

# Working with Fathers around Domestic Violence: Contemporary Debates

This article discusses the issues that emerged from a small consultation exercise with academics and practitioners in the field of domestic violence on their perceptions of practice interventions with fathers who were domestically violent. The exercise suggests that there has been a growth in such interventions especially in the UK over the last decade as a result of the recognition of domestic violence as a child protection issue. There are tensions, however, and these mapped onto tensions between interventions located in working with perpetrators and more recent interventions that have a focus on fathers. More importantly, tensions about what kinds of practice interventions were most desirable were linked to wider debates within practice about the merits of set programmes versus more individualised responses. Respondents expressed concern about the lack of evidence on effectiveness on programmes. Copyright © 2012 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

## KEY PRACTITIONER MESSAGES:

- Interventions directed at fathers that seek to tackle their violence towards their partners have grown in the last decade.
- There are tensions in philosophy that are related to the history of work with men as perpetrators and more recent developments constructing them as fathers.
- Tensions are also related to differing views on the desirability and efficacy of set programmes versus individualised, flexible approaches incorporating a range of delivery methods and formats.

KEY WORDS: fathers; domestic violence; interventions

**T**his article discusses the findings from a consultation exercise on contemporary practice interventions with domestically violent men around their roles as fathers. We recognise the terminology is much contested. Our focus was on men who were physically violent to their adult partners (or ex-partners). It emerged from a wider research programme on the engagement of social care services with fathers. This programme had noted the prevalence of domestic violence in cases involving child welfare and protection (see Ashley, 2011; Ashley *et al.*, 2006; Roskill *et al.*, 2008). These findings prompted concern about what, if any, work was being done with male perpetrators around their roles as fathers. Hence funding was sought to explore this.

\* Correspondence to: Brid Featherstone, Health and Social Care, The Open University, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA, UK. E-mail: brigid.featherstone@open.ac.uk

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**Brid Featherstone\***

Health and Social Care, The Open University, UK

**Claire Fraser**

Consult Research, Huddersfield, UK

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**‘A small consultation exercise with academics and practitioners in the field of domestic violence’**

**‘Tensions in philosophy that are related to the history of work with men as perpetrators’**

**‘Emerged from a wider research programme on the engagement of social care services with fathers’**

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**'A significant development in the UK has been the recognition of domestic violence as a child protection issue'**

We outline the background to the exercise and explore its aims, methodology and findings. A concluding discussion locates these findings within a wider exploration of contemporary debates.

### **Background**

In the last decades, research on fathers' roles and practices has blossomed and there has been particular interest in exploring the contribution fathers make to children's welfare. A key insight from the research is the importance of locating fathers' engagement with children within the wider family ecology (Lamb and Lewis, 2004). Locating fathers' engagement contextually obliges an understanding of the dangers to children of violence and hostility between their parents (Harne, 2011).

There is, now, a considerable history of developing programmes that work with men who are violent to women in intimate relationships. These are usually called perpetrator programmes and have their roots in both the therapeutic, anti-sexist men's movement and the women's refuge movement (Featherstone *et al.*, 2007). Historically, it is the latter that emerged to set standards for treatment and safety as a result of concerns that those which had a more therapeutic focus were in danger of excusing men's behaviour. Moreover, they were considered to be too isolated from mainstream services and, therefore, unable to ensure the safety of women and children (Rivett, 2010). Indeed, it was the murder of a woman and the community response to this that prompted the emergence of the Duluth programme which has become over time the foremost programme reflecting a feminist perspective on the causes of violence as rooted in men's control and power over women and masculine socialisation practices (Pence and Paymar, 1993). It is designed to be embedded within a coordinated community response and is not supposed to be a stand-alone programme. Safety planning for women and children is central. It consists of a set format where power, control and equality issues are systematically addressed and where cognitive-behavioural therapies are used. This is the model that has been supported by UK governmental guidance and is the regulated programme for criminal justice settings.

The history of working with men as fathers around domestic violence is more recent. Sternberg (1997) reviewed the research on fathers and located it in the context of the evolution of research on family violence as a whole. She noted that there was a lack of information from, and about, fathers who were violent to mothers. Peled (2000) argued, a few years later, that the fathering role of men who were physically violent to their partners should not continue to be ignored in research and practice.

Over a decade later, there would appear to be some growth in developing interventions with men, who are fathers, who are violent to women and a limited growth in the associated literature (Harne, 2011). There are a number of differing reasons for the growth in interventions. A significant development in the UK has been the recognition of domestic violence as a child protection issue. This has led to a considerable increase in referrals to child protection services. Whilst the majority of agency responses have tended to focus on the role of the mother in securing the protection and welfare of the children, there has been some recognition that such responses are unsustainable (in that domestically violent men may rejoin other families). Thus, interventions have been

promoted from within the children's social care sector, concerned with the needs and welfare of children primarily (although not exclusively, as there has been some recognition too of the unfairness of relying on women to protect children from violent men).

A further development internationally is the increased emphasis in private law on the importance of fathers, even in cases involving domestic violence, retaining contact with their children post separation and divorce (Harrison, 2006). This has prompted considerable concern among researchers and practitioners in the area of domestic violence. Indeed, Hester (2011) has noted that policies often appear to inhabit different planets with encouragement to retain contact between fathers and their children on a different one to that seeking to tackle men's violence. The emphasis on contact has been central in reinforcing interventions that incorporate safety planning for women and children.

A further, if much less significant, factor is that in countries such as the UK and USA successive governments have funded projects to 'engage' fathers. A discourse stressing the importance of fathers being involved with their children in order to secure better outcomes, especially for those who were disadvantaged, has been influential in promoting such developments. This area of policy has focused on fathers as resources for children, rather than seeing them as risks. It has promoted and benefited from a climate that stresses the importance of fathers, and has been a very indirect contributor to initiatives that work with fathers around domestic violence. Where it has, it has done so from a perspective that stresses child welfare rather than the safety of women (Featherstone, 2009).

Thus, it is important to note that a range of diverse constituencies and factors have prompted practice interventions with fathers who are domestically violent. This is returned to in our discussion below.

### Exploring Practice Interventions: The Background

In 2004, a number of differing organisations were successful in gaining funding to explore how social care services engaged fathers where there were welfare and protection concerns. Two further rounds of funding developed this work with a number of local authorities examining the diverse barriers and supports for engaging fathers. A range of publications have discussed the issues from the perspectives of fathers, mothers, grandparents, social workers and their managers (Ashley *et al.*, 2006; Roskill *et al.*, 2008). As a result of the findings from the earlier two programmes, it was agreed that a specific emphasis of the third programme would be the issues involved in working with domestic violence (Ashley, 2011).

The focus of this article is to discuss the findings from one small element of this third programme. The aim was to consult with experts in the field of domestic violence who could contribute both grassroots knowledge and theoretical considerations on interventions with fathers who are domestically violent. We understood that this was a developing area and were concerned to find out about the following: What were existing perpetrators' programmes doing on fathering and what other initiatives were being developed in relation to fathers and domestic violence? Thus, this is a limited exercise but we would argue this approach is appropriate for doing exploratory work in an

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under-researched area. It is important to note that great care was taken to be as inclusive as possible in engaging respondents. Alongside existing contacts known to the research team and the research steering group, supplementary internet searches were used to identify as wide a range of experts as possible. A ‘snowball approach’ was also adopted whereby each participant was asked to recommend relevant practitioners/academics. This process resulted in a total of 30 academics/policy experts (21 from the UK) and 29 domestic violence practitioners/programme managers (23 from the UK) being invited to participate.

In order to reach as many as possible, participants were offered a choice of methods of participation: online survey or telephone interview. From the initially identified sample of 59 invited to take part, 34 respondents (57%) finally participated. They represented a range of sectors (Table 1).

The majority were from the UK, although other countries were represented. In this article, because of word constraints, we concentrate on the responses from the UK (Table 2).

The data that resulted were analysed thematically and the following sections explore the key issues to emerge.

#### *Current Interventions: What Is Out There?*

Two-thirds of respondents had knowledge of interventions that were working with fathering and domestic violence in some way. Half noted that the previous decade had witnessed a growth in such interventions. Local authority children’s services departments were considered to be struggling with increased referral rates as a result of legislation, such as the Adoption and Children Act 2002, and the growth in understanding of the linkages between domestic violence and child protection and welfare, and this was considered to be contributing to the growth in interventions.

Respondents noted a growing tendency on the part of children’s services to refer violent fathers to local, already existing, programmes. This was not considered a wholly positive development. It was suggested that the quality of programmes was not always assessed in advance and that departments struggling with rising levels of referrals saw existing programmes as a solution:

‘Children’s Services are struggling to get a grip on the issue of domestic violence in families and one of the key problems is that it’s such a widespread problem. They’re really struggling to find an appropriate response because you know they recognize that they can’t take every family where children are exposed to domestic violence to a child protection case conference. So you know sending fathers on perpetrator programme is a very sort of attractive solution for Children’s Services.’ (Academic)

A further concern raised by respondents was that they considered there was very little evidence of long-term effectiveness available in relation to engaging

**Table 1.** Sectors

Academic	16
Statutory	7
Voluntary/not for profit/NGO	10
Private	1

NGO = Non-governmental organisation.

**Table 2.** Country

UK – England	21
UK – Wales	1
UK – Northern Ireland	1
USA	4
Canada	2
China	1
Australia	1
Israel	1
Norway	1
South Africa	1

men as fathers. This linked with concerns about the suitability of programmes for dealing with child welfare concerns.

About a quarter of the respondents felt that whilst some ‘progress’ had been made in engaging fathers who were violent, there was a long way to go:

‘Yes, to an extent although several stakeholders in the domestic violence field working with men are extremely resistant to working with them as fathers. Implications are that joint work is not done as it might be and barriers to expanding the work with fathers are created.’ (Statutory practitioner) ‘Some change towards recognising this, but violent men are largely still perceived and defined in terms of their violence in a reductionist and one dimensional manner.’ (Statutory practitioner)

The comments on how men who are violent are perceived as one-dimensional are of interest and linked to the genesis of the work, as explored further in a subsequent section, and the anxiety and defensiveness that can surround it. There was evidence from our exercise of discomfort on the part of a number of respondents with the accepted response to domestic violence of which the failure to tackle fathering issues was considered only one aspect:

‘Domestic violence is not an all or nothing – there is a large continuum from emotional abuse and controlling behaviour to actual physical violence – so for some, a ‘domestic violence perpetrator programme’ might not be appropriate – men [are] less likely to attend voluntarily if they don’t see themselves as perpetrators as they are not physically violent – so ideally we need a range of programmes, including ones that focus on parenting/fathering in the context of controlling behaviour (without the presence of physical violence). One model does not fit all.’ (Voluntary practitioner)

A quarter of the sample did not feel there had been any significant change at all. One respondent made the point that this reflected a lack of engagement with a family-focused approach and was symptomatic of wider tendencies:

‘No. The development of family minded policy and practice in the UK during the past few years seems to have had minimal impact on the point of engagement, with mothers remaining the focus of interventions and fathers still absent. The flurry of activity following the recent child deaths has raised the issues of violence but not necessarily working with violent fathers.’ (Academic)

### *Father or Perpetrator or ??*

One of the key themes to emerge from participants’ responses was that there were considerable disagreements between those offering different types of

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interventions. Some services constructed men primarily as perpetrators of domestic violence and, in that context, offered inputs on fathering. Other programmes (often imported from the USA or Canada, such as Caring Dads, Scott and Crooks, 2004) constructed men primarily as fathers and considered their violent practices toward children and women within a frame that emphasised the importance of non-abusive fathering.

There were tensions expressed about a divide between those programmes accredited by Respect (2004) (the Home Office-funded charity that has developed accreditation guidelines in the area of working with domestic violence) and others:

‘Organisations like Respect believe things have to be done in a certain way, which has created quite an ideological divide, for example, Respect is very focussed on tackling violence and engaging with violent perpetrators whereas programmes like ‘Caring Dads’ are more focussed on fathering, i.e. they engage with violent men as fathers but at the expense of focussing sufficiently on men’s violence, which is why Respect has an issue with them [Caring Dads]. Caring Dads believes you can do both – tackle men’s violence and engage with them as fathers – and I agree but not in one session! How many sessions might be needed to really tackle these two weighty issues and if more sessions needed, who pays for this?’ (Voluntary practitioner)

Indeed, Respect have indicated publicly that whilst they have considerable respect for Caring Dads as a parenting/fathering programme, they do not consider it suitable as an intervention to deal with violence by men to women (Respect, 2010a). A number of respondents expressed a wish to develop an integration of both approaches:

‘Ultimately the desired outcome is to stop men being violent rather than the broader fatherhood/parenting agenda but what is needed are integrated courses – say a combination of Respect-type programmes and Caring Dads – which also focus on the wider family to achieve a holistic view and to address [the] chaotic lifestyle often present in domestically violent households.’ (Voluntary practitioner)

For some respondents, there was a pragmatic recognition that one way into tackling men’s violence to women was through engaging with them as fathers:

‘We feel that a lot of these men, their initial motivation to come into the group is around being a better father. So we use that, the motivation itself has got some genuine foundation. I want to see genuine motivation and I want to see them taking responsibility for their actions. I think that [focus on fathering] offers a real opportunity to achieve that.’ (Statutory practitioner)

‘You have men who are just in complete denial about their behaviour, but they consider themselves to be good fathers, or want to be good fathers and that’s another way of attracting those men and trying to get them into an intervention process.’ (Statutory practitioner)

However, concerns were raised by others that a focus on violent fathering could alienate men who were not fathers, thus potentially increasing the risks for partners if interventions were not seen to be applicable to them.

In the UK, there are two types of domestic violence perpetrator programme: mandatory criminal justice-based programmes which are delivered by prison and probation staff to men who have been referred by the criminal courts

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following conviction; and community-based programmes, usually run by voluntary organisations, sometimes in partnership with the statutory sector, which can be attended voluntarily. The latter take self-referrals as well as referrals (sometimes mandatory) from statutory organisations such as children's services (Respect, 2010a, 2010b). Respondents were asked whether the method of attendance on a programme to tackle violent behaviour – mandatory or voluntary – was likely to influence the success of the intervention. The majority did not feel there were great differences between mandatory and voluntary interventions, although some felt that voluntary attendance indicated more of a willingness to change and offered increased opportunities to engage with violent men.

Some felt, however, that programme content was likely to be influenced by whether the intervention was mandatory or voluntary, with the latter being more likely to address fathering. A small number of respondents criticised the cognitive-behavioural approaches favoured by many mandatory programmes, suggesting that they focused too narrowly on risk assessment and lacked the depth of approach needed to fully engage with violent men. One respondent noted that reference to fathering was more important than the voluntary/mandatory status of an intervention and, indeed, others have highlighted that the notion of 'voluntary' attendance is perhaps 'flawed' since most men will be 'socially mandated' in some way due to the potential consequences of non-attendance such as lack of contact with their children (Respect, 2010a, 2010b).

## Discussion

Our exercise suggests that a range of factors have promoted the involvement of diverse constituencies with differing philosophies in this area of work. This is clearly causing tensions in a context where there has been a high premium placed on developing a coherent and consistent programme based upon very specific underlying assumptions and with a strong focus on safety planning for women as well as children (known as the Duluth programme). This programme has not been without its critics over the years of course, and what our exercise uncovered is not completely new (see, for example, Rivett, 2010, for a review). It is argued that the approach assumes singular explanations for why men are violent (Gadd, 2004). However, not all violent men are the same (Gondolf, 2002) and not all violence is the same (Johnson, 1995). The role played by factors such as mental health difficulties and substance misuse needs more consideration than that found in Duluth according to Rivett (2010).

Rivett (2010) has argued for the need to think more imaginatively about men and help-seeking. He argues that both Duluth and, the clearest alternative to Duluth to emerge with a direct focus on fathers, the Caring Dads programme share the same disadvantages: they are long-term treatment programmes undertaken in specialist centres and by specialist staff. These programmes, he argues, ignore the large number of men who may accept help for their violence in more local settings by local services but would resist a more stigmatising group setting. Indeed, recent findings from the Strength to Change programme in Hull, an evaluation undertaken since our exercise was completed, are of interest here and would offer some support to Rivett. Although it is important to note that

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this was a small exercise and a larger sample would be needed for more rigorous testing (Stanley *et al.*, 2011).

Rivett (2010) echoes the views of some of our respondents about the need for flexibility as to whether interventions are delivered in groups or on an individual basis. He argues that interventions should last less than the dominant model (24 weeks) and should be multi-faceted to incorporate dealing with substance misuse, mental health issues and emotional difficulties. Both partnering and parenting need to be focused upon.

It is important to note that debates about practice in this specific area fit into much wider discussions about practice interventions more generally. For example, 'one size fits all' models of intervention, such as parenting programmes, have been criticised within a wider discussion of the evidence-based movement (Dolan *et al.*, 2006). Issues about fidelity to programme and the transferability, or otherwise, of programmes from one context to another are all subject to ongoing debate and key into important issues about evaluating effectiveness.

As noted, the issue of effectiveness was raised in our exercise by many of our respondents as it was considered that there was a limited, or no, evidence base available. As Westmarland *et al.* (2010) have outlined, the issue of effectiveness is complex and multi-faceted when evaluating interventions with men who are violent. They note the considerable literature on the evidence base in relation to perpetrator programmes more generally. As yet, there is little rigorous evidence on the effectiveness, or otherwise, of those that focus on fathers who are domestically violent. In their helpful discussion of what counts as 'success', Westmarland *et al.* (2010) offer useful pointers toward what should be evaluated and the need for a wide and nuanced range of sources and measures.

### Conclusion

This limited mapping exercise in an under-researched area highlights that a range of differing constituencies have become involved in the last decade in delivering interventions to fathers that seek to tackle their violence towards their partners. There are differences between constituencies with evidence of ongoing tensions. These seem to be related to the history of work with men as perpetrators and more recent developments that construct them as fathers. However, tensions are also related to differing views on the desirability and efficacy of set programmes versus individualised, flexible approaches incorporating a range of delivery methods and formats.

Since the consultation exercise reported upon here was conducted, evidence has emerged of cuts across a range of services in the area of domestic violence including services for men (Guardian Datablog, 2012). Thus, it remains to be seen whether the developments and debates outlined in this article will continue or not.

We suggest it would be a shame if not. As one of our respondents noted: 'I think we are just starting to discover the power of using fatherhood to prevent and intervene in violent relationships. A lot of exciting work lies ahead.'

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