Worksheet 8.2

Reducing domestic violence through group therapy programmes

One of the biggest problems we face in evaluating research into the reduction of domestic violence is that it is difficult to know whether some reduction is the intended outcome, or if we are aiming for the elimination of violence. When a group treatment intervention is carried out, do all members need to show improvement? When an individual approach is taken, do we expect it to have immediate and permanent effect, or do we allow for lapses? Dunford (2000) suggests that these questions are less important than another one: Is there more improvement than there would have been without intervention? This suggests that the most important type of evidence for researchers to gather is experimental, particularly where individuals are randomly assigned to treatment and non-treatment groups and any changes compared.

1 What problems are likely with an experimental approach? Consider problems of sampling, ethics, and both researcher bias and demand characteristics.

Two experiments that address the problem of violence reduction in this way are Dunford’s own San Diego navy experiment, which randomly assigned 861 husbands who had assaulted their wives to three different treatment conditions and a control condition, and the Broward County experiment (Feder and Dugan, 2002), which randomly assigned 404 males convicted of domestic violence battery to either the control group which received probation as normal, or to the treatment group, which received probation and counselling.

2 What advantages and disadvantages could there be of having participants from the navy when you have the navy’s full support for the intervention and the experiment?

The San Diego navy experiment (Dunford, 2000) compared outcomes for two groups receiving 6 months of cognitive–behaviour group therapy (either a men-only group or a group also including partners), a rigorous monitoring group, who were paid extra attention by a case manager and client commanders, and a control group receiving no services. Husbands and wives were interviewed four times during the study: at the beginning, immediately after treatment, and then 6 and 12 months after treatment had finished. Apart from official arrest records for violence against the wives during this period, the researchers also used interview data to determine if violence was ongoing, specifically checking for incidences when the victim felt endangered, was pushed or hit, or was physically injured. The researchers found that there was no significant difference between any of the treatment groups and the control group. For example, 6 of the men in the control group (4%) were arrested during the 12 months after the treatments stopped, compared with 10 in the rigorous
monitoring group (5.8%) and 6 in the CBT group involving both partners (2.6%). It was therefore concluded that none of the interventions tested were effective enough to justify their use.

3 Identify the independent and dependent variables in this study. What problems are there in defining and measuring these? Did Dunford do it well?

The Broward County experiment in Florida (Feder and Dugan, 2002) compared outcomes in just two groups randomly assigned according to the randomly generated final digit of their court docket as mentioned above: probation only, and probation plus 26 weeks of group treatment according to the Duluth model (at one of five different centres, assignment to which is not explained). Judges changed this assignment for 14 men who should have been in the control group. Although in experimental situations like this, the control group often receive informal ‘treatment’, the researchers found that there were no significant differences in the amount of probation attention received or the number of alcohol and drug programmes they engaged in.

The men involved ranged in age from 19 to 71 and were mostly married or living with a female partner. The vast majority of them, regardless of the large number of previous criminal records among the sample, had not been arrested for domestic violence before this occasion. African–Americans were over-represented in the sample, as were men from lower socio-economic status groups.

Outcomes were measured through checking police and probation records and interviews with the men and victims (only those who consented) at 6 and 12 months after the beginning of the study, with interviews including some standardized social desirability questions to determine if offenders or victims might be lying. They used questions from the Inventory of Beliefs About Wife Beating Scale, the Conflict Tactics Scale and the Attitudes Toward Women Scale to construct their interviews. To assist in their analysis of results, researchers kept attendance records for the treatment sessions. They found that 13% attended none, and only 29% attended all sessions without missing any. Missed sessions had to be made up later. From the control group, 3% voluntarily attended similar treatment classes.

The researchers found that there was no significant difference between the CBT/Duluth model and the control group in terms of offenders’ attitudes, either in terms of final difference and change over time. The same was found for victims’ attitudes. Neither offenders’ nor victims’ reports of violence changed significantly over time, but the police records did allow the researchers to find a significant association in the treatment group between number of sessions attended and likelihood of arrest. After a thorough analysis of their data, the researchers concluded that those who attended all of their sessions, as instructed in court, would have avoided re-arrest anyway, as they were significantly more likely to be older and have a longer employment history, these two demographic variables predicting both adherence to the programme and lack of re-arrest. Thus it appears that having more to lose (described as ‘high stake-in-conformity’) is a predictor of positive response to the conditions
of probation, but nobody in the study showed any genuine change in attitude, only response to threat.

4 Using all the information gathered so far, make a note of strengths and limitations of group treatment for domestic violence offenders below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Limitations</th>
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5 Discuss what you have put in the table with at least one other person in your class and add anything you have missed. What conclusion do you reach about the effectiveness of programmes like this? Be sure to explain the importance of the idea of a ‘high stake-in-conformity’.

6 (for whole classes only) Divide into groups of three or four and construct arguments in response to the question: Where should the money for reducing domestic violence go? More advanced classes with more time might like to research how much their local authorities spend on this and how it is currently achieved.

The class carries out a ‘tendering’ process: each group presents its argument then the class votes on which presentation is the most convincing. Consider inviting a local judge, lawyer, psychologist, social worker or council representative to see your presentations. Perhaps you can make a difference.

References