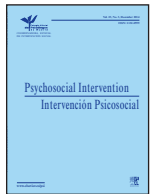


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Recidivism risk reduction assessment in batterer intervention programs: A key indicator for program efficacy evaluation

Marisol Lila^a, Amparo Oliver^b, Alba Catalá-Miñana^a, and Raquel Conchell^a

^aDepartment of Social Psychology, University of Valencia, Spain

^bDepartment of Methodology of the Behavioral Sciences, University of Valencia, Spain

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ABSTRACT

The evidence available on the efficacy of batterer intervention programs is still limited. The aim of the present study is twofold: (1) to analyze change in a set of intervention targets and their association with reconviction in a batterer intervention program implemented in Spain, and (2) to analyze pre-treatment participants' characteristics linked with an increased likelihood of change. The research design was a prospective longitudinal study with measures obtained in two points in time (pre-treatment and post-treatment). Self-report measures, trained program staff assessment, and reconviction official records were used. Participants consisted of 212 offenders participating in a court-mandated batterer intervention program. A significant gain in three intervention targets (responsibility assumption, perceived severity of intimate partner violence against women, and recidivism risk reduction) was found. Recidivism risk reduction gain score was the best success indicator. It significantly predicted reconviction with the highest effect size. A structural equation model showed that recidivism risk reduction was significantly predicted by pre-treatment offenders' anger control, impulsivity, social support, alcohol consumption, and offense seriousness. Participants changed in the intervention targets analyzed and risk of recidivism reduction played a central role in the prediction of reconviction.

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Evaluación de la disminución del riesgo de recaída en los programas de intervención con maltratadores: Indicador clave en la evaluación de la eficacia del programa

RESUMEN

La evidencia sobre la eficacia de los programas de intervención para maltratadores es limitada. Los objetivos de este estudio son: (1) analizar el cambio en un conjunto de objetivos de intervención y su asociación con la reincidencia en un programa de intervención con maltratadores y (2) analizar características pre-tratamiento vinculadas con una mayor probabilidad de cambio. El diseño fue longitudinal con medidas pre- y post-tratamiento. Se utilizaron auto-informes, evaluaciones profesionales y datos oficiales de reincidencia. Los participantes fueron 212 agresores que acudían por mandato judicial a un programa de intervención. Se encontraron ganancias significativas en tres objetivos de la intervención (asunción de responsabilidad, gravedad percibida y reducción del riesgo de reincidencia). La puntuación en reducción del riesgo de reincidencia fue el mejor indicador de éxito. Este indicador predijo significativamente la reincidencia obteniendo el mayor tamaño del efecto. Un modelo estructural mostró que las puntuaciones de los agresores en control de la ira, impulsividad, apoyo social, consumo de alcohol y gravedad del delito predecían significativamente la reducción del riesgo de reincidencia. Los participantes cambiaron en los objetivos de intervención y la reducción del riesgo de reincidencia desempeñó un papel central en la predicción de la reincidencia.

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*e-mail: marisol.lila@uv.es

The magnitude of intimate partner violence against women (IPVAW) and its effects on the physical and psychological health of women and their children makes it an urgent public health priority (Campbell, 2002; Ellsberg, Jansen, Heise, Watts, & Garcia-Moreno, 2008; World Health Organization, 2013). As Bowen (2011) argues, this should be more than enough to make us reflect on the need of the interventions with perpetrators of IPVAW. However, the implementation of these programs should be carried out with certain guarantees on their effectiveness in generating changes in perpetrators and preventing violence in their future relationships. According to Bennett and Williams (2001), assessing the effectiveness of intervention programs for intimate partner violence offenders is important for, at least, three reasons. Firstly, there has been a steady increase in the number of men transferred from the legal system to these intervention programs. This has brought about a sense of reliance in the effectiveness of such interventions. Secondly, these authors point out to the fact that there are many IPVAW victims who keep a relation with their aggressors (even with a restraining order in force; see Expósito & Ruiz, 2010). Their participation in the program can bring some hope to these women. Thirdly, the professionals who evaluate this type of programs wish to know not only whether these programs work or not, but also why they work, what type of participants are those who benefit more from this interventions, and what program elements and variables are the most important and with the most prominent role in the change process.

Since the 80s, numerous studies have been conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of Batterer Intervention Programs (BIPs). There are presently several studies published and, at least, six meta-analyses examining the available evidence base (e.g., Arias, Arce, & Vilariño, 2013; Babcock, Green, & Robie, 2004; Davis & Taylor, 1999; Eckhardt et al., 2013; Feder & Wilson, 2005; Smedslund, Dalsbø, Steiro, Winsvold, & Clench-Aas, 2011). However, the debate on whether this evidence proves or not the effectiveness of these programs is still opened and has become a controversial one (Bowen, 2011; Feder, Wilson, & Austin, 2008). Although there is a widespread use of these intervention programs, reviews and meta-analyses have found that the effect sizes of these interventions are small and, therefore, evidence available on the efficacy of these programs (primarily in terms of reducing the rate of recidivism) is limited (Aldarondo, 2002; Babcock et al., 2004). Moreover, the dropout rate in some intervention programs for IPVAW offenders is between 40% and 60% (e.g., Chang & Saunders, 2002). In general, these studies offer a modest support to the effectiveness of these programs (Scott, King, McGinn, & Hosseini, 2011).

One open question, which is central to the evaluation of effectiveness, is its own definition. In general, program effectiveness has been defined according to its ability to prevent violence by perpetrators against their partners (Scott et al., 2011). The evaluation focus is on fixed behaviors by offenders (i.e., violence) when entering and leaving the program (Lee, Uken, & Sebold, 2007; Tolman & Bennett, 1990). However there is a growing number of researchers who point out the limitations of evaluating the programs only by the recidivism rates. In this regard, rather than basing the program indicators of effectiveness only on the recidivism rates, it is also important to assess in which variables the program can achieve changes (Lee et al., 2007; Scott, 2004).

The aim of the present study is twofold: (1) to analyze change in a set of intervention targets and their association with reconviction in a BIP implemented in Spain and (2) to analyze pre-treatment participants' characteristics linked with an increased likelihood of change.

With regard to the first aim, this paper focuses on change in three intervention targets as success indicators: responsibility assumption, perceived severity of IPVAW, and recidivism risk reduction. Men condemned for IPVAW tend to show a lack of responsibility

assumption (Henning & Holdford, 2006; Lila, Oliver, Galiana, Catalá, & Gracia, 2014). These men frequently deny and minimize their violent behavior, blaming the victims for provoking this behavior (Cattlet, Toews, & Walilko, 2010; Gracia, 2014; Gracia & Tomás, 2014). The majority of BIPs acknowledge the importance of making offenders aware of their responsibility for the violent behavior (Lila, Gracia, & Herrero, 2012; Scott & Strauss, 2007). Another BIPs' goal is changing attitudes that encourage or tolerate the occurrence of IPVAW (Eckhardt, Samper, Suhr, & Holtzworth-Munroe, 2012). An indicator of tolerant attitudes is the perceived severity of IPVAW (i.e., to what extent an IPVAW incident is perceived as severe; Gracia, García, & Lila, 2009). The third target selected, the risk of recidivism reduction assessed by trained program staff, is based on risk factors solidly associated with IPVAW and is commonly used in BIPs (Hilton & Harris, 2005). Another indicator of success frequently used in BIPs is the intervention dose. For example, those perpetrators who complete the treatment tend to have a lower probability of re-assaulting their partners (Bennett, Stoops, Call, & Flett, 2007). Similarly, those participants who receive a higher intervention dose are less likely to be re-arrested (Bowen, Gilchrist, & Beech, 2005; Gordon & Moriarty, 2003).

In order to achieve the second aim of the study, we explore the contribution of a set of pre-treatment offenders' characteristics in explaining the change in those success indicators meaningful in predicting reconviction. The offenders' characteristics we take into account are variables traditionally linked to IPVAW, such as alcohol consumption, impulsivity, anger, social support, and offense seriousness.

Alcohol consumption has been considered as an important risk factor in IPVAW (Norlander & Eckhardt, 2005; World Health Organization, 2010). A significant percentage of batterers present alcohol abuse or suffer from alcohol dependence (Stuart, O'Farrell, & Temple, 2009; Catalá-Miñana, Lila, & Oliver, 2013; Catalá-Miñana, Lila, Conchell, Romero-Martínez, & Moya-Albiol, 2013). Also, alcohol consumption has been related to a higher probability of treatment attrition (Boira & Jodrá, 2010; Dalton, 2001), and to post-treatment recidivism (Tollefson & Gross, 2006).

Anger has been linked traditionally to IPVAW (Loinaz, Echeburúa, & Torrubia, 2010; Norlander & Eckhardt, 2005). In relation to the intervention with batterers, Eckhardt, Samper, and Murphy (2008) argue that those participants with high scores in anger-related disturbances are less likely to complete intervention program and more likely to be re-arrested. Likewise, impulsivity has been related to IPVAW (Caetano, Vaeth, & Ramisetty-Mikler, 2008). Impulsivity has been regarded as a risk factor because it is characterized by an inability to regulate certain behaviors, such as aggression (Plutchik & Van Praag, 1989). Several authors have pointed out that impulsivity is significantly high in batterers (Howard, 2012) and, like anger, high impulsivity at the beginning of treatment is defined as a predictor of poor therapeutic success and may be related to a high probability of recidivism (Caetano et al., 2008).

On the other hand, some studies have shown that social support may help resolve intimate partner conflicts and act as a buffer against the perpetration of violence (Choi, Cheung, & Cheung, 2012). In this sense, social support may help individuals appraise stressful events in a positive way or may provide partners with the resources they need to better cope with conflicts (Lila, Gracia, & Murgui, 2013). Furthermore, several studies have found social isolation or lacking a social support network to be an important situational risk factor linked to IPVAW (Heise, 1998).

Finally, in this study we have included the offense seriousness, which has been largely neglected in this research area. According to Echeburúa, Fernández-Montalvo and de Corral (2008), most research is conducted with general samples of IPVAW offenders, regardless of the offense seriousness. This variable, therefore, can be considered as relevant predictor of recidivism (Woodin & O'Leary, 2006).

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