



STOPPING FAMILY VIOLENCE

A study of the impact on men and their partners in the short term and in the long term of attending Men's Behaviour Change programs

**Monash University, Department of Social Work
Stopping Family Violence Inc. 2016**

Stopping Family Violence Inc. review of:

[A Study of the Impact on Men and Their Partners in the Short Term and in the Long Term of Attending Men's Behaviour Change Programs](#) by Monash University, Department of Social Work, 2016

Stopping Family Violence (SFV) acknowledges the need for longitudinal, multi-site studies of the effectiveness of men's behaviour change programs in Australia. The efforts undertaken by Monash University and Violence Free Families are welcomed, and represent a highly complex, expensive and ambitious study to undertake. Undertaking longitudinal research with participants in MBC programs is notoriously difficult and expensive. However, SFV is concerned about the conclusions that are being drawn from this study based on the various limitations of the study's findings.

The authors make claims about the effectiveness of MBCPs that in SFV's view cannot be substantiated from the results of the research due to its methodological limitations. The study's lack of well-defined research questions, absence of triangulation of data with independent qualitative partner and facilitator reports, and the heavy reliance on men's self-report data indicate that the findings should be couched far more tentatively than they currently appear.

As this study has already been reported in the mainstream media, and at both NGO and government levels, as signalling the effectiveness of MBCPs, SFV suggests interpreting this research as strong evidence of success is a disservice to the sector's plight to generate an evidence base. Consequently, it is advised that MBCP providers, stakeholders, and funders eager to cite studies that prove the effectiveness of their work utilise the research with more rigorous research designs.

The methodological limitations of this study are both transparent and significant, and SFV urges that the findings be stated with much far greater qualification and less confidence than how they are currently represented.

Research questions

The research is not geared towards measuring the effectiveness of MBCPs in systemic terms or through a triangulation of data sources, but rather as stand-alone programs focusing predominately on individual-level change in men's behaviour.

The primary and secondary research questions are not well-defined, and their focus on the effects of the programs on 'men and their partners' do not start from a basis that measures the program contribution towards women's and children's safety.

The researchers make the (unwritten) assumption that changes in men's behaviour correlate very highly with changes in family member safety, thereby only evaluating one indicator of behaviour change. The multiple other pathways through which MBCPs can potentially contribute towards (or compromise) the safety of family members are not part of the conceptual framework of the research, and are therefore not measured.

One aspects of the methodology that is not clear is the extent to which program content and delivery was similar and/or differed across sites. As the findings are presented the reader would assume that there is one single program type delivered across various sites and that the only variation is whether or not men were ordered by the court to attend the MBC. If program type and length and any other variables associated with the MBCPs made no significant difference this should be reported, or alternatively if they were not included as study variables this should be noted.

Lack of partner reports

The authors reported that their study included partner feedback data. On reading of the report there was no success in recruiting women partners of men attending MBCPs. Partner feedback instead took two main forms and included a total of 30 women:

- 1) 19 women writing feedback on their partners' survey questionnaire (10 were original partners and 9 were new partners since the men had commenced the program)
- 2) 11 women whose former male partners had completed an MBCP at another time and were not linked to the men in the study.

The study would have had greater methodological rigor had there been 'matched pairs' where women partners and former partners were a greater part of the study. Whilst a minor technical issue, it is not reported whether women may have felt pressure to write on their male partner's surveys.

Whilst the research team obviously endeavoured to obtain partner quantitative data,¹ the report gave little or no consideration to the methodological limitations resulting from the lack of this data. Given this absence of quantitative data from partners, and absence of triangulation of data from the men with partner reports, any conclusions drawn about the program benefits should have been stated very tentatively.

It is widely recognised that evaluation studies relying predominantly on perpetrator self-reports – without any triangulation with partner reports and/or service system data (e.g. engagement with police or courts) – cannot be counted as providing reliable and valid contributions to the current state of knowledge (Akoensi, Koehler, Lösel, & Humphreys, 2013; Gondolf, 2012). The conclusions drawn in the report from the quantitative data with the men, however, does not mention their tentative nature. Additionally, the executive summary does not mention the need to interpret the results with caution due to the lack of quantitative data from partners and the final sample sizes (71 men and 30 women).

The qualitative data obtained from partners cannot be used to draw any solid conclusions. It is promising that as many as 19 women reported positive outcomes for their partners from MBCP participation. However, the researchers have no way of knowing whether this would represent the majority or minority experience of the 110 men who were assessed at T2, let alone for the 270 men at T1 who started out on the MBCP journey.

Nature of self-report data collected

The study's use of self-report data of men's violent and controlling behaviours is a key methodological limitation with this particular population group who are known to underestimate, deny and/or minimise their violent, abusive and controlling behaviours and its effects on others (Black, Weisz, Mengo, & Lucero, 2015; Devaney, 2014; Edeleson, 2012). When both a perpetrator and his partner complete a violent and controlling behaviour checklist focusing on the perpetrator's behaviour, the perpetrator's ratings of which behaviours he has engaged in, and with what frequency, is likely to be significantly different from his partner's ratings. In intervention settings, much more weight is given to the latter, and the study's lack of such partner reporting is significant.

The men's self-reports of many violent and controlling behaviours at T1 (see Table 3 in the report) is considerably lower than what we'd expect for an average sample of 270 men attending a MBCP, and the extremely low endorsements of most violent and controlling behaviours at T3 and T4 (See Table 8) is hard to believe. This methodological limitation was not acknowledged in the report, aside from one statement on page 29. As the findings are currently presented they imply programs are effective,

¹ On page 20 of the report, however, it is clear that the authors misunderstood Project Mirabal's methodology when they reported trying to follow in this project's footsteps with respect to data collection from partners. The analogy they drew is incorrect and shows a misunderstanding of the Mirabal methodology.

the main evidence for this is men's responses to closed-ended survey items where they have ticked an improvement. This is not evidence of effect rather it is perception of men who are known to minimise how they have acted. It would therefore be more accurate to state that men rated the program positively.

Decreasing response rates

The decrease in response rates across the four data intervals from T1 (270), T2 (110), T3 (45) and T4 (71) is not unexpected. However, as with the lack of comparable qualitative and quantitative partner data, there was no qualifying statements in the report cautioning the reader about how program drop-out might affect the confidence with which one can draw conclusions from the results. No mention was made of the possibility that the outcomes of 26% of participants who provided data at T4 might be different from the 74% who did not.

Specific indicators of attitudinal and behaviour change

In SFV's view, indicator two has constrained usefulness as an evaluation measure. This indicator assesses men's narratives about changes they purport to have made to their behaviour. This measure's correlation with actual changes, and therefore the validity of this measure, is questionable.

Furthermore, indicators three, four and five are misinterpreted in our view. Changes in men's self-ratings about the seriousness or impacts of their violence is not the same as changes in their *understanding* of these things. Single item self-report measures do not measure understanding and are very susceptible to bias. Understanding needs to be demonstrated (e.g. through behaviours observed by partners) or assessed through multi-item measures addressing these constructs.

As the researchers have identified, men being aware and concerned about the effects of their violence and coercion on others is a key aspect in considering processes of change and accountability. Methodologically however, this is difficult to ascertain and measure as well as to be able to test if it has any direct effect on changing behaviours. Whilst recognising the difficulty of the research task, the validity and rigour of the survey items are questionable. Under the section *Impact of Behaviour* there are items asking about the seriousness of the effects on partners, children and other family members. This item was repeated over the 4 surveys with the intention to examine impact of the MBCP. The items were as follows:

How serious was the impact of this behaviour on your partner/any children you were in contact with?

- Not serious
- A little serious
- Serious
- Extremely Serious

Post program the question was:

Do you think the impact of your behaviour on your partner or ex-partner/children has improved since you completed the Men's Behaviour Change program?

The latter question about impact is not clearly expressed, in effect asking if the impact has improved, which does not aid in gathering quality data due to the different ways that this question can be interpreted. The use of a 4-point Likert scale without any other data to triangulate means that the data are unreliable as a measure of MBCP effect.

Conclusion

Overall, Stopping Family Violence believes researchers from a variety of persuasions would view this study as offering positive but tentative findings about the effectiveness of MBCPs. By stating conclusions much more boldly than what is warranted, the authors run the risk of overestimating the effectiveness of this work, casting doubt over any future efforts with greater methodological rigour.

Although the UK Project Mirabal research failed in its attempt to employ a naturalistic controlled experimental design, and eventuated as quasi-experimental in status, the strength of its conceptualisation and systemic focus of the research questions, extent of partner reports, and the outcome measures developed and employed, makes that research methodologically superior to the Monash Department of Social Work study. SFV believes that the results stemming from the latter need to be stated far more tentatively than those arising from Project Mirabal.

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