

**Family violence interventions and mandatory behaviour change programs:  
Explicating some obstacles to integration**

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This article explicates some of the many issues that arise when conducting behaviour change programs for male offenders within a correctional context. In doing so, the primary focus will be the organisational and client-specific obstacles encountered when seeking to implement the 'Victorian Network for the Prevention of Men's Violence ('V-NET', now 'NTV') Guidelines for Running Men's Groups' (1995) in such settings. In an effort to highlight the nature and implications of these limitations, particular focus will be placed on a model for conducting conflict resolution programs that is currently operational in Melbourne.

### **The program**

The 'REVAMP' program' is a ten week cognitive behavioural intervention that caters for male offenders who are required by the courts to attend an anger management program following the commission of a violent crime. REVAMP is based on the primary (but not uncontested) proposition that anger is an important emotional mediator of aggressive behaviour (Dengerink, 1976). According to this perspective, anger is a normal emotion that arises from the interaction of external events, cognitive processes, physiological arousal and behavioural reactions. As a result, it is not anger per se that is problematic, but its 'dyscontrol' that leads to harmful consequences (Robins & Novaco, 1999). From this broad basis, REVAMP has adopted a 'trans-theoretical' approach that incorporates principles derived from addiction studies, narrative therapy, aggression replacement training (ART), and cognitive-behavioural models. The program focuses on how beliefs, attitudes, and behaviour interact to produce undesirable consequences for all affected parties, and then sets about trying to provide its clients with the means to change their harmful personal patterns.

The program is funded by the Victorian Department of Justice via CORE, the Public Correctional Enterprise, and consists of a support component and a discrete program focused element. REVAMP has been in operation for almost two years, and during that time has provided service to over 130 offenders. To date, all REVAMP clients have been mandated by the courts to attend as one of the conditions of their Parole, Intensive Corrections, or Community Based Order.

In this sense, REVAMP exists outside of what could be termed the primary focus of agencies such as NTV. The program is not a dedicated family violence intervention, although approximately ten percent of attendees have disclosed information about committing acts of family violence. Current research (as well as common sense) indicates that the percentage of violent offenders (and other men) who disclose such offences is likely to be a significant underestimation of actual prevalence (Hughes, 1996; Cupach &

Canary, 1995). The ten percent who do disclose serve an important function nonetheless, as they 'allow' the group to engage with gender related issues that, in other situations, would meet with resistance from offenders who do not perceive a gender component to their crimes.

This tacit overlap notwithstanding, programs such as REVAMP occupy an uneasy position in the current milieu of men's behavioural interventions. An increasing (but still admittedly meagre) portion of government and non-government funding is rightfully being allocated towards family violence prevention programs and related initiatives to standardise the operation of such schemes across states (and perhaps nationally) (NTV, 1999). In this climate, and in an effort to glean some guidance in a multi-disciplinary and trans-theoretical field, programs that do not have a family violence focus inevitably draw on the models proposed by these higher profile peak bodies (Hollenhorst, 1998; Bartholomew & McCormack, 1999). Given the lack of a dominant paradigm in anger management theory (Berkowitz, 1993), it is understandable that program facilitators seek guidance from every available source.

Although it was the clear intention of the REVAMP program coordinator and co-facilitators to design and implement a program consistent with the NTV guidelines, a number of obstacles to this execution were encountered. These occurred at the organisational, client, and correctional levels, and raised recurring questions such as: 'What rationales form the basis for the drive to separate those who commit family violence from general criminal offenders?'; 'How much procedure and content should (or can) be shared by generic anger management and dedicated family violence programs?'; 'To what extent should a REVAMP-type program be adhering to the V-NET guidelines?'; and 'In what significant areas do (or should) the theoretical models that underpin such interventions diverge?'. Given space restrictions, this piece can do little to flesh out the aetiological and theoretical complexities underlying such questions (interested readers are referred to Hollenhorst (1998) and/or Bartholomew, MacKenzie, Burton, Aurora & McCombe, 2000 for related discussions). Instead, the objective of this article is to highlight some of the more pragmatic issues that arise when seeking to integrate generalist correctional programs into the pre-existing family violence milieu.

### **'Anger management' and 'Conflict resolution' as the new panacea**

An increasing number of offenders are receiving 'anger management' conditions on their correctional orders, and this trend is evident in many western penological systems (O'Neill, 1995; Beck & Fernandez, 1998). Men's anger is being reconstructed as an acute societal problem (Clancy, 1996; Biddulph, 1995), and the judiciary are playing a key role

in shaping the clientele that are referred to such programs. This is borne out by the make up of an average REVAMP group, where participants' offences range from window breaking, to road rage, armed robbery, family violence, and extreme injurious acts against unknown persons.

Consistent with this diversity, clients' patterns of aggression vary between the instrumental, emotional, impulsive, retaliatory, displaced and sadistic. This variance is at least partly due to a collision between, (1) the renewed societal and judicial interest in men's anger and violence, and (2) contemporary penological initiatives to manage the majority of offenders in the community, while sending only the truly 'dangerous' into custody (Lynch, 1998). An unfortunate ramification of this latter trend is vastly disparate 'types' of offenders being mandated to attend generalist rehabilitation programs (Feeley & Simon, 1992).

### **Applying the guidelines**

There are two groups of offenders who attend REVAMP. The first is the majority, and are required to attend an 'anger management' program as part of their correctional order. The role of the assessment with clients in this dominant category is simply to ascertain the suitability of the offender to the group in question, or to refer them elsewhere. It should be noted though that programs that are funded by Correctional Services act as a last resort for many offenders who have been found unsuitable for other community based programs. These other courses are either exclusively family violence orientated and/or require the offender to agree they have a problem with anger, and that they would like to address the problem in the group. Because very few offenders show this type of insight and preparedness, and REVAMP is funded as a 'last resort' program, most offenders assessed for REVAMP are accepted into it.

REVAMP participants are also routinely seen as not suitable for family violence programs because they are not prepared to involve their partners in their rehabilitation process. Although this requirement is valid in the family violence sphere, as mandated clients who are often serving sentences for offences that are not related to family violence, there is an argument that these offenders can not be required to involve their partners in their rehabilitation.

The second group of offenders who come into contact with REVAMP are only required *to be assessed* for an anger management program, and the onus lies with the assessor to determine firstly whether the offender 'needs anger management', and secondly if they would be a suitable participant in their program. Both groups present difficulties, but this

second group are particularly problematic in a therapeutic sense because they are (rightfully) fully informed about the conditions of their Order and are aware that it is *the assessor* who determines the nature of their ‘punishment’, and not judicial personnel. This greatly influences the offender’s level and type of participation in the assessment in the first instance. Second, and more significantly, if the assessment indicates that the offender could benefit from such a program, the onus is on the assessor to report this ‘verdict’ to the client. Obviously, this set of circumstances does not institute a favourable dynamic between the client and the group facilitator (the assessor) before the group begins.

This set of circumstances also raises another issue however, that of client willingness. Ideally, participants in rehabilitative programs should have an element of insight into their anger, some motivation to change, and be prepared to make a commitment to attend and participate (Beck & Fernandez, 1998; V-Net/NTV Guideline #2.9.2, 1995). Obviously, this ‘ideal’ is often not the reality with correctional clients who are required to complete a program as part of their Order. This is the most difficult aspect of dealing with this clientele in a rehabilitative setting. It influences every aspect of the program, from attendance, to participation, the types of activities that can be introduced, the utility of assigning ‘homework’ tasks (eg anger diaries), the amount of support the facilitators can expect from group participants, and the extent of challenge and change that is possible.

V-NET/NTV Guideline 2.10.3 states unequivocally that “V-NET members will not provide court reports or any other feedback on the progress of participants which could be used to obtain lighter sentencing” (1995). The provision of such reports is however a fundamental requirement of facilitators who undertake anger management programs through correctional services. Although the primary purpose of these reports is to indicate that the offender has completed that component of their Order, reports remain in the offender’s file and can be utilised (or interpreted) by a number of practitioners in numerous ways, unbeknownst to their author. This is another example of the conflict between organisational imperatives and a program facilitator’s desire to adhere to best practice guidelines.

When discussing changes to gender attitudes through improved language and conversational habits, Guideline 2.13.3 suggests that group members “be invited to monitor each other in regard to these behaviours” (1995). Although the invitation can certainly be extended, in a group of participants where a number have recently been in prison, the likelihood of constructing a dynamic whereby participants are correcting each other is unlikely. The prison culture directly discourages such behaviours, and because it is usually the participants who have recently come from custodial sentences who hold

powerful positions in the group's informal hierarchy, the possibility of establishing such a culture is low, regardless of how desirable such a situation would be.

The above examples are only a few of a multitude of conflicts faced by those who conduct behaviour change groups in correctional settings. Another includes the important issue of conducting closed programs, and the problem posed by very low attendances. A correctional program that is theoretically ten weeks long, and not open to new members to join, would have to run for twenty weeks (or longer) to allow the large percentage of participants who have high absentee rates to complete ten weeks of content before new members can join. In reality, a new (closed) REVAMP cycle begins every ten weeks, but many participants from the previous cycle are still attending at this time. Those who begin in week one appear as 'new' members to the large percentage who do not complete within the ten allotted weeks. This means that the program appears to be rolling, even when it is not. This less than ideal situation is due to the nature of the clientele, and the understandable organisational demands to process these offenders as expediently as possible.

## **Conclusion**

At 2.10 of the NTV Guidelines (1995), it is stated that "all mandated clients should initially attend a program focused group provided by the government or body ordering them to attend". In the case of REVAMP, this is indeed the case, although without a universally recommended structure for such programs, one wonders what purpose such a recommendation serves. If generalist programs remain on the fringe of centralised sources of guidance, they will continue to be a disparate collection of interventions that share little in regards to process, underlying theory, and substantive content.

Just prior to this recommendation, in the section that deals with mandated clients, the Manual states that "men who have been mandated to attend may have a genuine interest in personal change, or this may develop as the program proceeds" (NTV Guidelines, 1995; 2.10). Although the general tone of this article has been one of critique, it is not intended to imply that REVAMP participants (or those in other correctional programs) obtain nothing positive from program participation. Indeed, evaluations from REVAMP and other programs indicate quite the contrary (Beck & Fernandez, 1998; Howells & Day, 1999; Matthews & Pitts, 1998). The point that is to be made, however, is that family violence procedures/ guidelines have reached a stage where they are now further developed than generalist anger management guidelines, and in some cases the former are not applicable to the latter. The task then becomes one of identifying the procedures that are not portable across domains, and to draft others that acknowledge key differentials.

There are many practitioners working in generalist anger management courses with mandated (and often reluctant) clients who would benefit from guidelines that are relevant to the organisational restrictions they encounter. Pervasive organisational and correctional imperatives need to be recognised by peak bodies who draft best practice guidelines. In their discussion of the difficulties posed by mandated clients, the authors of the NTV Manual (1995) state that “these issues are the subject of ongoing discussion within the network” (2.10). Hopefully, the revision of the guidelines that is being undertaken in the latter half of 2000 will acknowledge theoretical discrepancies as well as existent organisational realities, and include some scope for this type of input. The growing number of practitioners who work with mandated clients would appreciate the acknowledgment, as well as the reference points.

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