

CHAPTER 8. BUILDING HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE AND THE PREVENTION OF DOMESTIC ABUSE

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Introduction

This chapter focuses on debates surrounding healthy relationships and the prevention of domestic abuse with reference to children and young people. The discussion examines the view that abusive behaviour is observed and potentially learnt by children and young people within the family environment and amongst their peers as they mature into adults. This recognises that this group is not just harmed physically and emotionally as a result of being witness to domestic abuse between adults, but that violence also occurs in young people's own relationships posing a threat to their safety and well-being. This discourse signifies a reconfiguration of current thinking around and responses to domestic abuse.

With reference to our own empirical research¹ this chapter examines how academic and policy discourses on these issues at a national level impact upon developments within an urban housing estate in the Midlands region. The project undertaken examined the concept of a 'Firebreak', which seeks to disrupt and prevent the transmission of unhealthy and abusive attitudes towards intimate partner relationships from the older to younger generation (Crowther-Dowey Gillespie, Hopkins Burke and Kumarage, 2014). One of our central contentions is that a consideration of the 'local' is essential to any proposed intervention, taking into account the relevance of the conditions and circumstances in which the abusive behaviours occur.

The chapter is divided into four main sections. Firstly, we provide some brief context

to the main discussion in terms of current policies which have seen a greater emphasis on domestic abuse work with young people. We then seek to situate the notion of healthy relationships in the context of research about domestic abuse in general and young people in particular. At this juncture the discussion briefly touches upon the importance of recognising intersectional identities and the interaction of gender, age, sexuality, race and ethnicity (Henne and Troshynski, 2013), thus acknowledging that service provision must be sufficiently sensitised to the needs of a diverse society. Accordingly, more research on young people and their perceptions of healthy, ‘good’ and abusive, ‘bad’ relationships is needed (Barter, McCarry, Berridge and Evans, 2009; Gadd, Fox and Corr, 2012). In addition an understanding of the interplay between individual, relationship, community and institutional factors and how they mutually influence the formation of abusive attitudes and conduct for both perpetrators and survivors is key to the identification of successful policy and interventions (Flood, 2011). This leads to the third section of the discussion which outlines some of the current myriad of interventions created to prevent and respond to domestic abuse. In this section we consider the view that domestic abuse should not solely be treated as an issue of individual responsibility but also a social and collective responsibility that is shaped by the diverse identities of people inhabiting particular communities; what we term as a ‘whole community approach’.

In the final section of the chapter we refer to some of our ‘Firebreak’ research findings to further explore the issues covered previously. This provides a context for a discussion of the potential development of community based interventions which seek to prevent the formation or reinforcement of abusive attitudes and behaviour. This, it is argued, requires an analysis of the factors influencing the lived realities of young people and their understandings of appropriate relationship interactions and boundaries and what constitutes abuse within intimate partner relationships.

Policy Background

The discourse on domestic abuse and young people is set in the wider context of a changing social and political landscape, with successive governments in the United Kingdom (UK) pledging to take violence against women and girls (VAWG) seriously (Home Office 2011). There has also been anxiety expressed in policy and governmental circles about the rise of domestic abuse amongst young people, with the revision of the Home Office (2013) definition of domestic abuse, now including behaviours exhibited by 16-17 year olds (Starmer, 2011). Running parallel to this are steps to strengthen criminal justice responses to domestic abuse, which raises concerns about the potential reach this may have across teenage relationships (Home Office, 2014) and with a clear need for policy makers to be more conscious of the specific needs of children and young people in the planning of domestic abuse services. The VAWG Strategy Action Plan (Home Office, 2011) highlighted how young women and girls in particular (Kelly and Westmarland, 2015) can be subject to sexually abusive and violent relationships (Home Office, 2015). This signalled a ‘preventative turn’ in this field (Peeters, 2015), a leitmotif articulated explicitly by the Home Office in 2015, who ‘put prevention at the heart of’ its ‘approach to tackle VAWG’ (2015 p13). The ‘preventative turn’ is not without its challenges, particularly if it is realised through the anticipation and prediction of future conduct as a means of identifying ‘pre-delinquents’ who require intervention.

The development of new innovations and interventions are also currently situated within a period of restricted growth, where the economic downturn has resulted in demands for effectiveness and efficiency to substantiate future investment. Austerity measures have an uneven impact on the capacity of the statutory, commercial, voluntary and community sectors to respond to complex social problems (Walby and Towers, 2012; see Turgoose, Chapter 5, this volume). It can be concluded therefore that within the domain of interventions for

abusive relationships, as with all social problems, there is currently intense competition for scarce resources. As a result addressing the diverse needs of survivors, perpetrators and those vulnerable to entering into abusive relationships are subject to difficult yet inevitable choices to be made pertaining to ‘who gets what?’.

Healthy Relationships, Domestic Abuse and Young People

In this section we review the literature to consider definitional issues of domestic abuse relating to age and gender. This is followed by some deliberation of the attitudinal (behavioural) and institutional (societal and structural) factors shaping domestic abuse amongst young people. The pattern of victimisation characterising these relationships is outlined, together with a consideration of an intersectionality which stretches beyond gender, recognising the ‘multiple axes of oppression’, such as class, sexuality and ethnicity, which interact to shape relations (Barbaret, 2014; Thiara and Breslin, 2006; see also Martin, Chapter 8; Barnes and Donovan, Chapter 12, this volume).

Definitional issues

There are clear societal views about healthy relationships, emphasising trust, love, care, humour and safety, while unhealthy relationships are characterised as physically and verbally violent, abusive and controlling (Wills, 2013). The Home Office definition of domestic violence and abuse, which is in use across governmental departments, refers to:

‘any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive, threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are, or have been, intimate partners or family members regardless of gender or sexuality’ (Home Office, 2013 p29).

The addition of 16 and 17 year olds to this definition in March 2013 accepts that domestic abuse can occur between young people, although the mechanisms of the abuse tend to be slightly different from those found in adult relationships. For example, in the context of

emotional abuse, it has been found that young people employ a relatively high level of surveillance through ‘mobile phones, specifically the use of text messages’ (Barter et al., 2009 p113). The lowering of the age range of the definition therefore reflects the reality of this problem for this age group as relative to their day to day experiences. It is important however, that by dropping the age inclusion criteria that policymakers prioritise welfare orientated and preventative measures over and above enforcement led and punitive approaches. If this proves to be the case then this is a welcome change, which we would suggest ought to be extended to young people under the age of 16 years as supported by our research.

Factors influencing abusive behaviour

There is a wealth of research concerned with attitudes and perceptions which influence the infliction of VAWG, which underpins the work of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) Committee (see the Women’s Resource Centre, 2013; Barbaret, 2014). However there has been comparatively little UK research into abusive relationships between younger people compared to adults (Barter et al, 2009). The research that does exist recognises specific areas in need of further exploration, including patterns of behaviour between different age groups and the development of appropriate age specific interventions (Barter, 2011; Fox, Corr, Gadd and Butler, 2012; Fox, Corr, and Gadd, 2013; Gadd et al, 2012). There is some evidence to suggest that gender-based violence starts to manifest at 16 years or below and that the 16-19 year old age group remains at a higher risk than others (Walby and Allen, 2004). Little is currently known about what influences young people to become perpetrators at a young age, or victim vulnerability, thus making solutions to the problem difficult to determine.

The inclusion of emotional abuse and coercive behaviour in current definitions of domestic abuse is however very important as it exposes the elusive nature of many forms of

abuse which can be applied to experiences across all age groups (Home Office, 2014). This was evidenced in our own study where two female participants, under the age of 18, believed that the reason their partner wanted to know where they were all the time was ‘because they loved them’, displaying a blurred line between ‘concern’ and ‘control’ (Barter et al, 2009). Despite targeted government responses to dealing with VAWG (Home Office, 2015), domestic abuse is vastly under-reported amongst young people, with evidence to suggest that the scale of under-reporting might also be under-estimated (Barter et al, 2009). However more recent figures suggest that there is a greater willingness to report sexual violence occurring outside of a relationship (Office of National Statistics, 2015). Burton, Kitzinger, Kelly and Regan (1998) studied the tolerance and acceptability of violence against girls, informing a later study by Burman and Cartmel (2005), which explored young peoples’ attitudes towards gendered violence. Burman and Cartmel sought the views of domestic abuse held by young people aged 14 to 18 years, revealing that young women were more likely to suffer emotional and violent abuse at the hands of their partner than men (Burman and Cartmel, 2005).

The relationship between domestic abuse, social class and social and economic deprivation has been seen as somewhat more contentious. Domestic abuse is not confined to poor and socio-economically marginalised areas and occurs in all communities affluent and poor alike (Ray, 2011). There is, however, an association between domestic abuse and socio-economic forms of exclusion, as there is for violent crime in general and indeed also acquisitive crime. Finney (2006) found that *British Crime Survey* data shows that:

‘Indicators of socio-economic status such as household income, vehicle ownership, tenure type and council/non-council areas [which] suggest fairly consistently that higher prevalence rates of intimate abuse are associated with relatively lower levels of

socio-economic status ... it is more vulnerable groups that are more likely to experience intimate violence or abuse' (Finney, 2006 p9).

More up to date research regarding this issue is clearly required, however the point is of theoretical significance for our study and the unpublished statistical data we were provided with by the research commissioners also confirmed this pattern. That said, the relationship between socio-economic status and reporting is complex and the focus of our study is primarily concerned with observations at a micro level on one housing estate. Poverty is certainly not contended here as a 'cause' of domestic abuse, however the stresses and strains of unemployment, low income, residential instability and other forms of disadvantage can be indicators of risk in abusive situations and can pose challenges to vulnerable gendered identities.

Victimisation, male and female victims

Criminologists have debated for some time whether abusive intimate partner relationships are either 'gender symmetrical', in the sense that men and women are equally culpable of violence or 'gender asymmetrical', meaning that male and female perpetrators behave differently (Dobash and Dobash, 2012; Hester, 2013). Our own observations concur with Hester (2013), that in heterosexual relationships domestic abuse is asymmetrical with males more likely to be more controlling, coercive and violent than their female counterparts, something that is sustained by a hyper masculine culture (Crowther-Dowey et al, 2014). Whilst another study found that 10 per cent of young women and 8 per cent of young men participating in a survey reported that their partner had tried to force them to have sex (Burman and Cartmel, 2005), the onus more generally is placed on female victims, who are often blamed for being abused and with a 'widespread acceptance of forced sex and physical violence against women' (Burton et al, 1998 p1).

Attitudes of young people towards abusive relationships

Although underlying attitudes can encourage people to behave in a certain way, the extent to which they may influence acts of abuse is contested, and ‘research findings into the influence of attitudinal factors on the perpetration of domestic abuse are not consistent’ (Burman and Cartmel, 2005 p11). Maxwell and Aggleton (2009) state that young men are often socialised to believe that if they are not interested in taking a leading role in initiating sexual behaviours, or if they do not have several sexual partners, they will be subject to humiliation by their peer groups. Young males experience pressure from peers to behave in a promiscuous manner, influenced by other factors such as status and self-worth, resulting in them condoning aggressive sexual behaviour towards young females. There is a sense of a ‘normalisation’ and a tolerance of sexual abuse against girls and young women (Burman and Cartmel (2005, p43). This unhealthy cycle continues to drive the acceptance of abuse in young people’s relationships, with peer group influences playing a significant role in shaping young people’s perceptions. There is also a set of expectations imposed upon young women to be compliant with such aggressive behaviour. It has been observed that young females may be led to believe that if a male spends a lot of money on them, they are then expected to engage in sexual relations with them (Home Office, 2012). Questions are raised regarding the experiences of young people and what has led to them holding such unhealthy attitudes and believing such behaviours to be acceptable. The overwhelming influence of peer pressure enables such attitudes to be ‘normalised’, but where do they originate from?

One apparent justification for physical violence which has been provided by young people is female infidelity, that is if a young female has slept with someone else (Bell, 2008). More boys than girls thought that a physical retaliation in this type of situation was acceptable, which shows a gendered disparity of beliefs. When evaluating young people’s attitudes towards abusive relationships Bell’s study suggests that young males are seemingly the driving force behind these demeaning and destructive attitudes. However, many girls held

the same view, which suggests that young females can assist in maintaining the oppressive culture, internalising it and accepting responsibility for any form of violence committed against them. Whilst they may consider the actual act of violence to be inappropriate, the perceived provocation leads them to consider it to be an understandable response, as it is accepted that males are more likely to react aggressively in such circumstances. There is a general consensus that the education of young people, both male and female, who may be vulnerable to forming such attitudes, can increase their awareness that they do not have to inhabit unacceptably abusive relationships (Home Office, 2015b). Arguably this is a realistic aspiration as most young people, of all age groups, articulate a clear disapproval of all forms of violence, stating that it is ‘pointless, stupid, disgusting’ and ‘never worth it, a last resort, or a sign of immaturity’ (Burman and Cartmel, 2005 p44). However this has been qualified by others who refer to the situational context and type of relationship, with more pessimistic observations and an almost a tacit agreement that violence is acceptable against girls in certain relationships, on certain occasions (Burton et al, 1998).

Intersectionality

The growing body of work examining VAWG and young people in particular, clearly highlights issues of gender, but there is a limited exploration of a wider intersectional approach to young people’s experience of abuse in intimate relationships. Our own research contribution adds to this body of work by exploring the extent to which the attitudes of young people towards relationships are shaped principally by age and gender on a single housing estate with residents from a low socio-economic background. We also explore the feasibility of changing negative attitudes at the level of the individual and wider community. The more diverse explanations of VAWG often draw upon on psychology and the social sciences in general, but our stance is explicitly sociological in terms of its concern with cultural and structural influences on behaviour. The discourse we present to explain male violence and its

impact recognises that there is a complex relationship between male on female violence, age and social class and that there are multiple forms of oppression shaping rather than determining the connections between these factors. There are other axes of subordination, resulting in complex relationships, such as the intertwining of gender with sexual orientation, race and ethnicity and immigration status (Gill and Anitha, 2011). Overall, there is a paucity of research in terms of children and young people and their experiences of domestic abuse within same sex relationships and in relation to different race, ethnicity, cultural and faith backgrounds. The specific experiences and needs of these groups leads to inequalities which are not experienced by white, heterosexual females (Murray and Mobley, 2009) and whilst patterns will emerge too many assumptions regarding ‘commonalities’ of experience pertaining to a single identity factor should be avoided.

Interventions Targeting Abusive Relationships

Efforts to address domestic abuse have seen initiatives in the areas of law enforcement, education and welfare more widely, including partnership working (Barter, 2011; Ellis and Thiara, 2014; Home Office, 2015). The importance of such responses to domestic abuse are undeniable yet many perpetrators of abusive behaviours can be resistant to change and ensuring they desist from future offending is challenging (see Hilder and Freeman, Chapter 12, this volume). With the current limitations of research on interventions promoting healthy and unhealthy relationships and the links with domestic abuse amongst young people, our research also drew upon recommendations relating to interventions designed for adults. However it should not be assumed that they are automatically transferable to work with young people.

In 2000 under the government’s Crime Reduction Programme a number of pilot prevention strategy projects were implemented to reduce interpersonal violence. Work was undertaken in primary and secondary schools to prevent the formation of abusive attitudes

and beliefs by increasing knowledge and understanding of domestic abuse (Hester and Westmarland, 2005). The delivery of lessons about abusive and healthy relationships were included in the Personal, Social Health and Citizenship Education (PSHCE) curriculum (Department of Education and Employment, 1999), although it was recommended that this material should be cross-curricular and school-wide (Hester and Westmarland, 2005). This student centred work focused on being safe, self-esteem, feelings and family and often adopted visual input approaches and the use of drama. Bell and Stanley (2006) argue that drama can be a useful medium for developing positive ideas about relationships, although some young people were still unclear about the gendered nature of domestic violence after completing the programme. Nevertheless, lessons in school on domestic abuse appeal to young people because they are 'social actors' in their own right and want to be listened to (Mullender, Hague, Imam, Kelly, Malos, and Regan, 2002). Schewe (2002) suggests that providing prevention programmes as part of school based work would be more effective if the focus was on increasing desired behaviours rather than decreasing unwanted behaviours. Hester and Westmarland (2005) continued to advocate for primary prevention strategies to raise awareness and challenge the attitudes of young people in relation to issues of domestic abuse. However insufficient attention and resourcing was directed towards this group, a situation which persisted until the more recent Home Office Strategy to end VAWG highlighted previously (Home Office, 2011).

Anthony Wills, Chief Executive for Standing Together Against Domestic Violence, reiterates the need for 'healthy relationships' to be part of PSHE programmes. To supplement traditional approaches to reaching children he advocates the use of alternative methods, such as social media. Achievement of this depends on building effective partnerships, which in turn requires raised awareness of the issue amongst professionals, including not only teachers and police officers, but also general practitioners and school nurses (Wills, 2013). This can be

difficult as Gadd, Fox and Hale (2013) demonstrate in their critique of social marketing approaches. Due to a ‘boomerang effect’, media campaigns can trigger the exact opposite of what is intended by the creators. For example in one anti domestic abuse campaign young men were only temporarily influenced by a media message to stop using violence and otherwise in the longer term interpreted the message to reinforce their own negative views about female victims. Wider social media initiatives are also very limited in being able to take into account the different social and cultural contexts where children and young people grow up, with interventions potentially being misinterpreted and undermined by what goes on within the family and wider community settings.

The role of education and schools is taken up elsewhere by Gadd et al (2013) who have designed an Attitudes towards Domestic Violence (ADV) questionnaire, which can be used by teachers. This is part of the READAPT (Relationship Education and Domestic Abuse Prevention Tuition) project, which uses a quasi-experimental design to measure changes in children’s attitudes to domestic abuse following exposure to programmes across three regions, in England, Spain and France. The findings from the three sites are complex and in some cases contradictory, however following the completion of all three programmes it appears that boys remain more accepting of domestic abuse than girls, to varying degrees.

The ‘This is Abuse’ campaign in the UK, which focuses on 13-18 year olds (Home Office, 2015), aspires to tackle abusive attitudes before they result in actions which come to the attention of the police, youth offending teams and courts. This is also discernible in the NSPCC’s Aggression Project, a programme designed to disrupt the habits and social context of 11-18 year-olds to reduce their aggressive behaviour in a way that is sustained into adulthood (Miller, 2013). There is a cautionary note to be had however, in relation to the limitations of more formal and legal interventions. There is insufficient evidence to show that they work unless they are reinforced by sources of informal control in the home and

neighbourhoods (Fagan, 1995). Internalised negative beliefs and unhelpful social bonds at an individual level must be challenged and healthy attitudes to relationships must be reinforced through positive normative behaviours in local communities.

The Firebreak Project: Key Findings

Context

Data provided by the City Council highlighted that the locality of this study was subject to high rates of unemployment and welfare dependency, along with lone-parent families and in particular female headed households. Due to high levels of social deprivation and exclusion a significant number of people were dependent on welfare, which as already discussed has been shown to have some influence on the dynamics of family and intimate relationships (Barter et al, 2009; Barter, 2011; Finney, 2006). The community in this study was relatively distinctive across the city as a whole for its homogeneity, particularly in terms of ethnicity; the inhabitants of the estate were predominantly white, working class, with a so-called ‘hyper-masculine’ culture. It was thought that this culture was enabling young males to sustain controlling, aggressive and domineering attitudes towards girls and women. The purpose of the research study was to consider the nature of potential interventions to address this culture on the estate at different levels, ranging from the individual to the social structures as part of a ‘spectrum of prevention’ (Flood, 2011). This is consistent with Heise’s (1998) ecological model², which was utilised to inform our analysis.

Here we tease out some of the key findings relating to the participants’ perceptions about age and gender with regard to relationships. Focus groups with different ages and gender of participant were undertaken, as were a series of semi structured interviews. The topics for discussion focussed on young people’s understandings of appropriate relationships, relationship boundaries and what constitutes abusive behaviour in a relationship. There were 74 participants in total: 23 (8-11 years, ‘young children’); 15 (12-14 years, ‘older children’);

19 (15-18 years, 'young teenagers') and 17 (19 plus, 'older teenagers and adults'). The study was primarily qualitative, although some statistical data was made available to the researchers, although much of this material was confidential. The research was time-limited and cross-sectional in design. The interview and focus group data was interpreted using a thematic analysis (Bruan and Clarke, 2006). The research has prompted some critical reflections of the policy implications which emerge from the data, rather the evolution of a specific intervention, which is yet to be fully determined (for a full discussion of the methodology and analysis applied see Crowther-Dowey, Gillespie and Hopkins-Burke 2014).

Participant Response: Healthy or Abusive Relationships?

The different age groups of young people were essentially asked the same range of questions, with the only deviation being the replacement of the words healthy/unhealthy with the words good/bad for the younger children. The first question concerned the participants' understanding of the word relationship, revealing a clear gender divide. Males perceived relationships in narrow dyadic terms, such as boyfriend, girlfriend, whereas females were more likely to see relationships as complex and extended to female family members and friends. What follows is an analysis of responses to some of the other questions of particular interest.

What does a healthy relationship look like?

Key features of a healthy relationship were described by the participants as trust, communication, respect, loyalty, a lack of deception and love, with trust seen as most important. Females focused more on feeling safe and secure in relationships, with some, especially the older teenage female participants, referring directly to domestic or sexual abuse within unhealthy relationships. Young and older teenage males focused more on deceit, lying and cheating regarding financial issues as a feature of unhealthy relationships, an issue not mentioned at all by any females. These risk factors, including jealousy and the controlling

behaviour it engenders, are evident in adult male perpetrator populations suggesting here that they manifest and need to be addressed at an early age.

Is aggression and violence acceptable in relationships?

Physical violence and overt aggression were tacitly recognised as a fact of life in the community yet they were not explicitly condoned. None of the female participants understood arguments, aggression or violence as positive attributes. One ten year old girl said:

‘a relationship can’t be violent; gonna have to trust the person and erm, other people have to agree that person is nice.’

Some of the male participants made an explicit distinction between arguments and violence, such as a 15 year old male who stated that:

‘some arguments can make a relationship healthy’.

Crucially, arguments were treated as something different from violence and there was no recognition from the participants that arguing could also lead to the escalation of coercive and controlling behaviours.

Have you ever seen a bad relationship? If so, how did you feel and what did you do?

The child participants aged 8-14 saw unhealthy or ‘bad’ relationships in terms of fear, worry, anxiety and sadness. Many, across the age groups, had witnessed violence that had upset them, including bullying and domestic abuse. Despite this, all of the young participants did not generally discuss domestic abuse and tended to see it as a sensitive and private matter that is ‘not anybody’s business,’ demonstrated by the relative absence of disclosures. There were gender differences regarding experiences of witnessing domestic violence and the construction of abusive relationships. Males stated that they did not want to become abusers in adulthood and females stated that they did not want to become victims:

‘It didn’t make me feel too good ‘cos you could come out like that’ (15 year-old male).

‘I just wouldn’t want to get in one’ (15 year-old female).

This lends some support to the view that abusive relationships are asymmetrical (Dobash and Dobash, 2012), in the sense that males might recognise themselves as potential abusers whereas females identified as potential victims. In light of the next question, however the findings were more ambiguous.

Who behaves worse in relationships, boys or girls?

Views about whether males or females were ‘worse’ in terms of abuse within relationships were mixed, and while granting that males were more forceful and argumentative, there was a consensus amongst the younger participants that ‘both are as bad as each other’. In contrast, some older female children, drawing on their experience, thought that males were more abusive. A female focus group of 12-15 year olds for example:

‘The men’, ‘the boys’, ‘That’s not true’, ‘You can’t say that though’, ‘It could be the girls as well ‘cos I’m more violent than my boyfriend...I’m more aggressive’, ‘It’s not always men, that’s just stereotyping’.

In a male focus group with 15-16 year olds, the following responses were elicited:

‘Could be either at times’, ‘Most people say it’s only like boys but sometimes it’s like girls who are aggressive in the relationship’.

What causes problems in relationships?

Domesticity and gendered roles can generate tensions. Expectations about gendered roles are apparent and influence the normalisation of conflict at an early age. A nine year old girl identified ‘washing the pots’ as helping to define a good relationship. She also referred to ‘not washing the pots’ as characterising a bad relationship, adding that boys not cleaning up after themselves can cause arguments. This reveals an implicit recognition of the gendered

nature of domestic abuse and issues of power and control within the domestic sphere. For example, as one young male stated:

‘I’ve got a few friends and they’re always like fighting with their missus, arguing. It’s like you go round there to their place and that, sometimes it’s their place and that, well sometimes it’s the missus’ place and you go round and there’s loads of people round all the time and she comes back from work and then starts swearing saying “ah, you ain’t done this, you ain’t done that” and then they’re like arguing in front of ya [laughter from group] so you just get up and go.’

What can be done to resolve a bad/unhealthy relationship?

The children participating in the study, although some of them had seen their parents engage in violence, were generally more positive, creative and hopeful about fostering good relationships, perhaps a reflection of their limited life experience. For instance, some of the younger children referred to the relatively positive impact in their lives of professionals and counsellors, especially youth workers and peer support workers. They enjoyed, for example, role-play sessions on healthy relationships. A ten year old girl also talked about involving social workers more in educational activities based in schools:

‘Other people, like social workers, could be more at school and ask pupils what they’ve been through and if there’s been violence in the house or on the streets and what their life’s been like.’

One 13 year-old boy suggested that a good way to get the message across to people about healthy relationships would be to:

‘Put it on a banner or like on a sign on the roads where like every time you go past in a car or walk you can see it...on a banner and, erm, on gates and on lamp posts and bus stops where people can go everyday.’

Teenage and young adult participants were more cynical, at times expressing an almost fatalistic attitude, that nothing could be done to prevent bad relationships. They were inclined to express negative views about the possibility of changing societal attitudes towards abusive relationships and they were not optimistic about stopping abusive behaviour.

‘Sometimes there’s nothing you can do really, if anything, it’s best not to get involved ‘cos it’s their business not yours’ (15 year-old female).

An older male, aged 19 stated:

‘There’s nothing you can do, it’s always gonna happen no matter what, it always has happened...when a relationship starts to go bad you just get out of it rather than staying in an unhealthy relationship...rather than waiting and hoping that it blows over.’

A 17 year-old male in a one-to-one interview replied:

‘Can’t do anything if it is a bad relationship’.

And a female in a 13-19 years focus group suggested that it would be:

‘Better to keep it between themselves and not let everyone know.’

A 15 year old girl also seemed resigned to such bad relationships:

‘You can’t tell them, it’s their choice. You try to help, but it is their choice.’

Some older teenage and young adult females talked about running away and ‘getting away from them [men]’ and speaking out, or seeking help rather than expecting men to change. For some in this group there was a sense that abuse and violence are normalised and something to be tolerated. An 18 year old female captured this when asked to think about change in the context of abusive relationships:

‘That’s a hard one, I don’t know. I don’t think society can help, it’s like all inwards like in people. Obviously there’s gonna be support groups, like for abuse and for

women who have been abused and things like that, but nothing's gonna stop the person from doing it.'

The findings in this section suggest that in order to prevent abusive attitudes and behaviour it is essential to focus on children's early perceptions and explore positive views about identities and relationships with them, ascertaining and negating the influences which appear to cause this to change as they get older. This was seen as key to the work and interventions which may emerge in relation to an inter-generational 'Firebreak'.

Potential interventions for preventing abusive attitudes and behaviour

There is arguably a requirement for age differentiated responses to working with young people on issues of domestic abuse that reflect some of the subtle transitions occurring between the ages of 8 and 18 years and beyond. However, there is a lack of any consensus across international research about the most appropriate age for work with children and young people to take place. The earlier an intervention occurs, the sooner a child can engage with alternative views and learn to make healthy choices in their relationships. However, educational programmes may also need to be repeated frequently in response to different types of abuse and the personal and social issues that arise at different ages.

The NSPCC's Aggression Project has a long-term ambition to reduce aggressive behaviours through the disruption of habits and the social context of 11-18 year-olds (Miller, 2013). Any change is likely to be gradual, while preventative interventions of this sort are required at different levels of social reality, ranging from the individual to society as a whole. This is why we draw upon a multidimensional approach that addresses the 'interplay of individual, relationship, community, institutional and societal factors' highlighted at the start of this chapter (Flood, 2011 p361). This is consistent with the four levels of intervention identified by Heise, (1998).

The *personal history* of the individual is very important and although it is not feasible to create bespoke responses for each person, their own stories, such as those revealed in the interviews and focus groups, should be heard. The awareness this creates of the impact of personal narrative, including disclosures, are key ingredients for any intervention. It is imperative that individual attitudes are acknowledged in order to understand the different expectations males and females have of relationships, with a recognition of the emotional maturity and literacy of different age groups. In doing this a number of patterns can be discerned relating to age and gender. It appears that young children are quite optimistic about the potential for change and improving unhealthy relationships, whereas older children are more fatalistic and sceptical about their ability to influence and transform relationships.

The *microsystem* refers to the nature of relationships in the community. The research participants tended to view relationships exclusively in terms of familial and intimate relationships. However there needs to be some consideration of the extent to which these relationships are shaped by cultural norms in the wider community, with learned behaviours reinforced by peer contact, sustaining stereotypical gendered roles and hyper masculinites. By no means were all intimate relationships abusive or violent, but many were and almost all the participants were aware of such behaviour. Although participants recognised that both genders across all age groups could be abusive, males were widely viewed as more problematic, not only for their abuse, but their behaviour more generally. This was also demonstrated, in part, by crime statistics for the geographical area studied. Familial ideologies and the prescription of gender roles are also influential and complex gender relationships require further consideration.

The *exosystem* covers issues at the level of the community, such as poverty, socio-economic status and levels of social cohesion. Any interventions such as educational and awareness packages should not neglect these factors and the need for a 'whole community

approach'. The presence of strong social ties in relatively homogenous communities can lead to the continuance of pro violent attitudes and behaviour, which poses challenges for statutory and voluntary community sector agencies who are required to bring about attitudinal change at individual and community levels. The estate in the study had the third highest rate of recorded violent crime in the city, which was also characterised by some evidence of a hyper-masculine culture. Due to the nature of labour markets in the area some males would appear to be marginalised on the estate due to their unemployment and lack of regular income. These men were, in some respects economically dependent upon women, which in some cases manifested in the form of subordinated masculinities and the infantilisation of some men. An aggressive hyper-masculine culture otherwise remained very influential, a legacy of 'traditional' forms of masculinity enabling males to control and dominate females through the use of violence and other forms of coercive behaviour. The nature of changing forms of masculinity and their influence on children's and adolescents' perceptions was less clear. Finally the *macrosystem* consists of wider influences on the community such as norms that support the view that women and girls should be controlled and that violence is accepted as a method of resolving conflict and establishing control, therefore normalising abusive attitudes and behaviours. Whilst this was beyond the remit of our own study, these considerations are vital in the design of interventions which may ensue.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have identified the need for location relevant interventions when addressing young people and domestic abuse. Whilst it is important to situate policies within the wider context of national and international policy on violence against women and girls, it is vital that work on interventions is targeted to meet the needs of young people within their own social networks and communities. By focusing on young people talking about their respective experiences of familial and intimate relationships on one estate our understanding

of relationships can be enriched. Beyond the accounts of the individual participants, evidence suggests that community based norms and wider influences, such as hyper masculine cultures and stereotypical notions of gender based roles, impact on children, young people and adults, constraining their choices and actions. This is compounded by central government under-investment in the resources, if not the rhetoric, needed to reach and change young people's perspectives in the context of their families, peer groups and the wider community.

It is clear that difficult choices need to be made when developing interventions that may inadvertently exclude certain groups and their interests. This is particularly relevant for those working with young people on healthy relationships and developments associated with the 'preventative turn', need to realise the imperative of recognising and engaging with intersectionality in the field of domestic abuse. There is a gap in the literature on intersectionality, young people and domestic abuse that warrants further research and investigation.

Our study also revealed another particular challenge in that there appears to be a particular form of subordinated masculinity amongst young males, which was evident in the interplay of interpersonal and gendered relations and the wider socio-economic context of the estate, and which is manifest in domestic abuse against female partners. In addition, of significant concern is the young people's sense of fatalism about abuse, the view that it is normal or a stubborn problem that is essentially unchangeable. A more optimistic reading of our account is that there is potential for children to follow a different pathway before they enter their teenage years, although it is not clear if they will have the capacity to make these positive changes in the context of a hyper masculine subculture, where older teenagers and adults appear to have relinquished hope.

It is understood that policy makers at national and local levels are faced with the difficulties arising from finite resources and the diversity of groups in need and it is not yet

known how the full impact of austerity policies will affect intervention work around young people and domestic abuse. What is clear is that while work with young people on healthy relationships has resource implications for already hard pressed authorities, it is vital for long term reductions in the incidence of domestic abuse. Finally, this chapter has identified a need for further work on a multidimensional approach (Flood, 2011; Heise, 1998), noting the opportunities and risks associated with the ‘preventative turn’ (Peeters, 2015; Home Office, 2015a). We see this as a fruitful area for further research on domestic abuse interventions targeting young people.

Endnotes

1. Firebreak Project: a Study of an Inter-Generational ‘Firebreak’ to aid the Prevention of Domestic Abuse. Empirical research undertaken by the authors as employees of Nottingham Trent University. Commissioned by a City Council and partners in the Midlands region.

2013-2014. For a full copy of the report see Crowther-Dowey et al (2014).

2. Heise describes four levels where interventions can be implemented: *personal history* and *the microsystem*, the family and the immediate context, here decisions can be taken to control behaviour; *the exosystem*, the immediate socio-economic position and the ways in which aggressive and abusive behaviour might be held in high esteem; *the macrosystem*, where broader cultural values around masculinities and violence may manifest.

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