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# Foregrounding Meaning and Motive in the Domestic Abuse Perpetration of and Response to Neurodivergent Men

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## ABSTRACT

Typological approaches have thus far neglected the perpetration, profiles, and response to neurodivergent men who are autistic, have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and those experiencing psychosis. This article addresses this gap, though adopts a psychoanalytic, psychosocial analysis of neurodivergent men's domestic abuse, using a case study approach. Drawing on the lives of three, non-learning disabled, neurodivergent men, this article reveals that neurodivergence does not cause domestic abuse, as meaning and motive was still discernible in their use of and relevant in the response to their violence and abuse. As I show, this does not obviate the need for more inclusive responses, as neurodivergent men experience additional barriers on mainstream programs that are developed and delivered by and for neurotypical people. This article offers a new contribution to the theoretical and empirical literature on the domestic abuse perpetration of neurodivergent men and criminal justice interventions. Practice and research implications are discussed.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## Introduction

Typological applications to the study of men's perpetration of domestic abuse have highlighted a diversity of motives, risks, and needs, and the implications of these in practice (Holtzworth-Munroe and Meehan 2004; Holtzworth-Munroe and Stuart 1994; Kelly and Johnson 2008). The validity of typological approaches has, however, been subject to critique because of the tendency to overstate their meaningfulness, with calls to engage more interpretatively with individual men's violence accounts (Gadd and Corr 2017). Heeding such caution, the current paper builds upon and advances these insights by exploring the individual violence accounts of and the response to non-learning-disabled, neurodivergent men who are subject to criminal justice interventions; specifically, men who are autistic, have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and/or experience psychosis alongside other co-occurring mental health difficulties. In doing so, this is the first study to explore the lives, violence motives, and change accounts of domestically abusive, neurodivergent men.

Insights emerged from an ethnographic study of the only accredited criminal justice domestic abuse perpetrator program in England and Wales, Building Better Relationships (BBR), which, like domestic abuse theorizing and interventions more generally was not developed with neurodivergent people in mind. The paper begins by outlining how BBRs curriculum was (mis)informed by typological approaches, while the limitations of typologies are exposed by drawing attention to the specific meanings violence holds for individual men using a case study approach (Gadd and Corr 2017). The core concern here is whether meaning and motive is still

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discernible in the domestic abuse perpetration of neurodivergent men, thus the narratives of three such men who were convicted of domestic abuse offenses against their female partners are explored. I do this through a psychoanalytic, psychosocial lens (Gadd and Jefferson 2007), while conceptualizing neurologically divergent people within a holistic, non-pathologizing, neurodiversity paradigm (Chapman 2020; Singer 2017). In doing so, I explore how anxiety and its defenses manifests in the lives of neurodivergent men who perpetrate domestic abuse, and what this might mean in practice. My central argument is that autism, ADHD, and psychosis do not cause domestic abuse: meaning and motive is still discernible in the use of and relevant in the response to violence and abuse. Neurodivergent men do, nevertheless, experience certain life adversities, structural inequalities and relational differences that can be distinguished when considered alongside their neurotypical counterparts in violence interventions. Practice and research implications are therefore discussed.

### **Beyond typologies: responding to a diverse domestic abuse perpetrator population**

Building Better Relationships (BBR) is an accredited group work program for men convicted of a domestic abuse offense against a female partner in England and Wales. BBR was implemented in 2013 after being substantially reviewed and redeveloped. It replaced its pro-feminist predecessor – the Integrated Domestic Abuse Program – with a more individualized approach (Hughes 2017; Renehan 2022), informed (in part) by research on different typologies of personality and types of intimate partner abuse (Holtzworth-Munroe and Meehan 2004; Holtzworth-Munroe and Stuart 1994; Johnson 1995, 2006; Kelly and Johnson 2008). More optimistic views on the utility of typologies suggested that a suite of programs designed and delivered in a manner to suit different personality types and motives could challenge sexist entitlement (controlling types), address emotional dependency (dysphoric types) and teach (family only) situationally violent men conflict resolution and emotional management skills (Cavanaugh and Gelles 2005; Holtzworth-Munroe and Meehan 2004; Kelly and Johnson 2008; Saunders 1996). BBR however proposed just one single intervention, embedding cognitive skills, emotion management, and conflict resolution techniques within its curriculum, which could be adapted accordingly to different types during its facilitation. Arguably, confidence in its success relied heavily on the assumption that cognitive behavioral techniques suffice as the solution to domestic abuse perpetration (Gadd 2004; Morran 2011), a population of offenders, collectively, assumed to have poor emotional management skills, deficit thinking, and a shortfall in effective communication when it comes to resolving conflict with their partners (Gilchrist et al. 2003; Johnson et al. 2006).

While, of course, those who perpetrate domestic abuse are far from being a homogenous group (Gilchrist et al. 2022; Hester et al. 2019; Jovanovic 2020), the extent to which typologies meaningfully explain or offer solutions to domestic abuse perpetration has been subject to critique. Extrapolating from a single case study of a 21-year-old man named “Glen,” Gadd and Corr (2017) highlight, when violence accounts are read at certain junctures, many domestically abusive men present with simultaneous co-occurring mental health difficulties, symptomology akin to anti-social and borderline tendencies, and engage in violence that is both controlling *and* out of control. A more careful interpretation of individual men’s violence accounts, they argue, defies neat categorization, and exposes the danger in professionals assuming that the violence of troubled and troubling men like Glen can be addressed as though they fit neatly into a definitive, undynamic type.

### **Towards the psychosocial**

Heeding such caution, a psychosocial perspective offers a holistic and humanizing approach to understanding individual motives underlying men’s domestic abuse perpetration. Crucial if, as Gadd and Corr (2017) contend, practitioners expect to work with men in meaningful ways to prevent further victimization. At the core of (psychoanalytic) psychosocial theorizing is that our earliest relationships shape the kind of people we become, and the extent to which

unresolved conflicts that emerge within these are: played out in our intimate relationships; impact how we relate to others more generally; and shape our capacity to cope with anxiety and the other unsettling feelings we all inevitably face at some point in our lives (Gadd and Jefferson 2007).

The psychosocial turn reignited interest in the individual offender, placing a defended, “internally complex, socially situated subject” at the core of criminological inquiry (Gadd and Jefferson 2007:8). Building on the work of object relations theorists, feminist psychoanalysts, and relational psychoanalysis, Gadd and Jefferson (2007:156) argue that domestic abuse is “often about one partner with many unresolved anxieties” resulting from inadequate “early care experiences saddling the other” with their “own vulnerable feelings.” The ensuing violence, in psychodynamic terms, is a form of “acting out,” articulated as, they say, “an unconscious defense against anxieties that are too troubling to admit” (ibid:142.). These intolerable feelings are “evacuated” from “conscious” thought and projected onto their partners where these can be safely “attacked” (ibid:142). Biographical contingencies, they explain, determine how and why some men become highly emotionally dependent upon women, and invest in gender differentiated discourses to exploit unequal power relations within their intimate relationships. Faced with the stigma that comes with being labeled a domestic abuser, the same widely held views about masculinity and femininity are invested in as a defense against the troubling feelings this engenders. In the aftermath of violence, therefore, domestically abusive men may choose to position themselves within more empowering masculine discourses such as the protector and moral guardian heroically saving failed women.

### **Domestic abuse, neurodiversity, and the defended psychosocial subject**

Of course, the central focus of this paper is whether neurodivergent men are constituted by the same psychosocial processes, how anxiety and its defenses manifests in their lives, and what this means when working with those who perpetrate domestic abuse. Research relating to neurodivergence and domestic abuse perpetration has, to date, been confined to experimental studies. These are executed with a preference for measures that define autism, ADHD, psychosis, and other co-occurring mental health difficulties and their risk of perpetration within a diagnostic viewpoint (Buitelaar et al. 2021; Wymbs et al. 2017; Yu et al. 2019). Symptomology deemed worthy of investigation include the assumed: “poor interpersonal skills,” “emotional dysregulation” and “paranoid ideation” amongst the mentally unwell; attention deficits, impulsivity, and its manifestation in the ADHD population; and deficits in communication, interaction, empathy and mentalization amongst autistic people (Yu et al. 2019). The problem with the diagnostic viewpoint, as Pearson and Rose (2023) contend, is that neurodivergent people are shorn from their social context:

The psychological focus on the [autistic] individual as opposed to society means that we often reduce humans into simplistic categories. Whilst this approach might have utility for experimental work. It oversimplifies the complex interactions that shape who we [autistic people] are and how we think. (Pearson and Rose 2023:81)

Contrasting a dehumanizing and stigmatizing deficit narrative (Botha 2021), the Neurodiversity paradigm paved the way for a non-pathologizing, more humanizing lens through which the othered lives of neurodivergent people could be holistically viewed. Building on – but crucially, departing from (Chapman 2020) – the social model of disability, a neurodiversity perspective offers a value-neutral understanding of naturally occurring neurocognitive variation, while shining a light on the disabling and stigmatizing effects of a neurotypical world on those who diverge from typical development and functioning (Singer 2017). From this perspective, all people are understood in terms of their differences rather than deficits and any disconnect resulting from the interactions of neurologically diverse people is viewed as a reciprocal (Dengsø 2022; Milton 2012) and can lead to *intersubjective breakdown* (Bervoets 2022). A deficit narrative, nevertheless, persists, with neurodivergent people expected to adapt to a neurotypical world, and the unwritten societal rules and preferences of a neuro-majority. Consequently, neurodiversity victimization research shows how this has shaped how neurodivergent

people are viewed by others and how they view themselves, while rendering many vulnerable to exploitation, interpersonal violence, and institutional harm and discrimination (Pearson, Rees, and Forster 2022; Pearson, Rose, and Rees 2023).

There has been less attention to neurodivergent people who both experience *and* cause harm from a neurodiversity perspective. However, the accounts of criminalized neurodivergent people do offer some insights into and highlight similar experiences of institutional and interpersonal harms. Institutional harms were, in their experiences, characterized by being left to cope in a criminal justice system unequipped for their needs (Criminal Justice Joint Inspection 2021; Day 2022; Vinter et al. 2023) and where their differences were “mocked,” “misunderstood” and “attacked” (User Voice 2021). Interpersonal harms amounted to parental violence, domestic abuse, othering, exclusion, marginalization, and early relationships so fraught that they were too difficult for many to surmount (Day 2022; Gadd et al. 2015; User Voice 2023). Memories of being “misunderstood,” called “stupid,” “bad” and “naughty” were similarly carried with them “throughout their lives” (User Voice 2023). Unsurprisingly, the school to prison pipeline had become a common trajectory for many (Kent et al. 2023). The intersection of misconceived traumas and neurodivergent presentations – emotional dysphoria, rejection sensitivities, attention difficulties, impulsive tendencies, sensory bombardment and autistic meltdowns – and the understandable responses all this provokes, are often misunderstood (Day 2022; Gadd et al. 2015; Johnston and Bradford 2019). Against this backdrop, many misunderstood othered, excluded, and marginalized neurodivergent young boys may project less authentic versions of themselves, commonly the *class clown*, while seeking to reclaim a more empowering identity and sense of belonging amongst their similarly stigmatized peers (Day 2022; Gadd et al. 2015; Johnston and Bradford 2019; Voice 2023).

Projecting a less authentic version of oneself can be understood as a form of masking, reflecting some neurodivergent people’s tendency to suppress or express neurodivergent presentations to appear less or more neurodivergent (Pearson and Rose 2023). This broader conceptualization of masking is a manifestation of both conscious and unconscious processes, as neurodivergent people attempt to *fit in*, *project acceptability*, and *avoid stigma harm* (Pearson and Rose 2023). Psychosocially speaking, such processes might be understood as a defense against anxiety, where neurodivergent people split off aspects of the self that feel troubling and/or are internalized in pejorative terms. Indeed, in psychoanalytic terms, the socially anxious talk of living out their lives “behind the mask,” where an authentic self is hidden in the “hopes of appearing in a way that is desired and accepted by others, to escape judgement and rejection” (McEvoy, O’Connor, and McCarthy 2016:558). Masking in this sense, may take shape through “both regressive and progressive properties,” allowing neurodivergent people to survive in the social world, while “simultaneously preventing them from experiencing the full reality of presenting their true self to a potentially hostile other” (ibid:558).

Taken together, a psychosocial analysis of the domestic abuse perpetration of neurodivergent men fits well within a neurodiversity perspective: the latter highlighting neurocognitive variation as another layer of human diversity worthy of consideration; the former, theoretically capable of explaining how multiply, situated, and intersecting identities play out within the psychic realm, depending on certain biographical contingencies. In what follows, I argue that attention to such idiosyncrasies can explain why some neurodivergent men become highly dependent upon yet abuse women they claim to love, and how the difficulties experienced by autistic, ADHD and/or men in psychological and emotional distress shape their relational and learning experiences within domestic abuse interventions, well known for their hostilities and discomfort (Renehan and Gadd, 2024; Hughes 2024).

## **Methods for eliciting meaning and motive in the lives and domestic abuse perpetration of neurodivergent men**

This paper reports on some of the findings of broader doctoral research which involved an in-depth cohort study of 11 practitioners, and 10 male program participants who were convicted of a domestic abuse related offense and mandated to attend a BBR program in England, United Kingdom. BBR is

a group work model usually facilitating 8–14 men and consists of four modules with six sessions in each covering socio-cultural issues, thinking, emotions and relationships. Key objectives are to teach men emotional regulation to reduce impulsive, violent responses and to develop thinking and communication skills to encourage rational, nonviolent resolutions (National Offender Management Service NOMS 2015). Individual sessions are also completed before, during and after program completion to develop individual plans, goals and to record facilitators' views on men's progress in post program reviews.

Permissions for the study were granted via the NOMS (now His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service, HMPPS) and agreed at a local level, private Community Rehabilitation Company where BBR was delivered prior to the unification of probation services in June 2021 where they are now delivered in-house. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Manchester Research Ethics Committee. Participants consented to interviews being audio recorded which were then transcribed verbatim and participants were given pseudonyms to ensure anonymity.

Practitioners participated in one or two in-depth interviews (depending on their professional role) and between one and four in-depth interviews were undertaken with the men attending BBR, during and following program completion, drop out and/or six month follow up. The interviews lasted between 20 minutes and two hours on each occasion, totaling 1493 pages of transcripts. The findings were further informed and complemented by five months' on-site observations (usually twice weekly), informal discussions, pre-sentence reports and (where available) the men's program reviews that were completed by designated facilitators. Based on psychodynamic principles, interviews were undertaken using the Free Association Narrative Interview Method (Hollway and Jefferson 2000). Free association principles facilitated the recalling of participants' stories about program facilitation, individual lives and events connected by emotional experience, rather than cognitive reasoning, to elicit rich and unique meanings. The data collection was also informed and embedded within an Appreciative Inquiry which involved asking appreciative questions to explore participants' experiences of the program and perception of change (Lavis, Elliott, and Cowburn 2017). This involved asking facilitators to reimagine better ways of working. It involved asking the men mandated to the program to recall the most important things they had learned by attending BBR, how previous incidents were reinterpreted in view of new knowledge, and how they perceived this would prevent abusive incidents in the future.

While many of the male participants in the broader doctoral study could be considered neurodivergent in respect of their mental health and anti-social and borderline presentations, the three case studies of Tony, Ben and Trevor were specifically selected because they presented with similar characteristics *and* (prospective) diagnosis of autism, ADHD, and psychosis. Tony described himself (and presented) as "hyperactive" and was prescribed medication to alleviate psychosis and social anxiety. Ben had a childhood diagnosis of ADHD and (prospective) borderline personality disorder. Trevor was awaiting an autism assessment following his daughter's recent diagnosis. All three men reported or were recorded as having experienced depression, anxiety and suicidal attempts or thoughts.

In what follows, *pen portraits* (Hollway and Jefferson 2000) of the three men are presented, and used to detail their lives, personal journeys through BBR, and their perceptions of change to highlight the scale and complexity of such a task. Their stories and self-proclaimed changes are interpreted psychosocially alongside more contradictory revelations, the ongoing struggles they experienced, and their desire to position themselves within more empowering masculine discourses to avoid anxiety provoking feelings. A limitation is that neurodivergence was an unanticipated finding, therefore I did not specifically ask the program facilitators about this (which I have subsequently explored elsewhere, Renehan and Fitz-Gibbon 2022). All of the facilitators did express concern about the extent to which superficial cognitive approaches and stressful working environments were conducive to the emotional and mental health difficulties that many of the men presented with (Renehan 2021, 2022). The experiences and perspective of one program facilitator – who acted as designated facilitator for



Tony and Trevor – is, nevertheless, captured here as they reveal important insights about the limitations of neurotypically informed, cognitive orientated approaches to working with harmed and harming neurodivergent men.

## Findings: three pen portraits

### Tony

Tony was a 30-year-old unemployed man who, despite his larger than average height and a local reputation for violence, presented as extremely anxious and, tellingly, was taking medication to alleviate social anxiety, depression, and psychosis. Talking at speed and often sweating profusely, Tony described himself as having always been “hyperactive,” recalling his struggles in mainstream education where “messing about” and “being stupid” “in class” had ultimately led to his exclusion. His mother, Tony claimed, (now) laughed about him always being in “trouble” even at nursery. Indeed, trouble did follow Tony into his teenage and adolescent years, most of which had been spent in “young offenders” institutions, and subsequently a series of (significant) sentences in adult prisons for “like harder drugs” and “GBH” (Grievous Bodily Harm). As a result of many years incarcerated, Tony had been unable to forge a “connection” with his son. This was something that deeply troubled Tony, serving both as a painful reminder of the intermittent relationship with his own father, and the troubling recognition that the inadequacies of a man he barely knew – premature death from “alcoholism,” stays in “mental hospitals” and parental conflict during the occasional weekend contact – were in many ways unfolding within his own life. According to Tony’s mother, his father “just couldn’t accept family life.” But while Tony similarly found it “hard to be a dad,” he did not want to “end up like” like his own and said this was a cycle he was determined to “change,” despite his actions providing evidence to the contrary.

Tony, had however, become “close” to Rachel’s son, a woman he had met two years earlier while released on license and who he “really, really” loved. Despite such declarations, Tony’s “paranoia” about “all kinds of mad stuff” led him to believe that Rachel was “cheating all the time.” Intrusive thoughts, Tony claimed, prompted him to break into Rachel’s house, “searching” for men hiding there. Despite Tony’s troubling behavior, the couple remained together, until that is, Tony’s infidelities resulted in Rachel leaving him. The separation “hit” Tony “hard,” but any hope of reconciliation was lost following an incident when his “jealousy” “kicked in big time” when confronted with Rachel talking to some “lads” on a night out. Though Rachel had tried “to walk away,” Tony said he:

Grabbed hold of her and we argued, like I said, and I think I— Well, I, I did, I pushed her over first. Then she got up and I just, I just basically wouldn’t let her walk away, type of thing, and I ended up, I ended up punching her . . . She fell to the floor. I kind of then thought, oh my God, what the hell have I done? I wish I, I wish I— I shouldn’t done that after I pushed her, after I pushed her, but I never. Um, I thought, what the hell have I done?

Reflecting on the incident, Tony claimed that had he only let Rachel “walk away,” he “probably could have got her back.” Though attributing his reaction to “paranoia,” taking “lots of cocaine,” and “jealousy issues” which had been “nowhere near as bad” in previous relationships, Tony now claimed medication helped to keep his “really mad thoughts” at bay. Despite this, Tony’s general presentation on the group was of concern to his designated facilitator, who expressed more than once that Tony was “not in a good place:”

So, there’s a chap on our group this morning, whose mental health is horrendous, he’s leaving here in rumination spirals, feeling horrendous about what he did, doesn’t understand why he did it. I can’t sit with him in a group of twelve people and say, “right, where has this come from, what’s happened in your life to bring you to that moment.” I can’t do that for him, but I have to sit in there and then let him go with that going through his mind, knowing how bad his mental health is. I can’t do anything else. (Designated facilitator, interview)

Tony attributed his domestic abuse perpetration to addiction-induced jealousy and poor mental health but, as his designated facilitator pointed out, there was ultimately little space or flexibility to work

through why Tony was unable to sustain the meaningful relationships upon which he was heavily reliant, and why he was so invested in foregrounding “madness” and “paranoia” for reasons which led to their violent breakdown.

## **Ben**

Ben was a 23-year-old unemployed man, with an unkempt and restless presentation. Officially, Ben had been “raised in a dysfunctional” family, had several convictions for sibling and child to parent violence, and subsequently multiple prison sentences for drug and violence related offenses. Ben’s relationship with his father, a “bad” drinker, was characterized by “fighting,” “slaps” and “punches” in both directions. Ben asserted that he had no time for his father as, in his own words, he did “not agree” with his “lifestyle choices,” having always been the first in the pub, never mind his “hypocritical” stance on Ben’s criminal justice involvement despite his own convictions. Ultimately, Ben felt ADHD had been the cause of the differential treatment he experienced at home and at school, the latter which he described as a similarly turbulent period. Ben recalled how he had been “thrown out” of school and “youth clubs” for acting the “class clown” and generally “disruptive behavior,” then subsequently from a “specialist behavior school” for “assaulting a teacher.”

Having ADHD, Ben said, did have its “positives,” like having “loads of energy” and “hardly” being able to sleep when entertaining four young children and coping with “night feeds.” ADHD, for Ben, though had “more negatives than positives.” Being “banned” from many welfare, employment and primary care services because of his “behavior” meant that he was unable to access services when needed, notable during our first interview in that Ben had been sleeping on the streets for three nights having “fucked up” his access to sheltered accommodation. Ben did acknowledge his tendency to be both verbally and physically impulsive, an admission that was nevertheless rationalized as a reaction to professionals who just “never said anything good” about him. Ben’s sense of persecution was felt most acutely when directed at him by child protection services who “never listened” to him. Ben did, however, acknowledge that his behavior was “dangerous” “back then” with his tendency to not “think about anything” and “react straight away,” so “obviously,” he conceded, they would have had “concerns.”

By way of contrast, Ben said he now did “think about everything” when he was around the children, an assertion that was difficult to qualify given the details of the offense which had resulted in him being referred to BBR. Ben explained that due to housing issues his children and, now, (ex)partner Hayley had been living with her mum, an invitation that was not extended to Ben (according to the presentence report) due to his “volatile and controlling behavior.” Because of this, Ben said that he had begun to feel “pushed out of the kid’s lives” and had confronted Hayley and her mother outside the house after waiting out of sight:

I rang my partner at the time to, to, like, cos I missed an appointment with me little boy, see, um, she told, she said to me on the phone, when I said, “Where are you?” she was like, “Oh, I’m at, I’m at, at nursery with Ellie,” which is my daughter. And, er, she was like— I was like, “I didn’t even know like, you was going to look at a nursery.” Like “why wasn’t I invited?” sort of thing. And then, like, she put the phone down on me and then started ignoring me. So, like, I went around and then we started arguing and it just got out of control. Er, I pu,’ I pushed her. I pushed her mother over a baby gate and then just walked out with me little lad.

Ultimately, Ben said the two women had “provoked” him and so he had “retaliated,” feeling he was “losing everything that mattered to him.”

Though Ben said his behavior was only “technically domestic abuse,” he was willing to “learn” more by attending BBR. Nevertheless, he was also “worried” about attending “big groups” likely to be “filled with loads of little tossers and dickheads,” made all the more difficult given his tendency of being the “center of attention.” Indeed, Ben did ultimately receive several warnings for “acting the idiot” toward facilitators and missing sessions and was eventually “thrown off the course.” In terms of what Ben had



learned, he was ambivalent, and as measure of such feelings had challenged the facilitators about the utility of the *time out* (emotional management) skill he had been taught and encouraged to use:

I can't remember what it was called, but yeah, it were like, um, in the domestic setting, like, er, if you, if you're feeling like you're gonna, it's gonna turn into an argument, go out and come back when you say you're gonna back, and then calm down and stuff like that. But like, it depends who you are as to whether that works, innit? Like if I'm pissed off and I go, I go away for ten minutes, that whole ten minutes I'm thinking about what I'm gonna do when I get back. D'ya get what I mean . . . So, like, obviously, they said, I said, I said that to them, I said, "That doesn't work, innit." Yeah, they was like, "Oh, in the next module, there'll be another one, and then as it goes, there'll be different ones and there will be one that you can do," blah-de-blah and all that, innit.

Despite Ben's honest reflection about the legitimacy of the content, the aims of the program remained clear: that there would eventually be a *skill* in the manual that would be suitable to help him manage his reactions to domestic conflicts. Unfortunately, this left little opportunity to explore the meaning behind what *had* "provoked" Ben's violence, or the extent to which being treated differently throughout his life, even by those closest to him, might present as a barrier to relating or engaging within the BBR program.

### **Trevor**

Trevor was a 43-year-old polite man, also unemployed, who was described in his program review as a quieter group member until other men had dropped out and the numbers were significantly reduced. Trevor's initial trepidation might have been because he was autistic. Indeed, Trevor was awaiting an assessment following his daughter's recent diagnosis; his partner Maggie, he said, had even observed similar "traits" in him too. Trevor himself hoped that a diagnosis could help him make sense of why he got "angry for no reason," why he "had some problems understanding things," "managing" his "behavior" and "having problems, jobwise and stuff." Indeed, Trevor's aversion to "noise," "sudden changes," and need for "routine" would certainly have made his participation in domestic abuse intervention group work difficult.

Like many autistic people, Trevor had felt "out of place" most of his life; all the more difficult to endure when considered within the context a childhood characterized by being singled out for his stepfather's violence, and the feelings of guilt and helplessness that would have followed being forced to witness his mother being "punched" and "kicked" for intervening. The school environment provided no reprieve from the differential treatment Trevor experienced at home, where he claimed to always be in "trouble" despite having done nothing wrong. A "boarding school" for "lads" with "behavioral problems and learning difficulties" soon ensued, though here, like his subsequent years spent in the army, was experienced as one of the few affirming spaces in his life with the familiar routines they provided and where "everyone was the same."

Nevertheless, a tendency to distrust people had been forged at an early age, with Trevor fixated especially on his stepfathers' infidelities and, later, those of his (ex)wives and only friend, the latter betrayal only discovered, Trevor laughed, by using his "army skills" to hide. Despite his condemnations, Trevor was unable to reflect on his own transgressions, trivializing his affairs while attributing his violence to being "attacked" himself or rationalized as a reaction to discovering his partners' infidelities. Such betrayals had left Trevor unable to get "close to any males," while years of feeling isolated had led to him feeling "suicidal," like he had "nobody in his life," often resorting to drinking in pubs by way of helping him just to "associate" with others.

With four failed marriages behind him, Maggie had been a turning point in Trevor's life. Though while their relationship was "brilliant," Trevor also found it "overwhelming." Forged on the backdrop of relationships of distrust, Trevor would get himself "into a bit of a state," thinking he was "being cheated on again" – despite Maggie's reassurances that she was "not that type of girl." Ultimately, Trevor said a "string of events" – convictions for violent offenses and losing his business – had caused him to "have a mental breakdown:"

They say you end up taking out on your nearest and dearest and that's what happened, arguing and she [Maggie] ended up getting a dislocated finger as I was trying to get her mobile phone off her, which it was an accident and she knows that as well, too. I didn't want her to ring the police. I knew – you know, I was already on a suspended sentence. I knew I was going to go to jail if she did, but she didn't bother for my safety at the time, and everything else, which I understand now.

It was, however, difficult to see that Trevor *did* “understand now” or that he was capable of putting himself in Maggie's shoes. Trevor's tendency to deny any abuse had taken place or by attributing his outbursts to “mental health problems” or “losing his job” was reflected in his program review:

Moving forward he [Trevor] was encouraged to consider beliefs that lie underneath all of this and would motivate aggressive behavior – on doing so he recognized that from being in the infantry for 6 years he was taught to use aggression to intimidate and win combat situations. He also commented that his ex-partner had taken “everything” from him but did not feel this has any impact on his relationship currently. When reviewing the module, he stated that he had found it “interesting” and that he is discovering things however struggled to elaborate on what, other than to say he has learnt it is important to be open with his partner. (Designated facilitator)

Trevor's subsequent progress across later modules was recorded in more positive terms, evidenced, according to his program review, in Trevor's articulation of how he envisaged putting his newly acquired skills to use to manage any future conflicts. There was, however, little evidence that Trevor's reported struggles had been surmounted, evident in his splitting of Maggie and his ex-partners into good and bad women who were, respectively, idealized and denigrated. During our final interview, Trevor's response suggested as much, revealing a less than convincing account of his improved reflective capacity. When asked to consider his learning in more detail, Trevor said he had not used these skills yet:

**Trevor:** . . . it's gonna be useful to me if I ever, ever need it because I, I didn't know it (pause) before coming on this course, that there was stuff like that available to you because of my way of thinking, it's changed my way of thinking and I'm now looking at different views in different situations and just, just like you say, picking it apart is, i-i-it just—

**NR:** So what about in the past then, is there an example in the past where that would have been useful, if you'd had that [thinking] then?

**Trevor:** (Pause) erm, (pause) years a – well cos I was, I was in the army and stuff when I was married an stuff, I was still in the army, erm, but (pause) yeah it was m – it was a case of it used to be like (pause) I, I was just in the wrong relationships as well that, that's what was doing it for me as well.

With long pauses and stutters, Trevor genuinely appeared confused. While he had been encouraged to *think* differently about unfounded infidelities and reasoning that supported his violence, he had himself started to buy into and repeat the program discourse in a way that appeared superficial and not cognizant of autism, or the overwhelming feelings that he experienced at the thought of losing Maggie.

### **Discussion: foregrounding meaning and motive in the domestic abuse perpetration of and response to neurodivergent men**

Supporting and advancing Gadd and Corr's (2017) critique of typological approaches, Tony, Trevor and Ben's psychological profiles and violence motives did not easily fit into Holtzworth-Munroe and Holtzworth-Munroe and Stuart's (1994) or Johnson's (1995) perpetrator profiles or violence types. Much like “Glen,” there was much overlap when their stories were examined more closely at the individual level. Clearly all three men presented with anti-social tendencies,

evidenced in their extensive criminal histories, causing “trouble” at school, and engagement in extra-familial violence. However, all three men grew up in households with violent and/or absent fathers and stepfathers, had suffered with bouts of depression and anxiety, and displayed high levels of dependency upon women and sexual jealousy that correspond with borderline characteristics. That both Trevor and Ben had felt “provoked” or “attacked” might also be read at certain junctures as mutual, while Tony’s explanation of his violence was in many ways construed as situational and beyond his control (Kelly and Johnson 2008). Similarly, all three men could be categorized as *intimate partner terrorists* who sought to entrap their partners (Stark 2007; Johnson 2006), motivated by sexist entitlement and a pattern of coercive and controlling behaviors that characterized most, if not all, of their intimate relationships. Indeed, Tony, Ben and Trevor alike had engaged in stalking behaviors, hidden in bushes, searched houses, and waited out of sight for their partners to return home, as well as relentless questioning around infidelity, checking phones and challenging (and assaulting) their partners’ male acquaintances.

However, a psychosocial analysis that foregrounds the complexity of individual background stories offers a more nuanced interpretation of how anxiety and its defenses manifests in the lives and violence of neurodivergent people (Gadd and Jefferson 2007). Take for example the research on the effects on children and young people who grow up in disadvantage and live in violent and neglectful homes (Gadd et al. 2015; Hughes et al. 2020; Miles and Condry 2015; Pearson, Harwin, and Hester 2006), it is not difficult to conceptualize Tony, Ben and Trevor’s emotional distress and “behavioral problems” in school and beyond as an understandable response to their traumas and unresolved childhood anxieties that were replayed in subsequent relationships (Johnstone et al. 2018) and the intersection of neurological differences in which they resolved to project a less authentic version of themselves to stave off stigma harm (Pearson and Rose, 2023). In the absence of understanding, all three boys were labeled as problematic and excluded from mainstream education and, effectively, marginalized from social life. Labeled as “bad boys” and banished to special education, neurodivergent young men with traumas are often left with few alternative subject positions to take up to the extent that the bad boy label is invested in as a means of securing social capital amongst similarly stigmatized young men, fending off the feelings of difference and segregation such exclusion brings (Johnston and Bradford 2019).

In Tony’s case, most of his adolescent and adult life had subsequently been spent living in prison or with his mum, and his only memories of his father were marked by his absence, “shouting” or “alcoholism.” While his mother “laughed about it now,” being the “naughty” “hyperactive” child of a single mother of two boys in a small town of two tales – holiday homes for the privileged and “ASBO’s” for the left behind – would certainly have been no joke at the time and would likely have invited criticism of Tony’s mother’s parenting and an early problem child label for him. Drugs, alcohol, and exclusions were not far behind, and the forward trajectory was sealed with the first stint in a “young offenders” institution and the restrictive “ASBO” that followed him well into his adolescence until the “real drugs” landed him in the pervasive clutches of the adult criminal justice system. It is feasible that Tony saw Rachel as offering a different life and perhaps why he, like Ben and Trevor, was so heavily invested in a relationship with a woman he (still) “really loved” and her son who offered some reprieve from the ambivalent feelings he felt toward his own, and the troubling realization that he was not too different from his father after all. Tony was clearly conflicted about his behavior toward Rachel, but that he could not in fact “get Rachel back” was too painful to acknowledge as his own doing which may explain why he was so invested in “madness” and “paranoia” as reasons for his violence. These psychological experiences would certainly have been difficult, and psychosis does lend itself to the kind of paranoia thinking Tony described. However, a *responsive response* (Gadd 2015) in which the facilitators *did* have the time to sit with Tony, as his designated facilitator pointed out, could have helped him to acknowledge the harm he had caused without reverting to a defensive position, in which his own inadequacies were split off and disowned, and controlling behaviors cast in a less stigmatizing “paranoia” discourse than that of a domestic abuser.

In Ben's case, criminalization had equally been premature, engaged in both familial and adolescent to parent violence. It is unclear whether Ben's family were offered suitable early intervention or whether Ben's safeguarding needs had been adequately assessed. What was evident though was that Ben had been tarred with an early deviant label which both neglected his attention differences, and the understandable trauma responses that many vulnerable young men's behavior manifests in (Gadd et al. 2015). Before the age of 16 and a child still himself, Ben had fathered his first daughter, followed by a period of child services involvement due to Ben's "dangerous" behavior. Perceived criticisms of his parenting and character were no doubt experienced as an extension of the "care-less spaces" (Rogers 2020) Ben had occupied throughout his life, and likely provoked the anxiety that came with the *troubling recognition* (Bollas 1993) that he was *too* engaged in the same "lifestyle choices" of his father that he had said he did not "agree" with.

Yet, the very services that Ben would have relied upon to support him with his emotional needs and behavioral responses had all but abandoned him and written him off. Ben had offered up some insightful reflections about being a young man with attention difficulties and an underlying persecutory rage, arguably developed over many years of feeling misunderstood and labeled as "bad." But the emphasis in BBR on emotional management, not *understanding*, as a central program aim was clear, and the only assurances Ben was (allegedly) given was that there would eventually be a "skill" that would be suitable for him to use. Moving beyond what (largely) remains a deficit focused model (Renehan 2022), more time could have been given to recognize Ben's understandable distrust of and disrespect toward professionals. Foregrounding and rebuilding relationships of trust and mutual respect could have prepared Ben for the daunting task of sitting in groups, where he might have been able to look beyond his perception of the other men as "tossers" and "dickheads" and more as men with genuine problems much like his own.

Because Ben moved onto another BBR program, it was not possible to obtain any specific practitioner view, but according to Ben no plan or discussion had taken place to support him to engage with BBR around his ADHD needs. Therefore, questions remain as to whether some contingency planning and relaxing "three strike" clauses would have better prepared Ben to stay the course (Renehan and Fitz-Gibbon 2022). Further, could Ben's exclusion for "acting the clown" be better understood as him projecting acceptability and an *intersubjective breakdown* between himself and the program facilitators (Bervoets 2022)? Owing not to (so-called) ADHD deficits, but to untrained practitioners' misunderstandings of neurodivergent people's communication differences as being deliberately "belligerent or disruptive" (Renehan and Fitz-Gibbon 2022:14)? Reconceptualized as such, with more time and tailored and dynamic responses, facilitators might have been able to reveal and communicate to Ben that what he perceived as provocations were about the vulnerable feelings that come with the real fear of "losing everything that mattered" and, simultaneously, the defensiveness that comes with the desire to be rid of such emasculating dependencies and stigma that comes in the aftermath of domestic abuse.

Trevor's case was further complicated in that his (prospective) autism diagnosis was missed as a child, no doubt subjecting him to many years of living in a world in which deviation from neurotypical thinking is pathologized (Bervoets 2022; Chapman and Bovell 2022; Milton 2012). This masking of his autistic social and communication differences would have required "considerable cognitive effort" (Lai et al. 2017:691) which for many autistic people increases stress, anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation (ibid, Bradley et al. 2021). The misrepresentation of Trevor's needs as "behavioral problems" saw him transferred to special education. Though he "loved it" there with the routine and choice of stimulating activities that a young autistic boy would have thrived in, it would also no doubt have been a welcome escape from an abusive home in which he was singled out for violence. The army was also a place where Trevor "fit in" as "everyone was the same." Yet these segregated experiences did not prepare Trevor for "civilian" life or the rejection he would experience in a neurotypical world in which he admitted to struggling with "jobs and stuff," "understanding things" and forging and sustaining friendships and intimate relationships. This, and the (perceived or

actual) betrayals of his stepfather, best friend, and (ex) wives which were not easy for Trevor to forgive or forget, had led to him feeling “suicidal” and “out of place” for most of his life. It should be of no great revelation then why an autistic man like Trevor would be so heavily invested in an intimate relationship with Maggie while simultaneously feeling “overwhelmed” at the prospect of losing her.

Despite Trevor’s claims and speculated progress on BBR, it was difficult to see that he *did* understand now as he proclaimed, or that he was able to put himself in Maggie’s (or any of his previous partners’) shoes, and there was little exploration of what the consequences for her would have been if she (like others before her) *did* turn out to be “that type of girl.”

Trevor felt an autism diagnosis might help him to make sense of some of his struggles. However, the danger (including for Maggie and their children) here lies in conflating *coercive* control with the kind of control Trevor exercised as an autistic man in other aspects of his life to provide him with routine and certainty in a world not created for neurodivergent people (Chapman and Bovell 2022; Renehan and Fitz-Gibbon 2022). This raises further issues regarding the content, structure, pace, and group environment for autistic (and other neurodivergent) men in that programs are designed by and for neurotypical people. For example, to what extent did Trevor’s harmful gendered expectations reflect an invested male entitlement, vis-à-vis an imposed and internalized gender order that is not cognizant of autistic subjectivities and non-conformity with gender norms (Jackson-Perry 2020)? Despite Trevor’s prospective autism being noted in his pre-sentence report, there was no consideration of his autistic needs or potential barriers to engagement. Trevor’s comparable quiet demeanor in larger groups was noted in both his program review and in my own field notes where I observed marked differences in how Trevor interacted and presented in interviews versus in the presence of the other men. Reflecting on these presentations and others in my field notes, I was left wondering to what extent Trevor’s interactions and fixed gaze were attempts to mask social interaction differences and sensory discomfort, and the anxiety he would have experienced sitting in a room full of men, staring at each other, known for their aggression.

Further questions remain. Could Trevor’s repeating back of the program discourse be taken as evidence of him “talking the talk” rather than “walking the walk” as has been suggested in previous evaluations of abusive men’s narratives of change (Burton, Regan, and Kelly 1998)? Or could it be interpreted as him masking his (mis)understanding of neurotypical content (Renehan and Fitz-Gibbon 2022)? Could his inability to (re)consider the thoughts and feelings of his (ex) partners be interpreted as a (so-called) autistic lack of empathy or mentalization capabilities? Or could it more accurately be understood as the kind of defensive projections we all engage in, to some degree, when feeling stressed or entitled and hence unable (or unwilling) to think about the perspectives of others?

What was apparent was that Trevor genuinely appeared confused when asked to reflect upon his learning of his violence in intimate relationships. His confusion suggests that cognitive behavioral programs such as BBR may be laden with neurotypical assumptions about deficit thinking and communication in ways that are not cognizant of autistic experiences and differences (Bervoets 2022; Jackson-Perry 2020). To this end, more research is needed, not *on* autism, but *with* autistic (and other neurodivergent) men about how they experience and perceive mainstream programs (neurotypical content, approaches, group dynamics and the therapeutic alliance) so as not to reproduce the same epistemic injustices and coercive therapies that many autistic people have endured in the pursuit of treatments and *cures* (Chapman and Botha 2023; Chapman and Bovell 2022).

## Concluding thoughts

There can be little doubt of the challenges men like Tony, Ben and Trevor would have presented to often undervalued, overworked, and stressed practitioners who feel unable to deliver on their own values within the discourses and practices of cognitive behavioral therapy (Renehan 2021, 2022). Neurodivergence is another intersecting layer of inequality and disadvantage that practitioners must understand amongst the many other “wounds and intersectionalities” that neurodivergent men present with (Renehan and Fitz-Gibbon 2022:18).

However, autism, ADHD and psychosis do not cause domestic abuse and to promote such a claim can be harmful and stigmatizing to neurodivergent people (Botha 2021). By adopting a case study approach and psychosocial analysis (Gadd and Corr 2017; Gadd and Jefferson 2007), it was clear that meaning and motive was still discernible and therefore relevant in the response to these three neurodivergent men's domestic abuse perpetration. This does not however obviate the need for more inclusive responses, flexibility in program structure, and rethinking of neurotypical content to ensure that neurodivergent men like Tony, Ben and Trevor are afforded the support they need to engage more effectively. However, there is much more to understand about how neurodivergent men experience perpetrator interventions, the support they and their families need, and to do so in ways that do not medicalize domestic abuse, but work *responsibly and responsively* (Gadd 2015) so that the specific meanings and motives underlying domestic abuse are revealed and meaningfully engaged with. The skills and knowledge that are required to undertake such work with neurodivergent men and the resources needed however reflects a significant gap and concern for the future (Renehan and Fitz-Gibbon 2022).

Further, questions remain about the experiences and needs of victim-survivors (including children), the support they need, and whether – given Milton's (2012) insights in respect of differences and reciprocity in communication – this varies depending on whether the victim and perpetrator are both neurodivergent or a mixed neurotype couple. For example, to what extent *did* Maggie see Trevor's autistic presentations as reasons for his domestic abuse and what kind of additional emotional toil and responsibility does this then place on victims of domestic abuse? How to deliver safe and effective interventions with neurodivergent people and their families in this context is a pressing issue. Recent announcements suggest that BBR is soon to be replaced with a *New Generation of Programs*. It is surely therefore timely to consider how violence interventions in the UK and beyond can better cater to a neurodiverse perpetrator population.

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## Data access statement

The data associated with this research project is not accessible as consent was not received to make data publicly available at the time it was collected.

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