

Responding to diverse ethnic communities in domestic violence perpetrator programmes

written by

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Introduction

Many commentators, practitioners, policy makers and activists in specific communities have proposed that perpetration and justification of and explanations for domestic violence varies significantly between different ethnic or cultural groups. They often then conclude from this that perpetrator interventions should ideally be specific to or contain specific understanding for individual cultural or ethnic groups.

Oliver Williams, the US practitioner and researcher has proposed the notion of cultural competence (Williams, 1994), to identify programmes with specific cultural group and practitioners with the need for specific skills and knowledge to work with that group.

In this paper I propose that the concept of singular identity of ethnic group or culture is in any case questionable. I further note that in practical terms most programmes would be unable to provide a specific programme for specific groups in most cases. I therefore propose an approach to working cross-culturally with a range of people from diverse ethnic communities, with awareness of specific practical needs such as language and immigration barriers combined with understanding of how culture is many layered and includes cultures of masculinity, highly relevant for work with men using domestic violence.

History of responding to cultural diversity in domestic violence perpetrator work and research

In the early days of interventions for domestic violence perpetrators, activists or therapists in the USA tried to develop specific ways of responding in general to men abusing their partners. Early so-called 'Batterer Intervention Programs' or BIPs as they are often referred to by practitioners, focussed on developing some system of intervening that at worst would do no more harm – this, after many criticisms by the battered women's movement of traditional generic mainstream mental health treatment.

Emerging needs and attempts to meet those needs were focussed on perpetrators/batterers as a whole group. As programmes developed, some were eventually developed specifically for African Americans, Native Americans, and Latin Americans.

In the UK, during the 1980s, refuges and other support for specific groups of women were set up, such as Asian or Latin American women. As these developed, the inevitable questions about the value of specific services for perpetrators from those groups gradually arose as perpetrator programmes came into existence in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Usually this was for practical reasons such as language barriers – there is no point putting a man on a group if he has limited skills in the used language. However, in the 1990s, DVIP in London set

up Al-Aman, a specific service for men of Middle Eastern origin, to attempt to make the service more directly accessible to men of Middle Eastern origin, with staff of matching racial and religious background, language skills and an ability to navigate the complicated territory of handling assumptions from indigenous and recently arrived communities, religious leaders and others whilst holding the line on the unacceptability of domestic violence. This service continues, with parallel work with women of Middle Eastern origin, outreach and training.¹ It allows DVIP to increase the reach of their programme without diluting down the clarity and strength of their message. Another programme specifically for men of Polish origin is developing in the UK, as reported to the Respect National Practitioners' Network in 2014. Where funding allows, this approach to cultural competence may be extremely helpful for other programmes considering how to meet the needs of diverse communities.

Practice and research on culturally specific programmes serving diverse communities

Meanwhile, research on domestic violence perpetrator intervention work developed and was and continues to be full of methodological challenges and apparently contradictory findings. Within this, research on the impact or added value of culturally specific programmes has so far shown little evidence of any additional benefits to rate of cessation of violence and abuse.

Oliver Williams and colleagues developed the concept of “ethnically-sensitive practice” (Williams 1994) or “cultural competence” (Williams and Becker, 1994). He uses this to promote the importance of practitioners developing relevant skills and understanding of the diverse population in the local community, considerations of how to match staff to clients with similar backgrounds and train others to understand the cultures and experiences of racism of the diverse population better, forge links to other relevant organisations and so on. This could perhaps describe approaches like the AL-Aman service at DVIP (see above). However, it also presents challenges for programmes, particularly in a time of austerity: to what extent can the provision of specific services be justified or even operationalised in the first place, given the diversity of a local population and the need to manage scarce resources effectively, particularly if the evidence for improved successful outcomes for specific programmes appears to be weak?

The first multi-site evaluation of domestic violence perpetrator programmes was carried out by Professor Gondolf and team in the US (Gondolf, 2003). His team evaluated the outcomes of men’s participation in four BIPs (Batterer Intervention Program, in US parlance, domestic violence perpetrator programme or DVPP, as Europeans usually refer to them) and tracked them, their partners and ex-partners over four years to find that there was a programme effect on the men (most stopped using violence and stayed stopped during the follow up) and also that it was significantly “the system which matters” (ibid.). However when examining the data about ethnicity and other demographic factors he found no significant differences between ethnic groups, but that the outcome varied more strongly by alcohol abuse status – untreated alcoholics were much less likely to change than everyone else. He also found that

¹ www.dvip.org

whilst there were some men for whom the programme didn't work, other factors did not seem to be related to likelihood to remain abusive and concluded that contrary to the well-worn criticism of many mainstream programmes that "one size doesn't fit all", in fact, for these 800+ men, "one size fits most" (ibid.).

Reviewing the state of the BIP sector nearly a decade later, Gondolf proposes that the evidence for enhanced success of culturally oriented approaches appears to be weak and therefore that with some caveats, 'one size fits most' (Gondolf, 2012). Given the shortages of funding most programmes currently operate in, this starting point is reasonable. However, what can we do to improve our response to the diverse communities we try to serve? In this article, I propose that we can first develop and enhance our understanding of what culture means, how it operates in many layers and what might be the most important aspects of culture for work on the perpetration of domestic violence.

The most recent multi-site evaluation of DVPPs was carried out in the UK and has recently been published (Kelly and Westmarland, 2015). This research examined the impact on 100 women of their male partner or ex-partner participating in one of ten DVPPs who had passed the Respect accreditation system of quality assurance against the Respect Standard (Respect, 2012). They also found that most men stopped using all or most forms of sexual and physical violence and reduced most other forms of abuse, and that most women felt safer as a result (Kelly and Westmarland, 2015). They did not set out to provide, nor did they have sufficient numbers for, an analysis of men's likelihood of change by ethnicity. Neither were there any participants in the cohort who were participating in a culturally specific programme. However, they did identify another factor in men's lives which they propose needs specific attention in DVPP work, that is, if they were long separated from the partner they had abused and were now referred to the DVPP as a result of contested application for contact (access) with their children, in which past domestic violence was alleged.

It is possible that if we over-identify culture or ethnicity as a significant factor in designing interventions with men using domestic violence we may overlook other, possibly more significant factors, such as mental health, substance misuse or parenting status or skills.

The concept of multiple cultural identities

A practical consideration for organisations running perpetrator programmes is the sheer impossibility of providing specific and separate interventions for each cultural group. However, consideration of how that could work if resources were infinite immediately casts light on the problems of defining a cultural group. Thinking about what a specific programme for a specific cultural group would include and how it would differ from one for another throws up further questions for this approach. Amartya Sen writes:

I can be, at the same time, an Asian, and Indian citizen, a Bengali with Bangladeshi ancestry, an American or British resident, an economist, a dabbler in philosophy, an author, a Sanskritist, a strong believer in secularism and democracy, a man, a feminist, a heterosexual, a defender of gay and lesbian rights, with a non-religious lifestyle, with a Hindu background, a non-Brahmin, and a non-believer in an afterlife (and also, in case the question is asked, a non-believer in a "before-life"). This is just a small sample of diverse

categories to each of which I may simultaneously belong – there are of course a great many other membership categories too which, depending on circumstances, can move and engage me'. (Sen, 2006, page 19).

He goes on to note that 'identifying with others, in various different ways, can be extremely significant for living in a society. It has not, however, always been easy to persuade social analysts to accommodate identity in a satisfactory way'. (ibid. page 19-20). He then describes the two types of reductionism he sees in formal social and economic literature and analysis: "identity disregard" (ignoring or neglecting the influence of any sense of identity with others) and "singular affiliation" (assuming that a person belongs to one collective group only).

Identity disregard and singular affiliation at work in domestic violence intervention

Programmes are at best adequately funded – in the WWP-EN network we are not aware of any programme which could call itself generously funded and certainly not the extent that it would be able to provide specific and separate groups for many different categories of clients. However, programmes do their best to meet specific needs.

Programmes in the WWP-EN network typically provide one, non-culturally specific intervention or response to domestic violence perpetration. At the very least, programmes will assess men for suitability but not have any explicit exclusion policy on grounds of ethnicity or race. They may identify someone as using intimate partner violence, who is male and therefore fits their model of work, or isn't male but has approached a programme willing to work with female as well as male clients, motivated enough to want to come, practically able to attend and therefore offer him a place.

The decision about whether or not to offer a place on an intervention programme is first based on identification of domestic violence (partner abuse, intimate partner violence, etc) as the presenting problem. This may come from referral from a state agency with a relevant role in this, such as the criminal justice system or child protection. It may also come from self-referral. Usually, there will then also be practical considerations to assess: can this person get to our service? Can we remove any barriers arising from disability or language? Are they capable of arriving sober? If they are female, can we offer a specific response?

Programmes following good practice will then at the very least want to make proactive contact with the partner/victim of the potential programme participant, or ensure that some other organisation does this, to make sure she is safe, knows about the programme and can have other support for herself or her children.

However, programme assessment criteria, whether formal or informal, may include an explicit requirement to provide separate services for men who don't have as a first language the language of the group. This has the effect of excluding some members of some specific cultural groups more than others, inevitably. If you are a Greek speaker with limited German, recently arrived and unable to converse at the same level as the average group member, the facilitators may well decide that it wouldn't be reasonable or fair to include you in the group. They may provide you with individual help – this would then become, in effect, a culturally

specific group. However, it may not fit Oliver Williams' aspiration of cultural competence – it is more likely to be making amendments to an existing programme.

Others will pass the linguistic test but be from a very specific cultural background which is, or appears to be, very different in espoused values from the other programme participants, particularly if there is or appears to be one or mainly one predominant cultural group in the programme. The Respect accreditation system² and other similar good practice guidelines will require programmes to consider the impact of putting this singular man into the group as it stands.

Whichever option is chosen or accepted, this means that the result of the assessment rest to a significant degree on an interpretation of culture as a) a singular affiliation and b) the most important characteristic of that particular man for assessing his suitability for the programme. Is that really the most important characteristic for assessing suitability?

(Safe and effective?) partnerships with culturally specific groups

One approach which has been used, criticised and improved over the last two decades of domestic violence activism is that of making a partnership or consulting with a local 'community' group. This tended to be seen as a way of developing some form of being respectful to a local community, not presuming to understand or speak for that community, paying attention to its specific experiences and needs. This was part of a wider social approach to diverse communities about a range of topics, often referred to as 'multiculturalism' (Patel and Siddiqui, 1993). State responses to domestic violence in the 1980s in the UK frequently employed this route, intended to inform and shape responses to diverse communities. As a volunteer with a young Asian women's refuge in Manchester (long since disappeared) we were often given cause for concern with this approach and our sister organisation, the pioneering and radical Southall Black Sisters (SBS) were vocal and articulate in campaigns and literature in their critique of the impact of multiculturalism on women's rights and domestic violence in particular for women from the Indian sub-continent. Our so-called 'community leaders' tended to be self-selecting or chosen by the state agency (usually the police but sometimes social work) and were often religious spokesmen (and they were invariably men).

This approach typifies the problems with taking a singular affiliation analysis of ideas about 'community'. When this analysis and approach is/was taken to guide decisions about who to consult about culturally specific interventions, this risks creating real problems and increased dangers for women. It is more appropriate and safer to work with specialist women's organisations if they exist, or to work with mainstream women's organisations to try to carry out meaningful consultation and engagement with women from a specific cultural group, ideally an organisation working with survivors of domestic violence.

² <http://respect.uk.net/work/work-perpetrators-domestic-violence/accreditation>

Assumptions about culture and domestic violence

One of the more common results of the multi-cultural approach to social work or understanding of domestic violence is that state agencies and/or women's services may absorb the assumptions presented or implied by the defence of 'culture' for the use of domestic violence. This leads to an over-eagerness to either identify domestic violence or justify or explain it in terms of culture, typically based on mono-cultural identification.

The phrase "It's part of his/her culture" then becomes a way of explaining the presence of domestic violence in the life of someone typically 'other' than the predominant ethnic group. This statement is worthy of questioning by practitioners when presented with it by referring organisations, the client or colleagues/self. Which culture? What are the implications of the statement? Are you going to provide less protection or intervention to that person or to their partner on the grounds that it would be disrespectful to perceptions of cultural identity? Or more? Or different? And in which case, how? How will this identity of culture as the prevailing explanation for the domestic violence help you to reduce risk, promote safety for the victim and children and hold the perpetrator to account?

One underlying implication of this statement is that there exists a culture in which domestic violence is not a part, which seems unlikely. At the very least, examining the numbers of referrals to a domestic violence service usually demonstrates that the majority of them are from indigenous cultures, undermining this belief.

As these challenges are considered, it should become clear to practitioners first and foremost that culture cannot be used as an excuse for domestic violence, but even when used as a main or partial explanation of the violence, the usefulness of this knowledge may be weak, particularly when considering that the man's 'culture' is likely to be many layered, influenced by or reacting against local values, and strongly connected also to cultures of masculinity. In short, the diverse range of understandings of what it is to be a man or a woman in intimate relationships are likely to be the most relevant aspect for responses to domestic violence. It would be foolish and impractical to ignore the influences of cultural values, from many sources, on every individual in the programme, both staff and clients – we are all the products of many layers of cultural influences on who we think we are, the values we espouse and those we practice.

Pluralistic understanding of culture and diversity

The existence of multiple layers and often fluid identity, coupled with need to show clarity and consistency of messages about violence and abuse don't fit in a straightforward way with the idea of creating specific group-work programmes for specific groups. However, the profound and often directly relevant influences of culture in all its manifestations and sense of identity, no matter how fluid, also challenge the identity disregard approach, particularly when belief systems about gender and roles in intimate partnerships are often so closely connected to justifications for abuse and interpretations of some aspects of cultural identity.

When a man says to us "this [gender roles, reasons for abuse, expectations of women] is part of my culture as a [insert category of identity which man believes has most strongly influenced his beliefs about gender/abuse/relationships] man" it doesn't always seem

sufficient to reply solely “well that’s no excuse”. It is of course no excuse, but it may well be part of the explanation, of the pattern of stories, thought and belief systems which led this particular man to this particular pattern of abuse. It’s possible of course that some men are using this type of justification as a deliberate attempt to throw us off-course, but even if this is true and in any case if it is more his way of making sense of what he is doing, he is also giving us useful information about the aspects of his diverse identity he is going to need to un-learn or re-make if he is to make lasting changes to the expectations he has of women and the ways he behaves if they do not meet these expectations.

Cultural landscapes and masculinity

There isn’t a handbook we can reach for which can provide us with a route map for each cultural group, each aspect of diversity. With rapidly changing patterns of migration, a tense stand-off between various groups defined by religion or secularism or race spreading once again across Europe, these would not be helpful even if they did exist. The notion of cultural competence, whatever it was intended to convey, cannot imply that we can learn what we need to know about one cultural group, say, people of Polish origin living in the Netherlands, and then move on, once competent to understand that cultural group sufficiently well enough to address domestic violence perpetrated by men of Polish origin living in the Netherlands, to study another.

The core skill to work with diverse communities in domestic violence interventions surely has to be competence to understand how to help men to navigate and become more explicitly familiar with their own cultural landscape, particularly, but not only, their sense of being a man as it is influenced by the various significant aspects of that cultural landscape, and from there to help them to re-make parts of it, sufficient to retain the sense of self and who they are, but to shift on those aspects which support gender-based expectations and a sense of (male) entitlement to enforce these with force.

Actions for programmes to respond better to diverse communities

Notwithstanding the challenges raised in this article about responding to diversity in domestic violence interventions to address perpetration of domestic violence, there are some practical and educational steps programmes can take to improve their responses.

- DO carry out some factual research about who lives in your catchment area. Even with the mono-cultural/singular identity approach to data collection at work in local and national censuses, they may contain information to help programmes to assess in the first instance if they are reflecting the local population. Local municipal (council) authorities are usually the first source of census information but so too may police or child protection or women’s services. Contact them to ask for anonymous, statistical data about who lives in your area, who may be coming to the attention of relevant services. Alongside this examine your own data.
- DO use the data, if possible, to help you to answer relevant questions about who is and who isn’t or can’t come to your programme. Are there people in your catchment area who may be unable to read your materials or understand course content but nevertheless

need your programme? Are there communities in our area who are currently coming to the attention of law enforcement or child protection for concerns about domestic violence who also face other specific forms of discrimination or exclusion? Does your service look relevant to people across the whole of your catchment area? Who is being excluded? Can you change some of this?

- DO ensure that other intersecting aspects of identify such as age, economic status, disability and education are also considered when reviewing your reach and responsiveness.
- DO also consider whether other differences, such as the situation with the children, or substance use, or mental health, might be significant for specific additional content or ways of working.
- DO consider your current materials, including assessment criteria and programme content. As a first step, consider whether your assessment criteria or methods might be unintentionally excluding someone on the grounds of language barriers or a different understanding of what constitutes domestic violence.
- DO also consider if there are communities from whom there are disproportionately high numbers of referrals – are they dealing with assumptions or misunderstandings by the local state agencies? Is the local women’s service aware of a specific problem with domestic violence referrals from that community?
- DO review what you have found out so far and decide if it is possible for you to make simple changes to materials or assessment processes or referral systems in order to reflect your local population better and be more accessible.
- DO spend time with the staff group discussing your own understanding of diversity and culture and how these affect your own assumptions, biases, understanding and relationships of and with the men and women you are working with.
- DON’T get overwhelmed by the challenges of trying to make your service more widely accessible and appropriate to different communities – remember if your programme is having a positive effect on the people you are already working with, it is very likely that it will have a positive effect on others too.

DO break down the changes you want to make into small, achievable steps.

Literature

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