



Domestic abuse service providers and their stories



Key points

- Harmful narratives which perpetuate myths, stereotypes and biases of domestic abuse and victimhood are still prevalent and persistent in the domestic abuse field.
- Practitioners encounter variations of these narratives on a daily basis in their work and find that they are entrenched in individuals, organisations and wider society.
- Practitioners are clear that further work needs to be done to revise these systemic and structural narratives and that educating young children should be the priority if we want to 're-write' the wider cultural narrative of domestic abuse.

Summary

This project was funded by the Vulnerability & Policing Futures Research Centre's Early Career Researcher Development Fund and was conducted by Dr Rebecca Shaw (University of Leeds) in partnership with Leeds Women's Aid, Behind Closed Doors, Fresh Futures, and Foundations + Choices.

The project aimed to investigate the power and persistence of dominant narratives in relation to domestic abuse (DA), as witnessed by service providers who support both victims and perpetrators.

A key ambition of this project was not only to identify and analyse these narratives, but to consider how we might improve future policy and practice to change them.

Qualitative data was collected through focus groups and individual interviews, which were conducted with 24 participants, six from each of the four partner organisations.

Background

Despite legislative changes in 2021 with the Domestic Abuse Act, and its stated aim to raise awareness of DA, harmful systemic narratives of DA persist.

A **2022 Women's Aid Survey** of UK attitudes to DA revealed the continuing presence of socio-cultural narratives that enable and excuse DA. These can include narratives such as "why don't you just leave?"; the "ideal victim"; domestic abuse "happens to others not me"; and coercive control is not as harmful as physical violence.

Narratives have a diverse role to play when it comes to harm and vulnerability: they can inspire and motivate harmful action; they are used to make sense of harm and vulnerability; and they are used in the process of surviving harm. How we see, react and make sense of DA often involves drawing on prominent socio-cultural narratives that silence victims and perpetuate problematic myths and stereotypes of DA – so-called dominant narratives. For example, these narratives often repeat stereotypical characterisations of victims and perpetrators, where if a female victim does not present in a certain way, she is culpable in the behaviour of her abuser; or that victims and perpetrators only come from certain socio-economic backgrounds. These narratives can also reinforce the misunderstanding that physical violence is more serious than other types of abuse, and that patterns of control and power which underpin domestic abuse are not harmful or do not constitute abuse. The issue with these dominant

narratives is that they are entrenched within both individuals and institutions. In the context of DA, this can include law enforcement, the justice system, statutory agencies – police, lawyers, judges, social workers are more likely to share understandings of domestic abuse from this dominant narrative without any revision of traditional ideas and concepts, rather than re-conceptualising the narrative of what DA should look like. Little work, however, has been carried out to explore these problematic narratives from the perspective of frontline workers who support both victims and perpetrators of DA. Specifically, their perceptions of the kinds of narratives that act as barriers to support and what needs to be done to dismantle those narratives.

Therefore, this project aimed to:

- Apply a methodology using narrative theory to investigate the stories of service providers' experiences with domestic abuse victims and perpetrators.
- Assess current practitioners' perceptions of the dominant narratives around domestic abuse and identify what kinds of narratives persist in preventing change.
- Identify potential strategies for practically changing the narrative of domestic abuse.

What we did

The data was collected in two stages from September 2023 to January 2024:

1. Focus group sessions were held with participants from each of the four partner organisations.
2. Individual narrative interviews were conducted with 24 participants.

The project utilised a narrative inquiry framework throughout both data collection and analysis. This is a qualitative research method focused on understanding experience and which uses stories as the unit of analysis. In the data collection phase, narrative-style individual interviews were conducted: participants were asked the same initial question to

draw out narration of their 'story' with the questioning phase commencing only when the participant's narration came to a 'natural' end.

The data was then analysed using a narrative approach, which enabled the researcher to explore both the content and form (i.e. construction) of these stories. First, a thematic narrative analysis was conducted, focusing on the content and identifying the key themes that emerged from the stories told during interview. Second, a structural analysis was carried out identifying the key elements of the story using the framework of linguist William Labov and drawing on the work of Vladimir Propp to identify key, recurring characters.

Key findings

Consistent themes emerged across all the storytellers, however, each teller combined different events, characters and elements of narrative to tell their tale. This revealed that, although there were similar themes, each storyteller had different points to make and there were important differences in the themes' meanings for different participants.

Participants identified consistent themes revealing that there is not one singular dominant narrative of DA, but rather it is multi-faceted and made up of many inter-related issues. There was evidence of good practice, showing that agencies such as the police and social services demonstrate an understanding of DA. However, these stories were in the minority. Instead, key plot lines identified:

- The belief that a victim should 'just leave' the abusive relationship.
- A hierarchy of abuse still persists, with some types of abuse taken more seriously than others.
- The stereotypical characterisation of victim and perpetrator remains persistent, with a lack of understanding when a victim and/or perpetrator does not fall within that particular characterisation.
- The belief that it is the responsibility of the victim for accessing support and removing themselves (and children) from the abusive relationship.

- Failure to recognise the importance of, and need for, perpetrator work, such as perpetrator programmes designed for individuals who want to stop abusive behaviour.
- The police and social services, as key characters in these stories, were portrayed in a negative light and cast as 'villains'.
- Service providers, in their stories, highlighted a continued lack of understanding and awareness of the nuances of DA across all agencies that work in the DA field.

This continued lack of understanding of DA among all areas of the field was clear, with many citing the impact of this as significant: it created barriers to support – for both victims and perpetrators – and continued to impact service provision. When it came to a resolution to the story, and a resolution to the issues faced in dismantling dominant narratives of domestic abuse, training and education were identified as key.

Next steps

This research has shown that if we want to change our response to DA and ‘re-write’ the harmful dominant narratives about DA, then we need to reframe the question we are asking and, instead, ask how all professional services, police, schools and the wider public are conceptualising, articulating and reproducing these narratives.

With many of the themes cutting across all ‘characters’ in service providers’ stories of DA, this research demonstrates that the identified dominant narratives can, and do, pervade any organisation and all aspects of society. Therefore, focus needs to shift to the source of these harmful narratives and consider how they are constructed and reproduced as part of any joint action to tackle domestic abuse. Until we tackle how these narratives are used through policy and practice, any attempts for cultural change around DA will continue to stall.

The project findings were disseminated to the project partners, the steering group and key stakeholders at a workshop held at the University of Leeds. It was acknowledged that there is still important work to be done to change the dominant narrative about DA as part of a wider cultural movement, and it was agreed that focusing on education (within and beyond schools) for children and young people was key. This reflected the data that was collected from interviews.

From this project, lead investigator Dr Rebecca Shaw along with the four partner organisations and other key stakeholders including West Yorkshire Police, Leeds City Council and West Yorkshire Combined Authority, are now developing a large, inter-agency working group to build on the work already taking place within

Leeds and West Yorkshire. Leeds City Council has recognised the importance of tackling domestic violence and abuse in their **strategy for 2023–2028**, with chapter four specifically focusing on children and young people. There are a range of services in the local area which, among other things, provide educational resources and training on domestic abuse including **Leeds School Wellbeing**; Health and Wellbeing Services with **Leeds for Learning**; and **Leeds Safeguarding Children Partnership**. However, there is work to be done in embedding an understanding of these dominant narratives, and their power, within educational resources in order to produce the cultural shift and movement that is required for tackling domestic abuse in Leeds and West Yorkshire.

This ‘Changing the Narrative’ working group will focus in the short term on creating a short educational animation, drawing separately on the lived experiences of victims and perpetrators. The longer-term strategy work will involve assessing current educational resources for all school children; collaborating with partners to develop a proposal for a cultural programme and accompanying hub, aimed at young children; and forging a local and regional level policy on tackling and changing the cultural narrative of domestic abuse.

For further information

Read more about the Domestic Abuse Service Providers and their Stories project at vulnerabilitypolicing.org.uk/domestic-abuse-narratives

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