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# Do Batterers' Programs Work?

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## Author's Note

The author wishes to acknowledge the staff and clients of the Domestic Abuse Project who provided fertile ground from which these ideas have grown. This paper is derived from one presented at the **International Study Group on the Future of Intervention with Battered Women and Their Families** held in Haifa, Israel, on March 19-21, 1995, with funding from the Women's.

## Do Batterers' Programs Work?

A recent, high profile case involving the murder of a battered woman by her estranged husband has brought a deluge of inquiries asking: Do batterers' programs work? Most of those asking have sought simple "sound bites" that can explain a complex issue to a startled public. Unfortunately, there are no easy answers to this question. In fact, most people who have studied batterers' programs hold mixed opinions on their usefulness and on future changes that might bridge the gaps between differing views.

This paper examines the complexities of any attempt to answer the question: Do batterers' programs work? It starts by examining the term "works" and the various meanings people attach to this term when evaluating batterers' programs. It then looks at the published outcome data on batterers' programs and examines their results through the various lenses of the public debate on treatment effectiveness. The article concludes with suggested policy and program directions for the future of intervention with men who batter.

## When Does A Program Work?

It is not uncommon to hear a practitioner, policy maker, or researcher stridently claim that "this program really works" and then hear an equally qualified and strident critic argue that the same program "doesn't work at all." Sometimes it almost feels as if one is listening to competing political advertisements. When discussing programs aimed at rehabilitating or re-educating men who batter it is hard not to hear such divergent claims pertaining to a single program or to all such programs. One of the reasons for such divergent opinions lies in the fact that there has never been agreement among major stakeholders in this area about what may be defined as a program that "works." How we answer hinges to a great degree on what changes we expect in violent men's behavior in order for a program to be deemed successful.

### Criteria of Success

The literature is full of essays and published program evaluations that each use quite different success criteria. Most such discussions focus on outcome studies and this will be the focus here. It should be noted, however, that many people judge a program's success on a variety of criteria other than outcomes. These include theoretical, ideological, moral and political factors, with measured outcomes often accorded less importance.

A range of perspectives are identifiable even within the narrower focus of outcome studies. At one end of the continuum, some researchers have used "typically significant positive change" or statistically significant changes in a desired direction among participants (Neidig, 1986; Neidig, Friedman & Collins, 1985) to claim program success. At the other end, others have advocated for nothing short of a transformation of program participants "until men are prepared to take social action against the woman-battering culture" (Gondolf, 1987, p. 347) and become an "accountable man" (Hart, 1988). These positions illustrate the ends of the continuum along which there are many positions concerning what signals a program that "works."

The use of statistically significant decreases in violent behavior or increases in other behaviors without linking them to violence can be very problematic as criteria for success. A group of men could, under such criteria, be successful participants if they have decreased their average violence from five to three beatings a week or similarly increased their average ratings on a measure of marital satisfaction. Or a large group of program participants who decrease their violence by a few percentage points more than a comparison group could also be judged successful under this criterion.

The problem with using statistically significant change as a criterion of success is that it may have little practical significance (see Bloom, Fischer & Orme, 1995) for victim/survivors. That is, percentage decreases in violent behavior or similar increases in marital satisfaction or communication may make little difference to those who continue to receive or witness repeated assaults each week, albeit fewer than before.

Considering practical significance, most working in interventions with batterers agree that ending violent behavior is an important success criterion. Many also agree that ending threats of violence is a worthy goal. Most program evaluators have attempted to measure the degree to which men's

programs end violent behavior, but only a few have examined a range of direct and indirect threats of violence (cf. Edleson & Syers, 1990, 1991; Tolman & Bhosley, 1989). It is more likely that greater attention will be paid to some classes of threatening behavior as states and localities adopt laws expanding the definition of illegal actions to include behaviors such as stalking.

A related debate concerns the almost exclusive reliance of most studies on the Conflict Tactics Scales (Straus, 1979). This measure - and the many adaptations of it - is by far the most commonly used instrument in batterer program evaluations. Critics have argued, however, that the CTS measures only a narrow band of perpetrator behavior to the exclusion of the effects that such "tactics" have on victimized women and children (see Straus & Gelles, 1990). Why are measures of the physical, psychological and social effects a perpetrator's violence creates in women's and children's lives so frequently missing from program evaluations?

An expanded version of the CTS, that attempts to measure sexual coercion and injuries resulting from physical abuse, and a related Tactics Correlates Inventory measuring individual and relationship correlates of violence have recently been released (Straus et al., 1995). There is still a need to go well beyond even these new measures in future studies that examine a broader indicators of success such as women's and children's experience of safety. Yet, one must ask whether we truly expect batterers' programs to create legions of "accountable" men who will act to repair the world they have damaged? Do we expect such programs to end men's use of manipulative behaviors, ones that may be characteristic of many intimate relationships where violence does not occur? For example, a common definition of psychological maltreatment includes the category of "using male privilege" in which a man excludes his partner from major family decisions and expects her to fill traditional role expectations in support of him (Pence & Paymar, 1993). Do we expect successful male participants of batterers' programs to become partners in truly egalitarian relationships as envisioned in Pence and Paymar's (1993) Equality Wheel? Is this a criteria for success in batterers' programs or does it represent our larger vision of social change, only part of which can be achieved through social services.

The degree to which one goes beyond acts of physical violence and threats to define the meaning of success is where most controversy surrounds evaluation of batterers' programs. Many strongly criticize or even reject batterers' programs as incapable of bringing about changes that have practical significance for women and child victims. Those most harshly criticizing batterers' programs argue that ending violence and some threats is insufficient to create true safety for women and children. They argue that other forms of manipulation often replace violence but maintain the same system of power and control by the man over his woman partner and children.

## **Role of Batterers' Programs**

A subsidiary question that arises and was alluded to above is: What role do batterers' programs play in the larger effort to bring about major and lasting changes in the way society defines healthy intimate relationships? Some critics of batterers' programs would likely argue that these programs must be an active part of the transformation of male-female relationships and, at present, they fall far short of such a vision. On the other hand, many policy makers and most funders of batterers' programs are more likely concerned with ending illegal, violent behavior regardless of the degree

to which the participants are transformed. Many people are in between these two positions. On the one hand, they recognize that unfair power and control may well be maintained even after violence and threats have ended. On the other hand, it seems inappropriate to expect or even mandate through the courts that certain men identified by social agencies (often lower income and racial minorities) attend a program to become transformed when others, who are not violent but who may be regularly applying unfair power and control in their own relationships, are not also required to attend programs to make similar changes in their behavior.

Another way of looking at this subsidiary debate, is to ask: Where does the responsibility of batterers' programs end and a social movement to change all men's behaviors in intimate relationships begin? Similarly, when does a man's participation in a batterers' program end and participation in a men's change program begin?

In summary, the ways in which one defines the term "works" in relation to batterers' programs will greatly influence the degree to which one perceives these programs as effective. It appears that there is a limited social mandate from policy makers and funders to assist men in ending the use of illegal violent and threatening behaviors. Unfortunately, these same decision makers have yet come to the point of supporting large-scale social interventions aimed at changing many non-violent men's controlling behaviors toward women. If such a time should arrive, it is very unlikely that psychoeducational programs aimed at a targeted subgroup of men is the most effective way to bring about the desired social changes in all men's behavior toward women.

## **What is the Best Format for Batterers' Programs?**

Just as contentious as the debate concerning outcomes are current discussions regarding the input that creates these outcomes. What is the appropriate format, content, and provision of programming for batterers? A great deal of debate has occurred around the issue of "anger control" and its relative importance in batterers' programs (see Gondolf & Russell, 1986; Tolman & Saunders, 1988). Related to this debate is the rapid growth in "state guidelines" that set parameters for and, in some jurisdictions, official certification of the structure and content of batterers' programs as well as the qualifications of providers offering such programs.

Programs described in the literature vary a great deal but the predominant format for offering services to men who batter is clearly small groups of 5 to 15 men, the leaders of which are often but not always male. Most programs described are highly structured, focused on teaching behavior and attitude change, and last from 10 to 36 sessions (see Edleson & Tolman, 1992; Eisikovits & Edleson, 1989).

## **Outcomes That Meet or Fall Short of Expectations?**

Over the past two decades a number of batterers' programs have been evaluated and the results published. These studies, while limited in scope, offer a glimpse into the types of changes achieved by batterers' programs. Evaluations of these programs have been extensively reviewed elsewhere (Edleson & Tolman, 1992; Eisikovits & Edleson, 1989; Saunders & Azar, 1989; and Tolman & Bennett, 1990; Tolman & Edleson, in press). Here, the focus will be on men's groups and the degree to which current evaluations shed light on the question: "Do they work?"

## **Batterer Program Evaluations**

A review of these summaries reveals a consistent finding that in varying programs, using various methods of intervention, a large proportion of men stopped their physically abusive behavior subsequent to involvement in the programs. Reports of successful outcomes ranged from 53% to 85%.

For example, in a study conducted at the Domestic Abuse Project, approximately 2 out of 3 men randomly assigned to receive structured educational programs or those combining education with group processing were reported not violent by their woman partners during 6 and 18 month follow-up periods (ranged from 62.1% to 67.7%). Men in these groups achieved more stable outcomes than did those randomly assigned to a less structured, self-help program. The study also found that 12 session programs achieved outcomes similar to 32 session programs. Factors including a participant's education and involvement with the court also influenced outcomes (see Edleson & Syers, 1990; 1991).

Favorable evidence supporting the use of batterers' programs must be weighed in light of other explanatory factors and with a high degree of caution due to many methodological shortcomings evident in the studies thus far reported. For example, lower percentages of success tended to occur in programs with lengthier follow-up and when success was based on reports of women victims rather than official arrest rates or men's self-reports. A major methodological shortcoming of the existing literature on group treatment is the scarcity of experimental studies, leaving open the question of whether intervention itself is responsible for change in abusive men's behavior. Another shortcoming is the near absence of qualitative studies that might provide a greater understanding of how men who change proceed to nonviolence. The qualitative method could also provide an greater understanding of the types of changes required of a batterer for victims to feel that their environment is safe.

## **Program Drop-Out Rates**

The evaluations cited thus far mostly concern the rate of recidivism among program completers. Unstated is the fact that these programs witness large numbers of men who contact the agency but never complete the prescribed program (see Deschner, 1984; Harrell, 1991). A graphic representation of this case-flow would resemble a funnel or cone with large numbers of men entering but fewer and fewer staying with the program at each point along the way to completion.

In one recent evaluation (Edleson & Syers, 1990; 1991) over 500 men initially contacted the agency during a 12-month period. Of these, 283 completed the intake process and attended a first group session and 153 completed the program. In addition, approximately two out of three of those men for whom follow-up data were available were reported to be non-violent. These data indicate that approximately a third (30%) of the men who initially contacted the agency and just over half (54%) the men who entered the program ended up completing the 12 or 32 session programs to which they were assigned. Finally, since two-thirds of those who completed the program were likely to be reported non-violent during follow-ups, in the final analysis only one of five (20%) of those who originally contacted the agency made it all the way through the program and were reported not violent during follow-up periods.

Consistent with these findings are the results of two national surveys of batterers' programs. Feazell, Mayers and Deschner (1984) reported in their survey of 90 programs that one-third to one-half of the men dropped out after the first session of a program. Similarly, Pirog-Good and Stets-Kealey (1985) reported data based on a survey of 59 batterers programs where they found that 48% of the men starting a program did not complete it.

Here again "success" is a relative term. Those who examine these data see many shades of success and failure. On the one hand, some see that approximately two-thirds of program completers are reported not violent for periods ranging up to 18 months. These people conclude that such programs are successful. On the other hand, others see that only one in five men successfully complete a program and remain non-violent over a relatively short period of 18 months. They often conclude that these programs are a failure and wasteful of scarce resources that could be spent elsewhere.

## Conclusion

This paper has attempted to bring the sometimes heated discussions about batterers' programs into focus in a way that might help us examine future policy and program changes. Most people do not want to hear a multi-layered and complex answer to the question posed at the beginning of this paper: Do batterers' programs work? They often persist in seeking a clear-cut and simple response that can be easily digested - the proverbial sound bite. Answering this question in an honest way, however, requires a complex examination of the meaning of the terms "work" and "success," the underlying assumptions of policy makers, program providers and evaluators. A recognition of the wide diversity of social agendas represented among those providing the answers is critical. Perhaps this question - the one most often asked by the general public, reporters, funders, and policy makers - is not even a question that can be answered at this time or at any time in the future.

Batterers' programs do appear frequently successful in ending violent and the most threatening behaviors among the majority of participants who complete a prescribed program. That is a worthy accomplishment. Ensuring a woman's physical safety is the critical first step in creating an environment where she can make choices that best meet her needs and those of her children. Affectively addressing violence against women also requires increasing support for women and children seeking safety, following through with criminal court sanctions designed to keep men in batterers' programs and promoting a major shift in our definitions of acceptable behavior in intimate relationships. Batterers' programs provide only one element in this larger

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