



Overcoming Family Violence: Effective Collaboration for Success

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Introduction: family violence as an issue

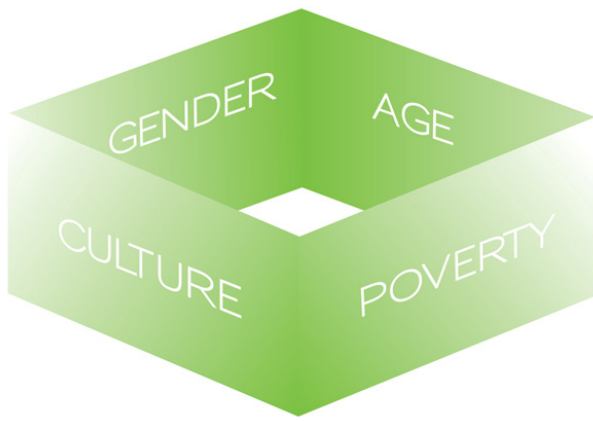
Family violence is a problem across the world – in all countries and all communities. It is an issue – for individuals, families and communities – at two levels. At one level it is an issue of social justice. Individuals and their families ought to be able to live lives free of fear and systemic abuse. At another level it is an issue of development. Family violence brings about dysfunctionality in families that affects their ability (and the ability of the individuals who make up that family unit) to function as effectively as possible as productive members of society. These problems can echo across generations of families. Family violence is a group of activities that, to some extent, are learned and so – if not effectively dealt with – they can easily become multi-generational issues. This complicated mix of background factors, which combined create and environment in which family violence can occur, are difficult not only to identify but also to undo.

In dealing with issues of family violence we need to ensure that we not only deal with the immediate issue at hand – a situation of family violence where an individual or group is at risk of harm – but also work to undo the factors which led to this situation emerging in the first place. In dealing with this necessarily complicated mix of factors a range of external organizations are required and to maximize their effectiveness there is a need for effective collaboration between these organizations.

Characteristics of family violence

In addressing the issue of family violence we need to be aware of the different characteristics that underpin its various manifestations. Family violence is not purely an issue of poverty – although there does appear to be a high correlation of the degree of material deprivation and the incidence rate of family violence. So too, family violence is not purely an issue of cultural mismatch although certain ethnic groups do appear to be over-represented in reporting and incident rates of family violence. Issues of gender and age also appear to be highly correlated, in various ways, with the incidence and reportage rate of family violence.

Family violence is a phenomenon that emerges because of the confluence of a variety of reasons: poverty, cultural alienation, gender effects etc. In our work we utilize our four-fold PACG™ model to better understand how these different issues come together to provide an enabling environment for family violence.



By better understanding the pre-conditions which enable family violence our matrix then is also able to function as a tool to help us understand how best to resolve these issues and so, ideally, reduce the ongoing incidence of violence within families.

However, in utilising our tool to deal with the issue of family violence there are two timeframes in which we need to operate to maximize its effectiveness. The first is the immediate reactive response which is to prevent the immediate manifestation of the violence – including the removal of at risk individuals (removal orders), the banning of contact between violent individuals and family members (restraining orders). The second is the long-term proactive response to understand and then unravel and undo the supporting preconditions that led to the eventual manifestation of family violence within a family unit.

Moving forward

The key issue given the spread of enabling factors that our model helps identify is that resolving them will involve an ability to work across a wide range of sectors across the traditional social policy spectrum – justice, social welfare, economic development etc.

The issue of family violence constitutes a ‘wicked problem’ for social service sectors around the world. Wicked problems are those that have multiple, complex causes with no single straightforward solution, and in which many different types of actors need to be mobilised. Over the past twenty years, a significant body of research has developed that suggests that inter-organisational collaboration is a central feature of successful attempts to deal with wicked problems (Hudson and Hardy 2002).

Successful collaboration can be seen as a necessary, although not sufficient prerequisite for achieving better co-ordination of family violence reduction strategies. A recent review of evidence regarding the effects of inter-organisational collaboration has found that:

There is substantial evidence, particularly from the USA, that shows that collaborative, interdisciplinary and multi-agency services have been successful at providing services, or improving access to services, for groups who otherwise do not have any (or substantially reduced) access to service provision (Rummery 2009).

Successful collaboration, and its absence, can thus impact heavily on disadvantaged populations, who already have limited access to social services, and can so be disproportionately affected by a discontinuity of care. Effective collaboration is thus not just an organisational issue, its absence has a direct impact on the well-being of individuals.

Putting this into practice

There are a range of issues which make putting this type of collaborative approach in practice difficult. These issues include the spread of government across a range of levels, the high mobility of some groups affected by family violence, the role of non-government agencies in addressing family violence issues and the very ‘political’ nature of inter-organizational engagement.

In larger countries one of the key challenges is that the spread of government across a range of levels (national/federal, provincial/state, municipal/local) can make continuity of care a difficult concept to put into practice. As an example, in a particular case the initial response to an incidence of family violence may be by members of a police force which reports to a municipal government authority. The follow up may be by a social worker who works for a Provincial government department. The medical treatment required as a result of the incident may be funded by a Federal program. While all three levels of government are important in an effective response to this particular incident the ability for agencies and individuals working in these three different levels of government to interact effectively, including simple steps like sharing information may be difficult.

These problems are often compounded as the most disadvantaged members of our societies are often highly mobile which can make continuity of care across even a limited geographic area – such as someone moving at several points during the course of a year around one state/province. The remedy for both of these issues is the use of better systems for sharing and transfer of information.

A third issue is that in the majority of countries around the world social services are not delivered purely by government agencies. A variety of non-government and private sector organizations often play important roles in the delivery of these types of services. This

complicates the types of collaborations that are required. While it can be difficult to get different government agencies to collaborate a whole new level of difficulty can emerge when non-government organizations (from either the private or community sector) are brought into the mix.

And, at the most simple level the 'politics' of organizational engagement – conflicting organizational missions, competition over funding, different personalities – can make successful engagement difficult. It is a truism – but people matter! However, good systems and structures can help maximize the potential of 'good' people to make positive interventions in helping overcome family violence (as well as minimize the negative effects of 'less good' people!).

Conclusion

Family violence is a complicated and multi-faceted affair. Emerging out of the interaction of a range of factors there is a need to not only stop, in a reactive sense, incidents of family violence but also undo the various factors which created the environment in which family violence was able to occur. A key issue in

helping bring this about is improved engagement and collaboration between the various organizations involved in preventing and combatting family violence.

Combined, collaborative forms of engagement and intervention should both remove the threat of immediate harm as well undo the enabling factors which led to the emergence of this kind of behavior. Ideally though, the interaction of these interventions and types of engagement should also have a more proactive role in creating an enabling environment for those affected by family violence to flourish as individuals.

References

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Rummery, K. (2009). Healthy partnerships, healthy citizens? An international review of partnerships in health and social care and patient/user outcomes. *Soc Sci Med*, 69(12), 1797-1804.

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