Four considerations in understanding and assessing choices to use violent and controlling behaviour

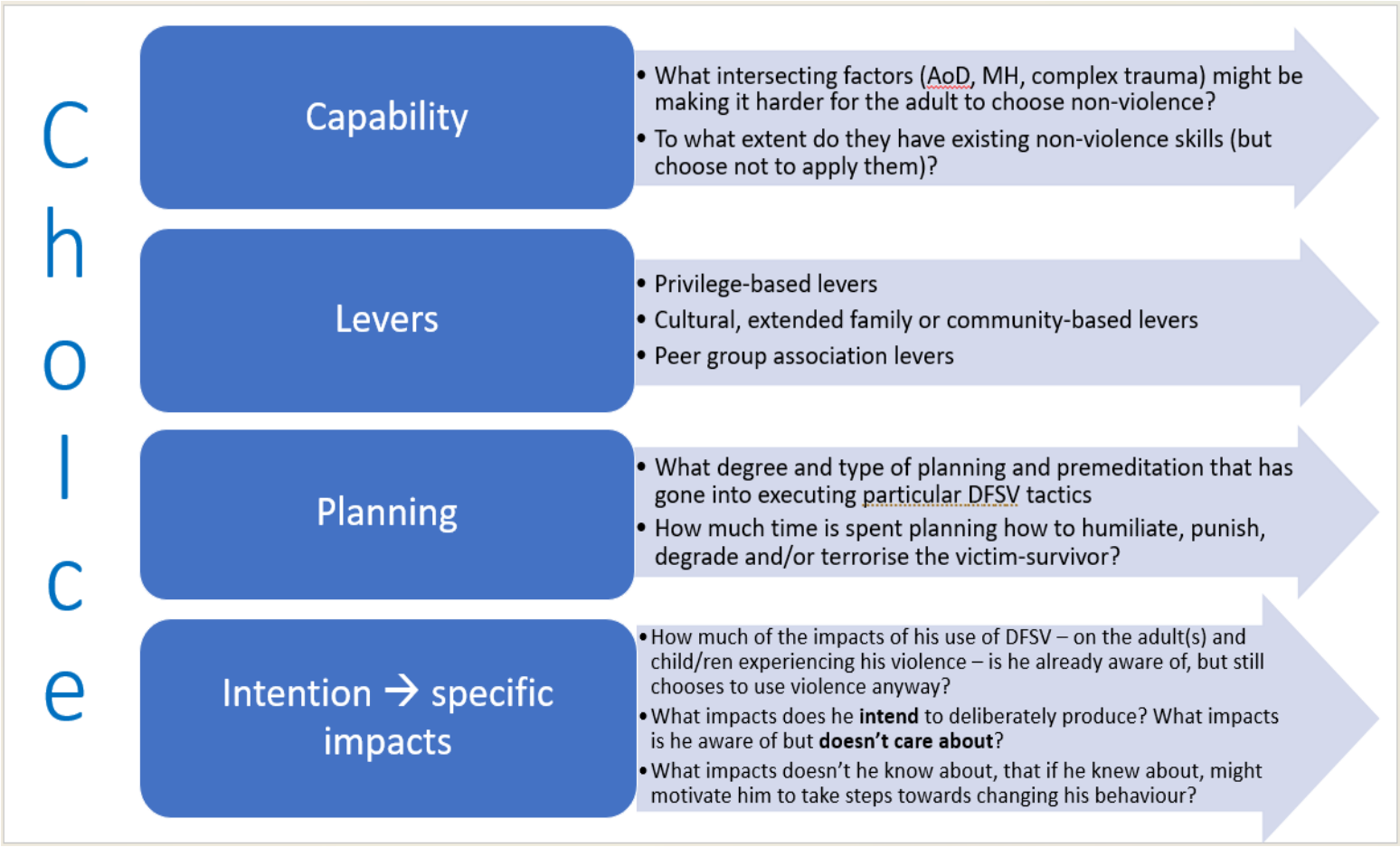
This is an intense and dense read (conceptually and emotionally), designed for practitioners and other responders to adults who cause domestic, family and sexualised violence harm. It is not something that can be read lightly, and is perhaps best to absorb when you have a bit of space.

Adult users of domestic, family and sexualised violence (AUV) are of course not all the same. There are strong commonalities in the violence-supporting (victim-stance) thinking and narratives that many adopt to minimise, deny and rationalise their violent and controlling behaviour (and often, to call it something else), in ways that give themselves the 'green light' to continue to cause harm. However, there are also important differences between them.

Understanding where a user of violence currently sits in relation to these differences can help us adapt our work to be more responsive to the choices he is making, and to the harm caused to adult and child victim-survivors. This understanding can also help us in our ongoing assessments of risk, and of the harm caused by his patterned behaviours.

One set of differences between AUV concerns the nature of the choices they make to use violent and controlling behaviour. The 'little' and big choices involved in creating regimes and systems of coercive control are of course numerous - made daily, sometimes hourly. At the same time, choice is a complex issue.

Unpacking the notion of choice in the context of using DFSV would take a thesis. There's four considerations, however, that I'm finding particularly useful in my supervision (including case discussions), skill-sharing and training provision.



Capability

I have to believe that every adult, in every moment of their lives, is capable of making a choice not to use violent and controlling behaviour. No matter what the circumstance, no matter what is occurring, no matter what the person is experiencing, no matter what they are feeling, no matter what the context. There is never an excuse for the use of domestic, family and sexualised violence.

That doesn't mean that I expect everyone, in every circumstance, to make a non-violent choice (I'm not talking about adult users of DFSV here – there is never an excuse for them to continue to use violent and controlling behaviour). I'm not a pure believer in non-violence, neither philosophically nor even strategically (though non-violence very often has strategic advantages, and ethically I support non-violence very much most of the time). I don't even know if a world *completely* free from violence is even possible.

Oppressed individuals and minority groups facing sustained precarity should be able to use a range of acts of resistance to survive and to limit harms for themselves and their community, including, when absolutely necessary, force. Of course, this can be reappropriated by those with power… we see, again and again, those who are causing harm believing that they are 'the victim' and therefore that they have the right to 'defend themselves', when in reality they are the oppressor and not the oppressed.

My point is that I need to believe that everyone, in every circumstance, is capable of making a choice to use non-violence. That every AUV is *capable* of making choices not to use violent and controlling behaviour. The video *I Am I Can* by Insight Exchange shows this clearly.

AUV, however, are not on a level field in how easy, or difficult, it might be for them to make non-violent choices. A range of factors influence how easy or difficult this might be for the person.

We need to be clear here that none of these factors relate to the victim-survivor, as they are *never the slightest bit responsible* for making it easier for the AUV to make non-violent choices. If a victim-survivor tries to do something to prevent or stop the person using harmful behaviour – something for example to interrupt his pathway of building up to use violence – this is not the same as making him more capable to choose non-violence in these moments. This is about protecting herself and her children. The fact that she is trying, in the moment, to influence his behaviour, to try to make it more likely that he will not use violence, does not mean in the slightest that she is in any way responsible for his capability to choose non-violence.

Where an AUV lays on issues related to capability matters a lot for our approach. They differ greatly, for example, in the skills they have to manage intense emotions.

Many of the men we work with *have* emotional regulation skills, and *have* proven track records of managing uncomfortable emotions in a range of situations. Rather, they choose not to apply these skills with those who are experiencing their use of DFSV because they give themselves the green light not to. Their violence-supporting beliefs (and other factors) not only lead to them experiencing righteous anger, humiliation, intense vulnerabilities, etc., but also, to them making a choice not to use the skills they have to self-manage these things.

These are men who often use overt forms of physical violence only with family members (but who might use some controlling behaviours in some other contexts as well as with their family). Like all(?) men, they draw upon their male entitlement, to varying degrees, to make women responsible for managing their vulnerabilities, a task that is impossible and totally unfair to expect (and demand) of women.

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Then there are other men – who while still capable of making choices not to use violent and controlling behaviours in any situation – are perhaps *less* capable of doing so in certain situations (e.g., when feeling 'threatened', 'abandoned', or 'humiliated'). These men not only choose not to use the skills they have, but they genuinely have less capability in making non-violent choices in certain situations, when experiencing certain things. These might be adults who use violence beyond their family members (e.g., a history of using violence against other men). They might be men who have experienced repeated complex trauma.

There's a lot one could unpack here. But it highlights the difficulty when we work with a diverse group of men or adults in a program, some of whom do need assistance in skills to understand and manage emotional vulnerabilities, and others where 'teaching' them skills they already have might be counterproductive. And this is a continuum, not a binary like the attempt to divide between 'generally violent' and 'family only' perpetrators that we see in some of the literature.

The adults we work with differ in the extent to which they do have skills to manage emotional vulnerabilities. They also differ in the intensity of these vulnerabilities, in what happens for them somatically, physiologically, and emotionally. They further differ in the extent of their entitlement-based, victim-stance attitudes and the degree to which they will choose not to use the skills they have or are learning. It's not binary.

Some might have experienced intense repeated trauma, have totally unfair and unreasonable expectations towards their partner (based on male entitlement and on their 'need' for their partner to 'mother them' towards healing), become totally 'discombobulated' when they perceive themselves to be the victim or that they are being 'abandoned' or 'threatened', have genuinely limited skills to manage these vulnerabilities, and be very unlikely to use the skills they are learning through a program because they are so intent on enforcing their demands and punishing their partner when their expectations (demands) are not met. For others, the relative intensities of some of these things might be less.

The extent to where an AUV lays in each of these things matters in how we work with him. It also matters in terms of our assessments of the degree and nature of the risk he poses to adult and child victim-survivors, the situations in which this risk might escalate, and of the nature of the harms he is causing to child and family functioning.

We need to expect each and every one of these men to make non-violent choices, every time, all the time. Every AUV is capable of stopping their use of violent and controlling behaviour, *right now*. That doesn't mean, however, that each AUV is *equally* capable of making non-violent choices. Capability is more complex than understanding it as a binary.

Contributing factors and complex needs

Also related to capability are contributing dynamic risk factors, of complex needs such as alcohol and other drugs, mental health, housing insecurity, gambling harm, education and employment, financial precarity, and so on. While these are contributing and not causal factors, we know that they matter.

An AUV experiencing complex needs might have less willingness and interest to focus on his use of violent and controlling behaviour through a men's behaviour change program. Factors such as AOD use and mental health can also contribute to the severity of violence or risk, such as the AUV whose agitated, anxious ruminations about his partner 'cheating on him' intensifies while intoxicated. Or the man with intensified beliefs that his former partner has 'ruined him' by ending the relationship, due to depression with a strong hopelessness component, and due to him having very little in his life to fill the vacuum created by the 'identity loss' that his former partner and service system responses have 'caused him'.

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Addressing complex needs such as these (AOD misuse, depression with a strong hopelessness component, loss of employment and identity) will not in itself make the AUV a safe man for current and/or future family members. However, doing so might make it less difficult, and possibly somewhat more likely, that he will choose to use non-violent and non-controlling behaviours at least in the short-term.

Again, we need to take a stand that irrespective of how many and how intense the complex needs are that he experiences, that he is capable, every time, of making non-violent and non-controlling choices. This is the expectation we need to have of each AUV we work with, every time.

Holding this expectation every time, however, doesn't of course mean that we flood him with it, or that we moralise at him. Overly confrontative, moralising approaches, as we know, can lead to felt experiences of shame and humiliation. Inducing shame and humiliation in the AUV is the last thing we seek to do when trying to ally with adult and child victim-survivors in their efforts to build safety and to prise open some space for action back into their lives. How we communicate this expectation that there is never any excuse for violence, will differ from perpetrator to perpetrator, and at different points across our work with him.

While we hold this expectation unwaveringly, at least in the background of our work with each AUV, we also need to be 'real'. Victim-survivors face the realities of the perpetrator causing them harm all the time, and the reality of the systems and institutions in our society that 'shoulder him up' and enable him to continue and intensify the harm. Often having to compromise. Often wondering whether 'small wins' is enough. Often experiencing, again and again, how he 'has won'.

The choice to use non-violence might be harder for an AUV struggling with complex needs. The choice might be genuinely more difficult. As practitioners and responders, we want to *make it easier* that he will choose non-violent and non-controlling behaviours in situations where he often hasn't. Especially at the beginning of our work with him, when we are trying to make some rapid and initial gains in building safety for those who experience his violence.

This is also about making it easier for the AUV to start desisting from some of his coercively controlling behaviours. We know, for example, that an AUV's substance using lifestyle can be intricately interwoven with his coercive controlling patterns. He might he using economic violence, in part, to maintain his family's financial capacity to support his habit. He might be engaging in a range of controlling behaviours so that during times in which he is obsessed with obtaining supply or is craving the substance (and therefore, has a very narrow focus), he can continue to force his partner to be responsible for just about everything required to keep family life ticking over. He might be forcing her into unwanted sex work or criminal activity to acquire money to feed his habit. He might be using a range of social violence, emotional abuse and acts of micro-aggression and micro-humiliations to make her cover up for the impacts of his substance use to his employer, friends, extended family, etc.

Think of mental health, for example anxiety. It is likely that an AUV with an anxiety disorder might use coercive controlling behaviours to make his family members act in ways that don't 'trigger' his anxiety. An AUV with obsessive compulsions, for example, might coerce family members to comply with his compulsive routines or anxiety-avoidant behaviours. The anxiety disorder doesn't cause his use of coercive control, but addressing it might make it easier, in the short-term, to work with the AUV on the factors that are driving his coercive controlling violence.

The AUV's experience of anxiety is no excuse for his use of coercive control. We want to make it easier, however, for him to choose non-controlling alternatives, rather than keep choosing to draw upon his male entitlement, keep choosing to feed his violence-supporting beliefs, and to keep choosing to blame his family members for 'making him feel anxious'.

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Again, we need him to make non-violent and non-controlling choices even when he's intoxicated. Even when he's craving the substance. Even when he's coming down from a period of intoxication. Even when his anxiety is hitting the roof. Even when he's feel totally distraught due to intense feelings of trauma-related abandonment and unworthiness. 'But', particularly in our early work with him, when we are trying to make 'quick' gains in building safety for family members, doing what we can to make these choices easier for him can really matter.

All this differs between each AUV we work with. Not all of the men have experienced repeated, complex trauma. Some men who have experienced significant adverse childhood experiences have genuine difficulties in regulating emotions in a range of situations, others have more skills to draw upon. Not all of the men have complex needs as contributing factors, and for those this do, how this impacts their capability to make non-violent choices differ. This matters in our approach, and in our assessments of risk and harm.

Shame

To briefly pick up a thread introduced a few paragraphs ago, AUV differ in their capacities to sit with shame. Some AUV will ignore experiencing shame at almost any cost. These can be adults who experience considerable shame anxiety, where shame is a chronic issue. They don't just experience intense, acute shame (that rises and falls 'rapidly') when they allow themselves to face up to how their behaviour has violated core aspects of their identity and values system; they also experience a constant underlying sense of shame in who they are, and are underlying highly anxious that they will be exposed as the worthless individuals that deep down they believe themselves to be.[1] And of course, there is collective shame, that AUV can experience when they are part of a minority group or community that suffers repeated experiences of being hated at, receiving messages and responses frequently that they shouldn't exist. When trauma is collectively experienced and intergenerational.

Shame is complex, and the men we work with differ in how they experience shame, and in their skills in being able to sit productively in shame. I believe that with *some* men, we 'molly coddle' them maybe just a little bit too much, perhaps even mother them too much, and inherently give them the message that we don't think they can deal with strong emotions like shame. Maybe this thinking comes from the part of me that just wants to yell al these men "grow up, stop acting like a three year old!".

We also, however, understandably need to be careful not to flood men with experiences of shame. There are definitely some men where we need to be very careful not to lead them into shame states that they can't handle, as for these men shame can so easily equal humiliation and therefore danger to those who experience his violence.

Being shouldered up to use violence and control

Another issue regarding capability is to what extent has the AUFV been shouldered up to use DFSV by influential others in his life, and by the communities and institutions he's been a part of. It could be argued – bleakly and bluntly – that for men in general in a patriarchal society, a journey towards non-violence and non-controlling ways of being, to not cooperate with the male privilege and entitlement men have by virtue of being socialised as men, is a radical journey. That the default option is to use violence and control because systemic and structural patriarchy shoulders men up to benefit from male entitlement and privilege in a number of ways, including through the use of violence and male supremacy.

[1] Note, this does not mean that these men need more 'self-esteem'.

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Without opening up debates and complexities that would require yet another thesis, there is no doubt that some of the men we work with, more than others, have been shouldered up by their communities over the course of their life to use violence and control. Some men's use of coercive control is *heavily invested*, and has been so since they were young. Coercive control in the context of DFSV is patriarchal, *and* it is sometimes heavily biographical.

Some men began using patterned coercive control in their teens, shouldered up by peers who, like them, experienced repeated abuse and/or neglect, and began to build an identity of value and acceptance through dominant masculinities associated with violence and control, risk taking behaviour, and substance use. Coercive control becomes wrapped up in an attitude towards relationships and life, of how one needs to relate to others to ensure respect and to not be taken advantage of. And wrapped up in what it means to be a man in a heterosexual relationship. A way of being and understanding the world that becomes heavily invested (and entrenched, to various degrees) in his 20's and 30's.

Some men are shouldered up by other influences to use DFSV (discussion of child sexual abuse to follow – if you'd like to skip this, ignore the rest of this paragraph and continue from the next paragraph). For example, the boy who was sexually abuse by his father or an elder sibling, blames his mother for 'not protecting him', becomes exposed to misogynist influencers on social media, and develops an orientation towards degrading and punishing women in his relationships (and expecting that they should heal him). His experience of child sexual abuse in itself isn't responsible for him developing controlling and demeaning ways of relating to women in his adulthood intimate relationships (and more broadly). The social media and other micro- and macro-communities (e.g. peer groups) that he belongs or belonged to have shouldered him up to do so, by influencing the meaning that he makes out of events in his life such as his experiences of being abused.

Being shouldered up to use DFSV doesn't mean that one isn't capable of making non-violent and non-controlling choices. But the more that one has been enabled by communities and influencers that one feels akin to, especially if this has occurred biographically over long periods of time, the more difficult it will be for the AUV to make these choices. This relates to the second general consideration of choice I will explore below – privilege levers.

There are many factors that can influence how difficult it might be for an AUV to make non-violent, non-controlling choices. It's no wonder that AUV who participate in behaviour change programs respond in different ways and journey towards non-violence (or even further away from it) at different paces. This work requires us to not come from a singular stance that all (or even most) AUV need skills in emotional regulation, or that all (or even most) have been deeply traumatised, or that all are equally capable of making non-violent and non-controlling choices.

There is so much to assess – and of course, our assessments will always be imperfect. I liken assessment to having a suitcase or an internal USB drive in our minds full of the important things that ideally we'd like to assess each time with each AUV – and to assess on an ongoing basis as new information and insights come to hand.

We need to console ourselves however to the reality that with each assessment, we might only get a window into a few of the things, and not necessarily most of them. It feels important to be on a journey to understand the fullness of the contents of the suitcase or USB drive, so that we know what's important to assess when we can… so that we can take opportunities as they come to identify serious risk and harm.

And so that we can predict the types of (possibly upcoming) circumstances in which the AUV might escalate their use of violent and controlling behaviour.

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Levers

Related to the concept of shouldering-up are the levers that an AUV might draw upon, that:

- enables him to extend his tactics of coercive control, and/or to introduce new ones, either because the lever knowingly supports and colludes with his behaviour at least to some degree, or is unknowingly being manipulated or used without intending to collude;
- provides access to resources that he can use to maintain or extend his tactics of coercive control;
- covers up for his use of DFSV; and/or
- participates directly in the use of DFSV against the victim-survivor(s).

Of course, there are levers everywhere that AUV can use and deploy – this is why the odds are so often stacked up against victim-survivors, why their options and choices can be so limited. The numerous levers available to AUV enable them to enact the 'trap wires' or 'fence wires' that victim-survivors often experience for themselves and their children (see the excellent Insight Exchange resource *Being Safety*,[2] one of the most important reads for any practitioner or responder seeking to support women and children experiencing DFSV).

While levers are 'in the water' of our patriarchal society, AUV vary significantly in the extent, nature and range of levers that they can draw upon. For example, some have greater access to *privilege levers* than others, such as through being in hierarchical positions of corporate or other forms of economic, social or political power, or through being part of law enforcement or intelligence agencies, defence forces, or legal systems. Some have peer associations that can act as levers. There are also extended family or cultural contexts, such as when the extended family of an AUV joins in with the use of honour-based violence.

The lever considerations here are of course numerous. However, assessing which levers – privilege levers and otherwise – are being used by the AUV, matters a lot in understanding the choices he is making, and in understanding the risk he poses and the harm caused by his coercive controlling patterns. Knowing the range and nature of these levers also matters in how we respond to him, including in our risk management plans and strategies.

They further matter in how we partner with adult and child victim-survivors to reduce these harms: sometimes, the most important work we can do is to help them to open up the space between the trap/fence wires to improve their space for action, by focusing on the levers being used by the AUV... where we can, where we might have some influence.

Understanding privilege levers also helps us to ally with victim-survivors in not leaving them alone to manage risk. Some risk management options are not easily available to victim-survivors because the perpetrator would have 'too much too lose'. Users of DFSV who benefit from significant leadership, executive, reputational or other forms of status and power might become more dangerous if their status and entitlements are threatened due to service system and victim-survivor responses.

As a result, victim-survivors are often left carrying risk for themselves and their children over years, yet our service systems are not set up to support her over this long-term. With AUV who has significant privilege levers, often our most important work is patient, multi-agency collaboration to try to open up more options for her to take to manage risk and limit harms.

[2] https://www.insightexchange.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Being-Safety.pdf

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It is crucial that victim-survivors are not left alone to manage the blowback if as a result of service system and other responses, the AUV feels that his status and entitlements are being 'taken away from him'. AUV make meaning out of each and every response directed towards them. We can anticipate and monitor the meaning that the AUV is making. We can do our best to follow the victim-survivor's lead[3] to determine what responses to the AUV might or might not be safe at the current point in time, versus what might be taking too much of a risk. We can collaborate across services, led by the victim-survivor's voice, to try to make options and responses that might be too much of a risk now, more possible at a later or upcoming point. Too often, victim-survivors are left along to manage the blowback.

Planning

The use of each violent and controlling behaviour by an adult causing DFSV harm is a choice, each and every time. However, when and how the choice is made differs.

Sometimes, a choice is made 'in the heat of the moment', where the AUV didn't wake up that morning choosing to engage in a particular act of violence or coercive control, but rather, chose to do so perhaps minutes or even seconds before carrying out the act. Of course, what makes the choice easier in these moments is that the AUV has made the same or similar choices before, over and over again.

Indeed, the AUV has not only made the choice during these moments to use violence and control, they've made choices not to engage in efforts to pay attention to the numerous signs that they are on a path towards making that choice in the moments and hours leading up to the act. Of course, he might not be very motivated to understand this path, due to his violence-supporting thinking and beliefs system giving him the green light to use these acts to control, enforce his demands, and to punish. He might, or might not, have much genuine interest at a particular point in time in our work with him towards learning about these opportunities to disrupt the path. Each AUV differs, and will respond differently to behaviour change program explorations of mapping chains of circumstances — body-reactions — feelings — cognitions — decisions/actions leading up to the 'incident'.

Other choices, however, are not made in the 'heat of the moment'. Many coercive controlling behaviours require planning, thought, even a degree of research. They can't just be implemented in the moment.

We can talk here about 'upstream' and 'downstream' choices. As mentioned above, even downstream choices, where the choice is made in the 'heat of the moment', involve a series of choices made a bit less downstream that work towards the user of violence making that downstream choice (maybe you could call these choices 'midstream', or 'midstream entering downstream'). Earlier series of choices that lay the ground/foundations for this downstream choice.

This is of course at the heart of preliminary safety planning and early behaviour change work, to help the AUV identify the choices he makes that are a bit less downstream and that lay the foundations for the downstream act of violence, and to see the extent to which he is motivated to make alternative choices that interrupt his characteristic pathways towards choosing to use violence 'in the heat of the moment'. By doing so, we get to learn the belief-based, motivational and other barriers that lead him to hesitate putting effort into addressing these choices that he often makes along the path towards using violent and controlling behaviour.

[3] See the great Insight Exchange resource https://www.insightexchange.net/follow-my-lead/

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We also of course explore with him values, core aspects of his identity, aspirations, etc. that are not consistent with these choices, and help him to use this dissonance as motivational fuel to work towards making different choices. As we go along, we assess:

- the extent to which he can genuinely reach into values, aspirations and aspects-of-identity inconsistent with the continued use of violence;[4]
- how other parts of his value system might continue to support his use of violent and controlling behaviour;[5]
- how he might weaponise values such as trust, fairness, respect and safety to justify his behaviour rather than critique it;[6] and
- where self-efficacy[7] and response-efficacy[8] sits in relation to him being able to be a preferred self even if he allows himself to experience the dissonance and sit in the resulting shame.

We also get to see what other acts of violent and controlling behaviour he makes along this path towards the 'incident' of violence. The various controlling and harmful behaviours he uses in the moments and hours leading up to the 'incident' together make up the whole *episode* of his use of violence.

But in addition to these less downstream choices made and behaviours used in the moments and hours leading up to the 'incident', some AUV, more than others, engage in substantial upstream planning and efforts to conceive of and execute their coercive controlling tactics. A lot of thinking and research time, done when they are not 'in the heat of the moment' in terms of heightened emotion.

AUV vary in the amount of time and effort they put into upstream planning of coercive controlling tactics. Most put at least some planning and effort in – I haven't met many AUV who *only* make violent and controlling choices in the heat of the moment. But AUV differ significantly in the amount of upstream time and effort they put in to control family members. Even amongst two AUFV who both adopt significant patterns of coercive control, the nature and degree of upstream planning can differ. Some put in substantial planning, such that it's their 'mission in life' to control, degrade, punish, humiliate her. Others put in much less, or relatively less.

The breadth and width of a perpetrator's tactics of coercive control, and the amount and nature of the upstream planning and preparation adopted to execute them, can say a lot about the seriousness of risk, and the extent of harms on child and family functioning.

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[4] Just supporting the AUV to choose a few values from a values list and to talk about them for 20 minutes or so isn't sufficient… working with him to identify, keep coming back to, thicken and to genuinely explore a value system that is incompatible with the continued use of violent and controlling behaviour, a value and ethical system that *is meaningful for him*, and not just something we superficially attempt to impose through a single 'becoming the man you want to be' activity (as useful as these activities can be), is one of the many core challenges of our work.

[5] AUV sometimes have 'elephants in the room' values that they draw upon to support their use of violent and controlling behaviours. These values and aspects of their identity can be deeply held.

[6] "She is never *fair* to me!" "You can't *trust* women these days…"

[7] "I couldn't be that man even if I tried… that man I'd like to be is out of reach …"

[8] "I'd like to be that man, and I could if I tried, but that's not going to wash in my world. Take your lattes and your feminist beliefs to a café. Out here, you have to be tough to be fair, and being honest means calling a spade a spade…"

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Intention to cause specific impacts

The final consideration focuses on the intention of the AUFV to cause specific impacts stemming from the use of violent and controlling behaviour. This is complex to outline, as of course all violent and controlling behaviours are intentional, in the sense that each behaviour is designed to produce one or more specific impacts.

Even when a choice is made to use violent or controlling behaviour in the heat of the moment, the choice comes with an intention to produce particular impacts. An AUV who calls his partner a 'slut' is often (though not always) intending to demean her sense of worth so that, in his view, she is less likely to want to 'sleep with other men'. An AUV who makes a rapid choice to stand over and punch the wall next to her is intentionally using fear to try to control her behaviour ("don't you ever do that to me again…"). An AUV who follows his partner while they are moving to another room to escape his escalating violence is making a deliberate choice to attempt to overpower their resistance and to tune out (or not care about) their signs of distress and their humanity, and to tune into his own ruminative victim stance cognitions and thought-stacking.[9]

There is always intent. However, each violent and controlling behaviour, and each pattern of behaviours, has a range of impacts. And of course, the impacts of any particular violent or controlling behaviour depends on the previous impacts of this behaviour, how and when this behaviour has been used in the past, and the impacts of other behaviours that the AUFV uses.

While an AUV engages in a choice to use violent and controlling behaviour to produce particular impacts – whether that choice is made downstream in the heat of the moment, or upstream involving significant research and planning – he is generally not aware of the full range of the impacts of that behaviour. In other words, there are some impacts he is aware of and is intending, and other impacts he is probably not aware of.

For example, he might be aware that the impact of a particular behaviour is to make his ex/partner too afraid to do something that he doesn't want her to do, or too afraid to not do the behaviour he believes she should be expected to do (the behaviour he believes he is entitled to). He might be deliberately using fear in these situations as a means of control, and to silence resistance or dissent. Or he might deliberately be using gaslighting so that she continues to doubt herself and her reality. Or he might use numerous other tactics, all with intent to cause particular impacts towards a goal of controlling her behaviour.

He is aware of these particular impacts – he is *intending* to produce them.

However, there are other impacts of these behaviours that he might or might not be aware of. He might or might not, for example, be aware that she is losing all respect for and trust in him. He might or might not be tuned into how real intimacy between them has been eroded in their relationship. He might or might not be aware that he is actually losing a lot of self-respect (within himself) by continuing these behaviours. He might or might not be aware that his son is starting to disrespect girls at school, or that his children are falling behind academically or are beginning to act very cautiously around him.

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[9] Because these cognitions are so automatic, and often because there is ruminative anxiety associated with them, AUV generally aren't very aware of the specific thoughts they are thinking when making heat of the moment choices to use violence, and aren't aware of the choices they make to thought-stack and to stew in these thoughts. Some of the choices made by AUV are without the adult being aware at the time that they are making the choice, such as to stew in particular violence-supporting cognitions. Of course, other choices are made with full awareness at the time.

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And if he is aware of these impacts, or some of them, he might, or might not, care. Or he might care (or not-care) about these impacts in particular ways.

AUV differ in the extent of awareness of the impacts of their violent and controlling behaviours. One AUV might become distressed to learn of the specific impacts of his behaviour on his children, and potentially become motivated to change some aspects of his behaviour as a result;[10] another might be seeking to produce these very impacts on his children, to prove to authorities that his partner is not a fit mother, or be attempting to alienate his children from her.

As a further example, one AUV might not be attempting to place a wedge between their children and his partner, or not be attempting to destroy her worth as a mother, but nevertheless his violent and controlling actions towards her produce these very impacts; while another AUV might not only be producing these impacts, but be *intending to produce them and knowingly produces them*.

It's fair to ask "but doesn't it matter what the intention is, we don't consider behaviour to be violent or not according to the intentions behind the behaviour, we focus on the impacts. If the impacts are the same, why does it matter?"

I believe it does matter, as the intention behind the behaviour says something about the seriousness of risk, and the degree of harm caused to adult and child victim-survivors. In general, AUV who are more aware of the range of impacts that their violent and controlling behaviour causes, and who continue these behaviours despite knowing these impacts, are likely to be further along the high-risk high-harm spectrum.

Not only does it matter when it comes to our risk and harm assessments, it also matters in terms of our approach.

We often hear that 'perpetrators are not aware of…' as a blanket statement, rather than taking the approach of being curious about what each AUV is and isn't aware of. If an AUV is knowingly producing particular impacts because that's tied up in his mission to control, punish and to hurt the victim-survivor, or he considers these impacts to be 'collateral damage'[11] based on his righteous sense that he is being denied his 'rights' and denied what he feels 'entitled to', then we need to think carefully about our work with him. 'Educating' him about these impacts might not be a useful approach – it might even cause inadvertent harm if the AUV is left with an even better understanding of how to approach their mission to control, entrap and punish.

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[10] As I might outline at another time, I find overall assessments of 'motivation to change' simplistic. I've come across so many AUV where it seems not very helpful – if not counter-productive – to ascribe a singular 'motivation to change' stage. The motivational journey by an AUV can be uneven across different parts of their patterns of DFSV. An AUV might be in contemplation or action stage with respect to not exposing his children to his use of violence, but be deep in pre-contemplation in relation to his use of sexualised violence. Or he might be at the action stage with respect to desisting from the use of physical violence, but just entering contemplation in terms of the use and impacts of emotional violence. I have found so many AUV who have been assessed as being in the 'contemplation' or even 'preparation' stages who are still firmly pre-contemplative in the use of some of their coercive controlling behaviours that have a substantial impact on his family members.

[11] Of course, many AUV will not describe these impacts as 'collateral damage', as they do not want to appear as 'callous'. However, while they might not use this language, we can assess the extent to which they truly do care about these impacts, through how they respond to our engagement and interventions with them, the discourse they use during sessions, and what violent and controlling behaviours they continue to use.

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And amongst those who are aware of more of the impacts of their behaviour, there's still nuanced considerations.

One AUV, for example, might be aware that his partner's mental health is suffering badly because of his sustained use of coercive control – and that's exactly what he's intending to produce. Another, however, while equally aware of these impacts, isn't so much on a mission to undermine his partner's mental health, but rather simply doesn't care if this is a 'by product' of his behaviour, because he so intensely believes that he has been wronged by them and that "if they can't take what I'm dishing up to them, they should get out of the kitchen and stop being in my face all the time about…". A third AUV might be somewhat oblivious to how their partner's mental health state is deteriorating because he is so self-focused; this AUV, if supported skilfully and at the right time to become aware of these impacts, might become somewhat motivated to change some aspects of his behaviour.

In other words, key questions include:

- → What impacts of his use of violent and controlling behaviour is he aware of?
- → To his ex/partner? To his children? To others? To himself?
- → What impacts is he not aware of?
- → What impacts is he intending to produce?
- → What impacts (to his ex/partner, to his children) is he not intending to produce?
- → What would his reaction be if he started learning about these impacts? (noting this could be different depending on who is being impacted)
- → Would he care? Does he seem to care? What might be care about?
- → Would he feel some shame or distress, would 'facing up' to the impacts assist him towards developing some degree of internal motivation to change (some aspects) of his violent and controlling behaviour? Can he be helped to see how these impacts are not consistent with who he wants to be, for how he wants to live his life?
- → Is there potential for an awareness of these impacts to create cognitive dissonance with his values, aspirations and cherished aspects of his identity?
- → What impacts can be explored with him 'safely' within his current zone of shame tolerance?
- → Or would he consider these impacts to be 'collateral damage'? How strong is his righteous sense of vindication and justification to continue using these behaviours?
- → What impacts is he willing to walk past, to tune out of, because of the strength of his mission to control, punish, seek 'justice' or entrap?
- → What impacts can he justify living with because he doesn't see them as impacts of his behaviour, but rather, the result of his ex/partner's actions?[12]
- → Would he be interested in learning about these impacts because he is looking for new ways to intensify or maintain his control and social entrapment, new ways to punish and make life hell for his ex/partner, particularly given now that the system is watching and he has to learn new ways to achieve his goals?

[12] "These impacts on our children will stop right now if she drops her unreasonable demands…"

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Concluding thoughts

Our behaviour change work with adults who use DFSV continues to evolve. I've written about a tiny fraction of this learning here. Or maybe it's not all learning, but rather new ways of describing what we always knew, or sort-of knew.

How do we apply this learning? In part, the implications are spending more time with each AUV in our interventions and programs, to understand them more as individuals, and to combine this individual-based understanding with the power of the group. But we come up against constraint after constraint – funding limitations, workforce limitations, contractual limitations and the administrative pressure of 'moving bums through seats', and of course AUV pressures (who do not want more intense or longer programs).

It's glib to say that we need to work 'smarter' with the time we have with AUV in our interventions and programs. I don't know what the 'answers' are. I just know that despite all the pressures, we can't have monolithic expectations of our programs.

Desistance for the use of violent and controlling behaviour is a journey. Especially when we consider secondary and tertiary desistance.[13] Our programs and interventions are one, and only one influence on AUV desistence journeys. Where each program participant is at on a desistence journey at the end of their participation in a program, compared to the point in which they started, will differ from participant to participant.

Being responsive to these differences perhaps means, in our men's behaviour change programs, combining group-work with some 1-1 sessions. Not as an add-on, but as an essential component of the program.

It also means thinking about how we respond when someone is down very deep rabbit holes of feeling justified to hurt their family members. Or when the task for them to stop using violent and controlling behaviour might be harder for them than it might be for others. Or when they are starting to put, or have been putting, a lot of upstream planning into their controlling behaviours. Or when they appear not to be motivated to take steps towards behaviour change through increased awareness – even when introduced very carefully and gradually – of the harm they are causing. Or when they might be aware of these very harms, and are intending to cause them, or when for various reasons they don't seem to care.

Or when they are some of these things, and not others. Or all of these things. Or some of these things at this current point in time, but maybe not at another time.

Sometimes, having a responder(s) who knows where an AUV is at with some of these things, even when the adult is not likely at the moment to take significant (or any) steps towards behaviour change, can be of help to victim-survivors. Sometimes it can help them to feel and be less alone in managing risk, and in trying to limit the harms caused by the person's behaviour.

[13] Primary desistance = stopping the behaviour. Secondary desistance = becoming a 'new me' who no longer wants to engage in the behaviour. Tertiary desistance = finding a community that values this 'new me' and with whom values and aspirations of non-violence are shared.

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