Article

Rejecting and retaining aspects of selfhood: Constructing desistance from abuse as a 'masculine' endeavour

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Abstract
Evaluative studies of men who have attended domestic violence perpetrator programmes have, thus far, paid attention to the question of what they are expected to desist *from*. This is entirely appropriate. However, the question of what they are expected to achieve, or 'become', is less clearly articulated, indeed often overlooked. Based on a series of interviews with men who had completed perpetrator programmes, the narratives explored in this articles suggest that their abusive behaviour was underpinned by fears about how to 'perform masculinity' satisfactorily in the past. Consequentially, the programme experience was perceived as threatening or as 'feminising'. However, the accounts of these men suggest that in desisting from abusive behaviour, issues of identity and processes of behaviour change remain profoundly gendered. Indeed, committing to desistance is perceived as something of an 'heroic struggle' in which qualities associated with being a 'proper man' are harnessed and utilised in the process.

Keywords
Desistance, gender identities, masculinities, perpetrator programmes

Introduction

> The programs are not about making troubled or anti-social and violent men into 'nice guys'.

> (Gondolf, 2002: 36)

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The origins of this article lie in a series of interviews carried out 8 years ago (Morran, 2013) with a sample of 12 men who had 'successfully completed' participation in a programme for perpetrators of domestic abuse (perpetrator programme). The interviews focused on the various practices and processes by which the men desisted from violent and abusive behaviour towards their partners and how they sustained these changes in behaviour over time. (The average period since programme 'completion' was 5 years). Among the issues explored, three themes are key to the discussion which follows. First, it was apparent that these men had extremely limited (and often unsupportive) networks, particularly of other men, in their lives. Second, their involvement with the programme was often a 'lifeline' which they regularly drew on when they needed support or advice. The third key theme, which is of central relevance to this article, is that these men frequently felt confused about various aspects of change in which they were engaged. If desistance was a *process* and had to be continually negotiated (McNeill and Maruna, 2007) where, they seemed to wonder, was that process taking them?

'Doing masculinity' differently

Most grappled with the question of what kind of men they were becoming (or were expected to become). If their abusive and violent behaviour had been underpinned by powerful emotions about losing control over others, it was also marked by their anxieties about failing somehow as a 'man' and the spectrum of qualities or characteristics this supposedly might entail (Pease, 2002; Seidler, 2006). Moreover, if the lifelong messages they had absorbed about how to 'do' or 'perform' masculinity (Connell, 1995, 2000; West and Fenstermaker, 1995) had been so pervasive and so often 'toxic', what would living differently and non-violently involve? How would they engage in a daily process of living a changed or changing life in the presence very often of other men's recalcitrance or intransigence? Would this involve a somewhat partial shift in their attitudes and behaviour or would it require a complete personal transformation?

These were certainly major concerns of one of the men I interviewed, 'Mick',[1] whose imposing physical presence and gruff manner seemed to be core aspects of his self-presentation. Speaking of his initial anxieties about having to attend a programme, Mick had wondered, 'what are they going to try and do to me?' He was anxious and confused that he might be turned into 'less of a man' . . . and consequently become . . . 'more like a woman' (Collier, 1998: 173). Mick may well have been justified in his concerns. His participation in a perpetrator programme meant that his behaviour and attitudes as a man *per se* would be subjected to scrutiny and challenge. Edley and Wetherell (1996) note that men's gender identities exist in a 'constant state of uncertainty' (p. 99) in which defensiveness and instability are prevalent (Wetherell and Edley, 2014). Sim (1994), Gadd (2002) and Gadd and Farrall (2004) have also commented on the extent to which masculinity must always be 'negotiated' or 'accomplished'. Given that 'men have to be constantly prepared to *prove* their male identities' (Seidler, 1998: 195, italics in original), Mick's fear that he would be under pressure to change in ways which he perceived as mystifying and threatening were entirely understandable.

Over the course of the emergence of perpetrator programmes in the United Kingdom and Europe, organisations such as *Respect* in the United Kingdom and *Working with Perpetrators European Network* (WWP-EN) have, respectively, developed guidelines and standards to

ensure safe and accountable practices with men who are violent in relationships (Respect, 1995, 2000, 2004, 2008, 2011, 2017; WWP-EN, 2018). These consistently stipulate that the primary aim and purpose of perpetrator programmes should be directed at the safety of men's partners and children. However, with regards to the men themselves, and as Turnell and Edwards (1999) had earlier argued in relation to the rehabilitation of sexual offenders, while practitioners are clearer on what they might expect 'offenders' to *desist from*, they are generally less so on *what they expect them to achieve.* Both the Respect Standards and WWP-EN Guidelines are, perhaps unsurprisingly, succinct on this issue. The accountability of such programmes to victims/survivors and the organisations which support them, requires that they prioritise the safety of victims/survivors and children. Measures of effectiveness have consequently (and rightly), generally focused on potential changes in terms of perpetrators' physical and psychologically violent and abusive behaviours. Less attention however has been paid to why or how they might change otherwise *as men* and moreover how such changes might be achieved or supported (Downes et al., 2019).

Edward Gondolf, one of the foremost researchers in the field of perpetrator programme evaluation, has outlined many of the ethical and practical challenges that researchers face in undertaking this task (Gondolf, 2002, 2012) Among the several methodological complexities he notes (e.g. the shortcomings of quasi-experimental designs, the difficulties of determining appropriate control groups), Gondolf addresses the crucial and contested question of what counts as 'success'. He asks whether this ought to be determined by' the total cessation of violence, or merely a reduction in the abuse?' (Gondolf, 2002: 36). In summarising the quantitative measures commonly employed to assess 'success' or otherwise, however, he makes a compelling observation. As far as court-ordered programmes are concerned 'the jurisdiction of most courts is *limited to re-assault* (italics added). The programmes are not about making troubled or anti-social and violent men into "nice guys"' (Gondolf, 2002: 36).

This comment, while apt in the context of assessing the effectiveness of programmes as a criminal justice sanction, nevertheless serves to highlight the concerns of other commentators who have paid rather more attention to the lives of men who attend perpetrator programmes. Such outcome-focused evaluations overlook the way in which men understand their violent and abusive behaviour and how this is inextricably linked with their personal histories (Gadd, 2002, 2006) They also fail to recognise the wider structural and other complexities in men's lives and which perpetrator programmes are neither equipped nor tasked to deal with (Morran, 2011, 2013; Renehan, 2021). Ferguson et al. (2020) have recently commented on the inadequacies of child protection practices where domestic abuse is also present.

> In relation to men who abuse women, the field in the UK is, to some extent, *characterised by a lack of curiosity about them*. It is as if we all know why they do what they do . . . it is still the case, . . . that if they do access a perpetrators' programme . . . they may receive an overly reductive approach. (Ferguson et al., 2020: 31, italics added)

Such a perceived 'lack of curiosity' about men (Morran, 2011) was significant in generating a subsequent study (Morran, 2013), which examined the various processes and practices of desistance in which men engaged and what these entailed for men who had been on a perpetrator programme.

However, the themes discussed therein only addressed part of the story. Two factors were of significance in motivating a more recent return to these data. First, the evaluation by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation (HMIP) in 2018 revealed, among several shortcomings, a profoundly 'uncurious' and limited appraisal (at least as far as management was concerned) of the lives of men attending the 'deeply flawed' perpetrator programmes delivered by the privatised Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs). Second, the arrival of the pandemic in 2020 (along with all the other attendant calamities it brought) seemed significant in generating a 'shadow pandemic' (UN Women, 2021), namely, that of a massive increase in men's violence towards women and girls. As has been noted (Fraser, 2020), organisations providing support and refuge for women had to struggle with a profound lack of resources. Meanwhile, agencies working with men who were, or had been, perpetrators of violence and abuse were observing (via various online forums in which this author was involved) the extent to which many men (often frightening and often frightened) were expressing an urgent need for contact and advice. Practitioners regularly referred to men's precarious identities and the potentially hazardous consequences of this precarity. This was another factor in prompting a return to material that clearly merited further attention. The consequent decision to apply a case-study approach to the data allowed space to capture, through men's own words, a more holistic picture of their lives. Indeed, the 'detailed and intensive analysis' (Bryman, 2004: 48), which this approach enabled, revealed much more about how, and what, was changing as far as *their sense of themselves as men* was concerned.

Crucially, it also shed light on the question of whether their involvement with programmes and the desistance processes in which they were subsequently engaged, might in fact help turn some of these 'troubled or anti-social men' into 'nice guys', or at least *nicer* guys. Indeed, rather than dismiss this concept as inconsequential or irrelevant as Gondolf (2002) appeared to do, it is in fact critical to pay attention to any potential for such a possible outcome. The most obvious reason for this is that women and children may well continue to live with, or have long-standing contact with, these men as partners, ex-partners or fathers. However, it is also of considerable relevance to the men themselves and furthermore for practitioners who engage with them. If men are to be motivated towards developing newer ways of thinking and behaving (while not forgetting the past), then envisaging a 'nicer' self, may substantially underpin, and help sustain, a more positive (and accountable) present – and future, for these men and for significant others in their lives.

The blindingly obvious?

In the process of re-appraising the stories that the men recounted, something became increasingly apparent, simultaneously evident and yet elusive. The following assertion therefore might be 'blindingly obvious'. But it is argued here that this may well be an issue which many programme practitioners (not to mention those involved in programme evaluation) neither fully grasp nor appreciate. The men I interviewed spoke of facing up to various fears and vulnerabilities that had often been at the core of their 'need' to control and be abusive of others, and of addressing, and managing multiple adversities in their own lives. Such a process required them to be 'tenacious' or 'courageous'. Doing

desistance could even be described as a 'heroic struggle' or endeavour (Prosser, 2008). If being abusive had underpinned one aspect of enacting a particular performance of masculine behaviour, then to 'do desistance' was to find other ways of accomplishing masculinity differently. How they might go about this however would be circumscribed by a range of personal, cultural and social factors and the norms pertaining to (heterosexual) masculinity in their everyday lives and the communities in which they lived (Carlsson, 2013; McNeill and Maruna, 2007; Maruna, 2001).

In the brief narratives that follow, it is intriguing to note the ways in which these men speak about themselves, how they discuss what has changed, and what they have relinquished or held onto as far as their sense of themselves as men is concerned.

Andrew: 'Some big decisions had to be made'

Andrew was interviewed 9 years after he had begun attending a perpetrator programme. He conveyed the impression of being a competent and energetic man. He was separated from his wife but 'co-parents' his two sons. He worked at two jobs, one in his local council, the other working 'with young people's aggression and conflict', something which he wanted to 'pass on from (his) own experience'. Work had always been a core part of Andrew's sense of self. In the past though it had stressed him out . . .

> I'd spend hours and hours at work and doing the house up, . . . we'd bought this house, . . . hours doing the house up, and not making any room really for leisure time or quality time. And if I was, *forced* – as I saw it then – to go to a family event or, you know, 'let's go for an afternoon out' I'd be thinking about what I could be doing at home rather than my relationship with my wife and children and not nurturing or loving that sort of thing.

Andrew now felt able to function more 'competently' as a man whose 'skills are valued'. In the past, he had felt compelled 'to do up the house' but did not have much investment in or ability to draw on or value relationships. Now, though, his openness to these 'add value' to his sense of self (a phrase he periodically employed during our interview). He now 'relishes' the importance of being there for his sons on an emotional as well as a practical basis.

Work was still a core value for Andrew. The job which he preferred, though, was that which allowed him to work with people who, like himself, had 'experienced difficulties with aggression and conflict'. He was also able to apply some of the skills which he had learned and developed to defuse volatile situations at his other job.

> Quite often I'll be asked to intervene in situations that are quite difficult and challenging . . . .. I can't remember the last time that someone was ever aggressive to me, but I think that's a sort of response to how I am with them.

Throughout, Andrew's narrative of personal change was one of accomplishment and of 'facing up to responsibilities'. The programme had given him the 'tools' that equipped him to deal more effectively with his life. He stated that he puts 'all these tools and strategies in place and practises and reads, and practises and read' (which is) 'a work in itself'.

Andrew reflected that he had reached some major decisions and come up with various strategies about regaining (or perhaps gaining) some control over his life. He had made 'a conscious decision' to distance himself from the somewhat shallow friendships he had in the past. He now valued keeping fit, 'as I owe it to myself to be healthy'. He also 'took action' as far as his stress was concerned.

> My work with the council was very stressful . . .but I changed my job which was a big step because it was a big salary. So, you know some quite big decisions had to be made in order for me to continue to be non-abusive. That was about me taking responsibility.

Clearly an intelligent and thoughtful man, Andrew replied to my question about what else helped sustain him in accomplishing a process which he clearly found rewarding, but which also required commitment, competence and (his word), 'tenacity'. His considered reply revealed much about what was changing for him, as well as what he was actively changing and of what this meant to him as a man.

> I think just to say . . . that actually I've abandoned this masculine stereotype . . . business. That's gone a long way to liberation for me, you know, emotionally, all sorts, spiritually, all sorts of things, and I'm not burning up energy trying to maintain an image. I can be me, and actually there's bits of me that need changing, but . . . there's bits of me which are, you know, I'm okay with, I can live with them and there are bits of me that are going really well. So, getting rid of that image, you know. I've got to live up to someone else's expectations and you know, be externally driven if you like. I'd be dependent on people's praise and everything to function, you know, all that's gone, I don't need that anymore.

Mick: 'I'm a lifer here'

Mick was a strongly built man who arrived early for our interview. Despite freezing weather, he was dressed in cycling shorts and a t-shirt. He arrived at the top of a very steep staircase carrying a track bike, which he told me proudly, he had built himself, one of his 'collection of four'. In his early forties, Mick 'works every hour he can' for a packaging company, is married with, between him and his partner, six children ranging from teens to early twenties. He began the programme 'six or seven years ago', adding that 'I'm a lifer here'. He comes back in 'fairly regularly' when he, or his wife, feels that he needs to 'take a day out'. He estimated that in the last 12 months he had come in to attend a group session on 'two or three occasions' when he needs a 'top up', making the gesture of pouring fuel into a car.

Mick provided several examples of how he was capable of scaring others at work and of how he intimidated people. However, until he came to the programme, he 'didn't think I had a problem' because, as he asserted, 'I'd never actually hit my wife or my children'. (His wife told me in a separate interview that he had never been physically violent towards her, but he was 'very scary as he used to smash things up around the house'). Mick 'just believed my general behaviour – because of the kind of people that I sort of grew up with – violence was all part of what it was all about'.

Asked how he now reflected on what he thought he should be as a man, he commented,

I was trying to uphold things that shouldn't be upheld. The fact that I felt like a man had to be strong, didn't show weaknesses, general things like that, . . . the fact that you know, men don't cry . . . and I think that's what the whole issue was, without actually realising it because of the circle of friends that I had.

Invited to describe himself before he came onto his programme Mick replied:

A bastard, as in mentally, physically, emotionally, everything was just . . .I had nothing, I was just . . .don't know, just a walking time bomb.

DM: And now. . .?

I'm halfway to being pleasant.

'Halfway to being pleasant' seemed to allow Mick the recognition that he was still liable to 'kick off' at times. Even now that he 'constrains' himself, he talked of moments when he has been cycling, and

Somebody cuts you off . . .I have been known to peddle like mad and lift my knee up and, 'oh what a shame, your wing mirror's cut off' – big cut on my knee but it seemed worth it at the time. But obviously it wasn't because I was just being more of a fool than they were.

Whether more fool or not, Mick seemed to convey in this exchange that he was, and quite possibly is, able to engage in aggressive acts while acknowledging that it is somehow unworthy (but perhaps worth it)!

He was 'still a force to be reckoned with', still has 'excess energy' which he needs 'to burn off' by working 'sometimes as much as six days a week'. He relies on his wife to tell him that he needs to slow down. He also burns off energy by cycling one of his bikes, sometimes with 'some lads that own a bike shop'.

They're only in their twenties and early thirties . . .and it's great when you're outrunning youngsters because you get a good sense of achievement and a buzz to think, well at least I've still got it sort of thing.

Physical fitness and cycling have become important priorities for Mick. In the past, he frequented his local pub and 'found himself' being involved in fights and arguments. Cycling now provides him with an excellent 'cover story' to stay away from old mates. He tells them he's got to keep fit for his cycling, 'winning and that'.

This deployment of a cover story is significant. Many men such as Mick have invested heavily in traditional male identities and live within families and communities wary of personal 'transformation', in which gender roles are prescribed and restrictive. Such strategies therefore enabled a type of 'reformative' or desistance-focused activity upon which they can credibly draw, without having to engage in or embrace a 'different', more 'feminised' style of thinking and speaking about oneself (Carlsson, 2013; Collier, 1998; Irvine and Klocke, 2001).

Derek: 'I took the bull by its horns'

Derek was a squat muscular man with close-cropped hair and a steady gaze. He was very fit looking, keen on sports and worked as a train driver. He had a breezy, matey style. Derek had recently begun supporting the facilitation of one of the weekly groups for men on the programme which he himself had attended. Aged 38, he has been with his partner 16 years and has a son of 10 and a daughter of 7 years.

Discussing how he came to the programme 3 years previously he was equivocal about his violent behaviour, describing his relationship at that time as 'volatile'. However, 'on one occasion', after he and his wife had begun attending *Relate* (marriage counselling), he 'had had too much to drink and "wound up by (his wife's) arguing"', he 'tried to strangle her'. When they returned to *Relate* the following week, the counsellor said that he 'couldn't carry on anymore because of my anger issues'.

Having begun by partially acknowledging this 'shameful past' (Schwalbe and Wolkomir, 2002), Derek moved swiftly into a story of achievement and attainment. Leaving the *Relate* premises with the programme number, Derek phoned the office, came into a group that very afternoon . . . 'and I've never looked back!'

As Derek told me what he has learned, I was struck by his 'can-do' tone in which he successfully addresses and accomplishes various 'tasks' that reinforce his presentation of behaviour and attitude change. His narrative was one of competence, achievement and skill.

> I learned pretty quick, I've always been a quick learner, so I picked up techniques and coping strategies really, really quickly and because I wanted to change as well. And the thing about this is you've got to want to – if you don't want to change nothing's going to happen. I wanted to change so for me in a way it was easy, things seemed to slip into place rather quickly.

Derek talked of how he was subsequently approached to assist in supporting some group facilitation. He saw this as a 'step forward', yet another rung on his ladder of progress. He 'loved every minute' of the facilitators training and 'did very well on it', observing that he has 'a lot of experience'. His own experience of attending the programme was thus conveyed as something additional which he had to offer. Although he acknowledged that this experience in itself was 'not a good experience', it nevertheless meant that he was 'well qualified' to gain the confidence of other men in the group. 'I feel they do look at you differently when you say, "I've been on the course, I've been where you're sat, I've gone through the feelings you're going through, I know what it's like"'. Derek reflected that he was looked at 'with respect' by other men in the group.

Leaving the armed forces after 13 years, 'leaving all my mates behind' was very stressful for Derek. He 'went into a job that I still don't like five years later'. Despite his love–hate relationship with the army, it nevertheless presented variety, excitement and a sense of belonging. By contrast, being a train driver is 'mind numbingly boring, doesn't do anything for me at all'. His move towards facilitation and trying to 'change the currency' was something that Derek was keen to develop.

Reflecting on how he has changed, Derek seemed to approach his strategies of desistance with the energy that one assumes he must have employed when he was in the services.

> If I pick something to do, I grab hold of it and I keep squeezing it and squeezing and I get every bit out of it in a lot of stuff I do, and I did this with this here, (the programme). I grabbed hold of it, and I took the bull by its horns, and *I owned it*, and . . . I put stuff into place, put coping strategies into place, I did all this, and Tina (his partner) could see the change in me.

Now and again, he gets 'heated', but then 'it's me realising that this is going to be something I'll have to do for the rest of my life which I'm quite happy with'. Derek was up for the task!

Derek valued Tina's support. 'I'm trying to put all my effort into my marriage, not that it's not good, it is, but I just want to keep it that way'. Throughout Derek's narrative however his relationship with his partner seemed not to be central to his desistance-related activities. These seemed instead to be about finding ways of coping with a need to engage time and energy and 'burn off the anger' (about his upbringing) which is still around. Reflecting on whether he thought he was still abusive, he observed,

> if I'm tired or vulnerable . . . I have to make myself aware, and I'm caught off guard sometimes. So, I have to . . . even Tina quickly reminds me you know, 'you're being a bit grumpy' and I go 'oh right, okay'.

He acknowledged that, 'sometimes I can lose it a bit and become verbally abusive. But you know, like I say, I'm not perfect, what is perfect? I'm nothing compared to the person that I was which I'm happy with'.

It appeared that Derek's 'anger issues' were compounded by other destructive or unhealthy patterns of behaviour, such as being involved in what he termed 'spending abuse'. This sat somewhat awkwardly alongside one of his stated priorities of 'being a provider', but he was keen to emphasise that he was also 'taking action' to resolve these issues. 'Taking action' and 'doing' appear though to be where Derek *is*. There was little sense that he had arrived at a destination of peace with himself. Instead, he was involving himself vigorously in activities which were employed to convey, to self and others, a commitment to a different *performance* of masculinity – in which his skills and acumen were harnessed to the desistance process.

Derek was involved in various 'rituals of redemption' (Maruna, 2001). He helps out in the project and has spoken to an audience of police officers about his experience of the programme.

> I was able to talk about it, I didn't find it hard talking about it, but I brought up a lot of stuff that I sort of addressed over a year and a half ago and had forgotten about it because I'd addressed it, but for me it was important to bring it back up again *to help them to understand*. So, it was very, very emotional!

He was asked to give his presentation again on several occasions, and despite the emotional intensity, 'it got better and better and the inspector said, "you were fantastic, I'd love to give you a job!"'.

Coming into the groups gave Derek both the opportunity to 'give something back' (McNeill and Maruna, 2007) and seemed also to recharge his energy – 'the more challenging the better, I enjoy it, I thrive off it!' This was also important 'because I want to

give them something back, I've helped them out all sorts, I'll do it till I die because without them I wouldn't be where I am now'. Crucially it also provides him with a different milieu. Since he came out of the military, he no longer had any real friends, only work colleagues. The programme and the contact he has with it and the opportunity to see himself in relation to other men there provided him with an important reminder of past and present.

Derek was accomplishing aspects of his masculinity differently. However, there were strong continuities between his need for active solutions, his desire to be 'recognised' (Gadd, 2006) as skilful, energetic and in 'owning' his new way of being and acting. He acknowledged throughout the support of his partner and the importance of being a father. Derek's enactment of masculinity was something that has caused him problems, as well, one suspects, as being a source of pride and personal identity. He struggles with what that new identity should be. He wants to switch from the drudgery of his present job to that of being a skilled, experienced and respected man who is grabbing and squeezing new experiences as he changes the currency from what he was before to wherever he is going now.

Discussion: Desistance, change and continuity

It is important to note that there are several limitations to this study. The sample of men originally interviewed was small, and it cannot be claimed that they are representative of a wider body of men on domestic violence perpetrator programmes. Nor can any conclusions be drawn from their comments as to the general efficacy or otherwise of perpetrator programmes. It is noteworthy that these three men (and the majority of men in the overall sample) were mostly in employment and in some form of supportive relationship with partners. These, and factors such as age, or being a father, may well have been important issues in enabling and sustaining changes in the men's behaviour and outlook. What was noticeable however was their acknowledged need to return to programmes for advice or support over substantial periods of time. The importance of the programmes' ability to offer ongoing support or advice for men is something that has rarely been incorporated into current perpetrator programme provision. For these men, the existence of the programme and the availability of programme staff offered an important site for reflection and indeed for a positive *connection* and engagement with other men which was often lacking in many aspects of their lives.

The examples explored here might also be subject to a critique, such as that by Gadd and Corr (2017), that an overt focus on presentation or performance of identity fails to connect sufficiently with the more psycho-social and emotional worlds behind the men's narratives. Nevertheless, it is still feasible to suggest that these accounts expose something that is seldom explicit in the analyses of desistance. While they focus in this instance on men who have been perpetrators of abuse, they highlight the need to consider accounts of gender and desistance in criminological research and criminal justice practices more generally. They reveal that, as in the enactment of crime (Messerschmidt, 1993), so too in desisting, 'notions of doing masculinity are deeply embedded' (Carlsson, 2013: 667) as each of them 'recreate and reproduce themselves as men' (Carlsson, 2013: 672).

Andrew's narrative is replete with allusions to being *responsible* by working hard, being a good 'co-parent', as one who 'can pass on (his) own experience' in working with

troubled young people. He has faced up to and 'taken big decisions' as to how he wants to live his life. The decision to 'abandon this masculine stereotype' has been a liberation whereby he has 'changed the bits that need changing'. While he maintains an active connection with the programme, his sense of independence, and its association with 'proper manhood' (Connell, 2000; Edley and Wetherell, 1996) rests upon the fact that he is no longer 'dependent on other people's praise' to function.

Mick has come 'halfway to being decent'. Acknowledging some precariousness about the processes of change in which he is engaged, he needs to come to the programme regularly to be 'topped up'. He is not afraid to admit that, as a 'lifer' he will require continuing support. Like Andrew, the importance of work, 'six days a week if necessary' is core. It also allows him to burn off energy. In addition, he demonstrates self-awareness by having developed a strategy (the cover story) that keeps him out of fights. His fears though of being 'turned into a woman' have been substantially unfounded. He proves he has 'still got it sort of thing' by outrunning 'youngsters' when out racing his bike.

As with Andrew and Mick, ongoing contact with the programme functions as an essential lifeline for Derek. Largely devoid of male friends since leaving the army, the programme provides him with a space in which he can convey to himself and others a vigorous, energetic performance as a fast learner, as someone who has 'got it'. As someone who has 'a lot of experience', he is well placed to pass this onto other men who look at him with respect as do the programme staff who are keen to utilise his energy and skills.

In the cases discussed here, reflecting and acting as *having changed*, but still presenting themselves as (heterosexual) men is important. To become non-violent involves finding and valuing new ways of enacting masculine roles but in ways that allow other pre-existing aspects of one's identity to be valued. These accounts afforded a nuanced and complex picture of desistance, of moving away from abusive attitudes and behaviour. They suggest that this process also requires a re-negotiation of how to enact masculine behaviours and presentation of self. They reveal that men observe, reflect and enact 'hegemonic masculinities' (Connell, 1995) in the group settings (as Derek readily acknowledges), as well as in the world outside. In addition, they demonstrate that desisting and being seen to desist, being prepared and able to talk about shameful pasts, as well as negotiating and navigating the uncharted waters of desistance, are acknowledged in themselves as positive 'manly' qualities.

Findings such as these are therefore relevant to the wider theoretical and practice development of perpetrator programmes (and indeed for programmes or interventions with male offenders more generally). They highlight the need to reconsider the processes of how important changes in attitudes and behaviour might be conceived, accomplished and performed. They confirm that while men need to relinquish and desist from violent and abusive behaviour, they are nevertheless likely to continue to value core elements of masculine identity and outlook. However, these can now be positively harnessed to motivate more positive, responsible and achievable ways of accomplishing masculinity. To commit to these changes requires, as Andrew explained, 'tenacity'. It necessitates being responsible, adult, mature, of becoming more in control of oneself, of demonstrating self-awareness and acknowledging when one needs helps and support. Just as in the heroic struggles of those overcoming substance or alcohol addiction (Best, 2010; Prosser,

2008; Yates and Malloch, 2010), to accomplish the transition from being frightening as well as frightened, is to become a responsible, adult man, a 'proper man' (Carlsson, 2013). Such a transition however, as the research discussed in this article indicates, takes time and often requires extensive support and resources.

Conclusion: Time, support and resources

The transitional processes of desistance are often complex, marked by continuity and change, progress and setback. Issues such as time and ongoing availability of support are key. Time is required for practitioners and those men who attend programmes to negotiate and develop relationships that may be simultaneously supportive yet challenging. Several studies of desistance (Gadd and Farrall, 2004; McNeill, 2006; McNeill and Maruna, 2007; Morran, 2013) also illustrate that (somewhat like masculinity) desistance has constantly to be negotiated, managed and sustained in the present and future.

Recognition of the complexities of what desistance often entails and how it might be accomplished and supported is urgent. The scathing report by HMIP (2018) relating to those domestic abuse programmes delivered by the CRCs following the Transforming Rehabilitation initiative in 2013 revealed numerous shortcomings. These included inadequate facilities and resources, minimal and insufficient training, uneven staff support and a poorly thought-out conception of the men it dealt with. In short, they were unsafe. Programme staff were often keenly aware of men's own complex histories of trauma and addiction as well as the risks they posed to partners and others. However, the short-term targets-driven model in which they were compelled to operate made meaningful engagement all but impossible. Instead, the CRC model of provision seemed to view men as entities that could somehow be 'fixed' by the application of somewhat simplistic cognitive behavioural tools, which lacked any sense of validity for the men themselves and indeed for many practitioners (Renehan, 2020). The publication of a further HMIP report (HMIP, 2019) and a progress review by the National Audit Office (NAO, 2019) confirmed that similar shortcomings, acute staffing shortages and insufficient resources prevailed more generally across the various offender interventions provided by CRCs and that the model was substantially flawed.

Concerns regarding the unpredictable and short-term nature of funding for 'community-based' perpetrator programmes (i.e. those engaging with men referred by family courts or social services) have also recently been expressed. A 'call to action' (DRIVE Partnership, 2019) by over 65 organisations in the violence against women sector has demanded a 'perpetrator programme strategy' for the United Kingdom. Much of the policy response from the present government in relation to abusive men has been to employ a muscular, masculine, rhetoric that will somehow root out and eliminate these, and various other forms of criminal behaviour. By comparison, the call to action from recognised experts in the field acknowledges the need for longer term, theoretically coherent and research-informed interventions to engage with the risks that perpetrators present to others. Significantly, they also call for recognition of the extent to which factors such as mental ill-health and trauma feature in the lives of many domestic violence perpetrators. While these do not *cause* men's abusive behaviour, these factors cannot be excluded from any meaningful engagement with a significant proportion of men who attend perpetrator programmes (Bowen et al., 2008; HMIP, 2018).

In May 2021, the Home Office injected £11 million into the further development and refinement of perpetrator programmes. (Subsequent funding is to follow). In addition, the 'reunification' of a national probation service has recently come into existence in England and Wales (HMIP, 2021). This body continues to be the largest provider of perpetrator programmes in the United Kingdom (as well as providing a range of interventions for various offending populations). These two developments might provide some small glimmer of hope that a more rounded and realistic conception will be allowed to emerge of many of those individuals who engage with their services, of what desistance might entail and how it might be accomplished. It could also be argued of course, in view of the various systemic shortcomings noted above, that this might be somewhat optimistic. However, it is abundantly clear that the time for a meaningful transformation of desistance-focused rehabilitative practices has rarely been more urgent.

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Note

1. Pseudonyms are used in all instances.

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