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The Complex Pathways to Violence in the Home

Better understanding male domestic abuse
perpetration

(Summary of Findings, October 2021)

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Background to the research: From 2018-2020, the Government funded the development of a range of innovative approaches for working with perpetrators of domestic abuse (DA) through the Police Transformation Fund. As part of this, money was allocated for research which sought to better understand perpetrators of DA, and strengthen the evidence base for 'what works' in addressing DA behaviour. The following research was part of that – the Domestic Abuse Perpetrator Research Fund 20/21. Our area of research has been to identify who the perpetrators are, and specifically, the early warning signs and behaviours that may indicate someone is abusive, or at risk of becoming abusive in future.

Please note: The views reflected in this research are not necessarily those of the Home Office.

Rationale for the research: Identifying perpetrators of DA is challenging. Most do not come into contact with the Criminal Justice System (CJS), and many will not have had the opportunity to be referred onto perpetrator programmes (Hester et al., 2006). As such, we don't know all that much about them as a group. One of the most valuable ways we can learn about people's lives, of course, is by asking them. However, research into perpetrators of DA is limited, and often focused on what is located *outside* of that individual. In particular, perpetrators' evaluations and experiences of DA interventions. There is little looking at the broader life-course of the perpetrator. This is an important gap if we are to recognise the early warning signs of such behaviour, as well as identify who the active perpetrators are. The following research project, therefore, explores the life-stories of adult males who are known to the CJS as perpetrators of DA. It considers their early lives and how they explain their various pathways towards DA, including the stressors and challenges experienced in childhood, early factors that they felt drove and triggered their DA perpetration, and other factors which sustained and escalated such behaviour. In addition, the research also explores how the participants explain tackling their DA behaviour. The research then takes a critical position – specifically, a narrative perspective. Here, the research considers *why* and *how* such stories might be told, and what that might suggest about future behaviour. It concludes by considering how such knowledge might benefit DA policy and practice.

Aims and research questions: The aim of this research was to better understand who the perpetrators of DA are, how they came to be, and how current interventions might be strengthened in light of this understanding. The research questions (RQs) were as follows:

1. How do male perpetrators of DA explain their lives, and in particular their pathways to becoming domestically abusive?



2. Why do DA perpetrators tell the stories they do?
3. How can the learning from this research be usefully applied in policy and practice?

Methodology: In exploring this topic, in-depth, narrative interviews were conducted with ten men, ranging from 22-53 years-old. The men were all known to the CJS as perpetrators of DA, with most involved with the Building Better Relationships (BBR) programme. The interviews were conducted between February and March 2021. The data from the interviews was explored in two ways:

- *Thematically:* In answering our first research question, we explored participants' narratives using their own words, and through their own lens of reason. We looked at the commonalities in their lives, especially their younger lives, and considered the various social and psychological factors they drew on in explaining their pathways towards DA perpetration.
- *Narratively:* In answering our second research question, we took a more critical approach. We considered *how* and *why* our participants told the stories they did. The rationale being, what more might we learn about this group by doing so? In particular, what might a narrative reading tell us about their sense of identity, their motivations to desist from (or even, to persist in) future DA perpetration, and the relationships they have with systems of power – specifically, ones that are in the position to issue labels of 'risky' and 'rehabilitated' (and the implications that come with that).

Addressing the research questions:

RQ1 – How do male perpetrators of DA explain their lives, and in particular their pathways to becoming domestically abusive?

Participants revealed a number of similar early childhood experiences. However, though the experiences were common, participants did not directly link them to their later DA perpetration. The experiences involved, **parental separation and the break-down of the family unit** (often with dad leaving the family home), **troubles at school** (academic, behavioural and developmental issues), and of particular interest, **one-off, traumatic events occurring in adolescence** e.g. finding a parent after a stroke, finding a parent after a suicide attempt, finding out they were adopted, witnessing someone being killed, and various life-changing medical issues.

Other childhood experiences, however, were *directly* linked to later DA offending by the participants. For example, **abuse and violence in the family home, mental health, substance misuse, anger & violence** (most commonly expressed through narratives of teenage stress, and the subsequent impact on coping in adulthood),



and **volatility in romantic relationships** (e.g. petty arguments, fights, sniping behaviours, and acrimony following break ups – especially amongst the younger participants). From a more psychological perspective, there were also **problematic beliefs about fatherhood and the 'role of men'** (e.g. outdated and reductive views of men and women, and the roles they played in heterosexual relationships). Indeed, some participants spoke of wanting to be like their fathers, which was of concern when these fathers were subsequently identified as being abusive and violent men themselves. There were also several who suggested their DA behaviour to be a product of **youth and immaturity**. This was most common amongst younger participants, who were more likely to give examples of how they changed going into adulthood. Finally, participants talked of their desire for change, and the ways in which they were working towards it. This was in **applying newly learnt skills in high-pressure situations** (e.g. 'breathing', 'counting to ten', 'going for a walk', and talking out problems), and **active engagement in DA perpetrator programmes** – (skills and techniques were often attributed to the positive role of such interventions). Ultimately though, **change was said to come from within** e.g. wanting to be a better person, wanting to reunite with a partner, and for one participant, through what had been lost forever following the death of a partner through his own violence.

RQ2 – Why do DA perpetrators tell the stories they do?

In paying attention to how and why participants told the stories they did, we made the following points. Due to **fears of being seen to be victim-blaming and failing to take accountability**, participants struggled to tell stories which linked their experiences of being a victim of DA to their perpetration of it. Participants got around this by implying causal links (i.e. not *directly* linking the two), and by drawing on the testimony of others (e.g. using the words of reliable friends and authoritative criminal justice professionals), who vouched for their partner's alleged abusiveness. For one participant, this topic prompted an additional narrative around the challenges of being a male DA perpetrator in the CJS, whilst striving to also be seen as a victim of DA. Narrative analysis also showed participants worked hard to **distance themselves from negative identities**. Given the shame and stigma of being labelled as DA perpetrator, participants sought to preserve their goodness by both pushing away other negative traits, and suggesting abusive behaviour was the fault of alcohol, and therefore outside of the good person they really were inside.

There were also interesting patterns in how participants gave their accounts of violence against their partners. Such accounts created problems in that, stories of men causing hurt and harm to women are rarely received well. As such, the **participants explained their violence in particular ways, which typically involved justification, mitigation and denial**. Telling stories of violence against women also appeared to threaten masculinity. Participants sought instead to preserve their



masculinity through explaining where they 'drew the line' in their violence towards women (e.g. it was proportional; necessary to de-escalate a situation). Some also suggested that, had these situations occurred with a man, things would have been very different. Masculinity was thus preserved in their restraint in not having done worse.

Finally, the analysis highlighted the commonality of **narratives of desistance**. Participants offered stories which placed them as reflective, reformed and ready for change. Telling such stories helped achieve a number of welcome outcomes e.g. repairing damaged self-esteem, providing opportunities for redemption (through participants being able to use their experiences to help others), and enabling participants to show their desistance focussed future plans. Such narratives also functioned to protect, when it came to the power of the CJS to give and withhold certain identities – specifically, ones which placed them as rehabilitated, and ones which placed them as still posing a risk. For the participants, all of whom wanted to move on with their lives, and most of whom wanted to reunite with a partner, these labels became barriers and facilitators to achieving that. As such, and often despite other issues and complaints they had, **they tended to promote their compliance and positivity, both towards the systems that held them and towards the processes and tools used to rehabilitate them.**

RQ3 – How can the learning from this research be usefully applied in policy and practice?

Points for policy and DA prevention programme development:

1. More attention needs to be paid to the damaging effects of aggression and violence in the family home, acrimonious parental separation, and the related disappearance of dads. These were collectively linked (by the participants) to violence and later DA.
2. DA programmes might benefit from a greater focus on the role which fathers (and father figures) play in perpetrators' young lives, and also the messages perpetrators get about 'being a man' from the important men in their lives.
3. Interventions should allow perpetrators the space to explore their experiences of being a victim of DA, such that this does not end up becoming a barrier to acknowledging and tackling their own abuse and violence.
4. DA programmes should consider the role that isolated traumatic events can have in a young person's psychosocial development.



5. More work needs to be done on stress management, especially in earlier adolescence. Not tackling strategies for stress at younger ages can pave the way for substantial problems in adulthood, and become a significant risk factor for DA when combined with other factors (as described earlier).
6. More education is needed for young men (and young women) around building and sustaining 'healthy' relationships, and preferably before destructive patterns and habits are formed and embedded.
7. Educate young people about what DA comprises, what the current legal definitions are, and how it can appear in a relationship.

Points for practice and practitioners:

1. Don't let concerns that perpetrators may be justifying or excusing their DA behaviour detract from the importance of such accounts being given at all. Stories themselves can be an important part of sense-making and reflexivity.
2. Related to above, male to female domestic violence often threatens masculinity, and therefore may see additional levels of defence as individuals seek to preserve it.
3. Older perpetrators may struggle more than younger perpetrators when it comes to understanding problematic beliefs about gender roles, in part reflecting the generation they were born in to, and their confusion about what value they have in the family dynamic.
4. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, perpetrators may withhold information, or be more inclined to tell 'success' stories which position themselves as reformed, changed and compliant, due to perceived risks about what might happen if they don't. It is thus crucial that practitioners working directly with DA perpetrators understand this and encourage perpetrators to talk about these issues without fear of repercussions.

For a more detailed account of these recommendations, and of the research, please see the main report.

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