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article

A problem solved is a problem created: the opportunities and challenges associated with an online domestic violence perpetrator programme

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Domestic violence perpetrator programmes are a frequently used intervention to respond to perpetrators of domestic violence. However, there is considerable concern about the use of 'online', 'virtual', or 'digital' programmes delivered remotely. Policy and practice have developed at pace through the COVID-19 pandemic and research is lacking. This exploratory research examined the challenges and opportunities associated with a pilot online programme in Minnesota, US, for court mandated men. It took place before the COVID-19 pandemic, making it the first study to investigate a 'live' online programme.

A mixed method design was used, consisting of 40 hours of observational data (covering 25 sessions); four interviews with programme facilitators, 12 interviews with programme observers, and six perpetrators enrolled on the programme. We did not investigate the experiences of partners or ex-partners or of partner organisations, which is a limitation.

We found that while the online format solved some long-established issues with programme delivery (for example, providing an intervention for rural communities, a lack of transport, continuity of intervention for those who travel as part of their job), different issues arose in connection to the online programme. These problems included access to necessary broadband speeds, technical hardware and a private place to participate in the sessions.

Key words domestic violence perpetrator programmes • batterer intervention programmes • men's behaviour change programmes • remote delivery • online

Key messages

- Online, remote delivery of a Domestic Violence Perpetrator Programme (DVPP) was found to solve some of the problems associated with in-person delivery, however new problems arose in their place including access to technology, broadband, a private and safe space to participate, and learning new facilitation techniques.
- Remote access programmes can be useful as an option where no in-person group is available, but adaptions are needed to facilitation style and programme curricula.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the importance of researching this mode of programme delivery, although research with victim-survivors and community partner organisations are necessary to confirm the safety mechanisms required.

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Introduction

A shift in public discourse has seen an emphasis on interventions that hold perpetrators of domestic violence to account for their abusive behaviours. Domestic violence perpetrator programmes (DVPPs) are one such approach that work with perpetrators to assist managing harmful behaviours by changing thoughts, actions and views to reduce victimisation. There now exists a greater understanding of what 'success' means in relation to DVPPs (Westmarland et al, 2010; Westmarland and Kelly, 2013), the extent to which they do or do not achieve this (Kelly and Westmarland, 2015), and their role within a wider coordinated community response (Gondolf, 2012). With an increased optimism towards the ability of DVPPs to increase safety and freedom for victims and children alongside an increased emphasis on the importance of developing broader domestic violence perpetrator strategic plans, several countries have turned to look at how they might increase the reach and impact of interventions. These calls have also included interest in promoting a range of interventions to combat the 'one-size-fits-all' approach. New approaches in the United Kingdom for example have included variation in programme length, content and format of delivery (Drive, 2020), arrest deferral schemes for 'low risk' offenders if certain criteria are met (Strang et al, 2017), and the piloting of one-to-one work with men deemed high risk, high harm through the Drive project (Hester et al, 2019). However, despite the significant uptake in the delivery of digital health and social care behaviour change interventions (Blackburn et al, 2011), until the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, there had continued to be a lack of development or focus of remote access, online interventions for domestic abuse perpetrators.

This article directly responds to this gap in understanding by outlining the findings of a 12-month exploratory study of an online DVPP in the US. First, some of the challenges are outlined which have hampered the widespread provision of in-person groups, before discussing the limited research on delivery using digital technologies. Next, the online DVPP at the centre of our investigation is described, followed by the research methods and analysis employed. Our findings are described from the perspective of the men on programmes, observers to the programme, and the programme facilitators. To our knowledge, we contribute the first work to examine 'live' videoconferencing for delivery of a men's behaviour change groupwork programme in order to contribute implications for practice.

Background literature

While many studies have highlighted the variety in content, length and intake size of men's behaviour change groups, the majority of perpetrator interventions have been delivered with a physically co-located group in a work-orientated format (Phillips et al, 2013). Until the recent innovations and the emergence of COVID-19, it has

been remarkable that the mode of delivery has stayed relatively consistent since their conception (McGinn et al, 2020). This groupwork format requires attendees to be geographically co-located for facilitators and domestic violence perpetrators to participate over an often-lengthy period of time, ranging from 22 to 40 weeks (Lilley-Walker et al, 2018). There are, however, difficulties and inequalities faced by people who use violence in their intimate relationships when trying to access such programmes. These include cultural and language barriers (White and Sienkiewicz, 2018), economic and social barriers (Donovan and Griffiths, 2015), education level (McGinn et al, 2020), the availability of combined health or social care organisations (Humphreys and Stanley, 2015), and geographic location (Coy et al, 2009; DeKeseredy, 2020). These challenges are further compounded when situated within a rural or underfunded context where domestic violence services may struggle to cover large spatial distances to form a men's group. For some groups, for example women who use force, men in same sex relationships, those who are neuro-diverse, there are often not enough people seeking a service in one location to warrant a standalone in-person group (Cannon, 2020). This can entail such groups going without an intervention or depending on a more resource-intense delivery format such as one-on-one. Rural communities have traditionally faced particular challenges with the groupwork format, documented in the UK, North America and Australia among others (Jamieson and Mikko Vesala, 2008). The impact of the lack of public transport and the high cost of private transport, due to the distances involved in travelling have been identified as important indicators to non-attendance and increase the possibility of dropouts from interventions (Jamieson and Mikko Vesala, 2008).

Very little work has examined the role of digital technologies within domestic violence service delivery (Bellini et al, 2020b), and even less that has focused specifically on perpetrators (Bellini et al, 2020a). In their review of online interventions in intimate partner violence, Rempel et al identified only 11 interventions for victim-survivors, all focused on enhancing personal safety planning and none that took into account perpetrators and the role of social factors in such interventions (Rempel et al, 2018). In their review on perpetrator interventions, Vlais and Campbell concluded that they could not locate any studies that 'independently evaluate any aspect of a videoconference-based MBCP [men's behaviour change programme] intervention' (Vlais and Campbell, 2020). In order to better navigate this concerning lacuna of work, we categorise what few interventions we were able to locate online (albeit without associated peer literature) as sitting on a spectrum of perpetrator engagement.

At one end, we identified a number of online courses that provide classroom-style e-learning environments for participants to work through material and learning relating to domestic violence with minimal involvement from other facilitators or attendees enrolled on the course (Brown et al, 2009). Such courses, while flexible for self-paced learning, may be subject to higher levels of dropout (Gütl et al, 2014; Jun, 2005) or cause a disconnect for participants from the vital pro-social environments for engaging with harmful social norms within programmes (Phillips et al, 2013). At the opposite end of the spectrum, sits a fully 'live' real-time remote access perpetrator groupwork programme hosted through video conferencing software where participants and facilitators can communicate synchronously such as the one at the centre of our investigation. However, such approaches demand careful coordination of an attendee's time and location in order to attend and attendees may feel a weaker personal connection to facilitators and other group members (Simpson

et al, 2005). We are aware of only one online perpetrator programme evaluation and this exists on a different place in the spectrum to the full-length remote access 'live' programme that this article investigates. In this existing evaluation, Rutter and O'Connor (2015) evaluated three trials of a 13-week programme based on weekly participant participation in a virtual classroom that permitted live audio (though not video) and online self-paced learning in Australia. While the pair report that despite initial technical 'hiccups', remote delivery resulted in improved attitudinal changes in all but one of the 21 men enrolled, though they note a control group was unattainable for comparison to in-person groups.

However, the restrictions on or cancellations of in-person groups as a result of nationwide shutdowns in response to COVID-19 have undoubtably expanded the spectrum in an unprecedented way. In this sense, we might anticipate more evaluations in the future, including hybrid approaches both across differing levels of participation, and a combination of digital and non-digital means of delivering perpetrator interventions.

Description of the online programme

The online DVPP was a 'live', 'real time' men's non-violence programme ran by Melissa Scaia and Jon Heath who are both at Pathways to Family Peace in the US, though both facilitators are not physically co-located. The programme used an adapted Duluth Model '*Creating a Process of Change for Men Who Batter*' curricula (a programme which emphasises the need to put the experience of women who have been abused at the centre of work with men, see Miller, 2010) and the addendum curricula entitled '*Addressing Fatherhood with Men Who Batter*' (Scaia et al, 2007). This programme has since been adopted by Global Rights for Women as part of their core work.

The men were required to participate in an intake interview, in 27 sessions of 90-minutes groupwork on a weekly basis and attend an exit interview at the conclusion of the programme. Each man was provided with guidelines for the required hardware, personal conduct and physical environment which was required for programme participation. They were instructed to connect to the session through a tablet computer (minimum screen size of 16cm by 16cm), personal computer or a laptop in order for their face and environment to be seen clearly by a facilitator. This also included participating using headphones so as to reduce the risk of privacy concerns for the other group members and facilitators. Finally, men had to join from an isolated, quiet environment away from children or partners, and opportunities for distraction such as television or recreational smartphone use. For attendees who were unable to secure these parameters in their home environment, provisions for digital equipment, broadband and private physical spaces were arranged by facilitators through contacting local community or statutory organisations. Activities such as smoking, vaping, or drinking alcohol was strictly forbidden in line with required personal conduct of in-person men's groups.

The video-conference platform GoToMeeting was used, which allows people to host and participate in an online meeting and share their desktop with other users via the internet in real time. The interface permits people to visually and audibly communicate with each other onscreen, dependent on screen size, and is equipped with a 'chat' function where text-based messages can be shared with the group or privately addressed to an individual. Participants are provided with instructions to join

a session either through GoToMeeting's desktop app or web app within a browser and a unique link to their email address that cannot be shared with another user.

Programme participants were court-mandated men from rural areas of Minnesota where attendance at an in-person group would be difficult due to access to personal or private transport, paid work patterns or the distances involved in travelling to a men's group. All men involved in the programme and hence this research were self-selecting and volunteered to participate in the pilot. As such, these men may not be representative of attendees of DVPPs more generally, such as being more motivated and/or being more confident about using technology.

Research methods

A mixed methods study was used comprising observational and interview methods. Ethical approval was granted for both parts of the study by Newcastle University Science, Agriculture and Engineering (SAgE) Ethics Board under the agreement that researchers request both written and verbal consent prior to conducting interviews with facilitators, observers and the men over video conferencing. During observations, non-identifying handwritten observatory notes were recommended over audio-visual recording of the online programme for data security and storage purposes (Archibald et al, 2019).

One or both researchers joined 25 sessions of the online programme, constituting around 40 hours of observation. At the start of each observation session, cameras and sound were first of all turned on to remind participants of their presence, and then the researchers turned their videos and sound off for the remainder of the session. The researchers followed the same rules as the men were required to follow (use of headphones, no smoking and so on). The researchers recorded detail on the performance of the video conference software (visual disruptions, interface design), flow of conversation, group dynamics, and to what extent facilitation methods were adapted to the online format.

Interviews were conducted with men on the programme, facilitators of two programmes, and observers to the programme. Six men attending the online programme were interviewed within two weeks of their final session. The interview schedule consisted of questions that explored their individual experiences of the programme. A second programme of two facilitators was introduced at a later date using the same curricula. As such four facilitators (two male, two female) of the online DVPPs were interviewed at the end of their programmes. The interview covered their experience of setting up and facilitating the online programme, comparisons with their experiences of running in-person groups, and the strengths and weaknesses they had identified. Interviews with 11 observers (five male, six female) were conducted within a week of the session they observed. Observers were highly experienced service managers/facilitators based in other parts of the world who were interested in viewing one of the sessions for their own learning/potential programme development. Observers followed the same protocol as the researchers in their observation – following the same rules as the men, introducing themselves and then turning off their sound and camera. Interviews focused on their views of the session they observed and comparisons between their online observations and their own in-person groupwork.

All 21 interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using a thematic analysis approach using Braun and Clarke's systematic, six-step process (Braun and Clarke, 2006). In the first stage, data were deductively grouped into broad themes derived from a critical review of online interventions in other spaces (for example, communication style, content delivery and technical functionality). Second, sentences and longer semantic units were coded at a manifest and at a latent level before, third, being grouped into ten semantic coding groupings. Fourth, we then read our groupings for coherence and distinctiveness before the fifth stage defined seven core themes by identifying variations within and between each grouping. We illustrate these seven themes with data within this work as the final stage within a thematic analysis.

The research has some limitations. It is a small-scale, exploratory study with self-selecting men and caution should be taken in extrapolating the findings. The research does not constitute an 'outcomes' study and research is needed with a larger sample of programmes and more diverse participants in order to investigate the long-term outcomes for participants on online programmes. Finally, we were not able in this study to explore the views of ex/partners or those of multi-agency partnership organisations.

Findings

Our findings set out the potential opportunities and challenges that online programmes could have for future for policy, practice and research. We divide our findings into our seven identified themes from our analyses: technical performance of the online platform; accessibility of the programme in terms of attendance; groupwork communication; individual participation and conduct; online facilitation methods; programme content; and finally, the identified risks associated with online programmes.

Technical performance of the online platform

In line with findings of remote accessed victim-survivor focused services (Steinmetz and Gray, 2017), there were a number of technical problems with the performance of the online platform. This was most evident both in the early sessions (before week 6) of the programme, and at the start of the 90-minute session, as men and/or facilitators experienced an initial difficulty logging into the programme leading to a short delay in commencing the sessions. This difficulty included altering personal security settings to permit the use of video and audio features to ensure that a facilitator could be seen and heard, and ensuring other digital devices were offline on their internet connection to ensure a stronger connection. With the exception of session 14, all significant technical disturbances (which we define here as lasting over 10 minutes) occurred within the first six sessions of the programme and within the first 20 minutes of the session starting. Such disruption was also a common occurrence for the observers that were joining from statutory organisations that may have firewalls or access restrictions for installing such platforms on their computers. While many observers had high levels of technical proficiency to manoeuvre around such restrictions, some facilitators identified that the men who were programme participants generally did not. This was also highlighted by one of the facilitators:

> 'So, a lot of time was taken up with not getting their devices to work, wifi dropping out, and I don't think they were messing with us – I think it was genuine obstacles for them.' (Amy, facilitator)

Being unable to act as 'a remote technician' (Darren, facilitator) meant that reportedly that a significant amount of facilitator time was taken up with the initial stages of removing the technical obstacles in participants' way in order to conduct the session.

Additionally, many participants, despite being present within a safe and quiet environment had microphones that picked up loud background noise such as police sirens and dogs barking that occasionally disrupted the flow of conversation. These contextual factors that were beyond facilitator or participant control proved to be a significant disrupting factor. This disruption was minimised considerably by participants moving to a different, quieter area (providing that location was also private) or remaining 'on mute' unless speaking.

Accessibility of programme in terms of attendance

Although programme attendance and completion has been criticised as not being synonymous with behaviour change and as too simplistic a measure of 'success' in community level programmes (Westmarland and Kelly, 2013), for court-mandated men on probation completion represents an important step in monitoring compliance with criminal justice requirements. Both the facilitators and observers felt that hosting a programme online would equate to increased levels of attendance, and would, in Paula's words, 'remove the excuses that some people would have for [not] engaging in services' (Paula, observer) such as weather conditions or mild illness. Due to our small sample size and lack of comparison group, we are not able to provide quantitative data on this, although one of the facilitators observed that there was a higher rate of attendance for men enrolled on the online programme in comparison with in-person groups she had facilitated. This can be somewhat reflected in the case of three of the men and one facilitator who all needed to travel significant distances as part of their occupation, who all expressed positivity in being able to attend sessions more easily than otherwise being absent from the in-person group. This included joining the sessions from Maine, Switzerland, Romania, Moldova, the United Kingdom and Mexico City: "I didn't miss anything, getting the time zones right was the only challenge" (Lenny, man on programme). Interestingly, we also saw this high attendance to extend to also include the facilitators who were able to conduct the session several times alongside their travel for work:

> 'Mileage, petrol, managing traffic – I don't have to think of that when I'm online. I'm definitely in a better mood when I'm not behind the wheel [for long periods] which is better for everyone.' (Mark, facilitator)

Facilitators and observers agreed that the use of online programmes could – in line with other health and social care e-delivery (Marcoux and Vogenberg, 2016) – also potentially have a positive financial impact on organisations who spent a lot of resources (time, money, meeting room hire) travelling to work with perpetrators. However, irrespective of the high level of attendance for the small number of men

on the programme, facilitators were careful to report that this did not equate to the digital programme being more accessible to men:

> 'One of the challenges for attendance, especially in rural areas in the US is internet accessibility. I think we cannot assume that people have good access to internet, or that they even have good computers or hardware that they can use.' (Roxanne, facilitator)

This was echoed in our interviews with observers, who felt that practitioners must exercise caution in assuming that online programmes could solve the problem of lack of access or attendance as this could inadvertently obscure digital barriers. Such digital barriers not only included good internet connection and hardware to connect to the group but also being able to be guided to carefully log into the session due to low digital literacy levels: "I know my way around a computer, but I know that not just everyone does" (Marcus, man on programme).

Groupwork communication

Learning through discussion is a core component of DVPPs so that pro-social behaviours can be identified and encouraged within a group environment (Brown et al, 2009). However, despite the reliable technical performance of the online platform on the server side, the participatory qualities of group conversation and challenge within the session were often stilted or disrupted. Maria, one of the observers, expanded on how the online nature of the programme seemed to impact on conversation within the group:

> 'there's something about the technology in the session that made the dialogue much more difficult – I'm meaning real dialogue here, because it's really hard. Sometimes it felt like I was like watching a series of one-on-ones.' (Maria, observer)

Here, Maria argues that the online nature negatively impacted on the men's and facilitator's ability to engage with more than one person directly at a time during group discussions or activities. All four facilitators agreed that it was a challenge to ensure that the men addressed and spoke to each other rather than addressing questions or discussion points from the facilitator. This change in conversation dynamics was accredited by some observers as a side effect of only being able to 'tune' into one person at a time through the online format where it might be possible to have cross-talk, multiple conversations and what Matthew described as a "synergistic communication" (Matthew, observer) within an in-person group. While facilitators shared that encouraging a natural flow of conversation to be a challenge in in-person groups, this is a particular challenge in video-conferencing settings where its technical component of a codec (coder/decoder) can only process a reduced amount of audio and video at a given time. In this way, the online format enforced a form of artificial turn-taking where one man felt that: "if two people started talking, we'd stop immediately and make sure one person took over the conversation and it would repeat like that" (Adam, man on programme). Despite the stilted nature of communication between the men in the group, facilitators and observers identified

that reportedly "juvenile behaviour such as sniggering or rudely coughing" (Brendan, observer) sometimes found within in-person groups was entirely absent from the online programme.

As time went on, the men increasingly started to creatively contribute to an on-going verbal discussion in non-verbal ways so as to (presumably) not disrupt the flow of conversation. We identified in 12 of the sessions that some men on the programme used visible ques (such as silently clapping (Wright, 2008)) or used GoToMeeting's chat function to publicly share or record important points for a discussion: "I just popped what I wanted to say in the chat, my memory goes so I want to be able to add to what's going on before I forget" (Lenny, man on programme). In these cases, facilitators permitted the on-going conversation to finish before reading aloud or summarising the men's contributions within the chat.

Individual participation and conduct

Akin to studies on online computer-mediated trauma therapy (Suler, 2000), it was widely felt that men were ready to be more 'open' and to share their thoughts and feelings earlier in the programme when compared with their experience of in-person groups. One of the facilitators reported that sensitive and (sometimes) tearful disclosures of violence started occurring at the fourth session mark instead of the (approximate) eighth session that could be anticipated at an in-person programme. Another facilitator felt surprised that the online format appeared to have the same impact on openness on his facilitation style: "[it] makes it much easier to share my own self-reflection in the group, I felt like I'd built a sense of trust between these men a lot easier" (Mark, facilitator).

All six of the men on the programme felt that the reason they felt comfortable and open sharing their personal stories, thoughts and opinions was down to not being physically co-present with the participants or facilitator and being in familiar surroundings:

> 'It feels more comfortable, sitting on your own with other people in a place that you know, I felt much more comfortable to share things I wouldn't be able to say in person.' (Nathan, man on programme)

Here, Nathan directly accredits being in his home though being virtually 'with' other people as a direct impacting factor on his willingness to contribute to the conversation. Lenny, who also expressed a preference for joining from a local community centre considered where his own comfort came from:

> 'The online group almost seems more … private? Even though you've got people looking directly at you, it just seems more private, you haven't got everyone in a real room staring.' (Adam, man on programme)

For many of the men, this feeling of privacy appeared to be irrespective of their concern for their conversations being overheard by people outside of the group, a sensitive leak of their data or facilitators recording as they trusted the online platform to keep this secure. However, observers and facilitators expressed that it could be concerning that men placed such a high level of trust in the online platform so easily

and non-critically towards their personal data. At the heart of these accounts appears to be the creation of a false dichotomy: being open in session content yet forfeiting rights to privacy or being unwilling to contribute in an environment where additional precautions around the collation of personal data is collected (Solove, 2013). While both observer and facilitator accounts were positive regarding how 'relaxed' or 'calm' the men appeared to be within the group session, a small number of observers stated that this feeling of comfort should be handled with caution. This was due to the fact that they did not wish the comfort created by being present in the home to detract from the necessarily uncomfortable discussions around violence which could, inadvertently "reduce the accountability and responsibility that they [men] should feel" (Brenda, observer).

Online facilitation methods

All four facilitators that we interviewed were highly skilled and experienced facilitators of in-person DVPPs and they all outlined challenges in adapting their facilitation style to an online format. This adaptation was taking place individually at the same time as they were having to adapt with respect to their co-facilitator's online style:

> 'I struggled with Amy's style. I have a different style to her – my approach is a lot more unstructured discussion while she has specific points she wants to hit. It's become a lot better as we've figured out how to co-facilitate well together.' (Darren, facilitator)

We found this initial "uphill struggle" (Mark, facilitator) description of co-facilitation in an online format to be common across both facilitator pairs that resulted in each individual developing a workaround in order to best support their co-host and deliver session content. This included using the chat function on the GoToMeeting interface, where instant messages can be sent privately to any individual within the session, to coordinate delivery and communicate concerns or thoughts about the men in the session. While all facilitators disclosed that their facilitation did significantly improve as their delivery became more "in-sync" (Naomi, facilitator), it was suggested that a pre-requisite to future co-facilitation would be that facilitators had prior in-person experience co-facilitating.

In terms of ensuring that the men's behaviour was in line with the agreed protocol, observers identified that facilitators were afforded the ability to scrutinise and examine the men in greater detail than might be afforded in in-person sessions:

> 'So, if the facilitator is concerned someone isn't paying attention, they can enlarge their image on their own screen for better monitoring.' (Siobhan, observer)

The ability of additional scrutiny of men within the session was also reflected in the men's experience where two men offered that they felt they "couldn't hide behind another participant" in the sessions following 'bad' behaviour with another man, sharing that he felt unable to "turn away from [Naomi] and [Mark]" (Lenny, man on programme). This was seemingly in contrast to how Naomi found some men to be "harder to read" down to the restricted view of the men's head and shoulders over

pose, posture and other non-verbal cues that could be more apparent in in-person groups. A small number of observers identified that the 'mute' (turning a man's sound off remotely) or 'kick' (removing a man from a session) functions in the online programme, if used as a way of disciplining men who violated the conditions of the group could be easily misused to exert an inappropriate application of power and control over others (Pence and Paymar, 1993). While we observed that none of the facilitators used the mute function as a method of discipline, observers expressed concerns that other programmes may use it as a way of avoiding challenging social situations within the group:

> 'It would be easier for somebody who's prone to being controlling anyway, I'm going to mute you, what you said is not okay, as opposed to navigating the tougher terrain of how to engage in a conversation in a more real way, without simply playing our power card.' (Omar, Observer)

Interestingly, in the one case we observed where there was a breaking of the rules of the group which resulted in him being made to leave the session it was the other men as well as the facilitators who picked up on the (attempted covert) rule breaking.

Programme content

Facilitators and observers expressed an interest in how the online programme could widen the scope and encourage the curricula to be continuously adapted and improved, seemingly in line with wider drives to innovate for safe practice with perpetrators (Devaney and Lazenbatt, 2016). Facilitators suggested that while the majority of the original content of their curriculum content could be translated into a digital format (that is, digitising worksheets), other activities entailed that "some kinks need to be worked out" (Amy, facilitator) in the programme. This was evidenced through the difficulty in being able to transmit live video to facilitate learning and discussion which one facilitator expressed could cause a problem to video-heavy curriculums:

> 'We use video at least once every three weeks, if we can't use videos, then we can't use this curriculum.'

Video that was transmitted frequently lacked sound and visually froze at various points within its running time resulting in facilitators changing the design of the sessions to be more focused on discussion. Men were instead encouraged to watch the videos as a form of homework in between sessions and email their thoughts on the content to the facilitators upon completion.

Many programme curricula require the use of writing material and either a whiteboard or flip chart paper to annotate or log discussion points within groupwork (Lilley-Walker et al, 2018). For the first seven online sessions, facilitators attempted to use a small physical whiteboard to illustrate course material and hold this up to the webcam as the session progressed. This changed to a 'digital whiteboard' in the form of a word document that was shared in real time with other participants. Interestingly, facilitators disclosed that they experienced a novel form of performance anxiety in

using the digital whiteboard, such as typing the wrong word or being unable to match the speed at which men contributed in the discussion:

> 'I'm good with an in-person whiteboard, but I'm simply not a fast typer … For me, the digital whiteboard was effective once Darren got into a flow, it's a solid log of everything that's happened in the session and you don't need to take photos of physical whiteboards – they never come out well anyway.' (Katie, observer)

Here Katie reflects on her observations of the session where she balances out the benefits and challenges of annotating a session against a log of the session's activities. Facilitators suggested that a way that fast typing could be reduced as a challenge for the delivery of the digital pilot project was through the creation of pre-made documents so as to not repeat the same material for the next session.

Risks associated with online programmes

All facilitators identified that the physical and their perceived conceptual distance between themselves and the men could cause an issue if men were to engage in what Martin terms 'new kinds of bad behaviours' that are normally disallowed in in-person groups. These included men drinking alcohol (either openly or discretely through hiding it in a mug/water bottle), smoking cigarettes or 'multi-tasking' by watching television that could divert their attention away from the sessions. As men were not close enough in physical proximity to the facilitators, facilitators offered that it was much harder to make inferences on indicators that would be available to them in person, such as the smell of alcohol on a man's breath: "we just can't know if they've been drinking or not" (Darren, facilitator). These risks also extended to a man's immediate environment where observers were concerned for men who were still living with their victim-survivors being present but out of view of the webcam or overhearing a man's contributions into a session (Blackburn et al, 2011).

One man on the programme described how he identified that his partner had been listening into his sessions:

> 'Yeah, so she would throw things back at me, like "you said …" when we were arguing, things like I was confident I'd only said in the group so yeah, she was listening in and I had no idea. I challenged her on it.' (Troy, man on programme)

Troy framed his partner overhearing group conversations as an immediate risk to his privacy but also mirrored some of the concerns offered by observers, specifically that victim-survivors could feel empowered to 'challenge' their perpetrators on content disclosed in the group. Observers extended this concern by suggesting that if a perpetrator was to be directly affected by the content of such material, there was a shorter time and a lack of a physical 'buffer' distance between the man and their victim-survivor who could experience negative impacts from his behaviour.

Many observers argued that any intervention regardless of its digital element, would need to be situated within an existing coordinated community response, or that such an approach should be established in order to ensure that "partner safety is

guaranteed to be addressed" (Darren, facilitator). However, one facilitator expressed that the distributed nature of many of the men on the programme – in this case outside of Duluth in rural Minnesota – brought about its own unique problems as to how this model could work:

> 'That's the whole thing about Duluth, if you're getting men from all over the country, and men coming on remotely, how can you have those community links that a CCR [Coordinated Community Response] has if everyone is spread out?' (Amy, facilitator)

It is the creation of these links of communication channels across a wider geographic area that posed a particular problem to the intervention, where two facilitators found it challenging to gain access to police reports, risk assessments and a full scope of the levels of abuse of the men enrolled in the online programme at the time they needed them. With respect to risks to staff members, one man shared that he had sought assistance from his facilitator Naomi outside of the session through messaging her personal social media account multiple times before the facilitator established professional boundaries. This appeared to be reflected in a facilitator account where being visual and online appeared to increase the men's levels of other forms of online communication with facilitators, sometimes in ways that impacted on their right to professional privacy, as one facilitator offered:

> 'With it being digital, there is a tendency for them to reach out on social media, it's an easier bridge to span than people coming in through a community group.' (Mark, facilitator)

In this way, the online delivery was accredited with giving a more intimate relationship between participants and facilitator, which could potentially lead to concerns around the personal safety of staff.

Discussion and conclusions

Our investigation is the first to examine the performance of video conference software as a means of remotely delivering a 'live' DVPP to multiple users over the internet. While the field has focused heavily on 'what works' as a means of mitigating or reducing violence (Brown et al, 2009), this has often come at the cost of examining the performance and content of men's behaviour change interventions (Wistow et al, 2017). As such, we shall now unpick the tensions and opportunities that the video-conferencing software presented in its delivery to highlight avenues for future research.

In this exploratory study, we found that facilitators were constrained by both the challenges of adapting an in-person behaviour change curriculum to online delivery and to their co-facilitator's style. When such programme material could not be adapted such as the facilitator's experience of broadcasting video – a reported staple of the adapted Duluth model (Pence and Paymar, 1993) – we saw a quick and often 'in situ' redesign of sessions with participants towards a more discussion-focused approach. Since video-conferencing platforms have been developed further from the rapid move to remote and online working in the wake of COVID-19 (Hodder, 2020), we are aware that there is considerable improvement in the area of video-streaming,

and they are, as of now, back on the curriculum. Nevertheless, such content is prone to a higher number of errors than other types of media and still require participants to have high rates of bandwidth to receive and watch the content live. Such a focus on discussion is in line with the pro-social nature of in-person groups (Brown et al, 2009); we were, however, concerned that the discussions we observed did appear to lack a 'synergistic' quality whereby participants did not engage as 'organically' with others as in-person groups. In this way, we anticipate that programmes that are facilitator-led over content-based may find less resistance to considering moving online than organisations who may have to question what content 'works'. As a means of combating the stilted nature of discussion, as identified in related health and social care delivery styles (Suler, 2000; Simpson et al, 2005), we suggest that such a challenge could be framed as a learning opportunity for facilitators and participants to hone their ability to express non-verbally and other communication styles.

Although this project was designed with improving access in mind, despite the minimum technical requirements of broadband speeds, appropriate hardware and attendance in a private, quiet place, the majority of men (initially) experienced problems tuning into the programme. These findings corroborate existing work that has previously highlighted the significant technological barriers that exist with this social group in their access to services (Jamieson and Mikko Vesala, 2008). We note that while online programmes may be seen to plug some of the holes related to inclusive, widespread programme delivery, new problems appear to grow in its place: creating a deeper 'digital divide' between perpetrators who possess digital hardware, broadband speeds and literacy skills and those who do not (Hoffman and Novak, 2001). In such a way, while all of our participant groups praised the reduced financial cost of delivery, we must be mindful of trading one set of problems for another, with perpetrators of a lower socio-economic status still disadvantaged.

The safety and advocacy of victim-survivors could, concernedly, be marginalised by this approach. We note this gap in our findings, linked partly to the fact that four of the six men enrolled in the programme were living physically separately from victim-survivor they were on the programme in relation to. None of these men had disclosed a new intimate relationship to the facilitators. However, we theorise that from our findings on concerns around data privacy, confidentiality and the removal of the physical 'buffer' between a DVPP and a victim-survivor creates novel risk factors in the attendance at these programmes that may not have been present before. As such, we argue that any changes to DVPPs should always ensure that they are part of a coordinated community response where victim-survivors are appropriately consulted on how safe they feel and are given free access to high quality support services.

Sitting alongside these issues were a number of surprisingly optimistic findings. These include the ability for facilitators to create a welcoming yet critical space online, and for (at least this group of self-selecting) men to open up and reflect on their use of violence and abuse earlier in the programme. The issues outlined earlier require further research, involving larger sample sizes, the voices of victim-survivors, and multi-agency partners. COVID-19 has led to delivery online at a scale previously unimagined, and it is unlikely that some programmes will ever go back to solely providing in-person groups. While we welcome the integration of online elements into DVPPs, for now, we caution against the allure of uncritically positioning online programmes as the solution to gaps in service provision.

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The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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