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Context and Scope

The aim of this study was to understand the language (by this, we mean terminology) used by domestic abuse intervention programmes. Specifically, how is the user of the programme referred to and how the language used characterises them within the context of the programme. The review was taken in support of the Drive Systems Change Evaluation and the 'listening and sharing' findings webinar held in April 2023. Using the Office of the Domestic Abuse Commissioner's mapped publicly-available data on perpetrator programmes^a, the content analysis was carried out between January – March 2023 by Dr Olumide Adisa and Lindsey Redgwell at the University of Suffolk.

Language matters? And the contested nature of the term 'perpetrator' as an under-researched issue

In the UK, the earliest use of the term 'perpetrator' in relation to domestic abuse change programmes was in the late 1980s, following the introduction of the 'British' Domestic Violence Perpetrator Programmes^b. These were initially offered in groupwork settings and then evolved to programmes like Drive, 1-2-1s.

Given that less than 1%^c of perpetrators have access to a specialist programme that might help prevent future harmful abusive behaviour (Safelives Insights, 2018)^d, the implication of labelling as a barrier to engagement and recruitment is an under-researched area.

The implications of this labelling issue can also determine the degree to which the system (professionals, organisations, institutions) continues to view a person that has used harmful behaviours as unable to change their behaviour and to recraft their identity into one that is not perpetually defined by their offending. This is likely to have an implication for recruitment to perpetrator change programmes for certain groups (for example, Black boys, and men (who are disproportionately those overpoliced and overrepresented in crime data), and other racialised communities. Based on Drive's service user voice, practice experience, the label of 'perpetrators' have also been found to be unhelpful in some contexts (Adisa and Allen, 2020^e; Adisa et al, 2023^f).

Respect's Matrix^g, which was developed as part of their work supporting male victims of domestic abuse recognise the complexities involved in this dichotomous label of victim/perpetrator, both for safe identification and safe working practices in situations where someone using violence could also be a victim, and also for accountability of

^a Acknowledgements: Thanks to the Office of the Domestic Abuse Commissioner (DAC) for providing us with a comprehensive list of perpetrator programmes in England and Wales to undertake this analysis. Also thanks to Michelle Phillips and Gemma Gall for sharing insights from their Safelives Authentic Voice work as well as feedback on the briefing itself. And to Jo Todd, for sharing insights on Respect's Matrix.

^b [Phillips R., Kelly L., Westmarland N. \(2013\) Domestic Violence Perpetrator Programmes: An Historical Overview, London and Durham: London Metropolitan University and Durham University.](#)

^c This figure may now be slightly higher, as a 2022 report published by the Office of the Domestic Abuse Commissioner suggested that only 7% of survivors who wanted their abuser to access behavioural change programmes able to access it. See DAC (2022). A Patchwork of Provision: how to meet the needs of victims and survivors across England and Wales .

^d [Safelives Insights, 2018](#)

^e Adisa, O. & Allen, K. (2020). [Increasing safety for those experiencing family and intimate relationship harm within black and minority ethnic communities by responding to those who harm: Survey findings.](#)

^f Available from Nov 27, 2023.

^g [Toolkit for Work with Male Victims of Domestic Abuse.](#)

those who use and experience domestic abuse. The Respect Matrix (while a simple representation) is based on Men’s Advice Line which has been running for more than 16 years, and there is scope to further include this Matrix in the future research agenda.

This is a gap in research, as the use of labelling can be damaging and the term ‘perpetrators’ further marginalises engagement with certain communities, especially Black boys, and men – where there is disproportionality of those overpoliced and overrepresented in crime data (Adisa et al, 2021)^h.

In relation to the domestic abuse sphere, less attention has been given to the ways that professionals speak about those who use harmful behaviours, and the ways that service users themselves engage in positive identity formation including the self-naming of oneself ‘perpetrator’, as well as how this may differ for different groups.

There are also strong moral arguments for respecting victims’ rights to be able to call their abuser by a criminalised term that they believe places the responsibility on the person causing the harm. Yet, this also brings about a tension for positive identity formation goals in behavioural change programmes, alongside the goals of accountability and responsibility, and which require further exploration outside the scope of this briefing. This review explored these behavioural programmes to find out whether there are commonalities to help inform practice.

What we did?

This study conducted a content analysis on the language used by a variety of programmes based nationwide on websites. Starting with an initial sample of 93 domestic abuse programmes, after exclusions the final number of samples used for the study was 43. Exclusions were made to 9 programmes aimed at child perpetrators as the language used for children may be deliberately different compared to that of programmes aimed at adults. Exclusions were made to 21 programmes providing more general support around domestic abuse rather than intervention provision specifically aimed at the perpetrator. Finally, 20 programmes were also excluded from the initial sample for either being duplications of another service already covered or because the programme was no longer running. To gather the data, samples were taken from the introduction to the programme featured on each providers website. Once the samples were gathered, they were coded into one of the four language categories.

Data analysis findings:

To better understand how language was being used the study identified four different categories of language focus:

Victim Focused

Language that specifically refers to how the programme can impact or help protect and support victims of domestic abuse.

Neutral

Language that was not person specific and only spoke in general terms.

User Focused

Language specifically referring to the programme users as perpetrators or offenders.

Person Centric

Language that refers to the programme users in terms of people or individuals rather than terms such as perpetrator or offender.

^h [Adisa, O., Bland, M., Weir, R., Allen, K. & Ferreira, J. \(2021\). Identifying predictors of harm within Black, Asian, and other racially minoritised communities.](#)

Examples of the language seen in each category can be seen in Figure 1 and Table 1 below.

Table 1: Examples of terms and language used to describe those using harmful behaviours

Victim Focused	Neutral	User Focused	Person Centric
Support survivors	Reduce harm	Perpetrator accountability	People who harm
Impact on Victims	Break Cycle	Challenging/supporting perpetrators	People who are abusive
Survivor Safety	Build Resilience	Work with perpetrators	Individuals who want to stop being abusive

Results

The results showed that user focused language was featured in the language used in the majority of programmes, either exclusively or alongside another language category. Specifically, 61% of programmes featured some aspect of user focused language.

However, only 28% of programmes were only using user focused language, suggesting a move towards less ‘perpetrator’ targeted language. Further to this, 39% of programmes featured no element of user focused language. Neutral/Person centric language accounted for 37% of the sample, also suggesting a move away from offender language.

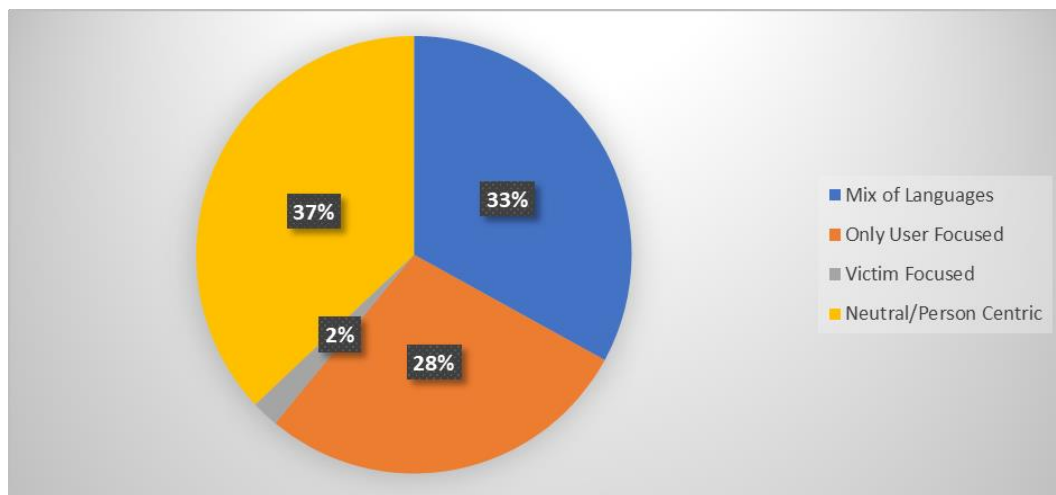


Figure 1: Use of terms and language used to describe those using harmful behaviours

In contrast, out of the 43 programmes sampled, only 2% exclusively used victim focused language. However 33% were using a mix of language types, including victim focused language.

Limitations

The language samples taken in this study were limited to the language used in the programme introduction on the provider website literature, which is only a very small sample of the total literature used by each provider. Therefore, it can only be taken as a snapshot of the language that provider uses. Other language categories may be used by the provider in different materials that make up the programme. Additionally, while the mapped data is comprehensive, the spreadsheet that was used for the analysis is not likely representative of all the available perpetrator programmes.

Where to go from here?

Further research is necessary in finding common ground around acceptable terminology which balances the rights of victims, and also those who use harmful behaviours who are candidates for behavioural change programmes.

Recommendations:

1. A participatory research and a complex systems approach should be used in informing an evidence-informed and co-designed guidance and resource aimed at informing professionals on the varying use of language in referring to those who use harmful behaviours. This guidance will include a preferred terminology framework (expanding on the Respect Matrix as an example) to help inform and guide the appropriate use of language/terminology depending on the context and communities being referred to.
2. Improve robust mapping data on perpetrator programmes to support the monitoring how change in the use of language is happened across systems

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