

# Stories of change in a Québec group for men who have perpetrated violence against a partner

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**Abstract:** *In the literature, there are many studies on the effectiveness of intimate partner violence group programs. However, practice descriptions and analyses of the group experience of men in this kind of program are rare. However, such knowledge could help to adapt programs to the realities of the men and to better understand their experiences as service users. This paper aims to fill this gap by describing the group experience and the stories of change of seven men belonging to an intimate partner violence group in Québec city. From a discussion group with the men, we highlight key moments that influenced the success of their group experience as well as the dynamics of the group, and the role of group leaders. We also describe the changes they experienced and what is successful from their points of view. We conclude with twelve pointers to successful groupwork, derived specifically from this group and, we hope, holding meaning for groups in general.*

**Keywords:** *group work; groupwork; group therapy; intimate partner violence; domestic violence; men; perpetrators*

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**Date of first (online) publication:**

**Acknowledgement:** *Sincere thanks to the participating group members and to Madame Valérie Meunier, director of GAPI.*

In Québec as in other countries, group therapy is generally recommended to help men who have perpetrated violence against a partner (Price and Rosenbaum, 2009; Respect, 2004; Gouvernement du Québec, 1995). Studies suggest that these groups have only a moderate effect on the complete cessation of violence (Babcock et al, 2004; Sartin et al, 2006). However, a reduction in violence is still a positive result (Sartin et al, 2006), and even though the objective is to stop the violence altogether, ‘success’ could be viewed as being more varied and nuanced than ending physical violence. The study of Westmarland and Kelly (2013) shows that, according to female partners, perpetrators, practitioners and funders/commissioners, ‘success’ is associated with several changes such as the improvement of the relationship between male perpetrators and their partner or ex-partner, a safe and positive shared parenting, the improvement of men’s consciousness of the well-being of self and the others, and a better awareness of the consequences of violence.

Another interesting aspect of the Westmarland and Kelly study (2013) is that it gives voices to the men’s perspectives. Despite numerous studies on intimate partner violence group programs, only a few studies have considered the viewpoints of the men participating in these groups (Pandya and Gingerich, 2002; Wangsgaard, 2000; Lindsay et al, 2006). Practice descriptions and analyses of the group experience of men in this kind of program are even rarer; yet such knowledge could help to understand the experiences of the men as service users and to adapt programs to their realities (Doel and Best, 2008). Moreover, it could help to better understand the processes that favour change, which are often neglected in research on these groups (Tolman and Edleson, 2011; Bowen, 2010). From a practical perspective, this article is written to help to rectify this and to help the reader to understand more about what makes for successful groupwork.

This article describes the group experience and the stories of change of seven men belonging to an intimate partner violence group. Their accounts were gathered in a discussion group lasting approximately three hours, led by the first author. This discussion took place in one of the organization’s rooms, without facilitators. The organization, known as GAPI (Groupe d’aide aux personnes impulsives, or *group for impulsive people*), is located in Québec City in the Province of Québec, Canada. The men received preliminary versions of this paper to ensure that it accurately reflected their statements. A meeting with the organization’s

director enabled us to fill in further detail about the group program.

We begin with a background of the group, where we supply details about the group's organisational context and the program. In the next section, we give a portrait of the group. We present afterwards the elements that contributed to the success of the group. We also present in this section the changes that they experienced as a result of their membership of the group. Finally, we consider the main lessons for groupworkers, for this kind of program and also for other groups. What do the experiences of these group members tell us about good groupwork?

## **Background to the group**

### **The group's organisational context**

The group is hosted by an independent and non-profit organization known as Groupe d'aide aux personnes impulsives (GAPI) – *group for impulsive people*. GAPI has been offering services since 1988 to men who have perpetrated violence against a partner. Men come voluntarily or are referred by the courts. The mandate of GAPI is to encourage men to change their violent behaviour toward their partner. Each man comes to two pre-group interviews before participating in group meetings to ensure that the program meets their needs and that they will benefit from their participation.

### **Goals and characteristics of the group program**

The group program is based on a feminist analysis of violence, in which violence is understood as a way used by men in order to control women (Yllö, 2005). The group program also takes male socialization into account and includes notions from the cognitive-behavioural approach. There are three main objectives: to stop violent behaviour and attitudes; to call into question the values underlying violence; and to improve the men's self-management of emotions, communication skills and interpersonal skills. Groups are led by two facilitators, most often a man and a woman. They also act as therapists and educators.

Groups are composed of eight men who must come to a minimum

of 20 weekly meetings. Their participation can be prolonged after completing 20 meetings. The groups are open-ended, that is when one man completes or drops out of the program, he is replaced by another. The groups therefore include men who are at different stages in the program. During their first meeting, all the men give an introductory summary in which they present themselves, describe their violence problems, and set personal goals. The main activity is each week's summary, where all the members speak about their experiences during the preceding week and their main concerns. Each member's progress is evaluated verbally at the end of his participation and the members are asked to draw up a final summary. All the men who have completed the 20 meeting program are invited to an individual follow-up meeting 6 months later, and then again 12 and 18 months afterwards.

### **An example of a group meeting**

Each meeting begins with *technical points*; that is the group is welcomed by the facilitators and information such as absences is given. The group members then give their *weekly summaries*. These summaries often depict violent or conflicted situations that occurred during the week or earlier. For example, a group member describes a situation he has experienced. After a specific request on his part for the group's comments or spontaneous comments from the other members or facilitators, the group discusses and analyzes the situation. The group uses different perspectives that they have been introduced to by the facilitators; for instance, accountability, control, domination, choices, warning signs, consequences. The group works on three or four different summaries per session, each one lasting about thirty minutes. Lastly, each meeting ends with a *final word*, where each group member speaks in turn without interruption or interaction. This allows each person to reflect on the session and to evaluate it, and to set an objective or an intention for the coming week.

### **Group portrait**

The group is composed of eight men, seven of whom participated in the group discussion. These men were Robert<sup>1</sup> (who has attended 21 meetings), Étienne (14 meetings so far), Antoine (10), Guillaume (7),

Paul (7), Pierre (5), and Thomas (4). Richard and Catherine are the facilitators. Richard has a community college diploma in social work and close to 15 years of work experience, eight with GAPI, whereas Catherine is a newly qualified social worker, having first joined GAPI as a trainee completing a practicum placement, and then as a contract worker leading groups.

At the time of the pre-group interviews that preceded their integration into the group, the average age of the men was 36 years old, ranging from 25 to 54. The group is homogeneous rather than heterogeneous - all are French-speaking and, with the exception of one man, all born in Canada. All the men have a high school diploma; one of them completed community college, and another graduate studies at university. They are all employed, though their incomes vary somewhat, with an average of \$42,000 CAN per year. All but Antoine were in a relationship (all heterosexual), and, of these, all but Guillaume are living with their partner. At the time of the group discussion, Paul had broken up with his partner and no longer lived with her. Guillaume, Paul, Étienne and Pierre have children. It is important to note that all of the men in this group are participating voluntarily; none has a judicial record for an offence related to violence against their partner. All the men acknowledged perpetrating violence against their partner, either verbal, psychological, physical, or sexual.

### **Goals and reasons for joining the group**

All the men have goals that are related to violence, whether to stop being violent, to learn how to improve the way they manage their aggressiveness, to develop alternative behaviours in place of violence, to know the various types of violence, or to gain a better understanding of their violence problems. Antoine, Guillaume, Paul and Étienne hoped that their participation would help to keep their partner and family relationships in one piece. All but Thomas and Étienne have reasons that went beyond violence and are related to personal development goals, such as enhancing their relationship and communication skills, learning how to manage and express their emotions and improving their well-being.

## **The members' experiences**

The group's story can be characterised overall as one of moving from the shame of violence to the pride of having 'sorted out their problems'. The following section presents what the group members consider to be significant for the success of the group.

### **Responses to the individual preparatory interviews**

Most of the men in the group describe the preparatory interviews of the group program as something of a shock. The interviews helped the men to become aware of their violent behaviour and 'got them thinking' about the changes needed if they were to correct this behaviour, and the help that they needed to make these change. According to the testimony of many men, these preparatory interviews were emotionally unsettling. As Guillaume says, 'it wakes up me'. Also, the information document about violence against partners that was given to the men after the interview often gave rise to feelings of shame. For instance, Antoine hid this information document and never looked back at it. As Étienne notes, 'I felt a bit like a monster. It makes you aware of things that you don't see. It unsettled me'. Therefore, the preparatory interviews are seen by the members of the group as turning points, perhaps because of their shock value. 'It gets you seeing straight again' notes Pierre.

### **Members' first group meeting**

According to the men's testimony, the first group meeting has had a significant influence on their future participation in the group. The men's perception of the first meeting depended on each man's individual characteristics, but also on the group dynamics at the time of joining. Given the fact that the group is open-ended, each man joins an existing group which already has a particular dynamic. Robert's initial meeting with the group was difficult because he felt that several men were not seriously working on their violence problems, nor were they participating honestly. As a consequence, he had at first started to question his own participation.

Guillaume, Paul, and Pierre joined the group at around the same time. As there was a very positive atmosphere in the group when they

began, they immediately identified with the other members' situations: 'It was like a balm for my soul. It helped me see that I wasn't alone in this situation, because you always think you are the only one,' reflects Pierre. Also, at these men's first meetings, the way the group members exchanged ideas and shared personal experiences proved to be decisive in their decision to stay and become full participants. As Paul says, 'I came to the first meeting with the idea of telling them that I would give up, that I was not interested in participating anymore. But the dialogue with the members, the group discussions and the experiences that we shared made me want to stay. Since then, I've come regularly. The first meeting has been very significant for me'.

### **The dynamics of a successful group**

After Guillaume, Paul and Pierre joined the group, and more recently Thomas, the members felt that they went through a more stable patch enabling the group to develop a certain rhythm. The men note that the elements contributing to this stability include the fact that all the men acknowledged their violence problems, all wanted to change, and all were striving to do so. They also mention that the group's homogeneity generates a feeling of 'being in the same boat'. They are able to see themselves in the violent behaviour of other members. As Pierre notes, 'We are always able to connect with ourselves when someone tells his story.'

Week after week, the men come to the group sessions because they notice progressive changes in their behaviour, because after every meeting they have a feeling of well-being and pride, and because they would have a feeling of failure if they dropped out. They have the desire 'to stay till the end'. The men also come to the group sessions because they always learn something: 'Each one makes you grow up. Even if you have not experienced any violent situation within the last week, someone else would have experienced some and you learn from them' (Robert). Furthermore, the friendly relations and exchanges between the members are significant in the decision to pursue the group therapy. As Guillaume says, 'I like the group.'

The fact that there is a good *chemistry* between the group members is another element noted by the men as being good for a successful group. Chemistry is difficult to describe or predict, but it makes for

a climate that is friendly and relaxed, with room for humour despite the seriousness of the subject matter. As the group members relate to one another, exchanges are smooth, there is always someone ready to break the ice at the beginning of a meeting and the members are non-judgmental, whatever is said. They worry about one another. Pierre gives an example that everyone noticed Guillaume's increased involvement in the exchanges after he was invited to participate more. 'We could have chosen not to notice but everyone did and they said it, too.' They also note the importance of encouraging each other, both about what is happening inside the group and also outside the group in their lives, whether for violence or other issues. For example, Paul once told the group he had stopped smoking marijuana for a month. The members congratulated him for his accomplishment and gave him encouragement and support.

It was for all these reasons that Robert decided to continue the therapy beyond the 20 initially programmed meetings. Robert compares the present group's dynamics with that of the group that he started with. He emphasizes that the transparency, openness and authenticity of the men play an essential role in the current group dynamics. Robert's perspective is testimony to the way in which the group's chemistry can change over time and over membership.

## **Confrontations**

The members do not hesitate to confront and 'push each other to work harder' (Paul). For example, Pierre and Paul describe a situation where they confronted Robert, who seemed to be justifying his violent behaviour in a particular situation. As Paul says, these confrontations are motivated by a desire to know the person better and get an improved grasp on the situation, to help the group member to progress. Therefore, confrontations have a beneficial effect on the group process of change. The confrontations thus are not intended to belittle, but rather, to support them: 'It's because we identify with the situation that we make remarks' (Paul). When it happens, it can be difficult for the person being confronted: 'I felt like I was caught, but afterward I felt better. You see they're doing it to help you. Anyway, it's no use when they treat you too nicely' (Robert). These confrontations can also concern group process, such as when



a member is reluctant or silent, like the situation of Guillaume, who was invited to participate more.

### **The role of the group leaders**

What of the group leaders, what is their part in helping this group to be a success? The group members remark mainly on the attitudes of the facilitators, saying that they are respectful and non-judgmental with the men, using humour when appropriate. The fact that the leaders treat the group members as equals and do not keep their distance or remain outside the group is seen to be a successful group dynamic: 'You can really connect with them, there's a mutual exchange' (Antoine). The men say that the leaders take their work 'to heart' and do not hesitate to give examples from their personal life when pertinent: 'They're ready to talk about themselves. You don't have any choice but to join in' (Pierre). The examples given by the facilitators are strongly appreciated by the members and show the facilitators' role in fostering work on violent behaviour. Étienne, Guillaume, and Antoine remember a situation where the male facilitator used a personal situation to illustrate the differences between masculine and feminine socialization and their influence on violence. This was particularly enlightening because it illustrated a non-violent way of managing a conflict and the importance of being sensitive to what the other person is feeling.

Furthermore, the group members appreciate that the facilitators encourage all the members to participate, observing the men's non-verbal behaviours and asking them to express their viewpoints. Members recall many situations where the group leaders asked a man to express himself after they saw him shaking his head for approving a situation shared by a member.

The facilitators help the group and each individual member to work on their violent behaviour: 'They put their finger on the problem' (Paul). As reported by the men, the work is first accomplished through a group analysis, with the facilitators leading the group to deepen the members' analysis of situations, for example by 'concentrating on what is not said' (Pierre), or by asking the whole group a question based on the discussion of a concrete situation brought up by a member. The group members finish by identifying or discussing a more general violence-related theme, such as the notion of choice or the cycle of violence.

The members explained that the facilitators' insights and analyses, in particular using diagrams on a board, help the men to get a better grasp of the group's analysis and to retain certain ideas and concepts. The leaders' contribution can also take the form of suggesting behavioural strategies or techniques; for example, how the men can assert themselves non-violently, manage conflicts, and express emotions. These tips and tools are strongly appreciated by the members because they are concrete.

Paul, Thomas, and Étienne recall a situation where, after a member describes a violent incident, the facilitator has the group think about the differences between reactions and emotions, and self-affirmation through the word 'I'. For Thomas, the diagram put up on the board illustrated these differences and the 'I' was the first technique learned to manage conflict situations better. Paul and Étienne thought this technique encouraged the men to take responsibility for their violent behaviour, whatever the other person's behaviour.

### **Difficult moments**

There were some difficult moments in the group, too. The members associate these moments mainly with difficult subjects under discussion. What is considered 'difficult' varies according to each person's situation. Robert observes that over his 21 meetings, subjects related to childhood (such as family violence, sexual abuse) and relationship break-ups often rekindled painful emotions. It is also difficult for the men to talk about situations when they are violent towards their children, especially physically, or when 'you know you can act differently' (Paul). The members say that a feeling of deep shame is associated with this kind of violence. Even so, the men took turns speaking because 'we're here for that' (Antoine) and 'this is the right place to do it' (Étienne). They feel that the people in their circle of family and friends, even those close to them, cannot easily understand this behaviour. Despite the painfulness, the group members agree that 'it was good to talk about it' (Paul).

### **Stories of change**

The group members that have figured in this article have not yet drawn up their final summaries but can give several examples of changes and learning that have occurred since they joined the group. Most have seen

a decrease in violent behaviour, remarkably, even in driving behaviour on the road. Several say they handle their aggressiveness better and become angry less quickly when there is conflict, better able to step back and think more clearly. Robert observes that he is less possessive about his partner. Some members also say they are more conscious of the physiological signs preceding violence. Thomas, who is towards the beginning of his therapy in the group, has begun paying more attention to these signs. Robert and Paul have noticed that they are less prone to *negative forecasting*, that is repeatedly envisaging pessimistic outcomes to a situation.

In terms of feelings, Pierre notices that he is opening up more and talking about what he is feeling, both with his wife and with friends. As for Paul, he notes that he is more open and sensitive to the reactions and emotions of those around him. Étienne says that he is learning to acknowledge his emotions (such as anger) and their legitimacy, but also to manage and express them appropriately.

Though these changes are positive, they have also led the men to become aware of the *consequences* of their violence. For example, in conflicts where they responded non-violently, Pierre and Étienne realized that their children were afraid of their reactions: 'It hurts to see that others are afraid of us' (Étienne).

Finally, some men are aware of changes that go beyond their work on their violent behaviour. Antoine states that for him 'It was a therapy for impulsiveness, but it was *also* a general therapy'. As Paul confessed, he decided to stop smoking marijuana at the end of one group meeting. Pierre said he just felt more relaxed and less stressed out.

## **What we can learn from this group's stories of change**

There are many messages that the stories of the Québec men's group give to us. Here are some of the highlights, with some links with studies on change processes in similar groups. Although these twelve 'learning points' arise from this particular group for men in Québec, it seems to us that they are pertinent in some respect to many other groups and groupwork. They help us understand the commonality of groupwork across service user groups and across national frontiers.

## **1. The importance of individual preparatory interviews**

The offer of groupwork service to prospective individual members has long been identified as significant to a group's success (Heap, 1985). First, it enables the group leaders and the prospective members to get to know one another; second, a judgement can be made about the suitability of the group for this person; and thirdly, the individual pre-group sessions have their own impact on the service users, as many of the men noted. The testimony of Guillaume and Étienne demonstrates that the preparatory interviews contributed to make the group members aware of their violent behaviour and the work they need to do in order to change their behaviour.

## **2. The value of incremental change**

Although some of the men in the group describe the shock of the pre-group preparation interview, in general there is a recognition that change is generally incremental; that is, it is a step by step change. The men's conception of change therefore meets with the notion of success proposed by Westmarland and Kelly (2013), in which 'success' is understood as being diversified and not only linked to the end of physical violence. Each little change is valuable and needs to be recognized. Sometimes these small steps are only evident when we have the chance to look back (like looking at photographs of children from six months ago and suddenly realising how much they have grown). Thus, group members need regular opportunities to take stock ('looking at the photos' as it were) in order to appreciate the changes that have been achieved.

## **3. Concrete 'tips' hand in hand with abstract analysis**

Many of the group members commented on the value of concrete advice or strategies, for instance in recognising the physical symptoms that can build up to violent explosive behaviour. Sometimes these tips came from the group facilitators, sometimes from other group members – both are valuable sources of practical help (Lindsay et al, 2008). Analysis is equally helpful – talking about and understanding the meaning of certain behaviours and what lies behind them, and translating this understanding into practical strategies for change. So, *both* the analysis *and* the strategies are important.

#### **4. Learning something new regularly**

What sustained the men and kept them returning to the group was the opportunity for regular new learning. If each session felt like a mere repetition of the last one, this would be insufficient to keep the members' attention and, therefore, attendance. However, the repeated pattern of the structure (from one session to the other) paradoxically allowed differences and new growth from one meeting to another. As a matter of fact, Pierre and Robert report that they learn weekly from the shared situations because they easily identify with the other members' experiences. According to Chovanec (2014, p. 338), 'learning things and motivation to learn are important elements in keeping men engaged in treatment'.

#### **5. Group sameness**

This particular group describe its members as being very similar and that this homogeneity promotes the group's success. The men actually mention that they could see themselves in one another, in the situations they experienced. This appears to be particularly decisive in assisting the group sessions. Universality, which can be defined as the 'group members' awareness of commonalities in their concerns and feelings and those of other members' (Lindsay et al, 2006, p. 34), is a significant therapeutic factor in a group process of change (Schwartz and Waldo, 1999; Lindsay et al, 2006; Chovanec, 2014).

Of course, sameness has its value, but so does difference. The message for group facilitators is complex: how to determine the best mix of sameness and difference in any particular group? (Doel and Kelly, 2014)

#### **6. Group cohesion**

It is clear from these stories that the men like the group as a group, as well as the other individual members, and that it gives them a feeling of well-being and pride. They describe the good 'chemistry' between members. The men feel that they belong and that it is their group. This could be related to group cohesion, which can be defined as 'belonging to a group of people and feeling accepted by them' (Lindsay et al, 2008, p. 263). Group cohesion has many positive effects on a group dynamic. Indeed, it has been shown that group cohesion improves

the involvement of the members and their willingness to share their experiences and to talk about taboo subjects (Lindsay et al, 2008).

## **7. Fear of failing**

In addition to obviously positive factors such as pride, good chemistry and group cohesion, there are other equally powerful influences on sustained group membership. If they dropped out of the group they would have a sense of failure, and many of the men mention the peer pressure, not just from other group members, but also from their families.

## **8. Challenges and confrontation**

The supportive nature of groupwork is well known, but the experiences and testimony of these group members highlight the significance of appropriate challenges and confrontations in groups – confronting taboo issues, and challenging remarks and behaviours so that group members see their behaviour in a different light and become aware of the need to change them (Chovanec, 2014; Sullivan & Claes, 2015). As Sullivan and Claes (2015, p. 40) emphasize: ‘the power of group therapy rests on the confrontation, feedback, and support of peers.’ The situation of Robert, who had been confronted by some members, clearly demonstrates the importance of confrontations: it helps to acknowledge his justifications towards his violent behaviour and the need to change.

## **9. Non-judgemental attitudes and respect**

The members recognize their frank and direct conversations. They challenge one another, push to work harder on their problems, but all the time the men describe the way they did not feel judged. The group members also remark how they feel respected by the group leaders. This is an important factor of change in group process (Gondolf & Hanneken, 1987, in Chovanec, 2009).

## **10 Group leaders share their own stories**

The group members appreciate that the facilitators spoke of their own

personal situations. This made them human and approachable. This is a particularly important message at a time when ‘professionalism’ is in danger of being defined as keeping distant and ‘no self-disclosure’. For male perpetrators, there are positive effects of sharing facilitator’s non-violence experiences, especially from the male facilitator (Roy et al., 2013). He could be viewed as a masculine model and help to dissociate violence and masculinity. This awareness generates for the group members hope and motivation to develop other forms of behaviour. However, personal experiences shared by facilitators are not always well perceived by the participants and some would rather like to take more time for learning. The level and timing of any personal history or attitude on the part of a group leader must be *highly* tuned and *carefully* judged, but to deny oneself as a group facilitator the opportunity to tune in to group members’ stories by remaining zipped up and out of reach is not good practice.

## **11 Whole group techniques of groupworkers**

From the testimony of the group members, there are several examples of the group facilitators using whole-group techniques to address group process and provide insights for the group as a whole (such as the ‘*T*’ technique described earlier in the article). In other words, the Québec men’s group is not an example of ‘working with individuals in groups’ but, truly of *groupwork* – developing mutual aid and using group processes to help the group move forward.

## **12 New group members learned from established group members**

Although there is no explicit testimony, we can read between the lines and reasonably speculate that in a group of this nature, where new members join an existing group, that these new members are socialised into the new group by established members. These older members become internal leaders and models, albeit facilitated overall by the group leaders, and help the incoming members to adapt to the groups norms; for instance, of non-judgemental attitudes, of making appropriate challenges and being honest with oneself. Older members usually enjoy a high level of credibility; their opinion, stories and experiences of change are important for the progress of the newer members (Chovanec, 2009; Chovanec, 2012; Lindsay et al, 2008).

## Conclusion

This practice paper attempts to give voice to male perpetrators as service users of groupwork programs. We hope that the approach of this article helps readers to see ‘inside the black box’ of group intervention and to pinpoint the many small steps and processes that are often hidden beyond effectiveness studies. Although these latter studies are needed, it is also important to acknowledge the complexity and the richness of the detail in group experiences and to find qualitative ways in which to share these experiences with the wider groupwork community for mutual learning.

## Note

1. The men’s names, as well as the facilitators’ names, have been changed to protect identity.

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