



Difficulties, skills and therapy strategies in interventions with court-ordered batterers in Spain

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ABSTRACT

As a consequence of its coercive context, psychological interventions with men convicted of intimate partner violence in Spain involve a series of challenges in the design and development of the therapy program. This article reviews the main international contributions that have considered the difficulties produced by the context and analyzes the most important skills that the therapist can utilize in order to facilitate the therapeutic process. The difficulties have been grouped in accordance with origin: (a) difficulties derived from the context of the intervention; (b) the characteristics of the offender; (c) the therapist. The principal skills and strategies of the therapist seem to be related to the clear definition of the intervention context, the management of therapeutic relationship and the therapist's capacity for analysis and reflection. Finally, this work recognizes the need for research projects that focus on the therapist and aspects of the therapeutic process that could optimize the implementation of therapist training actions and improve treatment results.

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1. Introduction

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) is a social problem of the first order that requires the development of effective measures, both for the attention and protection of the victims and the penal mechanisms and rehabilitation of the aggressors. The Spanish State Monitoring Centre for Violence against Women reported that in 2010, 134,105 cases of gender-based violence were brought before the courts and

between 2003 and 2010, 545 women were killed by their partners (Secretaría de Estado de Igualdad, 2011).

The passing of the Law of Integral Protection Measures against Gender Violence established a series of actions aimed at preventing and eradicating IPV. Among the judicial measures oriented towards the aggressors, in cases of suspended sentences or as an alternative to imprisonment, there is an obligation to undertake a rehabilitation program; a regulation that applies to first-time offenders sentenced to less than two years in prison. The basic differences between this sentence and imprisonment are the obligation to participate in the rehabilitation program, the severity of the criminal offense and the fact that the offender is conditionally released from a custodial sentence (Exposito & Ruiz, 2010). The new law

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has resulted in a dramatic increase in non-custodial sentences for gender-based violence in Spain — from 361 in 2005, to 45,878 in 2010; of these, 14,443 sentences have obliged the offender to undertake a gender-violence treatment program (*Secretaría General de Instituciones Penitenciarias*, 2011).

In Spain, studies on the evaluation of treatment programs and recidivism are recent and few in number (Boira & Jodrá, 2010; Echeburúa & Fernández-Montalvo, 2009; Echeburúa, Sarasua, Zubizarreta, Amor, & Corral, 2010; Echeburúa, Sarasua, Zubizarreta, & Corral, 2009; Loinaz, Irureta, & Domenech, 2011; Pérez & Martínez, 2010). Results obtained have been discrete and very much in line with findings of international research projects of a similar nature (Babcock, Green, & Robie, 2004; Feder & Wilson, 2005; Murphy & Ting, 2010; Saunders, 2008).

The aforementioned works have stimulated intense debates, both in Spain and internationally, on the theoretical framework that should be the basis for the rehabilitation programs, their relevance and their effectiveness. In recent years, this debate has not only concerned interventions with male aggressors but it has also contemplated issues fundamental to the understanding of IPV. The debate is centered on the efficacy of the programs and the consideration of the gender paradigm as the only theoretical framework that can be employed for the comprehension of domestic violence (Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2010; Ross & Babcock, 2010; Stark, 2010). Authors, such as Lehmann and Simmons (2009), feel that there is a need for a change of paradigm as a result of the study of a number of core aspects related to the dynamic of violence, the characteristics of the aggressors and the rehabilitation programs. They argue against, what they see as, excessively partial and reductionist models that aim to explain this type of violence solely from a gender perspective and suggest that the heterogeneity of offenders should be taken into account and programs should be adapted to subjects. This new paradigm should include a variety of approaches and practical alternatives to the Duluth model (Pence & Paymar, 1993), such as: Solution-Focused Treatment; the Motivational Interview; Narrative Therapy; Strengths Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT); the Therapy Broaden-and-Build Theory of Positive Emotions and the Good Lives Model.

One of the effects of Spain's Law 1/2004 has been the questioning of the intervention model and an increasing focus on the offender and the design of the rehabilitation programs. New treatments, based on differing theoretical approaches, have been put forward: (a) the Ecological Model (Lila, García, & Lorenzo, 2010); (b) Gender Orientation (Exposito & Ruiz, 2010); (c) Evaluation of Motivation and Processes of Change (Quinteros & Carbajosa, 2008). In addition, the Ministry of the Interior's Directorate General for Penal Institutions has developed a national program that combines several approaches and is currently being implemented in the majority of court-ordered, domestic-violence offender intervention programs (Ruiz et al., 2010).

In this context, one of the main challenges is the identification of factors that can improve the effectiveness of the treatment. Some authors have concentrated on the detection of aspects concerned with mechanisms and processes of change, motivation, the therapeutic alliance and therapy skills, thereby emphasizing the need to analyze these variables for the design of more efficacious rehabilitation strategies (Boira & Tomás-Aragón, 2011; Marshall & Serran, 2004; Taft & Murphy, 2007; Taft, Murphy, Elliott, & Morrel, 2001; Taft, Murphy, King, Musser, & DeDeyn, 2003). The role of the therapist in these interventions has received scant attention in comparison with the characteristics and methodologies of the programs (Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2010; Saunders, 2008).

Ross, Polaschek, and Ward (2008) advanced a conceptual structure for the therapeutic alliance with offenders, based on the analysis of the interaction between the elements of the intervention process. The model proposes that elements, such as the influence of the legal, political and institutional system, the intervention environment and the characteristics of the therapist and the subject must be carefully examined when designing the programs. The same authors underline the necessity of taking into consideration the systemic factors (e.g., the

obligatory nature of the program and the breaching of confidentiality) that will determine the type of intervention and the need for therapists to develop specific skills for interventions in a context in which the characteristics of the aggressors implicitly involve added difficulties. In spite of the fact that studies have shown that the therapist's skills can influence the results of the programs (Marshall, 2005), the issue of the therapist's skills for interventions with aggressors in coercive contexts has not been the subject of a great deal of research (Marshall & Serran, 2004). Penal rehabilitation programs are highly specific in content, but short on detail with regard to their implementation from the point of view of the therapist and the skills that are required (Marshall et al., 2002).

Based on the elements of the conceptual structure designed by Ross et al. (2008), and the proposals of Lehmann and Simmons (2009), the aim of this work was to determine and describe the core skills and techniques required by therapists for the improvement of coercive interventions with men that have been found guilty of domestic violence. To this end, a review of the main international contributions that identify the difficulties associated with interventions with gender-violence offenders and suggested treatment strategies was undertaken, in conjunction with an analysis of the rather limited number of similar studies that have been carried out and published in Spain.

2. The therapeutic process: problems and complications

This section examines the main difficulties that have been identified by researchers that have studied rehabilitation techniques with men found guilty of domestic violence. Based on their origin, the difficulties have been grouped into three areas: (i) the context in which the intervention program takes place; (ii) the characteristics of the offender; (iii) factors related to the therapist (Table 1).

2.1. The intervention context

The initial conditions that characterize interventions in a coercive context are quite different from those of other therapeutic environments which usually involve a motivated subject that establishes a collaborative and confidential relationship with the therapist (Ross et al., 2008). With coercive interventions, the enforced nature of the program and the fact that the therapist is required to report to the court are significant and determinant factors that complicate treatment adherence and the participation of the offender (Miller & Rollnick, 2002; Ross et al., 2008). It is clearly vital for the therapist to establish a solid therapeutic alliance with the subject in an effort to avoid treatment rejection and prevent the strengthening of negative attitudes towards the victim and the use of violence (Taft, Murphy, Musser, & Remington, 2004). It is in this context, in which the rules and boundaries are predetermined and in which the subject is under threat of imprisonment if they do not comply, that the therapist must strive to create minimum conditions that foster motivation and assuage resistance to the rehabilitation program.

2.2. The offender

In addition to the specific, contextual factors that influence the intervention, there are a number of difficulties and challenges that must be faced by the therapist that are derived from the characteristics and personalities of the offenders. One of the most common hindrances is the low level of subject motivation at the beginning of the program (Taft et al., 2004). Unlike other rehabilitation interventions, the subject does not usually start the treatment with genuine internal motivation to resolve their problem (Kistenmacher & Weiss, 2008). Furthermore, as suggested by Eckhardt, Babcock, and Homack (2004), the participant's predisposition to change is not uniform, and the mere fact that they are involved in the program does not mean that they have begun the process. An intervention focus on motivation towards change must, therefore, be a priority objective at commencement and during the whole course of

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