has previously been in the army) (Extract from IDAP field notes)*

Adam regularly provided narratives that emphasised the biological basis of physical toughness and a potential for violence. He would refer to *his man instincts kicking in*, within certain situations, with nods of approval from the other men. In the following, he gives a more explicit expression of these beliefs:

*Adam: ... We are in probation and for political reasons, we can't be saying this, but violence works...It's in our nature and girls like it too. They are attracted to us if we are aggressive and we defend them. They are not attracted to us if we are meek... The thing is men are more powerful than women. It's nature and its natural. Men need to be men. Women should be able to work but I believe that they should also know to let men be in control because it is natural. Let men be men. (Extract from BBR field notes)*

There was an ambivalent relationship with violence, which was on the one hand condemned, but, in keeping with other explorations of masculinity (Connell, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2018, Cohen, 1955) value was placed on being able to use it when required and having had experience of doing so in the past. Simon, an IDAP participant, had spent considerable time in a prison outside the UK. He made lots of reference to the extreme forms of gang related violence that he had been exposed to and had participated in. His current conflicts involved, he said, an avoidance of violence, but he was clear that this was a matter of choice, emphasising that he could respond to situations with effective violence if he needed to do so.

Narratives that drew on essentialist constructions of masculinity did not just revolve around the capacity to use physical violence. Heterosexuality was also regularly expressed. A common strand of expressions involved making sexualised and occasionally misogynistic comments about women; and often expressing heterosexual identities through a presentation of desire for regular sexual activity:

*Arthur referred to being more 'sexed' than his wife, and that she would only want sex to have children. He paused and then added [smiling] that he 'didn't do that badly because they had a*

*lot of trouble conceiving their second child' [laughter from the group]. He referred to having sex in various locations because of his wife's eagerness to have a child' (Extract from IDAP field notes)*

Displays of heterosexuality occasionally revolved around the perceived threat of homosexuality. Explicitly homophobic comments were rare, although the value placed on heterosexual prowess and banter about 'gayness' did reinforce the 'gendered order' (Connell, 2005).

### ***Negotiating and revising masculinities and relationships***

Throughout the programmes the men conveyed that some elements of traditional male identities would not be compromised (Morran, 2022). Nevertheless, acknowledging this, where a safe group culture was established, the men demonstrated a mutual commitment to engage in reflection on issues including change, what sort of men they wanted to be, the harms they had caused, and the dissonance between their behaviour and their relationship aspirations. This was illustrated by Shane who shared the following with a BBR group:

*I'm a different person now and it makes me think about other people. ...the pattern of thinking and that...It is also just coming here. It reminds me of what I have done...(Extract from BBR field notes).*

Morris, who had attended BBR, demonstrated profound comments during an interview, where he refers to video vignettes (which depict various forms of abuse), that are shown during groups sessions:

*They show you and explain about the DVDs. It is very graphic. It is very eye opening. And when you see the situations you do actually sit there and think, bloody hell, and you see yourself. I've said that, I've actually used body language like that. The way the bloke is talking to his wife or whatever...Fuckin hell. (BBR interview Shane)*

And again during interview, Trevor emphasises what he perceived as the transformative impact of IDAP:

*Denial, minimisation, the whole thing, and I thought to myself, you are lying your fucking teeth off mate, and it was nice to see some of the group go off of that stance...I thought: 'you know what, I'm a prick and I did it...It's like you see in the videos [the vignettes] and I would feel some sort of horror that the guy would behave like that. What a prick. But then I would start to study my own behaviour. Honestly, it was like you would see in a Syrian video of torture. It was inevitable that if I carried on, someone would die. (IDAP interview Trevor)*

The observations and interviews suggest that although the demonstration and collective performance of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005) were in clear evidence throughout the programmes, the men were willing to reflect on their need for change, their understandings of masculinity, and the impact of their past behaviour on their relationships and goals, where there was an environment in which this could take place. Men who acknowledged emotional sensitivity, responsibility and a commitment to change were mutually endorsed within the programmes.

Change was experienced as a process, requiring negotiation and an attempt to consider established understandings of masculinity and develop alternative narratives of maleness. The men did not tend to understand change as internalising a new form of masculinity, grounded in gender equality, as underpinned in IDAP, or as accepting that they had deficits in their thinking skills, as underpinned in BBR. Instead, the men tended to understand change within masculine narratives. For example, the men referred to '*giving everything 110%*', acknowledging mistakes, '*taking it on the chin*', and being able to adapt. Men were also able to explore childhood difficulties within narratives which emphasised resilience, rather than vulnerability. Within these frameworks of understanding, men were able to consider how they had caused harm through dominating others, explore what positive and supportive relationships might look like, and consider their aspirations for intimacy. This may suggest that the programmes produced, at best, superficial changes, and can risk reinforcing hegemonic ideas about masculinity. Nevertheless, these discussions prompt further consideration of how programmes can be used to enable degrees of change, and reflections about masculinity, without expecting transformational abandonments of traditional gendered ideas. In the accounts of the group members, there were distinct commitments to behavioural change within relationships. These were ascribed by the men to the group environment and the collective 'feel' or 'buzz' of the group.

### **Summary and conclusion**

This paper has endeavoured to explore and identify the interactive dynamics involved in domestic abuse perpetrator programmes. Domestic abuse programmes have tended to be evaluated on the basis of content or outcomes. As a result, the experiences, interpretations and

dynamic interactions of participants have been neglected. Drawing on a symbolic interactionist perspective, but with particular attention given to gender and emotion, it has been argued that group attendance constitutes a profound threat to the masculine identities of participants. Shame emerged as a key theme which the men expressed at the point of referral to a domestic abuse programme, along with generalised anxiety about attendance. The participants responded to these threats through strategies of resistance. Initially these were characterised by expressions of minimisation, denial and blame, along with hostility towards the programme. However, participants developed collective strategies to manage the threats posed. These strategies involved humour, reciprocal validation, and setting limits on how much their conception of masculinity would be compromised. Through these processes, individuals could present a version of masculinity within the constraints of the programme, and retain an acceptable sense of themselves as gendered beings. The men generally shifted from being fearful of stigma to being able to compartmentalise perceived blemishes on their masculinity. Some of the aspects of the groups observed could be understood as counterproductive, or even as collusive, because they sometimes involved assertions of forms of masculinity which can be perceived as destructive and oppressive. Similarly, the emphasis here on the positive or enjoyable aspects of group attendance may prompt considerable discomfort about the potential failure of perpetrators to be held to account within the programmes that they attend. However, through group processes a sense of safety can be created, which has the potential to enable men to be challenged about their behaviours and their beliefs. Perhaps more importantly, group processes can facilitate a personal exploration of the individualised and emotional difficulties associated with abuse, which are beyond the scope of the content of standardised programmes, which target generalised skills or deficits.

The impact of differing facilitator styles has clear implications for how group dynamics operate, as does the organisational culture in which they take place (Renehan, 2021). This paper has made an artificial separation in focussing on the interactions of group members, without explicit attention to the facilitators and the impact that they have on group interactions. There will also be differences based on the individual group members present, who will bring varying levels of commitment, enthusiasm, or disruption, which will affect group processes accordingly. The research took place within one geographic region in England and the participants largely identified as White and British. As such there are clear limits in the representativeness of this study. Nevertheless, it is emphasised that the data was drawn from over of 86 sessions, and 10 interviews with participants. Within the groups studied and individuals interviewed, there were significant consistencies, which played out irrespective of which programme was attended, and the individual members in attendance. Overall, this paper seeks to promote a discussion of the importance of process, rather than content our outcome, and thereby emphasise the need for greater nuance in understanding of how perpetrator programmes work, and how their efficacy can be enhanced.

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