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Service user involvement in social work education: Enhancing student learning about intimate partner violence

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Abstract

Men who use intimate partner violence (IPV) are often excluded from service user involvement approaches, including those provided in social work education. This article outlines Australian research in which men who use IPV developed a learning resource, the resource was shown to social work students and student feedback sought through pre- and post-test questionnaires and group discussion. Students reported increased knowledge regarding interpersonal violence, greater awareness of the skills required to engage service users who use IPV and willingness to work alongside service users who are involuntary and/or have multiple issues in future social work placements and practice. The findings suggest, when risks are well managed, it may be possible to incorporate the lived experiences of men who use IPV in social work education with positive benefit for student learning. The ramifications of these findings for social work education and practice internationally are discussed.

Keywords: domestic violence, men who use violence, perpetrators, service user involvement, social work education

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Introduction

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is globally pervasive (World Health Organization, 2013), and there is disagreement in the literature as to what works to decrease men's use of violence (Gondolf, 2011). Concerns have been raised that social workers have insufficient knowledge and skill about how to address IPV with families (Lundberg and Bergmark, 2018). It is also suggested that social workers are failing to work with men who use IPV to change violent behaviours (Westmarland and Kelly, 2013). Anti-oppressive approaches within social work give direction, highlighting the importance of engaging with oppressed peoples rather than oppressors (Wilson and Beresford, 2000). Fraser and Seymour (2017) suggest that anti-oppressive approaches should not absolve social workers from engaging with men who use IPV, as engaging these oppressors may contribute to reducing violence towards women.

The Australian research outlined in this article is part of a larger research project that examined service user involvement in social work education by men who use IPV. The aim of this research was to explore whether this involvement is appropriate and helpful to the academy, social work students and the men. This article will outline the final focus groups for the research in which first- and second-year social work students reviewed a learning resource that was developed by men who use IPV. The students watched and listened to the resource and then provided their feedback through pre- and post-test questionnaires and group discussion. This article will discuss the findings from these groups.

To begin, the article explores literature about the involvement of service users with multiple issues and who are involuntary/service refusers in social work education. The article goes on to discuss the inclusion of content about IPV in social work curricula. The methodology and methods are then outlined, including focus groups with social work students who explored and discussed a learning resource developed by men who use IPV. Findings from the focus groups are then described and linked to contemporary literature. The article concludes with recommendations for social work education, research and practice.

Service user involvement in social work

It has been generally acknowledged that service user involvement in social work education has positive benefits for students (Hughes, 2017). There are also possible benefits for the service users who participate, including improvements in self-worth, increased relationship building with academics and other service users, and new skills and knowledge gained from contributing to student learning (Smith, 2013; Tanner *et al.*, 2015; Dorozenko *et al.*, 2016; Raikes and Balen, 2016). There are no identifiable studies that have engaged men who use IPV in social work education. There are some studies that have explored service user involvement in social work education by service users who may be attending services involuntarily or who have multiple issues in their lives. Social work approaches with these populations may be more complex and require increased ethical and relational engagement strategies (Smith, 2020).

Involuntary service users may be legally mandated to attend services but may also be mandated through other means such as family or social pressure (Chovanec, 2020). Groups with multiple presenting issues may have alcohol or drug addiction, child welfare concerns, distressing childhood experiences and mental health issues.

As a service user group, men who use IPV often have multiple issues and are involuntary. These men have additional complex issues; they perpetrate violence against family members and may either continue their use of violence or relapse to use of violence after they access services (Centre for Innovative Justice, 2016). These men therefore pose a safety risk to the people with whom they share deep interpersonal relationships.

Service refusers provide a wide descriptor for people accessing services, including those who are reluctant to attend services but become socially or legally mandated to do so. The co-researchers in the present research had multiple service access experiences, including drug and alcohol counselling, child welfare involvement, ongoing legal issues, criminal injunctions, mental health service interactions and parole requirements. All had been socially mandated by family, friends or human services staff to attend domestic violence services due to their violent, abusive and coercive behaviours towards their partners.

There has been no identifiable research where men who use IPV have been engaged in social work education. However, there has been some research with service user groups with multiple issues and who may be resistant/avoidant, hard to reach or attending services involuntarily. This research is now discussed.

The few studies that have engaged service users with multiple issues in social work education, have suggested positive outcomes for service users and students. For example, Raikes and Balen (2016) and Smith (2013) identified positive student and service user outcomes when female prisoners and women receiving child protection services participated in service user involvement activities with social work students. The outcomes for students included decreased stigmatised views, greater awareness of the impacts of living with multiple issues and improved understanding of the types of social work approaches that might be effective with these service users. The outcomes for service users included self-reported improvements in self-awareness and self-respect. In summary, the literature suggests there is limited involvement in social work education by groups with multiple complex issues but that this involvement may benefit both service users and social work students.

Social work education and IPV

According to the Australian Association of Social Workers (2012), a large number of social work students are employed in the domestic violence sector post-graduation. Crabtree-Nelson *et al.* (2016) acknowledge the prevalence of contemporary domestic violence research and indicate it to be well connected to social work practice. However, the authors also suggest social work students demonstrate low knowledge and skills in relation to social work practice with individuals who use violence or individuals or families who are subjected to violence. This disparity occurs despite the suggestion that much research into IPV is led by social workers in practice, education and research may have accessible research about IPV within their working environments.

In research that has examined IPV content in social work education, authors have suggested social work studies are not preparing students for working with individuals or families who have experienced or used violence (Black *et al.*, 2010; McMahon *et al.*, 2013; Crabtree-Nelson *et al.*, 2016). One mechanism to explore the impact of low IPV content in social work education is to explore student responses to real-world case studies. Bent-Goodley (2007) identified social work students struggled to resolve ethical dilemmas about IPV, suggesting students need learning experiences with greater ethical complexity to create deep learning.

Further, it has been suggested social work students and graduates demonstrate low understanding of the dynamics of power that exist in IPV. In research that explored graduates' ability to identify causes and dynamics of IPV, and suggest interventions, Black *et al.* (2010) suggest social work student graduates have low understanding and demonstrate low awareness of appropriate responses. Crabtree-Nelson *et al.* (2016) found students showed little understanding of the types of behaviours that could constitute a use of power and control by men who use IPV.

In social work education, there have been some creative approaches to including more curriculum content about IPV. Adelman *et al.* (2016) used an intimate partner simulation tool, In Her Shoes, with social work students. The findings suggest this tool generated greater student understanding of the broad range of issues survivors of IPV may experience. Spiteri (2013) also used simulation exercises with students and identified improvements in critical thinking when examining interpersonal violence. It may be that real-world case examples about violence perpetrated in relationships can provide an enhanced learning experience for social work students.

The research described in this article is part of a larger research project which has been described in Jury and Boxall (2018, 2021). The findings from this larger project suggest men who use IPV can articulate the barriers and enablers that restrict or facilitate access to domestic violence services for men and that these men can develop learning resources about those experiences. These learning resources may be considered real-world examples and social work student learning about IPV may be positively impacted by engaging with these resources.

The section to follow explores the methodology and methods for the present study.

Methodology

The research described in this article is part of a larger participatory action research (PAR) project that examined service user involvement in social work education by men who use IPV. This research project was granted full institutional ethics approval. The wider study incorporated PAR cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting (Reason and Bradbury, 2008), using Collaborative Inquiry and focus group methods to engage with higher education staff, social work students and men who use IPV. This larger project involved focus groups with higher education staff to explore barriers and enablers to service user involvement in higher education, separate focus groups with social work students and men who use IPV to explore their ideas about service user involvement and two collaborative inquiries with men who use IPV. The men who participated in these two groups were living in a residential domestic violence service for men at the time of the research. The first collaborative inquiry engaged twenty men from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds in discussion about their service use experiences, identifying themes that best captured these experiences (Jury, 2022). In the second collaborative inquiry, seven men who use IPV (five Aboriginal and two Caucasian men) developed a PowerPoint resource with voice over which outlined these themes for social work students. It is this PowerPoint resource that was shared with social work students in the research described herein.

The smaller study, described in this article, was guided by the question, how could a learning resource developed by men who use IPV be used with social work students in a university setting? This was the final stage of the research in which a learning resource developed by men who use IPV was shared with social work students and their responses captured through pre- and post-test questionnaires and group discussion. University contexts are suggested to be patriarchal settings (Maguire, 2001; Winchester and Browning, 2015). Social gender norms are indicated to be at the heart of the behaviours of power, control and violence that men who use IPV utilise towards female partners (Dobash and Dobash, 1992; Bagshaw and Chung, 2000). The research described in this article was situated in universities and involved men who use IPV. Due to the complexities of power and control embedded in men's relationships and in the environments in which the research was undertaken, feminist approaches were utilised as a theoretical framework to both ground and drive the research. A feminist perspective provided a lens with which to consider the myriad of power relationships within the study: between students and academics, service users and academics, students and service users and the power in gender relationships across all participating groups (Reid and Frisby, 2008; Stanley and Wise, 2002).

Ethical issues

When considering research design, the emotional safety of participants was at the forefront as it is acknowledged social work students may have their own experiences of violence which can be triggered by in-class discussions about IPV (Robbins, 2014). As a precaution, Adelman et al. (2016) suggest content about IPV in social work education should be taught by staff experienced in IPV practice. The author of the present article is an experienced lecturer and practitioner in IPV, with both men who use IPV and women and children who have experienced IPV. The author therefore had the ability to manage student issues or concerns that might arise.

It is recognised that research participants with multiple presenting issues can be adept at identifying safety concerns in research studies (Lakeman *et al.*, 2013). In the present study, social work students and men who use IPV identified face-to-face discussions as risky, with both having concerns about being identifiable post-research process. Despite these safety concerns, students and men who use IPV did want to engage the other and therefore chose mediated approaches to service user involvement (Jury and Boxall, 2021). This provided space for the development of a learning resource that did not require face-to-face contact between the groups, but which highlighted men's direct experiences. The learning resource included the voices of the men as they indicated this would enhance authenticity of the product. The men also indicated the use of their voices increased their feelings of ownership for the completed resource.

A feminist lens identifies that 'patriarchy gives men the power to take responsibility for what they choose to be responsible for' (Horshall, 1991, p. 8). It is therefore essential research involving men who use IPV centralises issues of accountability and responsibility, as all family and domestic violence research should aim to improve outcomes for women and children who are victim-survivors (Keenan, 2012). For the research to highlight equality of participation and to limit power relationships between people (Sayer, 2000; New, 2003), it needed to include examination of power and how power was situated (Letherby, 2011): between researcher and researched students and academics and students and men who use IPV. This critical consciousness (Heron and Reason, 1997) was present at all stages of the research, with structural disadvantage, power and gender being at the heart of the methods, analysis and interpretation of findings. The researcher held this lens, providing ongoing awareness of risks that might arise when researching with men who use violence. These risks include participants legitimising or confirming their existing world views (Black *et al.*, 2010).

The researcher was a lecturer in the university social work programme in which the research was carried out. There are some possible challenges associated with being an insider researcher in higher education environments including maintaining role clarity, balancing roles and power and authority (Humphrey, 2013). The researcher therefore took measures to manage any potential conflicts by ensuring there was no current teaching relationship with the students invited to participate. Information and consent forms indicated participation in the study was voluntary and would not impact student marks or progression in the course.

Sample

All first- and second-year students in a regionally based social work programme were invited by online invitation to participate in a focus group. Four male and eight female students engaged in three focus groups: three student participants attended the first group, four attended the second group and five students engaged in the final group. The cultural background of the students was self-identified as African (30 per cent), Caucasian (60 per cent) and Australian Aboriginal (10 per cent), with 30 per cent being international students and 70 per cent domestic students.

Method

Three focus groups were held over a one-month period. These were held at the university at which the student participants were studying. One format was used for each two-hour focus group. First, students were provided with an individual pre-test questionnaire about the students' views in relation to service user involvement in social work education. This included indicating which groups should or should not be involved in education environments, from the student's viewpoint. Secondly, students undertook a whole-group session in which the PowerPoint and audio resource were viewed. Students were engaged in focus group discussion following this viewing, with the following questions as a guide: do you have any questions or comments about the resource, was there anything that stood out, were there words, expressions or ideas that caught your interest, what do you think was the message being conveyed through the PowerPoint and would the resource impact on your approach to working with men who use IPV? Finally, students undertook a post-test questionnaire which asked students to consider the impact of the learning resource on their views about men who use IPV, including future social work practice with groups such as men who use IPV.

Data analysis

Data analysis was undertaken using NVIVO software. Multiple-choice questions were pooled to allow exploration of similarities or differences between individual responses to each question. For the open-ended responses and the focus group transcripts, a combination of manifest and latent content analysis techniques was utilised (Lune and Berg, 2016). A manifest analysis involves analysing scripts for key terms, ideas or statements that are either unusual or out of place or perhaps used several times by one or more participants. Latent analysis follows this first level of analysis and digs into these terms, ideas and statements, identifying themes that have arisen from the research. Both the manifest and latent levels of analysis were guided by two questions to ensure the feminist research lens was maintained. These questions were adapted from Reid and Frisby (2008):

- How are the experiences of the participants, including students, service users, university staff and the researcher, 'tied to gendered, classed and racialized power relations'? (p. 97).
- How are the parties involved in the research impacted by patriarchies? How are the worldviews of the parties influenced by patriarchies?

The emergent themes are next discussed.

Findings and discussion

A summary of the themes, findings and possible research outcomes is provided below in Table 1. A more thorough discussion of the themes and findings is then provided, connecting these to the literature.

Themes	Finding	Research outcome
The place for service user involvement in social work education	Students indicated this place was one-off sessions in higher education with there being no place for this involvement in assessment	Further research about student views regarding the place for service user involvement in higher education may be warranted
Stigma and preconceptions about service users	Students may have negative preconceived ideas about service users Students may make assumptions about causality of social issues	Service user involvement may improve student knowledge about domestic violence
Future social work practice	Students reported a higher likelihood of working with involuntary service users Students reported a stronger understanding of the safety needs of women and children who are victim-survivors	Service user involvement may help students better under- stand the importance of increasing men's responsi- bility and accountability for their use of violence
The value of co-production	Students reported increased knowledge about co-production	Service user involvement may provide unique insights into the impacts of models of practice such as co-pro- duction and how these can increase men's accountabil- ity for their use of violence

Involuntary service user groups in social work education

The findings from the pre-test questionnaire suggested student participants supported all service user groups being included in social work education. Student participants were divided about how this involvement should occur, with the majority indicating one-off teaching and learning sessions as being appropriate. Few student participants (2 per cent) suggested assessment, research, supervisory roles or tutorial sessions were appropriate spaces for service users and no student participants indicated service users should be involved in the assessment of placements. There is little social work research regarding the challenges and rewards of service user involvement in assessment roles, with any limited research being located mostly in the UK (Crisp et al., 2006). Anka and Taylor (2016) suggest students are reluctant for service users to be involved in assessment processes due to the power that is inherent in marking and assessment roles. Disciplines such as nursing, however, have suggested there is value in service user assessment that moves bevond the practical elements of placement roles (Stickley *et al.*, 2010;

Muir and Laxton, 2012). Skoura-Kirk *et al.* (2013) suggest there are changes needed in social work education to ensure service user involvement in assessment is effective. These include supportive and reflective team relationships between academics and service users and joint formal training to create positive environments for carer and service user involvement in social work assessment.

Challenging stigma and preconceptions

Student participants made comment in the focus group discussion and in their post-test questionnaire on the value of directly hearing the voices of men who use IPV, indicating this was more meaningful than reading these ideas from a book. Student participants suggested hearing the men speak about barriers and enablers to accessing services increased their understanding, empathy, concern and interest in the topic of domestic violence services for men. Student participants indicated that viewing the learning resource had challenged many of their preconceptions about men who use IPV:

one man in particular sounded quite educated, and articulate, and I felt surprised by this. I feel embarrassed now that I had made assumptions that men who use IPV would not speak this well or be intelligent. (Student Participant 4)

Raikes and Balen (2016) reported reductions in stigma when students interacted with mothers in prison and reported greater understanding of the issues these women might encounter due to their service use experiences. Social workers are not immune to holding stigmatised views about service users. Authors such as Gormley and Quinn (2009) suggest service frameworks that focus on recovery, rather than deficit-based approaches, and embrace inclusion of service users in planning and development of services, may provide opportunities to reduce stigmatised views held by social workers.

Seventy per cent of student participants indicated surprise that not all men who participated in the research and developed the learning resource reported adverse childhood experiences.

I was surprised to learn that not all DV perpetrators were subject to abuse as a child or witnessed abuse. I just had made an assumption that they all experience bad childhoods. (Student Participant 2)

Student participants furthered this discussion in the focus groups, indicating this realisation led them to question their beliefs about causality, as they had believed there was a causal link between violence in childhood and use of violence in adulthood. These students indicated they had also believed there was a low chance that people could recover from either experience. Social work as a discipline may be embedded in theoretical ideas that are drawn from the medical model which suggests direct causal pathways for a range of human experiences (Healy, 2014). The medical model is based on a foundational view of normality as bounded, with any deviations from normal being subject to treatment and remediation except for the more complex issues in the human experience (such as mental health issues) which are unlikely to be cured (Byrne *et al.*, 2015). McCormack and Adams (2016) suggest using medical model approaches when working with service users can be debilitating for professionals, leading to work-related distress. Jewkes *et al.* (2015) discuss the low effectiveness of causality approaches with men who use IPV, suggesting there is a stronger likelihood of long-term behaviour change when sociological approaches with a focus on gender norms are utilised instead. The learning resource appeared to offer opportunities to debunk myths and offer alternative viewpoints about causes of and approaches to addressing use of IPV in relationships.

The resource provided opportunities for the researcher to directly challenge student views about IPV. In Focus Group 1, a student participant questioned whether lack of access to domestic violence services could escalate a man's violent behaviours, leading to acts of femicide or familicide. This view had not been suggested in the learning resource. It may be difficult to ascertain if lack of access to services could result in persistent usage or escalation of violence as there is little research that examines what leads to acts of desistance of violence by men who use IPV (Walker et al., 2013). There is research that examines media and societal views of IPV, which reflects the sociological framework for the research described herein. Gillespie et al. (2013) suggest femicide and familicide are presented by media, and understood by societal members, to be independent acts of violence, rather than a final act that follows an earlier pattern of IPV which is most often the case The outcome of this representation of femicide or familicide as a response to a one-off difficult event is it diminishes the responsibility of men who use IPV for their previous use of violence, and/or for their final catastrophic act of taking a life or lives.

The researcher engaged in discussion with the focus group participants to challenge the view that the murder of a partner or child could be attributed to the lack of services, or a one-off difficult event, but should instead be viewed as the final act of extreme violence following a series of earlier violent acts. Research with social work students and graduates has indicated low understanding by both groups regarding the use of power and control by men who use IPV (Black *et al.*, 2010; Crabtree-Nelson *et al.*, 2016). Students in this present study also demonstrated low knowledge about power dynamics in IPV but were amenable to discussions and challenges, perhaps indicating the group-based research design provided opportunities for reflexivity and knowledge development (Probst, 2015). It is important for social work students and practitioners

to question dominant social views and ensure their practice locates responsibility for use of violence solely with men who use IPV.

Future social work practice

All student participants reported a greater willingness to work with people with multiple issues or involuntary or mandated service attendance in their future social work practice. Pope and Kang (2011) reported similar findings with students who engaged with involuntary clients during their social work placement, with students indicating a higher likelihood of seeking out work with involuntary service users, post-graduation.

The student participants also demonstrated new learning about the barriers and enablers men who use IPV may experience when attending domestic violence services for men. One student participant linked this new learning to future practice:

I think if I read these ideas in a book I wouldn't have really understood how serious the issues were and how difficult it was getting the right services. Hearing the story directly from the men made their experiences a reality – it made me worry about women being safe. It made me think about what needs to be done to fix this problem. (Student Participant 8)

In research that examined social work practitioner views about service user involvement in social work education, Hughes (2017, p. 211) suggests social work students experience 'light bulb moments' when they develop learning relationships with service users. Hughes' research suggests one of the positive impacts for social workers is an improved understanding of good practice from a service user's point of view. Greater understanding of service user's perspectives may lead to better identification of appropriate practice approaches. Hughes indicates social workers' first interactions with service users can continue to impact their practice decisions up to ten years post-qualification.

The value of co-production

In all focus groups, student participants reported they did not expect men who use IPV to have valuable insights about the skills and knowledge they need from professionals. Two student participants focused on a particular audio excerpt from the resource in which two men discussed the need for professionals to be authentic about their practice. In this excerpt, the male participants indicated a preference for social workers to talk openly about the models or approaches they may choose to use with the service user.

That was so refreshing! I kind of thought I would need to be an expert in all things – like I would need to know all the theories...and just use them on someone. But now I can see I can just work with the person and talk about what is working or not working for them as we go along. We can learn it together – and that's what the client would prefer! (Student Participant 2)

This made me think about my ideas about social work. I thought in a role with perpetrators the social worker would be taking the lead and trying to *make* them change. I can see now that it is more productive to work alongside the man to [achieve change]. (Student 10)

Students appeared both surprised and relieved that they could engage in collaborative relationships between social worker and service user. In other discussions, a student participant questioned the concept of safety in service provision.

I am thinking now about safety. It seems so strange to be thinking about the safety of the man who uses the violence! But I can see what they were saying—that they need to feel safe, supported and not rejected by workers. If they don't [feel safe with the worker] then they won't be able to change things. If they do change their behaviour...that makes women safer. (Student Participant 4)

The student participants seem to be indicating a better understanding of the benefits of social work practice where there is a shared experience between a service user and a social worker. Co-production between service users and professionals signifies a mutual, reciprocal and respectful relationship, which is equal in nature and recognises the strengths and abilities of each party (Hatton, 2017). Mayer and McKenzie (2017) suggest if service users with multiple presenting issues and professionals each contribute assets, knowledge and resources they can create a relationship of shared decision making and joint responsibility. Bird and Albertson (2011) report involuntary groups, such as prisoners, experience increased self-worth and greater ownership of problematic behaviours when they are included in shaping decisions about service provision. The students in the present study suggested co-production was an approach they wanted to use in their future practice.

The findings suggest students may be positively impacted by service user involvement in social work education, even when that involvement is by mediated approaches. In the next section limitations are discussed, followed by the article conclusion which suggests ramifications of the research.

Limitations

The research described in this article has attempted to meet the call for a more thorough examination of meaningful engagement of service users with multiple presenting issues and/or involuntary or mandated service attendance in social work education (McGinn, 2019). There are some limitations with the study. The three focus groups included twelve student participants. The learning resource was created by a small group of seven service users. The findings should therefore not be extrapolated too broadly. The use of a PowerPoint with audio provided a tool that provided the mediated approach that both students and men who use IPV had requested but this mediated approach also reduced the researcher's ability to have revolving feedback loops between the participant groups. The service user participants in this study were transient, often homeless, lived with mental health and/or addiction issues and attended most services sporadically. The three months to six months they had resided at the therapeutic community where the focus groups took place, was the longest period the men had maintained contact with any service. By the time the resource was shown to students, all service user participants had completed the programme and/or had left the service. This meant the feedback from students could not be relayed back to the service users for consideration. Future research could include faster feedback loops between service user and student participants to facilitate more interaction between the groups.

Conclusion

The findings suggest social work students may hold stigmatised views about service users that can be challenged by service user involvement in social work education. In relation to social work approaches and skills development, the findings suggest social work students experience improved knowledge and understanding of approaches to addressing IPV after they engage in mediated approaches to service user involvement with men who use IPV. Further, service user involvement may offer students opportunities to hear service user perspectives about coproduction approaches, with students considering the value of embracing co-production in social work practice to improve service outcomes. The research described herein used a mediated approach to service user involvement which included service user voices. Despite non-face-to-face engagement, students reported a connection to the service users' experiences through their voices. These types of mediated approaches were identified by service users and students as offering lowered risk but may also offer greater opportunities to engage service user involvement in social work education when face-to-face engagement is not possible, such as for students studying in online environments.

This study is acknowledged to be small and situated in an Australian context, but it has broader ramifications for the academy. A radical revisioning of the ways content about IPV is embedded in social work education may be warranted. It may be that social work education can find space for creative and risk managed approaches to the delivery of content about IPV, including real-world examples that can de-stigmatise student views and increase opportunities for skill-based learning. These educational experiences may then become the 'light-bulb' moments for future social workers.

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