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Nicky Stanley, Benedict Fell, Pam Miller, Gill Thomson and John Watson

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# Men's Talk: Men's Understandings of Violence Against Women and Motivations for Change

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## Abstract

This article reports research undertaken to inform a social marketing campaign targeting men's violence toward women in a city in northern England. Eighty-four men drawn from community groups participated in 15 focus groups. Participants struggled with wider definitions of domestic abuse and resisted depictions of men as wholly responsible for domestic violence. The potential loss of the relationship with children and, to a lesser degree, the relationship with their partner were identified as powerful incentives for changing abusive behavior. Men were particularly affected by the prospect of damage to their own self-image that children's perceptions of their fathers' violence conveyed.

## Keywords

domestic violence, men, social marketing

## Introduction

While there is increasing acknowledgment that initiatives to end violence against women need to include a focus on men (Crooks, Goodall, Hughes, Jaffe, & Baker, 2007; Flood, 2008), interventions for perpetrators have developed comparatively recently in the United Kingdom. Despite some early examples of perpetrator programs (Burton, Regan, & Kelly, 1998), the first large-scale implementation of such programs did not occur in England and Wales until 2004 when the Probation Service rolled out its Integrated Domestic Abuse

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Programme (IDAP) based on the Duluth model (see Bilby & Hatcher, 2004, and Bullock, Sarre, Tarling, & Wilkinson, 2010, for evaluations of program implementation). These developments in the United Kingdom have been shaped by the substantial body of practice and evidence available in north America (Gondolf, 2002), where perpetrator programs have been established and evaluated from a much earlier date. The growth of perpetrator programs in the United Kingdom has coincided with increasing interest in preventive interventions that take the attitudes and behavior of the community as the targets for change, rather than focusing on individuals. Such interventions draw on public health models and acknowledge the widespread nature of domestic violence and the extent to which it may be embedded and sustained in neighborhoods. Again, U.K. developments have been influenced by earlier work in north America (see Wolfe & Jaffe, 1999).

The research described in this article was part of a U.K. intervention based on a model originating in Western Australia where the Freedom from Fear program utilized a social marketing campaign to target men engaged with or at risk of domestic violence (Donovan, Francas, Paterson, & Zappelli, 2000). The social marketing campaign delivered in the city of Hull in northeast England in 2009 and 2010 was planned to raise men's willingness to seek help to change abusive behavior and to access a new local program for male perpetrators. Social marketing aims to harness the strategies and techniques developed in the commercial field of advertising to the task of changing behavior (Andreason, 1995; Department of Health, 2008) and to build a strategy for intervention grounded in the needs and understandings of the target audience. The campaign in Hull, therefore, began by commissioning formative research to explore local men's attitudes and understandings of domestic violence so that their views might inform the content and delivery of the campaign. The study offered the opportunity to explore in some depth men's conceptions of domestic violence and their thinking on motivations for changing abusive behavior.

### *Studying Men's Attitudes in the General Population*

Studies of attitudes toward violence against women undertaken in the general population have shown that levels of tolerance have decreased over the last decade (Ipsos Mori, 2009; VicHealth, 2006). However, both men and women are still more likely to associate domestic abuse with physical injuries and to evince low awareness of the psychological or emotional impacts of abuse (VicHealth, 2006). Perpetrators have been found to regularly deny or minimize their violence and blame the victim (Anderson & Umberson, 2001; Cavanagh, Dobash, Dobash, & Lewis, 2001; Heckart & Gondolf, 2000). Studies of the wider population also show that men are less likely than women to perceive domestic abuse as serious and to attribute blame to the victim. Bryant and Spencer's (2003) survey of university students in New York State found that male students were more likely than female students to attribute blame to the victim. Donovan et al. (2000), reporting the findings of the formative research undertaken for the Freedom from Fear campaign, describe a siege mentality in men confronted with male violence against women, which manifested itself as an unwillingness to take full responsibility for abuse and an insistence that women were at least in part to blame. Bagshaw, Chung, Couch, Lilburn, and Wadham's (2000) South

Australian study found that men in the general population participating in a phone-in expressed resistance to the view that “women are always the victim” (p. 53). While prevalence studies provide evidence that men are increasingly likely to identify themselves as victims of domestic abuse perpetrated by women, women experience more incidents, more severe injuries, higher rates of sexual abuse, and are more likely to describe emotional harm as a consequence of domestic violence (Walby & Allen, 2004).

Interventions that aim to effect change in men’s abusive behavior need to be based on a clear understanding of what might motivate change in behavior that, in the short term, can be perceived to reward men with a sense of their own power and control (Dobash, Dobash, Cavanagh, & Lewis, 2000). To date, motivation to engage with programs has been studied mainly in terms of avoiding recidivism or drop out in those attending programs (see, for example, Duplantis, Romans, & Bear, 2006), and there has been some enthusiasm for the application of Proschaska and Di Clementi’s (1982) Transtheoretical Model of Change (Scott, 2004). Hester et al.’s (2006) study of the needs of 62 perpetrators of domestic violence in England and Wales found that the experience of loss or anticipation of loss, whether it involved the loss of a partner or the loss of child visitation, was often the trigger for change. Other studies have identified the impact of children’s views on perpetrators’ behavior. The batterers in Goodrum, Umberson, and Anderson’s (2001) study attached more weight to the perceptions and interventions of their children and the police than they did to those of their partner or their partner’s friends. However, there has been less discussion of what might motivate men not yet in contact with services to seek help to change abusive behavior, since most research has involved men already participating in such programs or engaged with the criminal justice system.

The study reported here presents the formative research undertaken to inform the social marketing campaign in Hull; a fuller account of the social marketing campaign is available (Thomson, Miller, & Stanley, 2012). The research captured the views of a broad cross-section of the male population in a city in the north of England characterized by high rates of unemployment and low educational achievement and where traditional working-class culture remains dominant. This population was the target for the social marketing campaign that aimed to raise men’s awareness of violence against women and engage them with a newly developed local service for perpetrators.

## **Method**

Focus groups were the chosen method of data collection since this approach has the benefit of mitigating the researcher’s control and privileging the conceptual frameworks, language, and beliefs of the participants (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999). Fifteen focus groups with a total of 84 men were held in the city of Hull in 2008. Men were recruited to these groups through local networks and contacts with the aim of constituting a range of groups that would both reflect the diversity of the local population and that would include men who were either identified perpetrators of violence against women or were at high risk of perpetration. Some groups, therefore, were recruited from settings such as workplaces, the local university and a church that all took their membership from the general population.

Other groups were convened through third-sector organizations serving particular segments of the population such as older people, young people, and Black and minority ethnic (BME) groups. One group consisted of participants in a perpetrators' treatment program, and two additional groups included men attending substance misuse programs.

The aim was to create groups of men who knew one another already and would be reasonably comfortable discussing a sensitive and stigmatized issue in a group. In some cases, the groups were already constituted, but in others men who shared membership of an informal group, such as a work environment, were brought together for the purposes of the research. Key individuals, such as program staff, workplace supervisors, and a local minister agreed to recruit focus group participants on behalf of the researchers. This approach to recruitment means that it is not possible to calculate participation rates. Focus group participants were provided with information about the research and its purposes and informed consent procedures were adopted. It was emphasized that participation was voluntary, but an incentive was offered in the form of shopping vouchers worth £25, which were given to all participants (with the exception of those participating in the perpetrators' program, since program managers did not consider a monetary incentive to be appropriate) to cover their time and expenses.

The groups were facilitated by two male researchers who used a structured schedule to guide men through a discussion that explored their conceptualizations of and attitudes toward "domestic violence." (This was the terminology used in the groups as it is the most widely used term in the United Kingdom.) Men were asked to discuss definitions of domestic violence, including the current government definition; to consider why some men perpetrate domestic violence and why others did not; what would motivate men to seek help to change abusive behavior; and for their views on the planned social marketing campaign and what would constitute effective messages for the campaign. Group members also completed individual scorecards during the course of the groups that required them to ascribe effectiveness rankings of 1 to 5 to a selection of motivating messages and to different sources of help for abusive men. Completion of the scorecards allowed for different options to be rated according to the scores allocated but also served to stimulate in-depth discussion of the options presented and the thinking that informed the process of assigning a score. Groups lasted 60 to 90 minutes and men were observed to talk freely and at length with some drawing on personal and childhood experiences, despite being told at the outset that the research was interested in collecting their views of the attitudes and behavior of local men rather than personal testimonies.

All focus groups were recorded with the participants' permission and professionally transcribed. Data were analyzed thematically with the assistance of the NVivo software package. Three research team members undertook coding, allowing both those who had facilitated the focus groups and those who had not to contribute to the interpretation of data. Key themes were generated by the research questions that informed the focus group schedule, but also by the data themselves; both descriptive and theoretical categories were used for coding (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). While some sections of the data, such as group members' anonymous reports of their personal experience of domestic violence and their scorecards were collected on an individual basis, the focus group

**Table 1.** Distribution of Focus Group Members Across Groups.

Group type and number	Focus group participants
8 General Public Groups	43 (51%)
2 Substance Misuse Groups	14 (17%)
1 Young People's Group	9 (11%)
1 BME Group	6 (7%)
1 Older People's Group	6 (7%)
1 Family Support Service Users' Group	3 (3.5%)
1 Perpetrators' Group	3 (3.5%)
Total 15 focus groups	84 (100%)

transcripts were attributed to groups rather than individuals, although this did not prevent diverse views within groups being noted. Group views and positions were characterized and compared; for instance, members of the perpetrators' group were distinguished by their insightful reflections on men's abusive behavior, which had probably been acquired through their experience of the criminal justice system and of the perpetrators' program they were attending. In reporting the findings below, most data are attributed to groups rather than individual research participants. Ethical approval for the study was given by the University of Central Lancashire's Faculty of Health Ethics Committee.

## Findings

### *The Participants*

Table 1 shows the distribution of 84 participants across 15 focus groups. Just over half the participants came from those groups categorized as "general public groups": these were the groups recruited from settings such as workplaces (manual, skilled, and professional workers were included), the university (students), and a church. The remainder were recruited from existing groups of men via community support services targeted on specific populations such as older or younger people. The sizes of groups varied from 2 to 10 members.

Group participants ranged in age from 17 to 72 with nearly three quarters of the 84 participants aged 20 to 49. Three were under 20; 20 were aged between 50 and 72. The majority of men participating in the focus groups were White British and this reflected the makeup of the local population. However, convening a focus group through BME organization in the city ensured that the views and attitudes of five Black and Asian men were included in the research.

When invited to disclose previous experience of domestic abuse on an anonymous tick-box form at the outset of the focus groups, over a third (32 of 84) of participants reported experience of domestic violence as children, victims, and/or perpetrators. While men were more ready to disclose experiences of being exposed to domestic violence as a child or victim—17 of 84 did so—12 group members reported that they had been perpetrators of

domestic violence. Three of these men were in the group recruited from the perpetrators' program and three were members of the substance misuse groups. However, the remaining six were spread across the groups with four found in general public groups and two in the young people's group. Eighteen of the 84 participants described themselves as victims of domestic violence.

Key themes generated by the data are identified below and illustrated with anonymous quotations.

### *Defining Domestic Violence*

The groups began by asking men for their immediate response to the term "domestic violence." Physical violence was the first response evoked for men in all groups:

Somebody slapping a woman or thumping her . . . (General Public Focus Group 5)

However, psychological violence was also mentioned in 11 of the 15 groups and some groups mentioned sexual violence also:

. . . the abuse doesn't have to be like punching and kicking and things like that, it can, it can be other things as well.

Group Facilitator: What other things do you think it can be?

Attacks on self-esteem, just gradually wearing somebody down over time, making them feel like . . . (General Public Focus Group 1)

There's also like I say sexual violence as well. (General Public Focus Group 4)

Participants were asked for their response to the following definition of domestic violence, which was based on the U.K. Government (Department of Health, 2005) definition in use at the time:

Domestic violence is any incident of threatening behavior, violence or abuse (psychological, physical, sexual, financial or emotional) between adults who are or have been intimate partners, regardless of gender or sexuality.

Men in five of the General Public focus groups and in one of the Substance Misuse Groups criticized this definition as too inclusive, with the phrases "any incident" and "threatening behavior" attracting especially negative comments. Men felt that these terms could be applied to them whenever they had a heated argument with their partner:

If for instance you miss your wife's birthday, you have a massive blazing barney [row] about it but then the next day it's kind of forgotten. . . . I mean if somebody

gets hurt through that, that's kind of, that's obviously unacceptable but . . . it's just two people who are really, really pissed off at each other and I think that is kind of separate from domestic violence or domestic abuse because it's just, you know, people do get cross with each other. (General Public Focus Group 3)

Concern about the inclusion of financial abuse in the above definition was expressed by four of the General Public focus groups and one of the Substance Misuse Groups. While men acknowledged that finances could be used as a means of controlling their partners, they were concerned that common negotiations concerning finances might be interpreted as abuse. These discussions provided some indication of the extent to which men were prepared to accept definitions of violence against women that extended beyond physical abuse.

Most of the groups saw domestic violence as specific to heterosexual relationships, although the possibility of it occurring in homosexual relationships also was mentioned in two groups. A frequent theme that emerged in all but four groups was the perception that "women can be perpetrators, too":

I think domestic violence cuts both ways, it means that a man can be abusing a woman and a woman can be abusing a man.

A woman can be abusing a man.

Yeah.

It only works both ways, it's just not all men bashing women up, it's . . .

The trouble is where men don't feel . . . they feel degraded to a point that they don't publicize it, they don't tell other people and I know that through first hand.

(Older People's Group)

While men were seen as more likely to be responsible for physical violence, members of one of the General Public Groups and the Older People's Group suggested that women were more likely to be psychologically abusive. Together, the groups conveyed a strong resistance to the depiction of men as wholly responsible for domestic abuse.

### *Living With Domestic Violence*

As noted above, over a third of focus group members had personal experience of violence against women; some men reported intervening to protect their mothers:

. . . all the way through the 70s, early 80s, me dad was . . . coming home and we was little children, basically what it boiled down to was listening to that door banging on



a Friday or Saturday night. . . . Then all of a sudden you heard all the banging and the screaming and the shouting downstairs and stuff being thrown, you know you're lying upstairs a little child and it's petrifying. So . . . I'd have got to a certain age and it was a blessing for me mother, when my dad did it and I basically you know got there and gave him a good punching and he's never done it ever since until this day . . . (General Public Focus Group 4)

However, other groups emphasized that domestic violence was a submerged issue both at the family and community levels, where its presence was known but not acknowledged. Focus groups members described it as a "hidden" issue (three General Public Groups) and talked about people turning "a blind eye" (Substance Misuse Group and General Public Group 7):

. . . I don't think it's a, it's a bragging like subject in the same way that bedding seven women a week or scoring a winning goal at football or the new car you've just bought or anything like that . . . I think like [focus group member] said, it's just something that generally people are aware it's wrong but either don't, can't or won't do anything about it. (Perpetrators' Group)

Group participants also noted that domestic violence was not addressed in men's conversations with other men (two General Public Groups), but was surrounded by a wall or blanket of silence:

. . . it's such a hidden thing as well, I think it's something that no one talks about, I mean I've never had a conversation about domestic abuse with anybody ever or wife beaters, . . . I'm sure . . . a lot of people have come across incidents like that or they've been involved in some minor levels of physical things when, maybe as a kid or as an adult and but no one, no one's going to talk about it, just like a complete blanket. (General Public Focus Group 3)

Members of the young people's group contrasted formerly controversial issues, such as sex and drugs, which were now discussed openly with domestic violence, which remains a "taboo" topic. Participants in the BME focus group noted that, while violence against women was not condoned within Asian communities, bringing it to the attention of public services and the wider community was considered a greater transgression:

Some things aren't acceptable but it's even sort of more unacceptable for outside agencies to get involved and it's still a private matter between man and wife.

Yeah, I think that's, that pretty much sums it up. . . . I think it comes into where you brought shame on the family kind of thing because whatever happened behind closed doors it's still frowned upon but when it becomes public and it's, it's even worse. (BME Focus Group)

## *Explanations for Domestic Violence*

A range of different explanations for domestic violence emerged across the focus groups. There was considerable discussion of the extent to which domestic violence was culturally embedded in Hull with members of the Young People's Group describing violence occurring regularly in their neighborhoods and at school. Men in the Perpetrators' Group and in one of the General Public Groups considered that the fishing industry, which dominated the local economy until the 1960s, had left a legacy that promoted and sustained male violence:

Since moving to Hull, I was probably in fights, without exaggerating, nearly every day . . . I was constantly fighting all the time and I always wanted to be in control of a situation . . . certainly looking at Hull, classic fishing village and stuff like that, you know, the men go out in the fishing industry etcetera and the wife's at home, the men come in, they go to the pubs when they're back at home etcetera, there's a lot of drink involved and that side of its dying away now but people are still here, you know, and people haven't moved on, we all still live here, you know. (Perpetrators Focus Group)

The point made in the last line of the above quote was reiterated by other groups: men in one of the General Public Groups and in the BME Group also noted that the lack of mobility in the local population contributed to the persistence of traditional and violent patterns of behavior and attitudes.

While the local culture was seen as a key factor contributing to male violence, gender inequality was not cited as an explanation for domestic abuse by group participants. However, images and ideas of masculinity were felt to be relevant:

This is more with the teenagers or the younger people, where they see it as a kind of achievement that you stand out, . . . you're strong and you know and then this kind of follows you . . . oh you're married but you still feel that you have to bring in . . . in a way that macho image you know, strong man, powerful person. (BME Focus Group)

Male characteristics such as aggression and difficulties with verbal communication were also identified as contributing to abusive behavior by men in a number of groups (Family Service Users Group, Young People's Group, Perpetrators' Group, General Public Group 4, Substance Misuse Group 1). Low self-esteem in men was described as underpinning sexual jealousy (General Public Group 1) and feeding a need for control (General Public Groups 4 and 5, Young People's Group) in intimate relationships; the term, "little man syndrome" (General Public Group 4) was used to describe such men.

While early exposure to domestic violence was considered a key factor influencing abusive behavior in adult relationships by most of the groups, men in some groups (Substance Misuse Group 1, Older People's Group and two General Public Groups) argued

that childhood experience of domestic violence could lead men to reject abusive behavior. It was generally agreed that men should not attempt to use intergenerational transmission as an “excuse” for violence. All but one of the groups discussed the influence of alcohol and drugs, describing them not as reasons for violence but as “triggers” or “catalysts.”

However, a recurrent theme in explanations of abusive behavior found in four groups (the Young People’s Group, the BME group, a General Public Group, and the Family Service Users Group) was that women provoked violence. Women were described as “nagging,” “pushing,” “agitating,” and “winding men up” without employing physical violence. The extract below depicts the man tired on his return home from work as the woman’s victim:

Because the woman agitate the men to the point of boiling.

A lot of it’s stress isn’t it?

[They] keep on doing it and doing it.

Yeah, as [focus group member] was saying, most, most women say the man’s at work while the woman stays at home, so the man’s going to come home from work and his wife or girlfriend or whatever she’ll be going blah blah blah to him, he’s like, “look just. Just give me half an hour, I’ve just got back from work.”

Yeah, “give me half an hour, I’ve just got back from work,” you’re nagging as soon as he gets through the door, just going to get the guy going, winding him up. (Young People’s Focus Group)

### *Barriers to Change*

Stigma, shame, and embarrassment were all seen as barriers to the process of acknowledging abusive behavior and seeking help to change it. Expressions of vulnerability and requests for help were conceptualized as nonmasculine behaviors that together with the legal and social consequences of disclosure acted to stifle help seeking in men:

. . . most men especially don’t like talking anyway, so that’s the first problem. (General Public Focus Group 8)

I think self-image and ego really, like, “I have denial, I haven’t got a problem,” or I don’t want . . . I’m in fear that if I do put my hand up and say look I do have a problem, I don’t want people just to start kicking up a big fuss and then I’m being outed and then I’ll be then scared of what’s going to happen next and that would be the biggest thing.

The shame and embarrassment.

Yeah, shame and embarrassment would be.

Probably police just a bit below that, if they were being getting charged with something and . . .

Losing everything. (Family Support Service Users Focus Group)

Participants across a number of groups (three General Public Groups, two Substance Misuse Groups, and Family Service Users Group) emphasized that the most likely sources of help would be those that were perceived to be nonjudgmental and would therefore reduce feelings of shame and embarrassment. Moreover, men wanted recognition of their identity as an abuser to be confined to one nonjudgmental individual in a situation where either the abuser would be anonymous or the confidante could be trusted not to share information. A confidential telephone helpline or family doctors (general practitioners [GPs]) were considered particularly appropriate sources of support for these reasons:

A GP, you would trust a GP and also they've got . . . the confidentiality written into their contract so . . . you know you can go to because it's safe to go to them. (General Public Focus Group 5)

However, the barrier to change reiterated most frequently across all the focus groups was the difficulty men experienced in acknowledging their own behavior as abusive:

Admitting to what they're doing, I think that's one of the main things, if they [abusive men] don't . . . if they see as that's [abuse] the norm, they're not admitting to what they're doing is wrong, where is the help? (General Public Focus Group 7)

They [abusive men] think if they do have help they know they've got a problem and they don't think they've got a problem.

That's it, that's it, the all and be all of it is they don't . . . they think they're in the right.

See a drug addict is not a drug addict to themselves. (Older People's Focus Group)

### *Motivations for Change*

Consideration of motivations to change abusive behavior began by focus group participants completing individual scorecards on which they gave a rating of 1 to 5 to a number of key messages that might be used as part of the planned social marketing campaign. These messages were based on those used by the Freedom from Fear campaign (Donovan et al., 2000), which provided the model for this intervention, but were modified following consultation with local professionals on the project's steering group. The scores allocated

**Table 2.** Motivating Messages Ranked as Highly Effective by Focus Group Participants.

Motivating message	Ranked as highly effective
Effects on his children	67 (80%)
Worried about losing his wife/girlfriend	56 (67%)
Knowing help is available	44 (52%)
Getting in trouble with the law	43 (51%)
Wanting to improve relationship with wife/ girlfriend	42 (50%)
Trying to do things differently from when he was growing up	40 (48%)
Worried about what others might say	33 (39%)
Wanting to be a better person	27 (32%)

convey group members' immediate responses to these messages and the relative value they placed on them, while the consequent discussion revealed more nuanced and varying views. Table 2 ranks the messages according to participants' rating of them as highly effective (i.e., those messages allocated a score of 4 or 5) in changing abusive behavior. Messages that emphasized the effects of domestic violence on children were those most likely to be rated as highly effective, and such messages were rated as highly effective by men in all types of groups with the exception of the participants in the BME group who gave their highest ratings to messages about wanting to be a better person. No focus group members gave this message the lowest rating of 1 or "least likely to achieve change," and even those participating in the group that did not include any men who were fathers gave this motivating factor their highest rating.

Children were viewed as invested with an emotional currency which outweighed all other factors:

Well if he's likely to change, if he wants to change he's going to change for his kids isn't he? (Substance Misuse Focus Group 1)

While some participants felt that messages concerning the effects of domestic violence on children would be most resonant for men who were fathers, men in the Family Service Users Group and in one of the General Public Groups pointed out that abusive men could draw on their own childhood experiences to identify with arguments for change that foregrounded children's needs:

I think maybe it taps into . . . seeing themselves as a child and as a victim, but it's very likely they suffered as children and maybe see images of that would then tap into something like deep rooted, into their own, learnt behavior. (General Public Focus Group 3)

The saliency of messages concerning children appeared in part to derive from the promise of a better future that children can represent. Men in the Young People's Group, the Family Service Users Group, and in one of the Substance Misuse Groups expressed concerns about their children growing up to be abusers:

Because if I was violent towards the missus or anything like that, I still would worry about what my children would be like because I wouldn't want them to be like me. (Young People's Focus Group)

In addition to concerns about harming the children, fear of losing the children was considered to be a strong motivating factor. One of the General Public focus groups noted that, even in violent relationships that ended in divorce, a father would be likely to want to retain a relationship with his children:

. . . know when they're divorced and things like that, always the problem is access to the children and you know keeping a relationship with the children and it's got to be the children, even if it's a violent relationship, I would think the children. (General Public Focus Group 5)

Underpinning concerns about the harm inflicted on children was men's interest in maintaining a positive image of themselves in their children's eyes. Focus group participants evoked vivid images of children who experienced their abusive father as "a monster," and this theme recurred across groups and acquired particular force from participants projecting themselves into the child's position. Some focus group participants drew on their own experiences to produce these emotive accounts:

What I don't want to do is make my child see me as a monster. . . . I have shouted at my wife and I've seen the look on me son's face and I've thought, "Christ, that's just shouting," you know and if shouting can produce that look on a child's face what did I look like when I was witnessing me dad you know pasting me mother, so God knows what we all thought, like as kids we must have looked like white as ghosts. (BME Focus Group)

And that, that will stay with me forever, is just that look on his face. A mixture of disgust and terror and I think just the fact that a 12-year-old saw what I was doing was just probably hardest thing to bear. (Perpetrators' Focus Group)

The theme of the "monster" recurred in the designs and slogans produced when focus group members were asked to use pens and paper to develop messages that might be used by the social marketing campaign. Assuming the perspective of the child who turns his or her gaze onto their violent father was described as evoking feelings of shame and was experienced as an assault on men's self-image.

As noted above, implicit in men's discussions of the impact of domestic abuse on children was the fear that fathers might lose their children as a consequence of their violence. This theme of loss was reiterated in relation to the messages concerning the potential to lose their wife or girlfriend through their behavior. Two-thirds of focus group participants gave this motivating factor a high ranking and a number cited the fear of loneliness it invoked:

Nobody wants to be out on their own, especially when you're getting . . . I'm 43, so I don't really want to be on my tod [own] anyway. (Substance Misuse Focus Group 1)

However, some men argued that abusive men were unlikely to value their relationships and attached more importance to the sense of power and control that they derived from the abuse.

Group participants were divided in their scorecard ratings of the motivational impact of a number of the other messages discussed. About half the participants rated knowing that help is available, getting into trouble with the law, wanting to improve the relationship with a wife or girlfriend, and trying to do things differently from when they were growing up as highly effective in changing behavior. A number of those who did not rate these messages highly considered that they depended on the circumstances or were not sufficient on their own to effect change. There were some polarized views expressed. For instance, while some felt that men who had grown up with domestic violence would react against it and attempt to live their own lives differently, others felt that they would be unable to acknowledge this behavior in themselves, but would see it as "the norm."

## Discussion

This study has some limitations. Participants were recruited in one U.K. city only, and it was not possible to structure the membership of the focus groups to achieve exact representation of the local population. However, Hull provides a useful example of a working-class city where traditional social attitudes have been slow to change and where gender roles and expectations are still comparatively rigid.

In contrast to the research undertaken to inform the Freedom from Fear campaign (Donovan et al., 2000), men participating in this study were informed beforehand that participation would entail discussing attitudes toward domestic violence. This approach was chosen by the research team with the aim of achieving fully informed consent to participation, but focus group members may have been primed by this information to express attitudes they perceived as more socially desirable. However, any bias toward political correctness appeared to be limited: Although men were explicit in condemning male violence toward women, some also expressed the view that women should take some responsibility for provoking this behavior. Alternately, it may have been the case that the group setting evoked feelings of male solidarity and encouraged men to adopt attitudes that were more defensive and hostile to women than those they might express as individuals. However, the group setting for this research does replicate the group settings in which

many perpetrator programs are delivered and any defensive feelings that surface in all-male groups may also characterize treatment settings. Thus, the findings of this study have the capacity to inform intervention as well as prevention programs.

Although group participants' familiarity with one another may have facilitated open expression of views on a stigmatized topic, it may also have constrained discussion, and it was for this reason that participants were told that personal disclosure was not part of the groups' remit. This approach meant that some men were articulating popular or folk beliefs rather than their own experience; nevertheless, over a third of participants had personal experience of domestic violence and it was clear from the transcripts that this experience was utilized and informed group discussions.

A key thread running through men's discussions was the central importance of maintaining their self-image in the face of men's violence toward women. Men were resistant to what they perceived as too broad a definition of domestic violence and were insistent that men should not shoulder sole responsibility for domestic violence. Although they were clear that physical and sexual violence to women were unacceptable and that men should accept some responsibility, they were not prepared to accept all blame or to acknowledge a broadly defined range of behaviors as domestic violence. This defensive position represents a refusal to take ownership of the shame and guilt that were seen to be implicated in the disclosure of abusive behavior, and which were identified as major barriers to seeking help to change behavior. Wexler (1999) draws on Dutton and Golant's (1995) work to identify the shame associated with public exposure of vulnerability as an experience that feeds men's violence to women. He argues along with other commentators (e.g., Milner, 2004) that interventions that aim to confront perpetrators with their abuse, and that insist on them taking full responsibility for it, risk demonizing and isolating them. A key finding from these focus groups consisting mainly of men who were not identified perpetrators of abuse was that men will resist definitions and approaches that evoke shame and guilt.

Group participants also acknowledged their vulnerability to the damage to their self-image that was inflicted when their own violence was reflected back to them. When this reflective gaze was that of their child, it carried a heavy emotional weight that appeared to be based in part on their own identification with the child. This gaze was described as particularly powerful and as having the capacity to stimulate change and the process of help seeking. Similarly, the threat of abandonment implicit in the message that domestic violence might result in the loss of their wife or girlfriend was judged to be a potent message.

The message that the researchers conveyed to the advertising company developing the social marketing campaign was therefore a complex one. Focus group participants had emphasized that few men recognized their own behavior as domestic violence and campaign messages would need to be hard hitting to achieve this recognition. However, messages that were experienced as accusatory or that evoked a heavy burden of shame and guilt were likely to evoke defensive reactions. The campaign, which was delivered for a month in 2009 and then again in 2010, used the focus group findings to deliver a range of messages designed to encourage abusive men to recognize the risks of loss implicit in their behavior, while offering a nonjudgmental response. A radio advertisement broadcast on



local radio for the duration of the campaign and one of the posters displayed on buses and billboards across the city highlighted the impact of domestic violence on children. At the same time, the campaign emphasized the availability of a confidential telephone helpline that would connect men to the new Strength to Change service for perpetrators.

## Conclusion

In common with research (e.g., Hester et al., 2006) undertaken purely with perpetrators, this study of the views of a broad cross-section of men found that the threat of loss emerged as a powerful incentive for change. Such losses included loss of their relationship with their children, loss of their partner, and loss of self-esteem. These are all “push” factors that rely on the desire to avoid a feared outcome. However, an exclusive emphasis on such factors can result in an emphasis on vulnerability that evokes a defensive response inimical to change. Interventions that aim to change men’s abusive behavior also need to identify “pull” factors, such as a nonjudgmental response to the disclosure of abusive behavior and the availability of support and relevant services.

This study also identified men’s image of themselves as fathers as a key arena for intervention, a concept that re-surfaced in the evaluation of the Strength to Change program delivered subsequent to the campaign (Stanley, Graham-Kevan, & Borthwick, 2012). Policy and practice have been characterized by a separation between fathers and violent men (Eriksson, 2005; Hester, 2005), but the men participating in this research were able to acknowledge and imaginatively recreate the integration of the two concepts to describe the impact on their self-image of amalgamating the violent man with the caring father. Transferring this juxtaposition of images into the wider realm of public education represents a key step forward in challenging and changing men’s violence.

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