

Tri-County Batterer Intervention Provider Network Meeting Minutes January 13, 2015

Present: Chris Huffine (Allies in Change), Matt Johnston (Domestic Violence Safe Dialogue), Jacquie Pancoast (Eastside Concern), Jacob Hunt (Eastside Concern), Phil Broyles (Teras), Tatyana Bondareticek (Modus Vivendi), Amanda Briley (Bridges 2 Safety), Jennifer Hopkinson (Clackamas Women's Services), Samantha Naliboff (VOA Home Free), Shannon Barkley (Clackamas County Community Corrections), Rachel Smith (Portland State University), Sandi Rorick (Multnomah County Department of Community Justice), Kim Hirota (Multnomah County Department of Community Justice)

Minutes by Rachel Smith, edited by Chris Huffine

Discussion Topic: Working with Low-Risk Men

Research by Amy Holtzworth-Munroe found that abusive men tended to fall into one of three categories:

“Family Only”

- 50% of all abusive men
- Only abusive within the family
- No history of childhood abuse
- Less severe levels of abusive behavior
- More prone to passive-aggressiveness
- More nonviolent values
- Lower levels of sexist values
- No criminal history

“Psychologically Distressed”

- 25% of all abusive men
- Greater enmeshment/dependency
- More prone to jealousy
- More likely to have a history of childhood abuse
- Mood swings, higher levels of depression
- More impulsive (e.g., more property abuse, public abuse)
- Intermittent remorse
- At greatest risk of committing murder-suicides

“Criminal”

- 25% of all abusive men
- Most likely to be abusive outside of the home
- More likely to have committed other crimes
- Low remorse/shallow affect
- Low dependency/more detached from partner
- More likely to have a history of childhood abuse

-More pro violent and sexist attitudes

There was some discussion of various definitions of risk. Typically risk is defined and measured in terms of risk of committing another DV crime or doing other kinds of criminal behavior. A significant subset of abusive men, particularly those in the Family Only category may score as low risk to be re-arrested even as they continue to be abusive in the home.

One trend among risk factors is that the less an individual has to lose (e.g., unemployed, more limited support system), the higher risk they are—because the penalties for their bad behavior are not as great.

There was some discussion of the presence of misogyny among abusive men. It was observed that some may have more overt misogyny, while for others it may be more subtle and covert. It also goes into their generational backgrounds and their general belief systems. There are some men who say things like "I was raised by women, I respect women, etc.", but then there is the underlying resentment that the men do not even see in themselves. There are also changes in their misogynist roles and beliefs that may be reflective of cultural changes in the bigger picture. It can also be more covert, they may not see things like "I let her have a job" as misogynist, but it is exactly that entitlement that is misogynist and controlling. So, it is not necessarily "I expect her to do the dishes", rather it is more "I expect you to do what I want you to do". One attendee noted an example from showing vignettes (in group) of men who are very overtly misogynist and abusive and the men in group will all see the problems with him and respond with "that is not ok, what a dick", but they still will not see their own similar behaviors as problematic and abusive. Part of the "family only" issue is that the men are not misogynist to other people and other women, but are still abusive to their partners.

Risk assessment measures may be more relevant in determining level of supervision rather than length of treatment. Typically the men in the lower risk groups don't necessarily need as much supervision versus the high-risk scoring guys. Society in general tends to be more concerned about the higher risk individuals. For example, "why do I care about this low-risk guy who is not breaking any laws aside from being abusive in their families, versus this high-risk guy who may abuse outside of his family?".

One very important point made relates to the use of language. It was suggested that we not talk about "low risk" abusive men, but rather abusive men who are scoring low on a specific risk assessment measure (e.g., the LS/CMI). Just because a certain instrument classifies an abusive man as "low risk" doesn't necessarily mean that he is at low risk for being abusive again. For example, there are some guys who may be considered high-risk according to probation and have no criminal backgrounds only because they had not been caught before. So, the system has deemed guys like this as "lower-risk", yet they might actually be quite abusive and manipulative.

One key issue when it comes to measuring risk is that there is no dynamic tool for measuring broader risk of DV perpetration. The SARA and ODARA focus on the likelihood of perpetrating

DV that could lead to one getting rearrested and the Danger Assessment focuses on the risk of committing domestic homicide. There are a number of common qualities of abusive individuals that providers can identify that are not mentioned in any risk assessment tool.

The issues with how risk is commonly assessed can be thought of through a Venn diagram-type framework: There are some people who commit crimes who are also abusive to their partners and some people who are abusive to their partners but do not commit crimes (or are not caught). The identified abusers are only a smaller part of the people who do criminal behaviors (some of whom might also do DV, but some of whom do not) and of the people who are abusive (but don't get caught or can't get arrested because their abusive behavior is not illegal).

One strategy for being able to better assess risk among perpetrators involves identifying what qualities define a perpetrator. There are a lot of qualities that give away who they really are, which would be a more diagnostic tool for identifying abusive partners rather than a risk of recidivism measure. Some of these qualities include victim blaming, external locus of control/ external focus, and vilifying the victim. People who are abusive can also switch tactics very quickly—if one thing doesn't work they'll simply try something else. They will also/even use program tools and concepts in controlling and abusive ways.

The reality is that there are many behaviors that abusive men will give themselves permission to do and many others they will not give themselves permission to do. The stereotype of abusers is that they are jerks to everybody, but that is a myth. Among the low-risk abusers, they will draw the line at physical abuse (e.g., "I will never hit a woman"), but they will give themselves permission to be verbally abusive and/or manipulative. It often seems to go back to who the partner is and the consequences they will face for their behavior based on whom they are abusive toward. For instance, we will hear guys who say they do not think various misogynist things about women, but will apply those beliefs just to their romantic partner. In other words, they are respectful to every other woman except their partner. It goes into being less about the partner being a woman, and more about her role in his world. Even if they are only behaving badly towards the female who is their partner, they may still have misogynist beliefs.

Many abusive partners are very cognizant about how they come off to society and strive to look good outside of the home. They may be the ones who always show up wanting to help others. At times it is quite willful in terms of "I need to get this buy-in from other people in order to maintain control over her" and then say things like "well, no one is going to believe you" to her. An advocate confirmed that in victim services they hear some of those exact same words from survivors. Across the board, whether they keep their abuse limited to their partner or their family, facilitators have seen abusers completely change their demeanor and behavior in a split second from when they are interacting only with their partner to when they are interacting with the public (e.g., when the police show up).

Another strategy for understanding how they are progressing is noticing when they talk about what her role is for them and when they start bringing up contempt or disdain for her - for her

thinking, for her values, for her behaviors. In terms of how they behave in BI group, they see us (as providers) in terms of a power dynamic in that they see us as having power over them. Then they start to get an agenda and start making little statements, not doing homework, etc., and that is when we realize that this is what she is going through, what she is seeing.

There were differing opinions on to what extent there are facial “tells” that someone is an abusive partner. One attendee spoke about flipping through the mugshots and noting that the men who have a defiant look in their eye, their chins up, arrogance in their expressions, etc. who often end up having been charged with DV related charges. Another attendee, an advocate, reported that when she used to go with survivors to court, she would try to get there before her to try to find out where he was in the room, but could never really pick him out because in court, they are perfect angels.

Another quality we see among abusers is narcissism. It is common among abusers that the way he sees himself and himself in relation to the rest of the world is often highly contingent on her and his control over her. Which is narcissism coupled with the entitlement characteristics described earlier. While they may come off as "not dangerous" to the community, the narcissism trait is often predictive of their abusive behavior towards their partner.

Many of the characteristics described in this discussion are not in the currently available risk assessment tools. Risk assessment tools are typically looking at the risk of committing another DV crime, which is different from being abusive.

One provider, who works with many voluntary men, commented that the voluntary ones often seem like "nice guys" in comparison to the court-mandated men. Part of what may be happening is that there are more-and-more men who are not giving themselves permission to be physically abusive because that comes with harsher consequences, but they will still find myriad ways to manipulate and control her. So they will be law abiding while continuing to be abusive.

Maybe the perception of the risk of dv is changing at large, which is part of our work - to raise awareness that, just because he is not necessarily hurting anyone else right now (outside of the home), he is still a risk to society - and "you" should care either way. We need to dispel the myth around the "monster" abuser, because abusers do not usually come off as scary to the rest of us, but they are very scary to their partner and kids. It used to be relatively easy to get support around intervening with the offender because he is seen as dangerous and scary, but now we are seeing more-and-more that the scariness of the offenders is disappearing, and they are able to abuse more successfully because nobody sees it. So, it is actually somewhat problematic to be talking about "low-risk" because it can hide the very dangerous abuse that is truly going on.

How do We Work with Men Considered Low-Risk

One reason for advocating programs to be one year or longer is that the long-term work that is really arduous is also the work that is actually getting them to stop the more covert patterns of behavior and challenging the core beliefs they use to justify their behaviors. They often do not

even open the window to challenging those beliefs until 3-6 months in. One of the real dangers of short-term groups is that it can teach them how to show superficial compliance without making any real changes to their behaviors and belief systems that justify those behaviors. At the same time, the survivor is still seeing his bad behaviors outside of the program but is terrified to tell anyone because he will know that it was her because everyone else sees him doing so well with the program. They are not internalizing the messages of the program, which is infuriating because you cannot control that - you cannot make someone internalize something aside from making the intervention longer. It is also important to not focus entirely on physical violence and to focus more on day-to-day, seemingly mundane, behaviors and experiences - which are much harder to fake, especially over time. One strategy to address this may be to argue, with evidence, that it takes a lot longer to undo these beliefs systems (i.e., longer than 14-24 weeks), even among guys who the criminal justice system has determined to be at the lowest risk of reoffending.

Another sign that they are internalizing the intervention is when they begin to use curriculum terms more often when they did not talk that way when they started the program and they do not talk that way in general. For instance, when they say things like "empathy is important and I need to have empathy", respond with, "ok, how do you do that, what does that look like?" which helps to bring in/reiterate the critical thinking component. It is further useful to emphasize not necessarily that they can describe empathy (and other intervention components/content), but that they can actually display it in their own behaviors with their partners (i.e., separating understanding and application of intervention content/components). Batterers' intervention has evolved from being more educational about how things should be. Now there is more emphasis on showing what these things (e.g., empathy) look like. It is also important to work toward moving away from having a set end date for men's participation in the program (unless it is a very logistical issue such as getting a job in another state), because it is a lifestyle change that we are working toward with these men. It is very hard for these men to get at this applied comprehension we have been describing.

In terms of problem solving in their relationships, one way to frame this is calling it "safe healthy problem solving", because, in their heads, they are seeing that they can problem solve and see it in various parts of their lives outside of the context with their partners and still see problem solving as different when it is in relation to their partners.

It is also useful to move away from talking strictly about criminogenic factors and toward emphasizing the mundane, day-to-day behaviors, including remorse and accountability and seeing the men expressing these in more subtle ways. This is especially true among men who are "generally legally compliant". Men may end up in "reduced supervision" category because they are generally legally compliant, and we find situations where we realize that we actually need to watch them more closely at certain times. So, it is also important to realize that they do not just go down in risk and stay down in risk. Also, many of the partners are not necessarily in fear of their own lives, even as they are suffering tremendously from his continued abuse. There is a list of behaviors that they are displaying that are abusive and as they go through the program they

reduce the list, often beginning with the more overt violent behaviors. It's when we see the list start to shrink in terms of the covert coercive and manipulative behaviors that we see that the men are being genuine about their participation in the program and comprehending the program's content.

Another important issue is "dynamic risk" in terms of when abusers are allowed to have contact with survivors. When no contact orders should be modified is a complicated process. But there are reasons to allow contact. When he really is lower risk and she wants contact, allowing contact is sometimes helpful because there is a lot more disclosure and subsequent opportunity for examining and evaluating his behavior in real situations. On the other hand, if there has not been any real sustainable change within the abuser, there needs to be more time in the intervention before contact, and she is really the best judge of his level and extent of change. At the same time, it can also be problematic to use the survivor as a "guinea pig" for determining his level of change. In some cases/counties, the probation officer will not make a modification without talking with the victim and/or victim services first. In such cases advocates will talk with the survivor and remind her that just because he has been in the program, that does not mean he has necessarily changed. There is also concern about the emergence of the "honeymoon" during the initial stages of re-contact. So, it is hugely important for the abusive partner to be in a program while re-engaging in contact.

As advocates and intervention providers, it is important to be cognizant of language and the use of labeling - including terms and labels such as "low-risk" versus "high-risk", abuser, abusive men, alcoholic, etc.