


# Addressing domestic abuse via qualitative action research: reflections, tensions and the potential for change

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Northumberland, Tyne and Wear   
NHS Trust

Northumberland   
Care Trust

## Aims for Today:

- Reflect on our approach to domestic abuse and violence against women
- Consider how to address violence against women in critical community psychological ways
- Present key findings from “Mapping the Journey”
- Further critical thinking about the limitations and potential for change

## Rebekah ...

- New Zealand trained community psychologist, based in Scotland
- Interested in a values approach, including empowerment, social justice, diversity collaboration, systems perspectives and prevention
- Experience of working in a community abuse intervention project
- Currently a researcher on a Primary Care and Mental Health Research and Development Programme

# My Approach

- I choose to describe domestic abuse as violence against women to maintain the social context of violence and a feminist analysis
- Individualising approaches cannot understand VAW adequately
- Traditional psychological explanations often do not fit experience
- How many psychologists would be needed to 'treat' one in four women/one in four men?
- Can research be part of the problem if it obscures the bigger picture through individualising?

# What is Abuse?



Adapted from:  
Domestic Abuse  
Intervention Project

Duluth, MN 218/722-4134

# Context of Abuse

- In a lifetime...
  - One in four women will experience abuse
- Over the next week...
  - On average two women will be killed
- In the next minute...
  - The police will receive a call reporting DV
- Causes more death or ill health than cancer in Europe for women between 14 – 44 years old
- One in three women abused in her lifetime
- 60 million women missing from the world today

Jan ...

- Trained as a clinical psychologist. Working now as a Community Psychologist in a Public Health Dept and as a Clinical Psychologist in Adult Mental Health in a specialist Trust.
- Committed to a Community Psychology perspective for understanding distress, tends to be mental health focused. Enjoys the scope Community Psychology offers for social interventions and Action Research.
- Interested in women's issues and feminist contributions to psychology. Experience of abuse to women (violent and emotional).

# Local Background

Commissioned by multi agency steering group and undertaken by Community Psychology Service

## **Context**

- Prevalence of domestic abuse
- Consequences of domestic abuse
- Concerns in Northumberland



# Background

- Cultural context normalises violence, but exceptionalistic view of domestic abuse (Salazar and Cook, 2002).
  
- 4 phases for women dealing with violence (Kearney, 2001):
  - 1) Discount early violence
  - 2) Immobilisation, demoralisation
  - 3) Re-define situation as unacceptable
  - 4) Move out of relationship

# Aims

1. To gain some understanding of the experience of domestic abuse from women in Northumberland
2. To understand the social processes that influenced the participants' experiences and the effects of abuse
3. To raise the profile of D/A and make recommendations for interventions and prevention in Northumberland

# Method

- 12 women who lived in Northumberland and who had experienced domestic abuse and used voluntary sector services agreed to be interviewed.
- 11 women were in heterosexual relationships, one was in a lesbian relationship, 9 were unemployed.
- Analysis influenced by grounded theory (*Charmaz 1995; Henwood & Pidgeon, 2003*)

# Questions for Discussion

How can Community Psychology inform the research approach? (10 minutes)

# Findings

## **Areas of Analysis :**

4. The experience of domestic abuse
5. Living with abuse
6. Systems reinforced or challenged abuse
7. Dealing with abuse beyond the relationship

# 1: Experience of Domestic Abuse

- How the abuse began
- Aspects of relationship/maintaining factors
- Ways of abusing

*“He told me I was carrying the Devil’s child, so that was a bit disturbing. When I fell pregnant, he said “you’re going to get rid of it” and he pushed me down the stairs” Maire*

- Impact of abuse

## 2: Living With Abuse

- Keeping the status quo

*“I didn’t have the energy for anything because I was looking after the kids the whole time. I wasn’t allowed out of the house, I didn’t have any friends, I saw my parents very little”*

- Recognising the abuse as intolerable
- Gaining independence

## 3a: Responses that Reinforced Abuse

- Ineffective protection
- Failing to address costs of leaving“
- Not recognising abuse as unacceptable

*“I heard them (the police) laughing and joking with him and he’d been a right lunatic just beforehand with me”*



## 3b: Responses that Challenged Abuse

- Taking the victim's side

*“...nobody, whoever it is, deserves to be frightened in their own home”*

- Offering a common bond
- Providing effective help

## 4: Dealing with Abuse Beyond the Relationship

- Isolation/support
- Support needs for children
- Increased material hardship
- Activity and aspirations

*“I have everything to look forward to – college, everything else is positive.”*

# Overview

## EXPERIENCE OF DOMESTIC ABUSE

- *How the abuse began*
- *Aspects of relationship/maintaining factors*
- *Ways of abusing*
- *Impact of abuse*

## LIVING WITH ABUSE

- *Status Quo Strategies*
- *Recognition of abuse*
- *Gaining independence*

## HOW SYSTEMS REINFORCED ABUSE

- *Ineffective protection*
- *Failing to address costs of leaving*
- *Lack of recognition of abuse as unacceptable*

## HOW SYSTEMS CHALLENGED ABUSE

- *Taking the victim's side*
- *Offering a common bond*
- *Providing effective help*

## DEALING WITH ABUSE BEYOND THE RELATIONSHIP

- *Isolation/support*
- *Relationships with children*
- *Increased hardship*
- *Activity and aspirations*

# Key Findings

- Attempting to end or reduce abuse was prolonged and unsafe for participants with multiple attempts to leave. No single solutions.
- Abuse occurred in context of dominant relationships at home and beyond
- Onus on victims to address and resolve abuse
- Informal and formal systems could exacerbate harm and were described as punitive

# Key Findings

- Participants' potential to deal with the abuse contingent upon the systems around them including friends, family, colleagues, legal, police, voluntary, social, and health services.
- Children maintained commitment to relationships and enabled victim to leave
- Domestic abuse is a significant public health issue

# Methodological Considerations

- Retrospective accounts for a white female interviewer active, Maureen Plumpton, in Women's Support Group
- All participants had used services and had sought to end abusive relationship
- Individualistic focus
- Interpretations shaped by organisational context and our limited imaginations

# Action

- Dissemination, training
- Discussion of recommendations, contributed to plans for services
- Development of help cards and self-help literature
- Health Task Group established and development of staff policy, directory
- Challenge of genuinely developing a more proactive and preventative stance
- Implications for approaches in mental health

# Discussion Questions

How useful are research methods that individualise accounts?

Is there potential for qualitative research methods to create change?

What are the limitations from a critical community psychology aspect?

How can the research process be more accountable and participative?

How can we build on and add to this work?

How do we stay critical in an uncritical world?