

Croatia Study Visit 2014.

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What an amazing experience! As a practitioner in the field of Domestic Abuse for 25 years I have spent the last 15 years working primarily with heterosexual male perpetrators in groupwork environments in the UK. I have worked on 3 different structured programmes all of which use the Duluth Power and Control wheels as a key tool.

I was very much looking forward to see what other models of work had developed across Europe- to see what we have as common themes and noticeable differences.

The agenda for the event was well structured with an appropriate amount of time allowed for networking. The first day was planned to have a visit to SPA prior to our first evening meal sadly this was lost due to delays in flights for many participants. For this reason perhaps the study visit would have benefited from a longer time spent in Zagreb perhaps an additional day. Or separating those days seen as 'travel days' from the identified 'study days'.

Dean had clearly planned a range of activities with a great balance between presentations from practitioners and social/ networking time with other study group members.

Including the visit to the shelter was a particularly good idea placing SPA's work within the context of the whole countries CCR rather than showing the perpetrator programme in isolation from other responses to domestic abuse.

The presentations themselves were very informative and gave a clear indication both of the goals of each piece of work but also the current challenges. I will say more about those challenges later.

The first presentation regarding the development of and progression of work across Croatia was fascinating with Dean giving a background of the work of SPA who started working with perpetrators of domestic abuse as a side issue to their first line of work which was working with refugees following the war. This is a very different context from my country and strongly reminded me that Croatia is only 25 years old as a country and had horrors and trauma so recently in its history. It appeared that SPA had chosen to engage on a strategic and policy level from the very start of it's work and had successfully influenced national policy to ensure that working with abusive individuals was both seen as a priority and delivered in a structured way with standards which should ensure a consistency of approach across the country. Dean showed us a map of where sites delivering interventions were across the whole country and which sites contained staff which his organisation had trained. This demonstrated the esteem which SPA is held in an organisation who have both the expertise and understanding around working with perpetrators of domestic abuse.

The second presentation where we heard about working with female perpetrators was much more focused on the clients of the work but was equally fascinating. The contrast between males and females in their presentation was not a big surprise. The numbers of females being referred and the types of behaviour which caused them to be sent to the misdemeanour court gave me an insight into the possible negative consequences of having such a robust criminal response to 'all types of abusive behaviour'. The case studies were particularly helpful for revealing these differences and the

presentation was comprehensive showing both how the personalities of the clients differed, the benefits of the group work as well as the 'interesting' results of the robust criminal response.

The final day of our visit we visited the shelter where we had a presentation from the director, a guided tour of the property and time to chat to practitioners within the service. Talking to the worker who is from their perpetrator service was interesting as she presented some contrast to the way in which SPA works. This was a casual conversation rather than a structured presentation but she was offering a perspective on female perpetrators- again she identified these individuals identified as abusive had very different characteristics from the males referred to the service but she also presented the notion of running mixed gendered groups. This is something which I have never done and have some concerns about due to the potential for victimisation but to talk to a practitioner who offered a very different perspective to the one I am familiar with and held the view that it had some merit as it reduced the group dialogue around 'it's just the way men behave' or conversely 'it's just men being demonised here'. I would have enjoyed exploring this topic for far longer but sadly the very tight schedule meant this conversation was left there.

The shelter itself was extremely well provisioned and demonstrated Croatia's strategic commitment to addressing domestic abuse in a robust and effective manner. The staffing levels and very clear boundaries of expectation for the clients was very interesting and in sharp contrast to current service provision here in the UK.

Some of the things which I learnt from my study visit were not just about Croatia but appeared to be themes echoed across all our countries. The impact of money on service integrity, several of the group had familiar experiences of a DVPP which was useful and worked effectively being asked to take more participants or be run for less weeks or have less one to one pre group work so that its overall cost would be reduced – of course the expectation being that these changes can be made with no impact on the quality of the service! The second common theme was the recognition of the value of ensuring that partners are aware of the perpetrator work and having an open door to communication for these victims. This was particularly highlighted by one area of Europe where, due to strict protocols around confidentiality, the DVPP working with criminal court directed participants were not given contact information of the victims. The third common theme was the need for a more diverse range of interventions with perpetrators of domestic abuse, while all countries have shelters, helplines, therapeutic groups, recovery groups and a range of victim interventions it appeared that there was a much lower range of options available to challenge and potentially change (rehabilitate) the perpetrators. The final common theme I noticed was the need for victim and perpetrator work to be more effectively delivered together –not for a particular couple but for services themselves. For all services to recognise that, particularly when a perpetrator remains in the household, the intervention offered by one service can complement or conflict with the intervention offered by another service unless both of those services are fully aware of each other's working methods and aims.

The mix of practitioner, research and strategic levels of experience in the group definitely added value to the study trip. Each participant brought so much knowledge but also seemed to learn so much from the others that I would definitely say this type of study trip should be repeated.

In conclusion my overall experience of the study visit was outstanding. I learnt so much that I feel this short review does a disservice to the efforts made by Dean and his team and understates the knowledge gained from the trip.

I would enjoy contributing further to the work of the wwp-en in any way I can.

Sara KP

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