The effectiveness of perpetrator programmes in promoting positive gender relations and preventing domestic violence: A case study of NICRO’S PIPV programme

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Abstract

Domestic violence is an enduring social problem in South Africa and call for a competent response to reduce the high rates of its occurrence (Kruger, 2006). The South African government developed a legal reform to deal with the implementation of Domestic Violence Act 116 of 1998. However this legal reform alone is insufficient to reduce domestic violence as it is still prevalent up to date. Other strategies and programmes have been developed by other relevant stakeholders such as NICRO in the fight against domestic violence. NICRO developed a feminist orientated Perpetrator of Intimate Partner Violence programme. There has been much contention with regard to working with perpetrators thus this study sought to contribute to the debate by examining the effectiveness of the NICRO PIPV programme. The goal of the study was to evaluate the effectiveness of the PIPV programme in promoting positive gender relations and preventing domestic violence. A sample of 8 respondents was used for the qualitative study. The results from the study indicated that positive gender relations are a key to reducing domestic violence as all participants stopped physical domestic violence perpetration. It was also apparent from the study that successful perpetrator programmes have to be coupled with legal reforms, such as the Domestic Violence 116 of 1998 to ensure compliance and effectiveness.

Key words: domestic violence, perpetrator programmes, gender relations
Introduction

It is no secret that South Africa has one of the highest rates of domestic violence in the world as it occurs in at least one out of three households (De la Harpe & Boonzaier, 2011). To address domestic violence, the Domestic Violence Act 116 of 1998 (hereinafter referred to as DVA) was developed to provide a holistic law enforcement response to protect victims of domestic violence primarily through the granting of protection orders (Dissel, 2010). The DVA has however been faced with many criticisms and challenges as it has failed to effectively address the issue of domestic violence. According to Summers and Hoffman (2002), one such criticism is that the DVA does not provide for state sponsored mandatory rehabilitation and counselling programmes for perpetrators of domestic violence. There also has been poor implementation of the DVA owing to lack of resources (Dissel, 2010). The rate of domestic violence in the country is still continuing to soar thus making it clear that the legislation on its own is not effective in lowering domestic violence rates. The White Paper for Social Welfare provides a framework for principles, guidelines and recommendations for developmental welfare programmes for perpetrators of domestic violence, victims of crimes and their families (Triegaardt & Batley, 2006).

The increasing rate of domestic violence in the country has prompted stakeholders and organizations like NICRO to take the onus upon themselves to help develop strategies and programmes to work hand in hand with DVA in the fight against domestic violence in South Africa. The PIPV programme was developed by NICRO in 2008 as part of the Non-Custodial Sanctions project to work with perpetrators with the aim of reducing recidivism and to give offenders a chance to reform and rehabilitate in the community without being imprisoned (Smith, 2010). The programme was therefore usually coupled with a sentence as condition which might have been a suspended sentence or a fine. The PIPV programme hails from a pro-feminist philosophy that posits that domestic violence is a manifestation of patriarchal social structures that promote male superiority and insubordination of women (Jackson, 1997). Domestic violence is deeply entrenched in social and cultural structures and results in unequal power relations between men and women (Kumari & Herdefeldt, 2012). Lucena et al (2016) concurs and states that domestic violence is produced under the hierarchical organization of male domination in social relations between the genders. NICRO therefore used this assumption is developing the PIPV programme aimed at working with perpetrators to address domestic violence and improved gender relations are at the forefront of this programme.
The guiding principles of the PIPV programme include reducing domestic violence by developing a zero tolerance ethos and promoting a culture of deterrence. Bancroft (2010) suggests that longer term solutions to addressing domestic violence can be found in changing gender relations and that this should entail changing the attitudes and negative gender stereotypes and beliefs that lead to domestic violence. One of the objectives of the PIPV programme was therefore to enhance positive gender relations between men and women. The programme also aims to assist male perpetrators to understand the underlying or root causes of their violent behavior towards their partners, with the hope of increasing their willingness to change their behavioral patterns and refrain from acts of violence (Padayachee, 2010).

Given the political history of violence in South Africa (Dunaaksi, 2013) and continued gender inequality, understanding the effectiveness of intervention of men who batter their partners in the country is important. Again, understanding why and how perpetrators change their behavior is an important skill in social work. The PIPV programme is conducted over a 20 week programme and comprises of group intervention, individual counselling session and couple counselling sessions where necessary. However there is no documented research on the efficacy of the programme as a domestic violence prevention programme. The only mechanism in place for evaluating the PIPV programme is a post-test completed by beneficiaries on completion of the programme as this is insufficient as a standalone evaluation tool because it does not provide detailed information to measure long-term sustainability of the positive outcomes of the programme. There is general agreement in the literature world (e.g. Gondolf, 2002) that insufficient research has been conducted on the impact of programmes available to perpetrators of intimate partner violence on recidivism, relapse rates and other long term benefits. This sentiment is also shared by De la Harpe and Boonzaier (2011) who stated that the effect of intervention on men’s behaviors is largely under researched in South Africa. The study was therefore concerned with bridging the gap in this research and determining whether the PIPV was a viable option to imprisonment that the courts could use with the hope of reducing recurrence of male perpetration of domestic violence. Outcomes of the research were measured against set objectives through establishment of recurrence of domestic violence, identification of attitudinal changes to domestic violence, use of non-violent methods of conflict resolution, increased responsibility and accountability and lastly assessing the extent to which participants attributed such changes to the PIPV programme.
Overview of literature

There are various approaches and theories that have been used to explain causes of domestic violence and address the issues thereof. These include the social learning approach which suggests that aggression, abuse and violence are learned and transferred by other individuals of the family; they are therefore modelled, rewarded and supported by families and/or broader culture (Wolfe & Jaffe, 1999). This approach is based on the principle that since violence is learnt behaviour, it can also be unlearnt (Harne & Radford, 2008). The researcher however chose to employ the feminist approach for this particular study. Feminist theory provided a useful theoretical lens for understanding if the power dynamics between men and women changed attendance and completion of the PIPV programme. Power dynamics between men and women were addressed during the programme since the feminist theory argues that domestic violence is a result of unequal power relations between men and women (Rasool, 2011). Feminism purports that, in male dominated societies, patriarchal relationships are widely supported by stereotypical or traditional gender role attitudes or expectations about appropriate social roles for women and men (Herzog, 2007). These traditional gender role attitudes are enforced in society by informal and formal control systems, which may embody the belief that men have the right to use physical force against their intimate female partners to control them and sustain power in the relationship (Dobash & Dobash, 1979).

The feminist approach aims at challenging these beliefs about women and the use of power in intimate partner relationships (Bowen, 2010). It proposes that the patriarchal beliefs of male heterosexual dominance lie at the root of domestic violence hence there is a need to address the power imbalances between men and women in these societies. Male entitlement and the use of violence to sustain that position is often attributed to male socialisation, with the implicit understanding that what is learned can be unlearned (McPhail, Busch, Kulkarni, & Rice, 2007). Historically, intervention in the field of domestic violence has focused on victim-oriented intervention. Padayachee (2010) states that this is because many organisations are skeptical about working with perpetrators, as critics view these programmes as extremely costly, both in financial and emotional terms for women. Some also feel that perpetrator programmes do not take the security and safety of victims as a priority, since women may be lulled into a false sense of security because the perpetrator is attending a programme. According to Cavanaugh and Gelles (2005), feminists have long been cautious and even suspicious of treatment programmes for male offenders, asserting that such programmes may create a false sense of security in victims, thus endangering their lives in the process.

Some feminists, however, suggest that treatment for male partners is important in order to hold men accountable for their violent actions. Bowen (2010) states that pro-feminist programmes may exert a meaningful therapeutic effect and reduce the incidence of domestic violence through challenging beliefs, norms, attitudes, values and the roles
ascribed to women. In this study, a feminist perspective is useful in ascertaining whether or not perpetrator programmes do indeed contribute to changed attitudes toward gender-based violence and, most importantly, initiate a reduction in domestic violence, indicating changed gender power relations.

At present, there is little research that evaluates the effectiveness of perpetrator programmes as an intervention method for addressing domestic violence in South Africa, and the research that has been done is inconclusive (Jewell & Wormith, 2010). Studies on the effectiveness of batterer programmes have been conducted in other countries – mostly in USA. A study conducted by Babcock, Green and Robie (2004) on whether treatment programmes for batterers are successful indicated that these programmes had a minimal impact on reducing recidivism. This study showed that men involved in the programmes resisted change and perpetrated domestic violence shortly after treatment. Dutton, Corvo and Chen’s (2008) studies on the issue also revealed little evidence that treatment programmes have a positive effect on violent behaviour. These studies, however, were conducted in the USA, thus they may not be generalisable to South Africa.

In the United Kingdom, the Strength to Change organisation conducted studies on the effectiveness of their PIPV programme (Stanley et al, 2011). Here, there was a great deal of evidence that these programmes had a positive impact on the behaviours and attitudes of the perpetrators. Domestic violence incidents decreased among perpetrators who had completed the programme a year previously, according to Stanley (2011). As a result of these research studies, a move to differentiate among different groups of perpetrators began. Cavanaugh and Gelles (2005) identified three types of batterers across current typology research: low, moderate and high risk. Best intervention outcomes are usually obtained when the type of offender is matched to the type of treatment, as evidence suggests that not all batterers are alike. According to Cavanaugh and Gelles (2005), interventions targeted to address the needs of sub-samples of offenders can lead to more effective protection of those most at risk of future violence.

A study carried out by De la Harpe and Boonzaier (2011) in Cape Town on women’s experiences of an intervention for violent men revealed that most women felt that the cessation of domestic violence perpetration by their partners was caused by the threat of incarceration, since treatment was court mandated. They called for further research on the effectiveness of treatment programmes for male perpetrators of domestic violence in order to understand the behavioural changes in men. The WHO (2001) concurs with the call, indicating that research on male perpetrators of domestic violence can provide important insights into the impact of different forms of intervention.

From the studies above, the results indicating the effectiveness of perpetrator programmes were variable, depending on the perpetrator, the programme and methodology used in the study. Thus, Taylor et al. (as cited in Gordon & Moriarty, 2003)
makes recommendations that more research needs to be done before conclusive statements about the success of treatment programmes in reducing domestic violence can be made. This study therefore sought to contribute to the current debate on the effectiveness of treatment programmes in the rehabilitation of domestic violence offenders through evaluating NICRO’s court mandated PIPV programme in South Africa as clearly there is a gap in the field.

**Methodology**

The study was qualitative in nature and evaluative research design was employed as outcomes were based upon previously set objectives. Evaluation research is used to determine the impact of a social intervention in this case being the PIPV programme. A social intervention is an action taken within a social context designed to produce an intended result. Evaluation research thus analyzes the impact of a particular program on a certain social problem the program is trying to solve (Weiss, 1998). Therefore this study focused on the outcome/results of the PIPV programme on the perpetrators who partook in the programme. Participants were selected from a pool of 23 respondents through purposive sampling, a form of non-probability sampling (De Vos et al., 2011). The research participants were 4 male perpetrators who had successfully completed the PIPV programme and were due for a 12 month follow up interview. The research was conducted with participants who had completed the programme 12 months to avoid chances of reporting superficial and non-sustainable changes. Interviews with the intimate partners of the perpetrators were used for triangulation purposes and to prevent possible biases of self-reporting. Therefore the research respondents were 8 in total including the pilot study.

A semi-structured interview schedule was used to collect data from the respondents and their partners. Open-ended questions were used so that the interviewees’ experiences of the effect of the programme could be understood (Esterberg, 2002). Examples of questions asked included whether the perpetrators had committed any form of domestic violence against their partner after completing the PIPV programme. Interviews with both perpetrators and their partners were tape recorded and transcribed for analysis. Interviews firstly focused on changes evidenced during and since attendance of the PIPV programme, and then on the extent to which participants attribute these changes to the PIPV programme. Collateral information was also collected from court records to establish whether the respondent had perpetrated further domestic violence though breaching a court order or assaulting the victim in the twelve months post the completion of the PIPV programme. Collected information was then coded and presented in a thematic framework as the findings of the study.
The researcher took into consideration the issue of confidentiality thus no identifying particulars were used to report the findings of the study. Pseudonyms were used in the final research report. All the research participants also signed an informed consent form as an agreement of participating in the study with no financial rewards given. Women safety was also another ethical issue that was prioritized by the researcher. The women were interviewed in a private and secure place to avoid possible disturbances from partners who might not have wanted them to partake in the study. Domestic violence is a sensitive topic and one of the ethical considerations made was that the study might traumatize victims once again. To cushion the respondents from such debriefing sessions were held and they were provided with a list resources for possible referrals to counselling if need arose.

Findings and Discussion

Feminist scholars argue that domestic violence is caused by unequal power relations between men and women and that the patriarchal system influences men’s violence against women (Scott, 2004). One of the objectives of the profeminist perpetrator programmes was to challenge these patriarchal beliefs that support domestic violence thereby promoting positive gender relations and eliminating domestic violence. This study also sought to evaluate the effectiveness of the NICRO profeminist perpetrator programme in achieving its objectives of fostering zero tolerance attitudes towards domestic violence and reducing domestic violence incidences.

Re-assaults are usually used as a measure of success or outcome after programme completion of a perpetrator programme. Success of a perpetrator programme is seen as a cessation of a man’s physical abuse against his intimate partner (Scott, 2004), not necessarily other types of abuse. This is an issue of contention however and therefore must not be used as the only measure of success. Physical abuse incidences were used as a measure of outcome to determine programme success as the first level of evaluation in this particular study along with other measures. Male respondents were asked if they had physically assaulted their intimate partners after programme completion. All four of the male participants’ responses were negative as none of them had physically assaulted their partner twelve months after programme completion. There was indeed a cessation of physical violence, which at face-value might be taken for programme success. However, other forms of domestic violence, which included harassment, verbal and emotional abuse, were still present in their intimate relationships. It must be noted that, although these forms of abuse still took place, they had reduced in occurrences and intensity. This suggests that the inclusion of some aspects that address other forms of abuse in the programme is important in ensuring success of perpetrator programmes. Despite this, none of the respondents had actually been re-arrested for any domestic
violence related crimes after successful completion of programme. One can therefore arrive at a conclusion that the NICRO PIPV programme had some effect in the reduction of domestic violence incidences therefore curbing the recidivism rate. One can however also ask if the only reason why they stopped physically abusing their partners was an impact of the PIPV programme.

Domestic violence perpetrators are believed to hold a set of beliefs and attitudes that influence the way they relate and behave towards their intimate partners. One of those beliefs is that they hold a superior role in the relationship as they view themselves as the providers and protectors (Dempsey & Day, 2011). These beliefs and attitudes about gender roles are considered a risk factor in domestic violence. Padayachee (2010) states that these beliefs and attitudes that promote violent behaviour should be challenged in perpetrator programmes to bring about sustainable behavioral change. Feminist scholars have always maintained that engaging men on attitudinal change towards women is a necessary pre-condition for decreasing domestic violence (Bowen, 2010). These attitudes and beliefs also influence the way in which men relate with women and in most cases, with a superior attitude towards the weaker gender.

The study also affirmed that a change in attitudes towards women was very important in reducing incidents of domestic violence. Through the PIPV programme, offenders had adopted and applied a new set of behaviours, attitudes and beliefs that go against domestic violence, thus effective behavioural change was acquired. Perpetrators learnt that to treat women with respect and as equal partners in a relationship at all times. They learnt that men were not superior and should not exhibit control in their intimate partner relationships thus chances of domestic violence perpetration were reduced. Empowering the perpetrators with cognitive behavioral skills and enhancing their protective factors such as positive relationships were also recognized as very influential in curbing incidences of domestic violence and are therefore essential to improve effectiveness of the perpetrator programmes. The findings of this study affirmed the argument made by feminist theory that abusive men have a sense of entitlement over women and they felt that they were more superior to women. This was revealed when the perpetrators indicated that they were the head of the household and that their partners were sometimes very stubborn and did not listen. They therefore sought to discipline, enforce superiority and exert control through domestic violence perpetration. However, by the end of the treatment programme, which aimed to modify these attitudes and beliefs, the male respondents were able to recognize and acknowledge the fact that they had no right to ill-treat their intimate partners and abuse their human rights through perpetration of domestic violence. Hence male respondents had learnt that they were not superior to women and that they need to treat women as equal partners.
Respecting women as individuals was another important realization for participants. The perpetrators were encouraged to change their gender stereotypical thinking and attitudes by relinquishing their sense of ownership towards women, which was essential in effecting positive behavioral changes. It is also quite evident from the above that successful perpetrator programmes have to address gender issues such as challenging patriarchal beliefs that influence the perpetration of domestic violence. Programme beneficiaries have to be taught new skills to replace maladaptive thinking patterns in order to stop the unacceptable behaviours like domestic violence. Domestic violence has serious consequences including intimate femicide, thus prevention and intervention involving perpetrators should be carefully planned and implemented with these above-mentioned factors in mind to improve the success of these programmes in reducing recidivism.

Understanding why and how perpetrators change their behaviour is an important goal in social work practice. Positive relationships with partners, family members or peers are known to reinforce good behaviours in offenders (Carlie, 2002). This research further supported this statement as indicated by the data collected from the female participants. After completion of the NICRO PIPV programme, there were reports of improved and strengthened relationships between the perpetrator and the victim. The couples were able to relate better and communicate more effectively, thereby preventing misunderstandings and conflicts that might have led to domestic violence. The programme therefore had managed to have positive effects on the relationships between offenders and the victims thereby promoting positive gender relationships as was originally intended.

Limitations of the study

The research had only eight participants. That is a small sample size and the results cannot be generalised to the all male perpetrators of domestic violence. It must also be noted that not all population groups and different types of batterers were included in the sample. The results might have been different if all population and batterer groups had been included in the research. This possibility therefore served as a limiting factor, thus it is recommended that another outcome evaluation study on perpetrator programmes should be carried out using a larger sample that includes all population groups in South Africa. There is still a great need to engage in further studies and evaluations in the area owing to the fact that there is speculation on whether or not the change is sustainable and if it fully attributed to the programme or rather due to the threat of incarceration. The participants could only speculate, as they were not sure as to what exactly brought about the positive behavioural changes.
Conclusion

Domestic violence is a serious social problem with serious implications in the lives of victims, the perpetrator’s families and the broader community. Social service practitioners have an obligation to work towards effective prevention and intervention of domestic violence. Effective treatment programmes have to prioritise safety of victims, educate perpetrators and emphasize the need for perpetrators to take responsibility for own behaviours and stop domestic violence. Studies have proven that for improved effectiveness, these programmes have to be linked to the criminal justice system (Kruger, 2004). This study on the outcome evaluation of the NICRO PIPV programme has made a contribution to the largely under-researched area of treatment for male perpetrators in South Africa by showing that, despite their limited success in reducing incidences of domestic violence, perpetrator programmes are a viable option that the courts can use as an alternative to imprisonment. It must also be noted that although physical violence was stopped by perpetrators after programme completion, other forms of violence decreased in frequency but did not stop completely. This therefore suggests that the treatment programmes for perpetrators must be continuously evaluated and modified to include effective strategies that successfully curb incidences of other forms of intimate partner violence. There were other important factors identified that played a huge role in the cessation of physical violence and these included fear of incarceration, increased accountability and responsibility, the potential of losing relationships and a positive attitude towards women. These factors seem to play a very influential role in the change of behaviors of perpetrators of domestic violence. It is thus importance to put emphasis on the how positive gender relations are an important factor in decreases the rate of domestic violence. However since these are gender attitudes and stereotypes are deeply entrenched in society, strategies that also focus on changing these in the communities are of utmost importance in the fight against domestic violence. Domestic violence is a serious social problem in this country and for it to be substantially reduced; strategies must be multifaceted and preventative, focusing on the individual, family and community. Socially acceptable beliefs and attitudes must be instilled in individuals whilst they are still children instead of working at changing these as an adult who has already offended. Domestic violence therefore has to be approached at multiple levels using various strategies to bring about positive changes and attitudes.
References


