

View and Commentary from the Trenches: A Battering Intervention Project's Reaction to Participation as a Site In program Evaluation



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Publication Date: June, 1997

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Note

A version of this paper was presented as part of the session "Batterers: A Comparative Multi-Site Evaluation of Battering Intervention Programs" at the The 5th International Family Violence Research Conference, University of New Hampshire Durham, New Hampshire, June 30, 1997

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Abstract

Collaboration between study sites and researchers might improve interpretation of evaluation results. The PIVOT Project of Aid to Victims of Domestic Abuse in Houston participated in a multi-site battering intervention program evaluation funded by Centers for Disease Control. Participation called for added demands on the site. Changes made to accomodate the research raised program's awareness of its own involvement in wanting the answer to the question, "What does what we do really accomplish?" Research results could be important to help verify program effectiveness to funders, referral agencies, legislators, and to us working in the field. The quantitative results were not sufficiently decisive to be used for these purposes; moreover, they did not capture much of the social education regarding tolerance of differences, parenting skill development, women in leadership roles, and the possibility of more than one right answer depending on the context of the situation. Many programs promote those kinds of incidental benefits. Possibilities of deleterious effects resulting from participation should be considered. What it was like to be a part of this effort is described. What has been learned from this effort is examined. Did the results of the research give worthwhile information and do no harm to battered women?

Organization

History

AVDA (Aid to Victims of Domestic Abuse) is a non-profit corporation which began in 1980 providing services to domestic violence victims. AVDA operates two main projects--the Legal Advocacy Project which serves victims with information, referral, counseling, and legal services,

and The PIVOT Project . PIVOT, the Battering Intervention and Prevention Project, began at AVDA in 1984 to provide services primarily to men who have been violent and/or abusive in intimate relationships. PIVOT has a long history of involvement in the domestic violence movement. PIVOT's Director is one of the founders of the Texas Council on Family Violence (TCFV) and she serves on that board as the Honorary Permanent Director. Both she and AVDA's Executive Director have served as chairs of TCFV. Beginning in 1984 with one group, PIVOT was granted as one of the original Texas Department of Criminal Justice-Community Justice Assistance Division funded programs in 1990 and soon grew to 5 groups. As of June, 1997, PIVOT provided 24 groups for men in its central and in outlying locations in Harris and five other counties. All outlying groups are conducted in cooperation with the battered women's programs in those areas.

Description

PIVOT is a direct service program for men who have been violent, abusive, and/or controlling in their relationships with women. The main purpose of AVDA's PIVOT Project is to provide group work in the form of education, counseling, and re-socialization to men. Concurring with others in the field that women have the right to safety and self-determination, PIVOT seeks to bring about the following: 1) increase the safety of the partners of batterers by working toward the elimination of violent and/or abusive behavior and by providing information, referral, and some support to the partners; 2) eliminate the violent and abusive behavior by providing a group intervention program which focuses on participants accepting responsibility for and making changes in their abusive behavior; 3) teach the skills which can assist a participant to become a partner in an intimate relationship that is not only non-violent but is also mutually respectful, mutually satisfying, and growth promoting; 4) encourage participants to continue working outside of PIVOT on social actions fostering societal change; and 5) end violence by participating in, assisting with, and providing other activities in the community, state and nation.

Participants begin PIVOT with an Orientation where men and, if they want to, their partners, attend a session to learn out about the program, have fees set, and make an appointment for an Evaluation with a staff person who is assigned to the group they have selected. Groups may be selected by participants because of day of the week, time of day, location, or staff working with a particular group. At the Evaluation, a private meeting with a staff person of the group the participant has selected, each man is assessed for suitability to the program. If suitable, he is invited to join the group. When a man completes requirements at the end of the basic 18 weeks of group sessions, he may leave the program, decide to stay on, or be recommended to Second Stage where participation is voluntary. Second Stage is a place for the more dedicated and committed participants to continue their work on an expanded level.

Research

Rationale for joining study

Learning that funds were coming available for a large scale study on batterer's programs, PIVOT's director heartened. Most who do this work want to believe that they are doing good things, but are not exactly sure what the good things are. Cessation of violent, controlling, and abusive behavior is likely not to be at the level we would like, but we believe the impact of the

program on the lives of many men has some positive and meaningful result. Examining many aspects of outcome behavior in a well-constructed study over time had the possibility of providing valuable information. When asked to be one of the sites in the study, PIVOT staff filled with pride in our program invited the scrutiny. Although we had a "can do" attitude, we did not initially realize how much was being taken on.

Modifications and Their Impact

In order to collect the data for the research, PIVOT's program required amending. The usual Evaluation session was cleaved into two sessions. Evaluation 1-Data Collection (E1) became a group session which was held before the individual Evaluation 2-Interview Assessment (E2). Two Research Assistants were hired. Research Assistant 1 (RA1) was a teaching fellow in Women's Studies and graduate student who would seek a dissertation topic from the experience. Her portion was conducting the E1 with the men. Research Assistant 2 (RA2) was a new-to-the-city man who was looking for a job and working at PIVOT would provide a local reference. His portion was the check-in, documentation, file-building, and clerical support. Both were remarkably competent.

Program structure before and after research.

Orientation, Evaluation, Group. Program structure during research. Orientation, Evaluation 1-Data Collection (added for research), Evaluation 2, Group.

Adding the E1 session made monthly statistics (both in-house and to TCFV) much more complicated, especially during the transition before research began and after ending. PIVOT had to figure out how to count E2 people without double counting.

Even with the two part time research assistants, extra work was added to the administrative staff's load as they had to track, report on, and close cases on participants who never came to the E1 after Orientation. Before being part of the research, the facilitator with whom a participant had made his Evaluation appointment would have been responsible for handling all aspects of participant documentation and case management once the participant had attended Orientation and made an Evaluation appointment. As the research assistants were in the office for only the E1 session, the administrative staff had to answer questions and reschedule the E1 appointments. The administrative staff had to count and track the E1 participants for the statewide TCFV statistics. They also had to keep a list of E1 participants and generate the statement to Mid Atlantic Addiction Training Institute (MAATI), headquarters for the Principal Investigator, for payment for the research assistants. They had to coordinate with MAATI regarding "valid" participants, who were those with intimate relationship offenses. The responsibility for coordinating with MAATI in regard to collecting all the paperwork on all the participants, initially the responsibility of the research assistants, fell to administrative staff when the research assistants had completed their initial data gathering and were no longer at PIVOT. Administrative staff had the burden of constantly reminding and requesting facilitators for the participants' Exit Criteria and Participation forms for MAATI. Facilitators acquired increased work in order to comply with obtaining the Exit Criteria and Participation forms required by the research and making sure that the administrative staff had them to forward to MAATI.

Research Assistants Experience

The experience of the research assistants was rich. Being the initial contact on the research was worrisome for RA1. The men had attended the Orientation and had time to think about the ideas presented there. They perceived both research assistants as targets for their sense of injustice and indignation regarding their participation in the program, especially the time and financial requirements. The E1 sessions were sometimes "bumpy" and characterized by defensiveness and posturing by both the men and by RA1. She sometimes wondered why she was so interested in being part of this project, but over time the procedures improved and it became a challenge for her and RA2 to set up and tear down the room in record time.

As the research progressed, the research assistants developed a structure. RA2 initiated the case folders at the E1 session for the men attending. RA1 was then introduced by RA2 as a volunteer at PIVOT whose primary responsibility involved the data collection. She made a point of saying that she could answer some but not all of their questions about PIVOT. This strategy of positioning herself as a PIVOT advocate who was somewhat removed from the PIVOT program reduced the "scapegoating" that occurred in the earlier sessions, and she believed it encouraged honesty in the men's answers to research questions. Following her introductions, she explained exactly what they could expect from the session and why they were participating. A printed agenda, listing the order of events and estimated time for each, demonstrated to the men that if they took up time with unnecessary questions and comments that the session would go over the allotted time. Cooperation was the men's key to "early release," and anyone who took too long brought not the research assistants but the other participants down on them.

Next RA1 would begin the PIVOT portion of the E1 session. This segment covered PIVOT policies and the Participation Agreement. Men sometimes asked questions about the items included in the Participation Agreement. Policies on Separation from Partner, on Firearms, and on Admissions to Violence were common points of contention. Over time, RA1, able to anticipate their questions, incorporated the answers in the presentation. This strategy cut down significantly on argumentative questions. The usual disrupters were particularly hostile men whose questions she addressed or redirected to the facilitator who would be conducting the E2. A common complaint from the hostile men occurred at the Financial Arrangement section of the Participant Agreement. They complained that they were unwilling to cooperate with those particular requirements. RA1 would direct them back to their referral source and take herself out of the loop. Those who found that they would be back in dialogue with the Criminal Justice System were soon quieted.

Following the Participation Agreement, the men were introduced to the research project and the data collection began. In the consent procedure, RA1 encouraged men to provide feedback regarding the program, emphasizing the importance of the feedback for the improvement of services. After noting the 800 number listed on their consent form, men wanted to know what information would be accessible to any of their contact persons who might call the number. RA1 stressed that the people answering the number were very much aware of the confidentiality issues and would make only vague reference to the research and give guarded answers to questions to anyone other than participants. Indeed, even a participant might not be able to get a specific, detailed answer. RA1 then reminded them about the payment they would receive for their cooperation. Most men consented to participate. In the E1, men sometimes complained about wording or personal questions in the questionnaires. She encouraged them to answer

as honestly, accurately, and completely as possible. When they finished, they were asked to wait for other group members before they moved on. After the E1 was complete, RA1 thanked them for their time and effort, reminded them that they might be contacted for the research, and wished them well in the PIVOT program. In retrospect, she believed that the most important qualities of this procedure were respect and firmness. She encouraged the men to acknowledge choices in their situation. They could choose to participate in the program as outlined or take their objections to the referral source. She was primarily providing them with information about the expectations should they choose PIVOT; this was tantamount to informed consent. Being consistent during the session set a stage for later participation at PIVOT. The consistency also eliminated wrangling over different procedures and requests. No one began late and no one left early.

One thing RA1 noticed was the different qualities sessions took on based on certain men. One or two hostile men could really move the group in an abusive direction of mob rule. As she became more experienced, other session participants would take on keeping the disrupters in line. Sometimes, RA1 would simply cut the disruption short, saying she had to move on and then moving on.

Different PIVOT staff attended the sessions to provide support, and both research assistants were rejuvenated by the staff encouragement and praise. Leaving the two research assistants mainly to their own devices and creativity fostered a sense of confidence in their abilities to manage. During one session, when PIVOT's most experienced male facilitator observed, he did not intervene to rescue and RA1 was grateful that her authority had not been undermined. Once the female director intervened when the disruption was reverberating throughout the suite and she worked hard to be respectful of the RA1's position with the group. Once the E1 data collection sessions were completed, RAs 1 and 2 were glad to get their Saturdays back.

Participant reactions

Initially, staff believed that the change would be hard on the participants; however, once the new procedures became routine, there was surprisingly little reaction. Men who underwent the extensive evaluation sessions seemed more committed to maintaining the program--very likely because people value what is more expensive and harder to attain. Some participants raised questions of facilitators, asking who had been calling an ex, wife, partner, and why were they doing it?

With all the difficulties, one good coming out of adjusting the organization to accommodate to the research was that weaknesses in many agency procedures became identified. Once identified, they could be corrected. Staff were very interested as to whether or not other program sites in the study were experiencing similar problems. When the Principal Investigator came, staff were very happy to have a forum to pose their questions. The Principal Investigator was diligent to be forthcoming with feedback and appreciation.

Staff reaction

It was surprising how ego-involved the staff became once the data collections were completed and results began coming from MAATI. Interest centered on comparison of the procedures in the different sites. What were the similarities and what were the differences? Could some retrieve data for MAATI easier? Were their systems more efficient and evolved than PIVOT's. Were

participants more cooperative at one of the sites than they were at others? It was worrisome to think that the outcomes from one site might be much more favorable than another. Would we compare poorly? Would the outcomes from each of the sites be similar? Would there be geographical differences? Would the results of the research change how the work would get done? Could outcomes of the research enhance the safety of women?

Possibility of deleterious effects

PIVOT staff did not consider the impact this well-funded study might have on once results came out. Would the results show that we are measuring more of what is measurable and still not finding out what we want to know? Would the results be worth all the resources allocated. Would those who specialize in program evaluation view this costly endeavor as precedent setting and an inroad interjecting themselves into grants let by governmental entities. Would the result of so doing divert portions of funds which might have gone to direct service? The multi -site evaluation was under the direction of Gondolf whom we believed to be one of the best possible to do this. Moreover, he followed the questions of what those doing battered women?s work wanted to know. Gondolf also looked at context of the locale in which each program operated. Has PIVOT inadvertently participated in helping bring about some very troublesome possibilities?

Summary and Conclusion

Being part of this effort was not as trouble-free to the program as some had anticipated it would be. The effort could never have been accomplished without the research assistants. Staff were proud to be part of something that they thought would make a difference. Would we do it again, even if the results, all of which are not yet available, were not favorable? Originally, with not a scintilla of hesitation, the answer was yes and in a heartbeat. After considering the possibility of possible troublesome outcomes, we are now not so sure.

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