

Book review: The rehabilitation of partner violent men

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Book Review

Book details: Erica Bowen. The rehabilitation of partner violent men. (Feb 2011). Wiley. 9780470997727 paperback 224 pages £32.99; 9780470683507 hardback 224 pages £75.00

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Dr Bowen provides a much needed account of current issues surrounding the treatment of intimate partner violence perpetrators in her book ‘The Rehabilitation of Partner Violent Men’. It necessarily concentrates on male offenders in the Criminal Justice System, due to the dearth of literature with female perpetrators. The thesis aims to “provide an introductory overview and critical examination of the influences that have led to the provision of [male perpetrator] programmes and the evidence regarding their effectiveness”. Whilst it addresses international issues, its primary focus is on practice in the UK.

The book is a refreshing addition to the literature, first because the majority of work in this area is from North America, and second because it is informed by the evidence base. Whilst many social scientists may take an evidenced based approach to understanding a subject domain for granted, research findings of good empirical

rigour are often absent or disregarded in the partner violence literature. Indeed the author makes her intentions clear from the outset, stating the text does not set out to “promulgate the feminist perspective”. As a result, Dr Bowen offers a very rationale and objective account of the relevant information. She provides a clearly structured and well articulated manuscript that will provide a good introductory text for anyone new to the area or an equally good resource for the more experienced researcher or practitioner.

The book contains ten chapters, the content of which naturally falls into three parts. First it considers evidence that has informed male perpetrator programmes, next it describes current practice, before finally discussing the efficacy of programmes.

In describing the work that informs perpetrator programmes, Chapter one provides the reader with a broad overview of intimate partner violence and highlights areas of debate within this topic. It lays bear some of the difficulties of working in this area, such as differences in definitional and theoretical approach which impact on research methodology and understanding the prevalence and aetiology of the problem behaviour. Chapter 2 outlines changes to the criminal justice response to intimate partner violence. Whilst consideration is given to other countries the focus is placed on the UK. The need for change is described before detailing amendments made to criminal law, policing, crown prosecution service policy, sentencing guidelines and court systems throughout the last two decades. Critical examination of whether policy change has positively impacted court procedures and the crown prosecution service highlights a dearth of literature from which to draw conclusions from and little changes in rates of case withdrawal in criminal prosecutions. Dr Bowen raises an important point at the end of this chapter. Amendments to sentencing guidelines and court systems have meant that perpetrator programmes, sometimes within a

community sentence, are currently perceived as a legitimate sentencing option, despite the lack of sound evidence demonstrating their effectiveness. This chapter therefore highlights the need for amendments to the criminal justice response to be guided by the empirical evidence, and provides a thought provoking context within which the following chapters can be understood. Chapter three walks the reader through the main theoretical explanations of partner violence perpetration, and highlights that a nested ecological model be considered to explain the multi-factor nature of partner violence. Chapter four examines the penal and social factors that have led to Governmental acceptance of group based programmes for intimate partner violence perpetrators. It details a succinct review of how the ‘what works’ literature has successfully influenced offending behaviour programmes which implicitly questions why the development of intimate partner violence programmes has not been more directly influenced by this body of evidenced based literature.

Chapters five and six detail aspects of current practice in the assessment and treatment of partner violent men. Chapter five provides a very clear account of the multiagency context of risk assessment specific to partner violence in the UK, before going onto discuss the nature of risk and specific actuarial and structured professional judgement tools. Importantly, Dr Bowen highlights that the reliability and validity of such tools have yet to be determined in the UK. Chapter six provides a fascinating review of the two models of group based intervention for male partner violence perpetrators offered in probation and custodial settings in the UK. Descriptions are taken from the programme theory manuals, presenting the reader with an original review which considers how the programmes sit within existing theory and ‘what works’ literature. This affords the reader with a much needed review of programmes

currently in use in the Criminal Justice System. Models adopted internationally are also briefly considered.

Chapters seven, eight and nine discuss the efficacy of intimate partner violence perpetrator programmes. Chapter seven presents a persuasive argument for the need to evaluate and the best methods by which this can be achieved. It highlights the methodological challenges inherent in evaluation and the difficulty of overcoming these. This is an important read for anyone involved in work in this domain. Chapter eight leads logically into an informative review about the effectiveness of international and national programmes addressing male perpetration. From this, Dr Bowen concludes the efficacy in initiating and maintaining change is questionable. Together these chapters highlight the need for standardised evaluation procedures that evaluators can adhere to so that a body of consistent empirical literature can be derived on which meta-analytic procedures can be carried out. Chapter nine considers the additional factor of treatment responsivity and how evaluations incorporating this element may produce more informative results, providing practitioners with knowledge about how programmes work and for whom they work best.

Finally, the concluding chapter turns its attention to future directions in intervention and evaluation practice. In addition, the benefits of primary prevention techniques are considered. This is a welcome and insightful chapter that provides hope for the future.

In conclusion, this book provides an excellent review of how intimate partner violence perpetration is understood and how this knowledge has informed current treatment of the problem behaviour in the Criminal Justice System. Dr Bowen provides a clear, in-depth and scientifically informed account of the area. The credibility of the authors account is demonstrated by her use of theory and over 20

years of empirical literature with which she moulds her arguments. Her dedication to presenting the scientific evidence in an area that is often dominated by ideological accounts should be applauded. A must read for professionals, clinicians and researchers alike, whose work impacts on victims, perpetrators or families experiencing intimate partner violence.