Bullock KA Dr (Sociology) <K.Bullock@surrey.ac.uk>Responding to denial, minimization and blame in correctional settings: The ‘real world’ implications of offender neutralizations

Abstract

This article examines ‘real world’ implications of offender neutralizations. Drawing on empirical evidence derived from a study of the operation of community-based cognitive-behavioural programmes for perpetrators of domestic violence it focuses on the implications for offenders of displaying neutralizations in correctional treatment settings. This article draws attention to the complex relationship between neutralization and correctional group work practice. First, it demonstrates that neutralization of offending does not always have the negative implications for offenders that have been assumed by some commentators. Neutralization may not preclude enrolment on to a correctional programme, is not always challenged in a confrontational way by practitioners, and does not automatically result in suspension and the application of more punitive criminal sanctions. Second, it demonstrates the difficulties that practitioners and participants face in tackling neutralizations in this context. Our findings suggest a need to rethink the central role that neutralizations play in aspects of contemporary criminal justice practice.

Introduction

This article explores what Maruna and Copes (2005: 300) refer to as the ‘real world’ implications of offender neutralizations. There is a substantial body of evidence which demonstrates the regularity with which neutralizations appear in offender accounts (e.g. Cavanagh et al, 2001; Maletzky, 1991; Marshall, 1994; see Maruna and Copes 2005 for a review). Our aim is not to add to this literature but instead to critically consider the implications for offenders who display neutralizations in aspects of correction practice. We take as our starting point the observation that displaying neutralization in criminal justice settings can have negative implications for offenders, from acting as an aggravating factor in sentencing decisions to resulting in extended prison stays or revocation of community orders (Maruna and Copes, 2005). Neutralizing is often assumed to promote negative outcomes for those who participate (or wish to participate) in correctional group work. However, much less is known about how practitioners grapple with the issues raised by persistent neutralizations in practice. Our focus in this article is on these ‘real world’ implications of neutralizing

offending within correctional group work. Grounded in sociological consideration of the concept of neutralization, the role it plays in correction practice, and in empirical data generated from a study of the operation of correctional programmes for men who have convictions for violence against intimate partners, we consider the mechanisms through which the criminal justice system and correctional programmes seek to challenge and transform neutralizations and the implications for offenders themselves. We conclude by situating the findings of this study in a wider body of literature about neutralization and ‘excuse making,’ the role of neutralizations in everyday day life and in offending, and implications for criminal justice practice.

Techniques of neutralization and criminal justice practice

Sykes and Matza (1957: 667) coined the term ‘techniques of neutralization’ to describe the rationalizations which are used by offenders to facilitate engagement in deviance whilst maintaining a commitment to the norms and values of society. For Sykes and Matza (1957: 666) neutralizations can follow deviant behaviour, acting to protect the individual from self-blame and the blame of others, although they might also *‘precede deviant behavior and make deviant behavior possible’*. Some fifty years later, neutralization theory is at the centre of both criminological theory and criminal justice practice. Studies regularly appear in journals confirming that people situationally invoke neutralizations when accounting for wide ranging social transgressions and *‘[t]he cross-study consistency in the types of accounts used to explain these disparate acts suggests that neutralization theory provides a highly robust framework for explaining how deviants allay their feelings of guilt’* (Maruna and Copes, 2005: 259). The mechanisms through which people account for and rationalise untoward actions have been conceptualised in different ways (see Maruna and Copes 2005) although within sociological considerations of neutralization Sykes and Matza’s (1957) ‘techniques of neutralization’ is commonly used and, since the framework resonated with both the purpose and practice of the programmes we examine here and the ways in which participants accounted for their actions, we draw upon it in this article. Sykes and Matza (1957) described five techniques of neutralization through which deviants account for their behaviour: ‘denial of responsibility’, ‘denial of injury’, ‘denial of the victim’, ‘condemnation of condemners’, and an ‘appeal to higher loyalties’.

The principle at the heart of neutralization theory – that neutralization makes deviancy possible – is firmly embedded in the operation of the criminal justice system. It helps to

explain the emphasis placed on accepting responsibility for criminal activity and why failure to do so might, for example, act as an aggravating factor in sentencing decisions (Rumsey, 1976; Weisman, 1999; Bagaric and Amarasekara, 2001; Wood and MacMartin, 2007), or negatively affect progress through a prison sentence (Hood et al, 2002; Waldram, 2007; Crewe 2011). Neutralization theory has also framed wider movements within contemporary criminal justice practice and particularly correctional therapy. Whilst concern with taking responsibility for one's actions characterises correctional treatment programmes of all types, it is particularly associated with programmes designed for sexual and violent offenders (Maruna and Mann, 2006), the focus of this article.

Despite the centrality of the notion of neutralization within criminal justice practice, doubts remain about its role in explaining offending and recidivism. The notion that post-hoc rationalisations are criminogenic may be '*an example of fallacious thinking*' for which there is limited empirical support (Maruna and Mann 2006: 155). However, invoking neutralizations in correctional treatment settings has been viewed as detrimental for offenders. Since acceptance of responsibility for one's crime is commonly a prerequisite for admission into correctional treatment those who neutralize offending may be excluded and might receive more punitive punishments, while offenders who continue to neutralize may suffer from negative reports, be suspended, or punished with probation revocation: '[t]hese "*real world*" implications make future research on offender neutralizations more than just an *intriguing academic exercise*' (Maruna and Copes 2005: 300). It is to an exploration of the implications of offender neutralizations in correctional therapy that we now turn.

This article

We take the example of community based correctional programmes designed for men who have convictions for assaulting intimate partners. At the time of writing, two such programmes operate in England and Wales: the Integrated Domestic Violence Programme (IDAP) and the Community Domestic Violence Programme (CDVP). IDAP is a cognitive behavioural programme based on the Duluth Domestic Abuse Intervention Project (DDAIP) and the IDAP curriculum is framed around its 'famous' (Dutton, 2006: 301) Power and Control Wheel (see Pence and Paymar, 1993). DDAIP has been hugely influential. IDAP is the most widespread programme operating in the UKⁱ and many other EU member states have developed programmes based upon this model (Graham-Kevan, 2007). It is also one of the most widely used court sanctioned domestic violence programmes in North America

(Dutton, 2006). CDVP is a sequential, cognitive behavioural intervention based on a family violence initiative developed by the Correctional Service of Canada. IDAP and CDVP are not exactly the same but their aims and the techniques and skills taught are similar (see Bowen, 2011). Both programmes embrace a cognitive-behavioral approach which seeks to understand the relationship between thinking, beliefs and evaluations in the process of committing crime (Maruna and Copes, 2005: 242). The underlying assumption is that violence can be reduced by challenging participants' maladaptive thinking patterns and replacing them with pro-social skills and alternative (non-abusive) behaviours. The view that violent behaviour is learned, sustained and enabled by the perceptions of offenders is reinforced. The programmes aim to achieve change in a group work setting through observation, role-play and teaching, along with discussions and critical thinking exercises.

Both programmes are rooted in feminist conceptions of domestic violenceⁱⁱ. For Pence (1983: 249), a designer of DDAIP, *'[h]istorically, our society has defined the role of women as subordinate to men and as such has given men a disciplinary role in the family which has ostensibly legitimized the use of violence against women.'* Pro-feminist programmes see violence as purposeful behaviour designed to dominate, control and punish women (Dobash et al 1999: 208). Although 'taking responsibility' for past behaviour characterizes the operation of many correctional programmes, doing so is rooted in pro-feminist correctional work which, in this context, firmly asserts that men cannot change if they deny what they have done. As Pence, quoted in the programme guidance, argues:

Many men want to just sneak by and say, 'OK I won't do this in the future, but I don't admit to anything in the past'. But it just doesn't work that way. When identifying the techniques of minimising and blaming, it is key to also name what his intents are and to show how denial, minimisation and blaming and lying function not only to maintain the behaviour but also to maintain power over her.

IDAP and CDVP specifically target rationalizations presented by offenders. The guidance requires that group tutors consistently confront offenders' minimization and denial and such confrontation was evident in practitioners' discussions of their role and in our observations of their practice.

In considering the implications of offender neutralizations we draw on an empirical study of the operation of CDVP and IDAP in ten probation areas operating across England and Wales. The primary data source was qualitative interviews with practitioners involved in delivering the programmes. Probation Service areas were purposefully selected to cover all the government regions of England and Wales and different operational contexts (e.g. urban/rural). We interviewed 50 practitioners comprising all roles – programme managers, treatment managers, group tutors and women’s safety workers. The exact number of interviews depended upon the size of the programme and number of staff involved, and was typically between five and ten. Interviewees were selected partly because of their knowledge and experience of working on the programmes – the design might be best categorised as ‘key informant’ or ‘purposeful sampling’ (Bryman, 2004). Accordingly, participants in the research were, on the whole, experienced in their roles. Many had also been probation officers before joining the programme teams giving them good understanding of the context within which the programmes operate. We were reliant on a senior practitioner (usually a programme or treatment manager) to select who was interviewed. This raises issues about sampling, but because of practicalities (staff illness, holidays etc.) and protocol (we could not bypass these gatekeepers without jeopardising the goodwill of those being interviewed) there was little option in this regard. The reader should therefore bear in mind that they were not selected randomly and instead were nominated by managers or were self-selected.

In-depth interviews were also conducted with 20 men with convictions for violence against their partners who were enrolled on the programmes and were at different stages of completion. Access to programme participants was usually arranged via programme staff. Because of logistical issues regarding their availability – often only for a very limited period prior to a group session – interviews were only conducted in some of the probation areas. The programme participant sample was selected by programme staff and the main criteria were that the men were available and willing to participate. This raises the possibility that programme practitioners were ‘cherry picking’ participants who they thought were likely to give a positive account of the programmes and it does limit the generalizability of the results. However, given the practical constraints of the research, we were left with little choice if we were to incorporate the views of participants. Participants represented a wide range of ages and social backgrounds. The interviews explored participants’ experiences of taking part in the programmes along with the perceived impacts and benefits.

All interviews were digitally recorded and fully transcribed. Interview data were organised into themes informed by the aims of the study. The interview data were used to consider how the programmes are being implemented and the perceptions of staff and offenders of the operation of the programmes. Throughout this article, practitioners are referred to by their job title and men as 'participant'. Interviews were therefore the primary method of data collection. In addition, approximately 50 hours of group work was observed to inform our understanding of how the programmes operated. These observations added further depth to the research and offered some balance between practitioner and participant accounts. Programme documentation was also reviewed and is referred to throughout this articleⁱⁱⁱ.

Commentators, professionals and activists generally agree that men rationalise violence towards their partners (Cavanagh et al, 2001). This is acknowledged within IDAP and CDVP discourse and the practitioners we interviewed most certainly concurred: *'Most men when they come in to the group, no matter how well they've been prepared, start defensive. Minimising, a lot of minimising, a lot of victim blaming going on'* (Group tutor 1). Mindful of the sizable literature which documents this phenomenon we do not seek to catalogue the nature of the neutralizations displayed by group participants, but instead focus upon the implications of these neutralizations. Taking as our starting point the view that expressing neutralizations can have negative implications for offenders we consider how neutralization and denial of offending shapes practitioner decisions to enrol men onto the programmes; the mechanisms through which neutralizations are confronted within group work; and the role neutralization plays in decisions to suspend men from the programmes and subsequent breach of community orders.

The reality of neutralizations in group work settings

Neutralization and programme suitability

Acceptance of personal responsibility is commonly assumed to be a prerequisite for admission into correctional programmes. What it means to take responsibility can be wide ranging. As Ware and Mann (2012: 280) note, it may simply mean acknowledging that a crime had been committed but, for those treating offenders, this is unlikely to be sufficient since 'it is not clear that there is an absence of denial, minimization and excuses'. Thus

taking full responsibility is more likely to be taken to mean the absence of neutralization within accounts (Ware and Mann, 2012). We found that refusal to accept full responsibility did not preclude participation on the programmes. A minority of the participants denied that they had physically assaulted their partner despite having convictions for doing so – ‘*I have never hit her, but it is all arguments, always arguing*’ (Participant 8). More broadly, in line with the findings of other studies, ‘denial of responsibility’ was the ‘master account’ (Cohen: 2001: 61) which pervaded the narratives of programme participants. Participants minimised their own culpability blaming forces beyond their control such as violence that they had experienced or witnessed in childhood, or (commonly) substance misuse. Given that neutralizations continued to permeate participants accounts it was clear that the relationship between accepting responsibility and enrolment was not straightforward, either in principle or in practice.

One reason why neutralization of offending does not preclude acceptance onto the programmes, demonstrated in programme guidance and reflected in practitioner accounts, is that the programmes view taking responsibility for offending to be a treatment target, rather than grounds for exclusion. Guidance acknowledges that men’s acceptance of responsibility at the point they are assessed for suitability for the programmes – the presentence report stage – will be somewhere on a spectrum from ‘full denial’ to ‘full acceptance’. The guidance stresses that those who acknowledge ‘some facts’ about their offending, take ‘some responsibility’ for it and have ‘some awareness’ of the possibility of change may be enrolled, points reflected in practitioners’ accounts:

You are looking for some acceptance of culpability, some sort of desire to change, some sort of understanding that the victim has not had a very nice experience. But within these parameters there is quite a degree of flexibility because they are going to be at an early starting point in that process of accepting culpability (Probation Officer 1).

Practitioners thought that a ‘motivational approach’ would give a potential participant an opportunity to be *progressively* more open about his offending and the effects that it has had.

Whilst, as we will shortly explore in more detail, the link between denial and reoffending is at best unclear, programme documentation *does* suggest that those in complete denial should be

excluded. Practice guidance states that this group should be viewed as high risk and ‘managed’ accordingly. Tutors *generally* agreed:

It varies ... you can get some who are still very resistant, minimizing, denying, but usually you can gauge, if they’re 100% denying then obviously they’re not programme ready, they’re deemed not programme ready, but if there is some ownership about what they’ve done, then we work with that and we can carry that forward (Group Tutor 2)

However, programme staff tended to couch the problem of outright denial as practical, stating that men who deny their offending are disruptive in group settings, a point noted in other studies (Henning and Holdford 2006; Ware and Mann, 2012). Whether constructed as risky or disruptive, some men denying their culpability were nevertheless enrolled. There is clearly complexity in determining suitability for the programmes and the role that neutralization plays within decision making. Two primary themes, evident in practitioners’ accounts, start to explain this. First, neutralization is not the only factor that practitioners are weighing up in making decisions about suitability. They are considering a range of issues including risk assessments and, especially, available resources (see Bullock, 2011). Second, the assessments of the extent to which men accept responsibility for their offending is imprecise. Probation officers make judgments drawing primarily on interviews with potential participants. Whilst practitioners reported that some men do see attendance as an opportunity, most are primarily concerned with avoiding a prison sentence. According to practitioners in these circumstances *‘they will say anything’* (Group Tutor 3) making it difficult to assess the extent to which men acknowledge ‘some facts’ about, take ‘some responsibility’ for and have ‘some awareness’ of the consequences of their offending, as stated in the guidance: *‘I have had people that say ‘I really want to make changes’ but then the reality is they actually aren’t all that good when they have got on the group, so it is very difficult to judge it’* (Probation Officer 3). Ultimately, practitioners drew attention to how each case would be considered individually: *‘I find it hard to give categories because I just look at everybody on their own yes, every case on its merits, in my view’* (Probation Officer 2) and men may therefore be given the benefit of the doubt:

I’ve put people into rehabilitation programmes thinking ‘this person’s really going to succeed’ and they haven’t. And other people that I’ve put in, ‘they’ll never get past

week one', they've done brilliantly. So I favour anyone who says they want to do it, should be given the opportunity to do so. It's up to them whether they succeed or not. I can't see the future. (Group Tutor 11)

Challenging and confronting neutralizations

Confronting neutralization in correctional work is controversial. On the one hand, practice can '*become bogged down*' in constant challenging (Maruna and Copes, 2005: 243).

Certainly we observed examples of this. In one session, proceedings were dominated by the experiences of one participant whose partner was addicted to heroin. Here the participant drew on an 'appeal to higher loyalties' – '*claiming that their behaviors are consistent with the moral obligations of a specific group to which they belong*' (Maruna and Copes, 2005: 233) – and argued that his violence towards her could be justified within the context of her drug use which, to him, solidified her position as a 'bad mother' and a risk to their children. Whilst the tutors tried hard to persuade the group that violence can never be excused, the participants resolutely believed that violence towards her was justifiable in this context. On the other hand, confrontation may push participants further away from taking responsibility for their behaviour, a point to which we will return. First we examine how practitioners confront neutralizations in practice and participant reactions to these challenges.

Tutors challenge neutralizations in a number of ways. Both group tutors and participants reported that tutors look for neutralizations present in participants 'check-ins' (accounts given by participants documenting their weekly progress) and written work, and that they ask participants for opinions, probe their answers and highlight discrepancies '*to get to the bottom of whatever that little nook and cranny was*' (Participant 3). This tutor explains:

Yeah, within the group would be directive questions so actually asking them by name what their opinion on that is, so trying to draw them in that way, highlighting discrepancies where they're saying one thing and they're doing something different. So, for example, they might say 'oh things are great in my relationship' and then they'll say, later on in the session 'oh we had a massive argument and I've got bail conditions', 'oh but you said earlier that everything was great' ... those kind of things. (Group Tutor 5)

However, tutors reported that they were wary of direct confrontation and tried instead to facilitate motivation, engagement and critical dialogue with participants:

We tend to engage with the men in terms of where they're at, so if we know there's a lot more to their offence than they're telling us, we try to go with where they're at and then gently, as you go along, probe by way of motivational interviewing or critical dialogue. We don't push them because they'll probably be more resistant. (Group tutor 2)

Tutors stated that they take the characteristics of participants into account in pitching the tone of challenges: *'if they feel stupid or they feel belittled or they feel worthless, I think that'll put up even more barriers'* (Group Tutor 7). The importance of showing respect, encouragement and praise and building relationships was stressed: *'I think it's about listening and keeping hold of personal information, things that are relevant to them, and then coming back and feeding [that] back to them...but it's also how you interact...I treat people how I like to be treated'* (Group Tutor 6). This was supported by our observation of group work sessions which were characterized by practitioners challenging the excuses men made in a way that was generally respectful.

That said, we sometimes observed tutors being more direct and more confrontational. 'Denial of injury' – minimization of the harm inflicted on their partners – was commonplace within offender accounts, a point that recurs in the literature on domestic violence. One participant, upon being asked how new participants felt at the beginning of the programme, stated *'probably a little bit like I felt at the start of mine maybe – 'oh, I only slapped her, I don't need this programme' - they probably feel a bit like that, defensive'* (Participant 8). Similarly, participant accounts routinely drew on terminology that down-played physical violence by using terms such as 'the incident' or 'the troubles' when describing their violence. In these circumstances, Pence and Paymar (1993) suggest that men who continually neutralize the harm they have caused could be confronted with the original police report, or other aspects of the case, a technique that tutors employed:

If you keep saying 'it was only, it was only, it was only', it will become 'it was only', and that's when you have to say 'well, no, actually it wasn't' it was only', it was this,

‘you broke her jaw or whatever’. Sometimes you have to put that out in black and white to them (Group Tutor 10).

This reminds us that in constructing an account of the events that led up to their convictions participants are balancing their narratives against an official rendering of events which already exist in formal records. As Waldram (2007: 147) notes, this ‘collision of truths caused by confusion between autobiography and disclosure [...] provides fertile ground for narrative conflict’.

Whilst we observed confrontations of neutralizations ranging from gentle probing to direct challenges, an overriding theme in participant accounts was discomfort they felt in having their accounts interrogated, a point also recognised by facilitators. As Group Tutor 1 notes *‘if a man is not used to being challenged then he might find that exceedingly difficult to cope with.’* Some of this discomfort was linked to situational features of the programmes, and especially the group setting: *‘I was a bit concerned at first about talking about what I’d done in front of other people ... I don’t really mind talking in front of other people, but when it comes to things like this it was a bit, I don’t know, shameful’* (Participant 11). Others noted their reluctance to talk about what they had done:

They ask you, yeah, they’ll say to you, ‘what are you here for? What was the scenario? What happened?’ And people were ‘blah, blah, this and that happened with my girlfriend and I had to do this, I pushed her, or I hit her’, or something like that. ...I didn’t want to talk about it, because I felt so much regret ... when you’re talking about it, it’s like trying to bring it back to the surface and it was something I was trying to put to the back of my mind. (Participant 12).

Participants drew attention to how features of the programme curriculum, along with the way that it is delivered, compound these issues. Participants reported frustration caused by what they saw as incessant challenging and questioning, a point made by Waldram (2007) who argued that the interruptions can also lead to confusion and anger. Some participants told us that they felt that tutors were not listening to them: *‘Well, there’s no point in me talking about it because you’re not giving me a chance to express the situation, because you need to be a bit more open-minded and little things that do happen from different situations, from different people’* (Participant 14). More specifically, it was common for men to maintain that aspects

of the programmes were not relevant to their own experiences: *‘if I am completely honest some of the modules I feel that they don’t apply to me - some aspects of it do, but overall there are some modules that don’t really apply’* (Participant 15). Of course, we need to be careful not to take the participants views that modules ‘don’t apply to me’ at face value. However, this point was also reflected by tutors: *‘the resistance that’s there already can be reinforced by people coming in and not seeing the relevance of what you’re presenting to them’* (Group Tutor 9).

This has two primary consequences. First, it fuels a perception that tutors are trying to urge participants to admit to things that they hadn’t done: *‘I don’t know, it’s as if, like, they’re trying to make you out to be, I don’t know, like, a rapist or something like that... I felt like I was getting accused of something ... And it’s like, well hang on a second, that’s not what I’m here for!’* (Participant 1). Second, participants felt that they had nothing to contribute: *‘Yes, sometimes you come here and you are like – ‘well that don’t apply to me, so I can’t do nothing’ – so you just sit there bored really’* (Participant 8). We return shortly to some implications for how participants shape their narratives in the knowledge that failing to be seen to be engaging with the course may result in their expulsion.

Participants also drew attention to what they viewed as rigidity in the techniques and tactics through which the programmes were delivered: *‘I think where they are going wrong is they are taking all the offenders, who are obviously all here for very different reasons, yes, it all led to violence, but why and how and x, y and z, and I think that they are painting by numbers’* (Participant 6). Again the suggestion is that the programme curriculum cannot account for variety within the individual circumstances of the participants. This resonates with the findings of a study of a cognitive treatment programme for violent offenders in a North American prison which had a rigid dominant discourse emphasizing the need for offenders to take responsibility for their crimes. Facilitators strongly resisted participants’ “cognitive distortions”, stifling any attempts at mitigation, and progress depended upon participants’ willingness to adopt the programme’s prescriptive narrative (Fox, 1999). In our study, tutors did not perceive the same degree of rigidity, suggesting that a one-size-fits-all approach was inappropriate and that to facilitate engagement content had to be tailored to the participants and their experiences: *‘I think it’s whether they actually see it as really relevant to them, how responsive you actually deliver it as well, because if we just actually delivered as a process out of the manual, I don’t think we’d keep them’* (Group Tutor 7). Flexibility

was considered important to explore the issues that the men raise in the group: *'you have to find your way. You have to be not afraid to explore what he is talking about'* (Probation Officer 2).

Participants described feeling particularly frustrated when tutors challenged attempts to blame their partners. We found that denial of the victim – the contention that *'some victims act improperly and thus deserve everything that happens to them'* (Maruna and Copes, 2005: 232) – pervaded participant accounts. Participants justified violence through reference to the behaviour of the victim, often situating it within the context of arguments:

We had an argument in the High Street and someone sees us, it was classed as domestic violence, so that's why I am here. Because I was shouting and raising my arms and she was raising hers and shouting back, it all got a bit too much and because I looked like the more aggressive one, I got arrested for it and then charged and that's why I am here. (Participant 1)

More broadly, the view expressed by Participant 7, *'what I done was wrong but its two people's fault. You know, what I done is not right but what she's done isn't right either. It's six of one and half a dozen of the other,'* was very common. Within the context of arguments, some participants claimed their partner had been violent – again a theme that ran through the group work sessions that we observed and the accounts of programme staff: *'And the big one ... 'well she did it back', 'yeah I did hit her but she hit me' – 'she pushed my buttons'* (Group tutor 15). This is clearly difficult to deal with as practitioner noted:

A lot of the men [...] when you ask them 'what did you do?' they will give you a 5 minute monologue on what she did and about 10 seconds on what they did. So we have got to dispel that: 'well OK, I take on board your point, but for the programme we need 10 seconds on what she did and 5 minutes on what you did, because that's what we are interested in' and again, that's a big block for some of the men - 'ah, yes but *she* ... (Programme Manager 1)

The guidelines are very clear. In describing events, a participant may refer to his partner's behaviour. But in subsequent discussion of those events the tutor will focus only on the behaviour and attitudes of the participant. Some men continued to be frustrated that they were

not allowed to make reference to a partner's behaviour: *'It doesn't matter about any of the arguments that are put forward, it doesn't matter what the woman says, the man's in the wrong'* (GM15). Participants tended to feel that the role women played in the events leading to violence ought to be incorporated into the curriculum: *'I mean it is sometimes the bloke's fault but there's also, you know, two people in an argument and they just don't look at that side at all'* (Participant 9). For Pence (1983: 264) traditional approaches to tackling domestic violence – marital or couples counselling focused on the family and relationship as the cause of domestic violence – did a disservice to both victims and perpetrators. These approaches, perhaps inadvertently, held *'women responsible for the man's violence and/or his transformation, which implicitly serves to blame the woman and deflect responsibility away from the violent man'* (Dobash et al, 1999: 208). Accordingly, this is something that would never be condoned within these programmes.

Neutralization and compliance

Whilst this short term study cannot generate information regarding the role of the programmes in long term desistance from crime we can make some comments about the meaning of compliance within the programme context. This should be understood within the statutory context within which the programmes operate and the risk, of which participants are well aware, that they will be sent to prison if they are excluded from the programmes.

Since persistent denial and minimization can result in expulsion from the course, with potentially significant implications, self-incrimination may *'be in the individual's best interest'* (Maruna and Copes, 2005: 300). One participant noted: *'if you're seen to not admit it then I assume you'd be off the course, back to court. It reminds me a little bit of the medieval times, if they threw you in the river and you sunk you were innocent... there's a major conflict there'* (Participant 9). Certainly, some participants felt pressure to contribute: *'Well the only reason I will tell them now, I still tell the truth, just because I want this done in the cleanest possible fashion so I can move on'* (Participant 6). Indeed, there was evidence of self-incrimination, described here by one participant in relation to written components of the programmes:

Yeah, that's very complicated to fill in. I really have serious problems with it. I mean don't get me wrong, there's always things you can pull out. I mean obviously 22 years I was married so you can always pull out arguments. So certain things that may

be relevant, you know, you can write that down but if you go into like sexual respect, which was an issue that totally wasn't relevant ... to actually come up with something in your control log is almost impossible. You've literally got to make it up.

(Participant 9)

However, in contrast to self-incrimination, other participants took the view that it is best to say as little as possible, to avoid the gaze of the facilitators and hopefully their challenges:

'So I just sit in the corner really and then when something does apply to me then I will start talking, but when it doesn't I don't get involved in it because otherwise ... I feel like I am going to get tarred with that kind of brush - that I am a woman beater, and really I don't like woman beaters' (Participant 8).

A further problem is that participants may well learn what the group facilitators want (and do not want) to hear and tailor their discussions in group work sessions accordingly. Indeed, tutors expressed concerns that participants might talk very differently outside the group: *'I would love to have ... the microphone when they have their break, because that would be a true indication of what they are thinking'* (Group Tutor 11). This was also noted by the participants: *'Oh the other men, yes, I saw some individuals who came onto the group that were - they were one person in the room and they were a completely different individual when we were outside having a cigarette'* (Participant 13). Some drew attention to how participants pick up the language of the programme – what Burton et al. (1998: 30) refer to as *'talking the talk'* – but do not engage with its content or do so only on a surface level. We found that group tutors were somewhat suspicious where participants took on the language of the programme in a straightforward manner, reflecting a similar finding in Fox's (1999) study. Group Tutor 11 notes *'I think one of the reservations I would say is - maybe I am concentrating on the negatives - is the fact that I think we teach them what we want to hear'* and Group Tutor 7: *'Yeah and if someone's just coming back with some nice big posh words that they've been using, they're very glib and there's no sense of personal journey, I sort of wonder are they actually using any of this?'* Whilst Group Tutor 7 went on to note how they can *'work out ways to try and get behind'* the language, generally through probing and asking for examples, others were more skeptical:

Yes, it is something I have debated with other tutors and some of them ... they say 'even if people are being schooled into saying what we want them to say, there is a

process of osmosis almost, whereby saying it, hopefully some of it will percolate and filter through' but I have my reservations with it. (Group Tutor 11)

Rather than viewing repetition of programme language simply as evidence of 'talking the talk' – and reflecting Burton et al (1998) – we found that many participants had difficulty in translating programme concepts into everyday language. Indeed, some tutors drew attention to how the programmes – which are firmly rooted in the concept of patriarchy and cover topics such as male privilege, inequality, power and control – are outside of the sphere of experience and possibly comprehension of many enrolled on them:

IDAP can be a difficult programme, the concepts can be quite difficult to understand, and it's quite a wordy programme. When you look at the skills, there are some that are quite straightforward....but when you're talking to them about accepting women's anger and those kind of things, sometimes they get lost within the words (Group Tutor 12).

Additionally, tutors suggested that some men, at least upon starting the programme, do not have the capacity to reflect on their behaviour in the way that the programme requires or the language to describe their emotions: *'It is really quite difficult to get across the learning points to some of our offenders who struggle to conceptualize what we are talking about'* (Treatment Manager 2).

Neutralization, programme suspension and breach

We have seen that there is a risk that participants who continue to neutralize their offending in group work settings will find that they are suspended from the programme, returned to court and potentially receive a more punitive sentence. This raises the question of how practitioners respond to neutralizations and the implications for participants.

The persistence of neutralizations within accounts of offending does not necessarily result in offenders being expelled. Whilst it is well documented that the rhetoric of contemporary community orders is characterised by enforcement with little room for practitioner discretion and deviation from formal guidelines (Robinson and McNeill, 2008), we found practitioners

had some discretion to formulate strategies on a case-by-case basis for individual participants. Ultimately, if a participant was deemed insufficiently motivated, whether for persistent displays of neutralization or any other reason, he may be suspended. However, a great deal of work goes into avoiding this and tutors reported working hard to motivate men within group work and through one-to-one discussions with them. They would also endeavour to work with others involved in the case:

Just one more thing, I think, which actually has quite a good impact ... is the relationship or rather the communication, I should say, with their offender managers, so they're very clear that there's joined up thinking right from the start. (Group Tutor 8).

The work that participants did with their probation officer outside the group work was viewed as important. Group tutors felt that levels of motivation were affected by how prepared the participant was: *'Sometimes you can really tell somebody who's had no pre-programme work or very poor quality, because they're just not ready when they start. And then some people have you know, good input, and it really makes a difference'* (Treatment Manager 1). Similarly, the ongoing role of the probation officer was stressed in terms of reinforcing the messages from the programme and working on any other issues that might be viewed as contributing to offending such as accommodation or employment. That said, the extent to which this ongoing reinforcement occurred was variable:

If it's not something that particularly floats their boat, they're not keeping up to date with thinking and the research and what's going on with the programmes team. So I think the basic difference is the knowledge that the case manager has and the interest that they have got in domestic abuse (Group Tutor1).

The process of being terminated from these programmes for failure to take responsibility for offending is far from straightforward. Since generating motivation and encouraging men to take responsibility are specific treatment targets there is officially some leeway. Even when men are suspended it should not be assumed they will be held in breach of their order and returned to court. Following more motivational work, men may restart at another time:

Because you have to make it more onerous, we have additional appointments, above and beyond what the National Standards might say we need to do at that particular point in their order - and they will be used to try and motivate him and get him ready to start the programme again. (Probation Officer 3)

As this implies, probation officers, and indeed group tutors, often go some way beyond what is formally required in trying to maintain an offender on the programme.

Limits to challenging neutralizations in group settings

The underlying premise of tackling neutralizations in group settings is founded upon two interconnected central assumptions: that neutralizations are pathological, or at least enable deviancy, and that through identifying, challenging and correcting neutralizations participants will cease offending. Our findings suggest that there is a need to think critically and interrogate these assumptions at both a conceptual and operational level. Given that the relationship between neutralization and re-offending is at best unclear, the assumption that offending will cease if neutralizations are tackled is problematic. Furthermore, we think there is a need to recognise that reason-giving – and neutralizations – permeate all aspects of social life, and are a normal part of how we negotiate our relationships with others.

Assuming that offender neutralizations are pathological is problematic for a number of reasons. Tilly (2006: 15) draws attention to how it is ‘human nature’ to supply reasons for the things we do, as part of the process of making sense of and negotiating our social lives (see also Saxe, 1991). We are constantly engaged in reason-giving in our interactions with others and offenders are no exception. It would be strange – and indeed perhaps pathological in itself – if explanations were not offered for untoward behavior (Maruna and Copes, 2005: 227). Outside of the criminal justice arena making excuses is viewed ‘*as normal, healthy, and socially rewarded behaviour*’ (Maruna and Mann, 2006: 155). Studies of non-offending issues have demonstrated that ‘denial can be functional, adaptive, and even has health benefits’ (Ware and Mann, 2012: 283). With respect to crime, commentators have noted that neutralizations can function ‘*to shore up the timbers of fractured socialization*’ (Scott and Lyman, 1968: 46), protect from labelling (Covington, 1984) and guilt and shame (Braithwaite and Braithwaite, 2001). Following Sykes and Matza (1957: 666), who argued that neutralizing offending demonstrates partial commitment to the dominant social order, Maruna and Mann (2006: 163) draw attention to how ‘*proffering excuses for criminal acts*

might suggest a shared commitment to social norms and a desire to move on from one's past.'

There is some limited empirical support for the argument that neutralizations precede offending (e.g. Agnew, 1994; Minor, 1981; Morris and Copes, 2012) but this is particularly difficult to demonstrate empirically, and furthermore the relationship between neutralizations and *reoffending* is not clearly established (Maruna and Mann, 2006). Those who deny their offending are thought to be 'risky' within correctional settings for a number of reasons. Ware and Mann (2012: 281) note that these may include 'the simple assumption' that those who do not take responsibility for their actions cannot fully participate or benefit from treatment programmes and that it would be impossible to determine their risk levels. However, they conclude 'that there is no well-articulated model of change for the popular treatment target of taking responsibility' – something that would be forgivable if empirical studies indicated an association between taking responsibility and reduced recidivism (or other positive outcomes such as non-disruptive behaviour or retention in treatment) (Ware and Mann, 2012: 282). But this position is more problematic since, as Ware and Mann (2012) go on to discuss, extant empirical studies find little support for the proposition that those who deny offending are more likely to reoffend than those who admit responsibility (Hood et al, 2002; Henning and Holdford, 2006; Mann et al, 2010). Indeed, some studies have found high levels of denial to be associated with *reduced* recidivism (Harkins et al, 2010). In respect to our focus, domestic violence, very few studies have examined the issue at all (Henning and Holdford, 2006). In short, the assumption implicit within criminal justice practice, that neutralization is a bad thing, is an oversimplification of empirical findings (Maruna and Copes, 2005: 228).

Neutralizations of various sorts permeate all aspects of social life and social relations yet within correctional practice neutralizations have been viewed as pathological. This has significant implications for those who seek to challenge and 'correct' neutralizations in correctional practice. The issues raised are quite varied. On the one hand, practitioners acknowledge the problem. They know that perpetrators are unlikely to take full responsibility for their actions at the point they are accepted onto the programme. Practitioners see the importance of motivating participants towards accepting responsibility and they acknowledge that confronting neutralization in group work is counterproductive in some sets of circumstances. Accordingly, their practices and processes mediate some of the more confrontational and punitive aspects of this form of contemporary correctional practice.

Yet on the other hand, tackling neutralizations presents difficulties and distortions of several kinds. Practitioners are required to circumnavigate the role played by neutralizations in shaping perpetrators' motivation for enrolling on the programmes and making decisions about the level of their engagement and progress. Perhaps most importantly, how offenders respond to being challenged is far from straightforward and the degree to which they are prepared to adopt a new perspective will certainly vary. We have seen that some participants clearly continued to present neutralizations both in the group work and the accounts they gave us in interview. This illustrates to us the persistence of this kind of talk, even in the face of significant criminal sanctions if they continue to do so. Yet attaching sanctions to neutralizations displayed in group work brings other problems. Indeed, we have seen that for other participants whilst neutralizations appeared to be 'corrected' within the group work setting it was much less clear that any 'change' had extended to other aspects of their day-to-day lives. This draws attention to the perverse behaviours that may arise where participants are threatened with sanctions if they fail to respond to group work in certain specified ways. This also reminds us that how we account for our actions varies situationally. Different social contexts call for different acceptable 'vocabularies of motive' (Mills 1940). Participants explanations may vary according to the audience and neutralizations that would never be formally condoned within the programme – in this context most clearly denial of the victim or denial of injury – might well continue to have currency within participants' everyday lives, for example when telling stories in the pub, or talking to a relative at home or indeed, as we have seen, when having a cigarette with the other participants at break time.

We are not suggesting that offenders' attempts to minimise culpability through neutralizations should be ignored. We know that listening to offenders making excuses for their violence and minimising its impact on women, and often their children, is distasteful. However, we also maintain that neutralizations are not necessarily abnormal or pathological. Taken together with the difficulties and distortions that practitioners face in identifying and confronting neutralizations in practice, we believe that it is time to rethink the central role that neutralizations play in aspects of contemporary criminal justice practice.

Conclusion

This article has examined the real world implications of offender neutralizations drawing on the example of programmes for perpetrators of domestic violence. Our starting point was that displaying neutralizations in correction group work has often been assumed to have negative consequence for those who participate. Our overall message is that the relationship between neutralization and aspects of criminal justice practice is a complex one. Neutralizing offending does not always have negative implications for offenders. It does not necessarily preclude enrolment in a programme, is not always challenged in a confrontational way, and persistent neutralization does not automatically result in suspension and the application of more punitive criminal sanctions. However, we have identified difficulties with tackling neutralizations in this context. Practitioners report that it is difficult to determine the extent to which participants take responsibility for their actions; participants are uncomfortable with the challenges; there is a sense that the programmes are rigid and inflexible in how they conceive the problem of domestic violence and how it should be responded to; and participant concerns about the implications of being suspended from the group can create perverse behaviour which makes difficult to know the extent to which the programme is ‘working’.

Our aim in this article has been to explore how these programmes work and the ways in which the problem of neutralization is tackled. Our data do not allow us to make detailed recommendations for practice. However, they do suggest a number of important considerations. First, programmes would benefit from a more nuanced understanding of the role of neutralizations, especially in light of the situational context within which the programmes operate. Our data suggest that practitioners do in fact apply a more nuanced approach than might be apparent from a simple reading of the programme discourse but this may be despite of the formal guidelines rather than in light of them. Secondly, our data suggest that it may be problematic to try to impose a rigid narrative framework on the complexity of these men’s situations and there may be a need for greater flexibility in programme delivery to make the group work meaningful to participants. This problem was identified by practitioners who said they sometimes struggled to get the men to see the meaning of the programmes or their relevance to their particular circumstances and by participants who sometimes felt excluded from this narrative. Flexibility of this kind requires experienced and knowledgeable staff with the skills to respond to individual participants

rather than simply deliver the content of a manual. Third, programmes need to remain cognisant of a wide range of levels of comprehension amongst participants and try to be accessible to all. Finally, whilst we do not have data about whether the programmes are ‘effective’ or not, it is clear that there will be limits to what programmes can achieve through challenging neutralizations. Even if they are successful in changing the ways in which participants talk about their offences within the programme, it may be unrealistic to expect that they can compete with cultural understandings of domestic violence and the multiple opportunities that men may have to continue to invoke neutralizations in day to day life.

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ⁱ At the time of the field work 34 IDAP and 8 CDVP were in operation

ⁱⁱ See Dutton (2006), Graham-Kevan (2007) and Bowen (2011) for a critique.

ⁱⁱⁱ Note that the programme guidance is not publically available and so quotations from the documentation are not referenced with page numbers (see Bowen 2011).