

BOOK REVIEW

OUT OF CONTROL: Stories of Men who are Leaving Violence and Partner Abuse Behind, compiled by Colin Iles (Wellington, Pacific Education Resources Trust, 1996) 160 pp.

Section 32(1) of the Domestic Violence Act 1995 states that in the absence of a good reason, the Court must direct a respondent (or associated respondent) to attend a stopping domestic violence programme on the making of a protection order. A direction to such a programme is a condition of a protection order and failure to attend constitutes a breach of that order, punishable by a maximum penalty of 6 months in jail or a \$5,000 fine. The recently decided case of *C v P*,¹ moreover, demonstrates that attendance at a stopping violence programme is a factor that may be considered by the Court in deciding issues of custody and access under section 16B of the Guardianship Act 1968. In *C v P*, a father supported his application for custody by leading evidence that he had “undergone counselling and attended 80 per cent of a stopping violence course which he claims has resulted in a changed attitude to women and violence.”² A psychologist testifying for the father, moreover, stated that “the ability to understand and empathise with the effects of violent behaviour are an important goal in stopping violence programmes.”³

The implementation of the Domestic Violence Act on 1 July 1996 has highlighted the importance of stopping violence groups as a tool for decreasing the incidence of intimate partner violence in New Zealand. It has also underscored concerns about the content of such programmes and their effectiveness. One of the oldest ongoing New Zealand stopping violence programmes, the Hamilton Abuse Intervention Project (or HAIP),⁴ is an education course based on a power and control analysis of domestic

¹ [1996] NZFLR 415.

² *Ibid.*, 421. Despite his participation in the stopping violence programme and the testimony of his current partner that he was not abusive to her, the Court found that the father was still engaging in psychologically abusive behaviour to his former partner and rejected his custody application and ordered supervised access.

³ *Ibid.*, 425.

⁴ For a discussion of the various men's and women's programmes offered by HAIP, an analysis of the protocols entered into between HAIP and statutory and community agencies working in domestic violence related areas, and a presentation of the HAIP interagency approach, see Busch and Robertson, “What's Love Got to Do With It: An Analysis of an Intervention Approach to Domestic Violence” (1993) 1 Waikato Law Review 109.

violence. It does not utilise anger management or therapeutic techniques but instead focusses on the self-defeating nature of men's violence for themselves (including arrest and conviction), their partners and their children. Participants are introduced to an alternative model of relationships based on equality and respect.

A 1995 evaluation of HAIP stopping violence groups suggested that unless men were compelled to attend such programmes (through the imposition of Court sanctions for non-compliance), they would usually drop out prior to completion.⁵ For example, more than 70% of men who self-referred themselves to HAIP, typically as a result of pressure from their partners or alternatively because they are facing impending court proceedings, failed to complete their 26 week education course. Even for those men ordered to attend HAIP programmes by the courts, approximately one-third managed to avoid attending the entire programme.⁶

In terms of an evaluation of "success" of the programme, the 1995 survey of programme participants⁷ reported that 88% of them stated that they had been motivated by the programme to make changes in their behaviours. Nearly all of them (93%) stated that they were behaving in less violent ways since participating in the programme. Significantly, however, questioning these men's partners highlighted concerns about the veracity and/or ability of programme participants to realistically assess changes in their behaviour. Only 28% of the women whose partners attended the men's programmes felt that their partners had in fact reduced their violence. Another 26% stated that they had experienced both negative and positive changes as a result of their (ex) partners' participation, 33% said that they had not experienced any change and 13% of the women, stated that the course had resulted in negative changes only.⁸

The results of the HAIP survey together with the Domestic Violence Act's emphasis on respondents' programmes make *Out of Control* a timely and important book. The aim of the book is stated in its introduction:

This book has been written primarily as a resource for men who abuse their partners. I hope it will encourage them to seek help by showing them how other men have successfully dealt with similar problems. I hope too it will assist women in abusive

⁵ Dominick, C, *Overview of the Hamilton Abuse Intervention Pilot Project Evaluation* (April 1995) 45.

⁶ Idem.

⁷ Ibid., 50.

⁸ Ibid., 49.

relationships to recognise exactly what is happening to them, and give them strategies to escape the abuse.⁹

The main strengths of *Out of Control* are its optimistic approach, the interest value of the stories told, and the informative discussion about theories of domestic violence. Strategies to avoid violence are provided together with a discussion of key concepts such as "anger" and "equality." The book includes the "Power and Control Wheel"¹⁰ alongside the "Equality Wheel," underscoring the idea that domestic violence exists alongside avenues for change. "The cycle of male domestic violence" is diagrammatically explained and there is a welcome description of the cycle from the abused woman's perspective, highlighting how different her reality is from that of her partner's. Throughout the book, difficult terms are explained and simplified, making the book accessible to the general reader. The book is also interesting for those with a legal or psychological background. A list of men's groups in New Zealand is included, providing a practical source of help for men reading this book.

Colin Iles purposely focuses on "success stories" in this book. It is, therefore, an optimistic book, so hopeful in fact that one wonders whether his approach may cloud the actual reality of how many men do stop their violent behaviours. Iles courageously includes a chapter on his own experiences. His final words are indicative of the tone of the book: "My hope is that abusive men will find inspiration for change from the stories in this book."¹¹

The stories range from details of extreme physical violence to patterns of seemingly minor psychological abuse. The incidents are often shocking and keep the reader aware of the gravity of the issues involved. Though the stories are told by men from various socio-economic backgrounds, all include the use of similar tactics of power and control, including isolation and the withdrawal of emotional support. The ways in which women managed to leave the abusive situations and the effect this had on their male partners are also enlightening. Many provide insights into how perpetrators can act from fear, jealousy and ignorance.

The introduction by Iles gives an explanation of the research methodology used. The stories are from men who attended stopping-violence and anger

⁹ Iles, *Out of Control* (1996) 9.

¹⁰ See *supra* this volume.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 34.

management courses at least one year before the interviews. Strict criteria were applied to those stories that would be included:

- a) The story had to be corroborated by the abuser's current partner and
- b) the man had to be presently living in a relationship without physical violence and with a "manageable level" of other forms of abuse. Problematically, this "manageability" judgment was made by the man and his current partner.

Iles discusses the cultural make-up of the interviewees in the introduction. All the men included are tauiwi, the majority Pakeha. An excellent interview with a Samoan man who facilitates stopping-violence courses for Pacific Islander men is included but that is the only story from a Pacific Island perspective and there are no stories from Maori men. Iles justifies this by explaining that invitations were given, but that non-Pakeha preferred to work within their own cultural frameworks. These omissions highlight the need for a similar book (or books) dealing with male Maori and Pacific Island abusers. They also highlight a major difference between the HAIP model and the one used by Iles, namely HAIP's commitment to running culturally appropriate programmes for Maori men which, along with a power and control focus, deal with issues of colonisation and institutional racism and the ways in which these factors impact on Maori perpetrators' attitudes towards women.

The structure of the reported interviews consists of short, open-ended questions from Iles (in bold type), long statements from the men, and comments from their partners (in italics). As most of the interviews are conducted in the presence of both the abuser and his partner (often the victim), I have concerns about how candid the women are in their comments. Will a woman who has been subjected to repeated instances of domestic violence be willing to comment openly and truthfully about the perpetrator's story when he is in the same room? The following statement by a battered woman excerpted from the story of "David and Sue" might well have been different if David had not been present. As mentioned, Sue's comments are in italics:

I'd take pride in saying 'Don't give me a hard time or I'll bury you fifty feet down, alive.'

*It sounds silly now, but believe me, it was scary.*¹²

¹² Ibid., 30.

In an individual interview, would Sue have been so ready to describe threats of violence as “silly”? There are limits as to how much an abused partner can put fear behind her and also about whether a violent relationship can be transformed into one where the victim feels safe to disagree with her partner, especially in his presence.¹³

While the atmosphere of optimism created by *Out of Control* should not be undermined, questions must be asked about the sincerity of some of the male participants. Are they telling the whole story, even as *they* know it? What details have they chosen to leave out in their recollections? Are they likely to give a full and honest account of their violence? Given what is known about the ways in which perpetrators use minimisation and trivialisation of their violence as tactics of abuse¹⁴ as well as the ways in which they tend to see themselves as having “reformed” despite their partners’ reports of continuing abuse,¹⁵ one can only be sceptical about Iles’ methodology and findings.

Lionel’s story is a reminder of the risk of recidivism. Lionel, who we learn has subsequently “relapsed” into violence after his interview, is questioned about his progress:

In what ways have you changed, Lionel?

There have been so many changes: the put-downs of Barbara; my self-esteem has grown; and I’m actually beginning to like myself...I am picking up on things quicker, I am not doing all this abusive stuff now. I say to myself ‘Now go away and have a think about it.’ In the old days I would immediately lash out at someone.

*So it’s much easier to live with him, pleasant.*¹⁶

The fact that Lionel begins to abuse his partner soon after making these claims of change casts doubt on his veracity and on his (and many other abusers’) ability to evaluate changes in their own behaviour. Lionel’s interview is prefaced by a letter received after the interview took place. The letter is from his partner and tells of Lionel’s “return to unacceptable levels of abuse”.¹⁷ She reports that he has begun drinking heavily,

¹³ Interview with Neville Robertson, Lecturer in Psychology, University of Waikato, 27 May 1996.

¹⁴ Pence and Paymar, *Power and Control: Tactics of Men who Batter* (1986).

¹⁵ Dominick, *supra* n. 5, 49-50.

¹⁶ Iles, *supra* n. 9, at 105.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

psychologically abusing her, and demanding \$100,000 before he would move out of their house. She comments:

I have become hurt, bitter and angry, and I think it is easier to remain this way than to ever hope or trust again, only to risk it being destroyed. I now believe all men are abusers and no matter how many courses they attend and how much work they do, no permanent changes will ever take place.¹⁸

Out of Control reminds us that new approaches to helping violent men change are being developed and implemented by men's groups throughout New Zealand. It is positive to have a book which focuses on the fact that some violent men have indeed changed their behaviour as a result of their participation in stopping violence programmes. However, the book also highlights weaknesses in some of these programmes. For instance, in contrast to the HAIP programme where the safety and autonomy of battered women is seen as of utmost importance, the joint interviewing structure adopted in *Out of Control* appears problematic. Again, in contrast to the HAIP model, there is no monitoring of the men's claims about behaviour changes from the perspectives of the women they abused in cases where the partners are no longer together. Only the current spouse of the man is involved in the interview with him. It should be noted that the lack of such monitoring was also a problem mentioned by Judge Robinson in the *C v P* case.¹⁹ Finally, the lack of Maori and Pacific Island stories is a disappointment. HAIPP shows that provision can be made for Maori and non-Maori through adaptation of the basic programme format to incorporate cultural differences.

I believe that the optimism found in *Out of Control* can help certain men to change, namely, those whose abuse is on a lesser scale, those who are younger and open to change and those who feel true guilt about their actions. But there is another group of men, namely those who believe in the subjugation of women, those who refuse to admit to their abuse older men stuck in the habits of many decades. I am not convinced that many of these men can be reformed, although we must still try.

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¹⁸ Ibid., 101.

¹⁹ Supra n. 1, at

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