

Alternatives to Violence Project (Britain): An Overview of Theory and Evidence

Executive Summary

This overview assesses the effectiveness of workshops run by Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) Britain in helping people to develop the ability to handle conflict well without using or being the victim of violence. Based on previous writing on AVP internationally and the input of AVP Britain facilitators, a model of AVP's theory of change is proposed. AVP Britain's effectiveness in helping people in 4 key areas of personal development outlined in the model is assessed, drawing on evaluations of AVP workshops in Britain. Academic theory and evidence that these forms of personal development enable individuals to handle conflict better, avoid using or suffering from violence, and build healthy relationships, is summarised.

The overview reports that:

- 1) **Violence in Britain:** Interpersonal violence is a pervasive problem in Britain. The real extent and effects of violence between people are under reported and not fully understood. However, we know that violence is damaging to people, relationships, families, communities, society and the economy.
- 2) **The Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) Britain** is a national charity with over 100 trained volunteer facilitators delivering intensive, low-cost group workshops for people from all walks of life who want to handle conflict and violence well. Workshops combine experiential learning with practical training in conflict awareness and skills.
- 3) **AVP's aim** is that people are able to build good relationships and handle conflict better without committing or suffering acts of violence.
- 4) **AVP's approach:** AVP workshops are held in communities and prisons, and with partner organisations to deliver training to specific groups.
 - a) AVP addresses a broad understanding of what violence entails and what causes it. Participants are encouraged to develop an awareness of violence to mean physical, verbal and emotional attempts to cause harm to others.
 - b) A core principle of AVP is recognising that everyone has the potential to develop the skills to handle conflict well and non-violently.
 - c) Participants attend workshops with a broad experience of conflict and violence. Workshop participants come from diverse, mostly disadvantaged backgrounds. About 15-20% of participants have experience of domestic violence, either as perpetrators or victims. Most participants have difficulties managing anger or other strong emotions, or live with people who do, and many are suffering from relationship and family breakdowns.
 - d) Workshops use experiential group exercises such as role-play and group tasks as a learning process.

- e) It is a requirement and strength of AVP workshops that individuals must have volunteered their own time and participation.
- f) The community belonging and positive emotion built in workshops are key factors in providing a positive and supportive working atmosphere.
- g) Workshop facilitators are co-learners in the workshop experience, continuously developing their own skills in both handling conflict and facilitation. All participants can potentially train as AVP facilitators.
- h) Progress in an AVP workshop is achieved through working on 4 'building blocks': (1) Self-esteem and self-awareness, (2) Communication skills, with an emphasis on listening, (3) The capacity for trust and cooperation, and (4) Responding to conflict and violence well, and solving problems.

5) A model of AVP's theory of change can be used to evaluate its effectiveness.

This model proposes that:

Individuals participate in an AVP workshop, attended and facilitated voluntarily, that act as enjoyable, safe and supportive spaces to explore conflict, violence and relationships through experiential learning.

Here, participants take part in exercises and discussions that are designed to achieve the 4 following subsidiary aims:

- People build on self-esteem and self-awareness
- People build on strong communication skills with an emphasis on listening
- People build on the capacity for trust and cooperation
- People can better respond to conflict and violence well, and solve problems

These 4 subsidiary aims combined help an AVP workshop to achieve its overall aim: 'People handle conflict better without using or suffering acts of violence'. This works towards AVP's vision of a nonviolent society. Each stage of this change happens through a process of Transforming Power.

6) Evidence of effectiveness: Both quantitative and qualitative evaluations of the effectiveness of AVP workshops provide a strong evidential base for the AVP process.

- a) The building blocks of the AVP process, although developed through practice and the experience of facilitators, have a clear rationale and are supported by academic theory and research findings. Recent standardised participants' evaluations show that 91% of workshops participants in 2010-11 reported that the workshop they attended had helped them in every form of personal development covered by the building blocks.
 - i) Current research findings show that high and stable self-esteem provides an optimum form of self-perception for showing low levels of aggressive behaviour. This stability in self-esteem levels can be achieved through developing sufficient self-awareness.
 - ii) Extensive evidence shows that poor communication skills and low empathy levels are linked to violent behaviour. Academic research confirms that training in communication skills can lower levels of violent behaviour, and people with developed empathy show more pro-social behaviour.

- iii) Research shows that high levels of trust are important factors for security and cooperation within close relationships. High social trust is considered to be a key factor in social capital, and found to be both a cause and result of positive social engagement.
- iv) Research shows that both individuals with high aggression and individuals who are regularly a victim of abuse display low problem-solving skills. Training designed to improve problem-solving skills has been found to be effective in reducing violent behaviour.

7) Conclusion: The presented model of change is well supported by wider research in to the causes of interpersonal violence and contributory factors in developing low aggression levels and pro-social behaviour. Evaluations also show that AVP has much success in helping participants develop what the model proposes to be key components to nonviolence.

Recommendations are given. Beyond these recommendations, this overview suggests that AVP's development through practice has had much success in delivering a beneficial and theoretically supported programme of training.

Introduction

This overview outlines the effectiveness of workshops run by Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) Britain in helping people to develop the ability to handle conflict well without using or being the victim of violence.

Drawing on writing on AVP from around the world and the input of AVP Britain facilitators, a theoretical model of the personal changes AVP intends to help workshop participants undergo is proposed. The academic theory evidence of the impact of improvements in these forms of personal development on people's ability to avoid violence, handle conflict well, and build healthy relationships is assessed. The findings of evaluations on AVP workshops, including the latest evaluations carried out by AVP Britain are discussed in order to assess whether AVP workshops are effective in bringing about these changes in workshop participants. We start by examining the problem AVP addresses: interpersonal violence in Britain.

1. Violence in Britain

Interpersonal violence is a pervasive problem in Britain. The real extent and effects of violence between people are under reported and not fully understood. However, we know that violence is damaging to people, relationships, families, communities, society and the economy.

A UN survey by the World Health Organisation in 2004 found that Britain has approximately twice the average occurrence of interpersonal violence in the industrialised world (WHO 2004). According to the 2009/10 British Crime Survey, there were 2,087,000 violent incidents against adults in England and Wales. It reported that 4% of men and 2% of women were a victim of violent crime in the past year. However, crime levels only tell part of the story as only some acts of violence are truly acknowledged or considered crimes by victims or witnesses, and a minority are reported to the police.

In 2005/2006, domestic violence accounted for 15% of all reported violent crime (Walker, A. et al. 2006). The unreported percentage of this form of violence is likely to be higher, considering factors that inhibit contact with authorities, such as fear of further violence as a result, acceptance of violence and victims protecting the perpetrator. According to a 2007 Home Office report, 29% of

women and 18% of men aged 16 to 59 had experienced one or more types of non-sexual abuse from a current or former partner at some point since age 16 (Coleman et al. 2007).

Many young children and young people have witnessed violence in their homes. In a survey over a quarter (26%) of young adults reported that during childhood physical violence took place between those caring for them (Cawson 2002). For 5% this violence was constant or frequent (p.37). Strong correlations were found between violence between carers and child maltreatment. Of those young adults reporting neglect physical abuse during childhood, 75% had lived with some level of domestic violence, and for 36% the violence was constant or frequent (p.37-8).

Both experiencing and witnessing domestic violence can have highly damaging effects on people's lives. There are a wide range of both immediate and long-term health outcomes of domestic violence, including physical injury, reproductive health problems, sexual dysfunction, depression, anxiety, psychosomatic systems and eating problems (World Health Organisation 2000). Research on homelessness found that domestic violence is the single most common reason given by homeless women for their situation. 40% of all homeless women stated domestic violence as a contributor to their homelessness (Cramer and Carter 2002). Domestic violence has a damaging impact on employment. A survey found that among employed women who had suffered domestic violence in the last year, 21% took time off work and two per cent lost their jobs (Walby and Allen 2004). The link between developmental and social problems and witnessing domestic violence are strong. 59% female young offenders and 25% male young offenders have witnessed domestic violence in their homes (Jacobson et al. 2010, p.84). There will be many more with related problems who have gone undetected.

Another highly damaging form of violence in Britain is violence to the self. Around 25,000 people a year receive hospital treatment for self-harm. Most sufferers, however, do not seek medical attention. A study of 6,000 school students aged 15-16 in England found that 1 in 9 girls and 1 in 30 boys had intentionally self-harmed at least once in the previous year (Hawton et al. 2002).

We can gain some idea of the scale of suffering and related damage as a result of violence in Britain by estimating its monetary cost. Government research into the cost of domestic violence alone on the state, employers and victims gives a shocking picture. Based on the Home Office framework for costing crime, the report estimates the total cost of violence to services (Criminal Justice System, health, social services, housing, civil legal) to be £3.1 billion per year, while the loss to the economy is £2.7 billion per year. In addition are the human and emotional costs. These are costs of pain and suffering that are not counted in the costs of services, such as moving home, additional healthcare and other strategies of coping with violence. The report estimates this to be as much as £17 billion per year, putting the total annual cost of domestic violence to Britain at around £23 billion (Walby 2004).

2. About AVP

The Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) is a national charity with over 100 trained volunteer facilitators delivering intensive, low-cost group workshops for people from all walks of life who want to handle conflict and violence well. Workshops combine experiential learning with practical training in conflict awareness and skills.

AVP workshops help participants to:

- manage strong feelings
- deal with risk and danger
- build good relationships
- communicate well in difficult situations
- develop conflict skills
- be true to themselves while respecting other people
- understand conflict and why it happens

AVP started in prisons in the United States in 1975. It is now operating in over 50 countries, supporting people in the community, the criminal justice system and youth settings.

The content and process of an AVP workshop has been through practice rather than research evidence grounded in academic theory. AVP was founded by individuals experienced in group work before theory on group work was well developed. They, like facilitators today, used what they believed to work, based on extensive experience of seeing people change their behaviour and outlook within and following AVP workshops. Nonetheless, it is useful to outline a theoretical model and relate this to evidence of positive change in order to assess whether AVP brings about change in its intended manner.

3. AVP's aim

AVP's aim is that people are able to build good relationships and handle conflict better without committing or suffering acts of violence.

4. AVP's approach

AVP workshops are held in communities and prisons, and with partner organisation to deliver training to specific groups.

Each workshop has an average of 10 participants who attend voluntarily, and is delivered by a team of 3 or 4 trained volunteer facilitators. Workshops are 16-18 hours long and usually held over a weekend. Facilitators have all previously attended workshops as participants.

4.a. AVP's understanding of violence

AVP addresses a broad understanding of what violence entails and what causes it.

Participants are encouraged to develop an awareness of violence to mean physical, verbal and emotional attempts to cause harm to others. Workshops also explore a broad range of causes of violence. Although workshops foremost address forms of personal development in helping individuals to avoid violence, participants are also encouraged to developing an understanding that of social factors such as inequality, social exclusion and poverty cause violence in society.

4.b. The potential in everyone for nonviolence

A core principle of AVP is recognising that everyone has the potential to develop the skills to handle conflict well and non-violently.

AVP works on the presumption that people are not inherently violent, and that violence is resorted to from a lack of visible alternatives. AVP upholds that, no matter the propensity to violence, all

individuals can have what many facilitators and participants call 'Transforming Power': the ability to *'transform violent or potentially violent or unhealthy attitudes, relationships or lifestyles into more positive, healthy, nonviolent ones'* (Shuford 1998;1) Individuals have and are encouraged to develop different interpretation on Transforming Power, whether as a psychological, spiritual, social or simply experiential process. However all these approaches conceptualise a process of realising and enabling a social, constructive, positive part of the self. The concept is presented to participants in a mandala, with 'Transforming Power' at the centre, surrounding by its aspects: 'Expect the best', Respect for self, 'Caring for others', 'Look for a non-violent path' and 'Think before reacting'.

4.c. Who AVP works with

Participants attend AVP workshops with a wide variety of experiences of conflict and violence.

Some participants have severe problems with perpetrating violence, being victim to violence or both. Others simply wish to develop further skills in handling conflict. This variety of experience is a key point of learning for participants in their understanding of violence and in developing awareness of self and others.

Workshop participants come from diverse, mostly disadvantaged backgrounds. 20% of participants are referred by solicitors, the probation service or GPs, 25% from community agencies and about 10% are in prison. Others refer themselves, typically on the personal recommendations of others. About 15-20% of participants have experience of domestic violence, either as perpetrators or victims. Most participants have difficulties managing anger or live with people who do, and many are suffering from relationship and family breakdowns. Certain groups are prioritised certain such as ex-offenders, young adults, people with mental health problems, low-income parents.

4.d. Experiential Learning

Workshops use experiential group exercises such as role-play and group tasks as a learning process.

Rather than teaching improved cognitive processes and behaviours to participants, as many anger management and violence reduction programmes do, a majority of workshop exercises help participants explore life experience and interact in the workshop to learn and practice new ways of regarding oneself and interacting with others. The need for non-violent and constructive approaches to conflict to be a realistic alternative to violence means change must be experienced rather than simply learnt.

4.e. Voluntarism

All participants on AVP workshops must have volunteered their own time and participation.

The willingness to draw on life experience and actively engage in open sharing and role-play means that participation must be voluntary. Commitment rather than compliance is needed for reflecting on and learning from the collective life experiences of participants.

4.f. Community Belonging and Positive Emotion

The community belonging and positive emotion built in workshops are key factors in providing a positive and supportive working atmosphere.

Through the building of trust and support, upheld through a 'working agreement' put together by participants at the beginning of the workshops, a sense of belonging allows open up and improve

self-esteem in a 'safe space'. Facilitators maintain a sense of enjoyment by including fun exercises and games called 'light and livelies' to lower people's inhibitions.

4.g. Facilitators as Co-learners

Workshop facilitators are co-learners in the workshop experience, continuously developing their own skills in both handling conflict and facilitation. All participants can potentially train as AVP facilitators.

The main role of the facilitator team is not to teach, but to assist in delivering exercises whilst also participating alongside the rest of the workshop group. Participants are encouraged not to only learn from facilitators, but also from other experiences and skills of other participants. All Facilitators have attended at least three workshops as a participant and have undergone further facilitation training.

4.h. Building Blocks and the AVP Process

Progress in an AVP workshop is achieved through working on 4 'building blocks': (1) Self-esteem and self-awareness, (2) Communication skills, with an emphasis on listening, (3) The capacity for trust and cooperation, and (4) Responding to conflict and violence well, and solving problems.

Each building block covers a core component of commitment to nonviolence. If we see AVP's main aim as to increase people's ability to handle conflict without resorting to or experiencing violence, in these building blocks, we can see a number of subsidiary aims that workshops facilitate participants to achieve. Although individual facilitators and writers on AVP have varying opinions on the exact division and number of building blocks, they broadly follow the following categories:

1. **Self-esteem and self-awareness:** affirmation of self and others, setting personal goals, recognising existing ability to handle conflict well and be nonviolent, recognising choices, gaining clearer sense of commitment to one's values.
2. **Communication skills, with an emphasis on listening:** assertiveness, listening skills, empathy, and recognising others' points of view, communicating one's needs and feelings.
3. **The capacity for trust and cooperation:** experiencing a supportive community, creating a 'safe space', working as a team, valuing diversity of opinion, experience and background, respecting self and others.
4. **Responding to conflict and violence well, and solving problems:** understanding violence and nonviolence, understanding feelings and actions, taking responsibility, practising nonviolent ways to solve familiar problems.

The order of these building blocks is also of key importance. Due to the autonomy of facilitator groups to decide the exact content and running order of a workshop based on their experience and understanding the participants' needs, the blocks are generally covered in the order below. Each block is a key component in itself, but also lays the foundation for improvement in the next stage:

Improved **self-esteem** and **self-awareness** is the foundation for learning within the group, and improves confidence and optimism to succeed.



This confidence and awareness brings about both the assertiveness and sensitivity required for improved **communication skills**.



The understanding and empathy of others' needs and feelings developed from increased communication improves the ability to **trust** and **cooperate** with others.



Improved trust, and skills and confidence in cooperation improve the ability to **handle conflict** and **solve social problems** in a creative and constructive way.

5. A Model of Change

A model of AVP's theory of change can be used to evaluate its effectiveness.

Some evaluations of AVP's effectiveness have proposed a theoretical model of change of the workshop process. These models, like the flow diagram above, explain a step-by-step process by which the participants transform their conflict handling abilities. In their evaluation of AVP workshops that took place in 3 prisons in Britain, Bitel et al. (1998) propose a model of how AVP facilitates the reversal of the process by which criminogenic background factors may lead to a propensity to violence.

Similarly, in his evaluation of AVP workshops held in a prison in Delaware, Sloane (2002) proposes a model by which a similar process, occurs within a transformative 'safe environment'. Problematically, Sloane's model does not theorise a process of becoming non-violent but instead a process that transforms an 'anti-' to a 'pro-social behavioural disposition'. This insinuates a transformation from non-conformity to conformity, rather than violence to non-violence, and therefore is not an explicit aim of AVP Britain. However, we can see that the model is closely comparable to that of Bitel et al. in the broad experience described.

The theoretical models of Bitel et al. and Sloane are useful in understanding the process of the workshop experience, as well as logical and valid in the theory they propose. They are also based on the researchers' extensive experience of the AVP process. However, for the purposes of this overview, a model is needed that:

1. Can be evaluated against wider scientific evidence showing that all the 'building blocks' of the AVP process have a direct positive impact on an individuals' ability to handle conflict well without using or suffering from violence.
2. Theorises a process that is relevant to AVP participants both on prison workshops and community workshops.

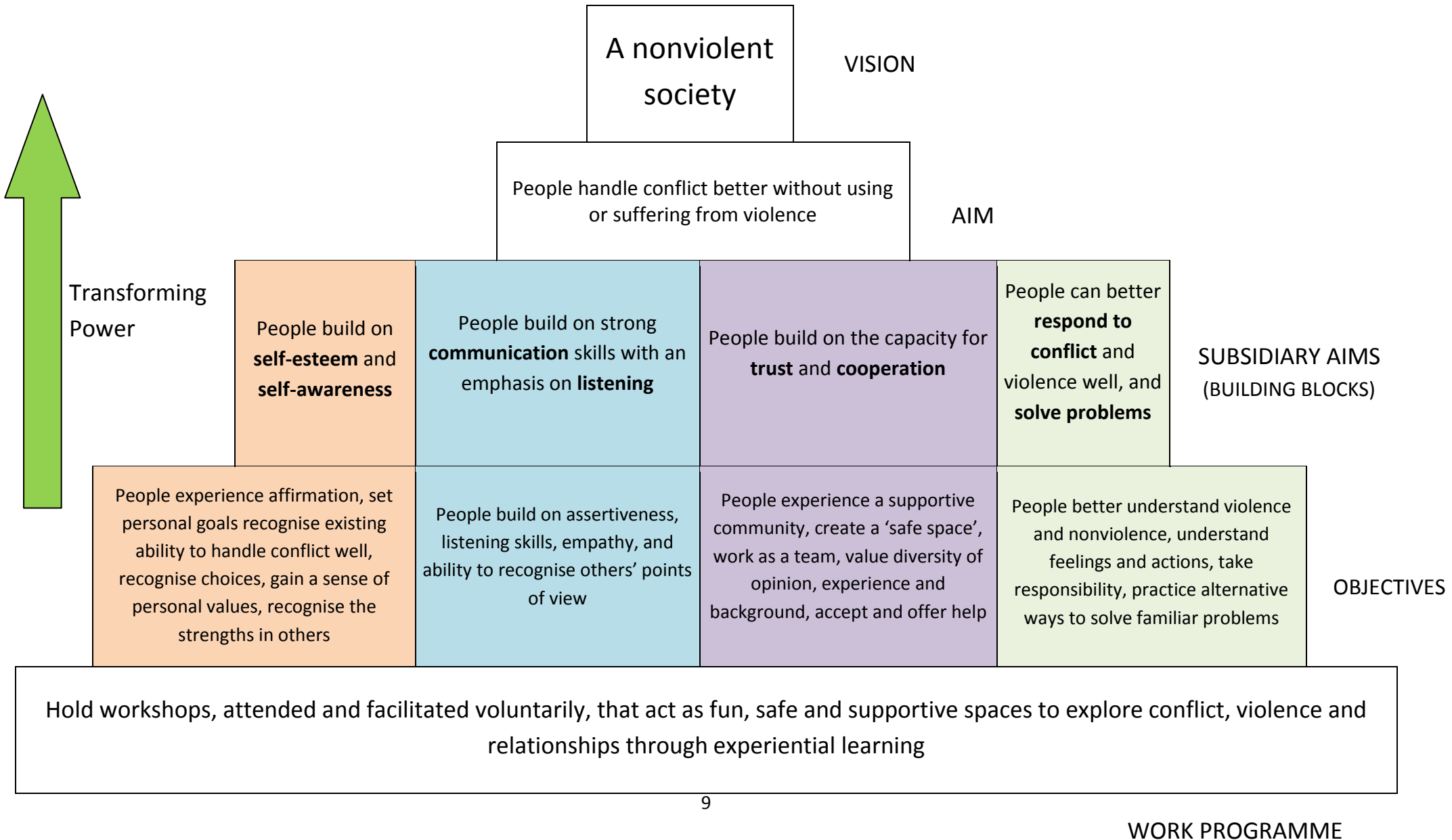
Proposed here is a model of change (see below) that encompasses the workshops process, as well as the process by which AVP works towards its overall aim and its vision of a nonviolent society.

This model proposes that:

Individuals participate in an AVP workshop, attended and facilitated voluntarily. The workshops become an enjoyable, safe and supportive space to explore conflict, violence and relationships through experiential learning.

Here, participants take part in exercises and discussions that are designed to achieve the 4 following subsidiary aims:

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- ***People build on self-esteem and self-awareness***
- ***People build on strong communication skills with an emphasis on listening***
- ***People build on the capacity for trust and cooperation***
- ***People can better respond to conflict and violence well, and solve problems***

These 4 subsidiary aims combined help an AVP workshop to achieve its overall aim: ‘People handle conflict better without using or suffering acts of violence’. This works towards AVP’s vision of a nonviolent society. Each stage of this change happens through a process of Transforming Power, by which individuals realise and enable their positive, constructive and social abilities.

6. Evidence of effectiveness

Both quantitative and qualitative evaluations of the effectiveness of AVP workshops provide a strong evidential base for the AVP process.

Evaluations of AVP workshops around the world provide evidence of AVP’s effectiveness, particularly in prisons. A number of studies have attempted to measure AVP’s success quantitatively. An evaluation by Walwrath (2001) of AVP workshops held in a prison in Maryland, USA found that AVP participants showed significantly lower rates of confrontations after participation (2001, p.707). Sloane (2002) found that, in the 12 months following AVP workshops in a prison in Delaware, participants had committed a mean of 1.81 infractions, whereas a control group of inmates who had not yet participated in a workshop but had signed up to do so, committed a mean of 4.35 infractions.

In order to evaluate AVP workshops in a way that both reflects importance of experiential and continual personal development, and evaluates a theory a more detailed theory of change, others have undertaken qualitative research on AVP. In doing this, Bitel et al (1998) and Phillips (2002) have evaluated effectiveness of the success in AVP’s main and subsidiary aims, based on participants views of how AVP works and how it has helped them.

In his evaluation of AVP workshops in New Zealand, Phillips’s [2002] found that AVP participants commonly reported that AVP: develops respect for self and others; develops critical social skills (communicating, interpersonal trust); and helps participants develop alternate approaches to conflict resolution by providing examples, practice and positive reinforcement.

Bitel et al. (1998) undertook evaluation of AVP workshops delivered in 3 UK prisons. Based on outcomes selected by AVP participants and the researchers, the evaluation found that AVP was successful it helping participants develop many of the essential skills and qualities outlined in the proposed model of change.

The findings of Bitel et al. and those of an extensive participant’s evaluation of workshops over Britain in 2010-11 are included below in order to assess the effectiveness of AVP’s building blocks.

6.a. The effectiveness of AVP’s building blocks

The building blocks of the AVP process, although developed intuitively through practice and the experience of facilitators, have a clear rationale and are supported by academic theory and research findings. Recent standardised participants’ evaluations show that 91% of workshops

Participants in 2010-11 reported that the workshop they attended had helped them in every form of personal development covered by the building blocks.

Both quantitative and qualitative research shows strong evidence that AVP helps people to handle conflict and avoid violence. However, in order to evaluate the proposed model of change, we must examine the effectiveness of AVP's building blocks further. For each building block, this section examines:

1. AVP's rationale for helping participants in this area of personal development. .
2. The evidence that AVP bring about positive change in this area amongst participants.
3. Wider scientific or academic evidence and theory that this form of personal development is linked to an individual's ability to handle conflict well, build healthy relationships and avoid violence.

6.a(i). Self-Esteem and Self-Awareness

Definition and Rationale

Self-esteem describes the level at which an individual has respect and positive regard for oneself, and shows this in social situations. Self-esteem is needed in handling conflict well as it improves the:

- motivation and confidence to stand up for one's needs and feelings;
- motivation and confidence to communicate well with others
- confidence to be cooperative; the confidence that one is respected by others
- motivation to avoid violent situations
- confidence in one's ability to learn how to handle conflict well

Self-awareness describes the level at which an individual accurately perceives: their effect within their environment; the level of their own strengths and weaknesses; and their personal needs and emotions. Self-awareness is needed in handling conflict well because it improves:

- understanding of one's own needs and feelings; understanding of particular situations when one is prone or vulnerable to violence
- the communication of needs and feelings
- understanding of the effects of different ways of communicating and behaving in conflict
- understanding of one's strengths and weakness in handling conflict

Another form of self-awareness developed in AVP workshops is gaining a strong sense of personal values. Knowing which people, things and ideas matter most can help an individual assess whether getting in to conflict is worthwhile in order to protect one's needs. The perception of oneself as having strong principles and loyalties also acts a form of affirmation, and can help to build respect for others.

EVALUATION FINDINGS

Results from a survey of all workshop participants in 2010-11 showed that 96%of participants thought that the AVP workshop they attended had helped them to better understand and believe in themselves.

93% of participants thought that the workshop had helped them to know the things that matter most to them better.

Bitel et al. (1998) found that, based on participant feedback, AVP was 'highly successful' at helping participants to experience affirmation. It was also found that AVP was 'moderately successful' at helping participants to:

- **Recognise that they always have choices**
- **Understand the relationship between feelings and actions**

Current research findings show that high and stable self-esteem provides an optimum form of self-perception for showing low levels of aggressive behaviour. This stability in self-esteem levels can be achieved through developing sufficient self-awareness.

Extensive psychological literature suggests that people with higher self-esteem are less likely to show aggressive behaviour. Kirschner (1992) suggests that aggressive behaviour towards others may serve as a compensatory role for perceived faults and a poor self-concept in the perpetrator (quoted in Hellman et al. 2010). Some theorists relate this relationship to past experience. Ritter et al. (2002) show that childhood exposure to aggression through familial alcoholism and family violence had a damaging effect on psychological functioning leading to low self-esteem and conduct disorders. Importantly, Goldstein and Rosenbaum's (1985) demonstrate that low self-esteem does not correlate with the level of conflict in the men's relationships, but whether violence and aggression is used within them.

However, a number of theorists including Bushman & Baumeister (1997) argue that a *low* level of self-esteem has less effect on violence and aggression than an *unstable* one. People with an unrealistically high level of self-regard, or narcissism, for example, may experience greater challenge to their self-concept. Kernis (2003) argues that this requires a sufficient level of self-awareness. Self-awareness brings with it knowledge of one's weaknesses and limits as well as strengths, ensuring a self-concept that is more congruent with their experience of social interaction and relationships.

This range of research findings suggests that development of self-esteem and self-awareness together is key to building the ability to avoid using violence.

6.a(ii) Communication Skills and Empathy

Definition and Rationale

There are two key aspects of communication that the AVP process aims to develop: expressing feelings and needs that lay behind conflict in a constructive way that avoids exacerbating the conflict and avoids an escalation to violence, and listening. Explaining and articulating the needs and feelings that play a part in the conflict can help others understand what one requires or expects from a solution. The other part of this process is a deep and constructive form of listening that makes the other person feel heard, and brings about a deeper understanding of the two different 'truths' at work. This leads to a deeper level of empathy, a key skill in managing conflict. We can define empathy as the process of taking another person's perspective and/or experiencing sympathetic or compassionate emotion as a response to the other person's emotion or situation (emphatic concern).

EVALUATION FINDINGS

Results from a survey of all workshop participants in 2010-11 showed that 96% of participants thought that the AVP workshop they attended had helped them to communicate including listening and speaking up for themselves better.

Bitel et al. (1998) found that, based on participant feedback, AVP was 'highly successful' at helping participants to:

- **Recognise other people's point of view**
- **Develop conflict resolution skills of active listening, assertiveness, (cooperation) and empathy.**

Research Findings

Extensive evidence shows that poor communication skills and low empathy levels are linked to violent behaviour. Academic research confirms that training in communication skills can lower levels of violent behaviour, and people with developed empathy show more pro-social behaviour.

There is extensive evidence that poor communication is linked to various forms of destructive behavioural patterns. It is well documented that offenders are more likely to have poorer verbal communication skills than the rest of the population (Bryan et al. 2007). Sanger and Hux (1997) note a clear link between juvenile delinquency and the tendency for speech to include syntactic and morphological errors.

Research suggests that poor communication skills are linked to violent behaviour. Babcock et al (1993), in a study of violent male partners, found that exhibiting poor communication skills during interviews was associated with higher reports of male to female partner psychological abuse. Aggressive verbal communication appears to have a lasting effect on social functioning.

As Wilkinson and Hamerschlag (2005) report, arguments precede about 80% of domestic violence events. This suggests that physical aggression is a conflict negotiation strategy that is used when communication has failed. Importantly, evidence suggests that training in communication skills plays a central part in reducing violent behaviour. Mosely (2006) found that violent young offenders gaining oral communication skills qualifications were 50% less likely to re-offend in the year after release than other offenders.

Substantial evidence has demonstrated that violent offenders are more likely to have a marked defect in empathy (Day et al. 2010, 204). Lisat & Ivan (1995) found that violent offenders were significantly less able to recognise the emotional states of others. Rusbult et al (1998) found that empathic accuracy (the ability to accurately detect others' emotions and needs) amongst couples was positively correlated with accommodative behaviour, commitment level and relationship adjustment. McCullough et al. (1997) found higher empathy lead to more pro-social behaviour and attitudes in close relationships.

6.a(iii) Trust and Cooperation

Definition and Rationale

In the context of the AVP process, trust describes the confidence in and reliance upon another person's ability and willingness to be supportive and constructive in social situations. It is also about honouring another person's confidence and reliance in you to do the same. Both these aspects of trust are addressed and explored in an AVP workshop. 'Ground rules' or 'working agreements' and exercises involving role play and discussion both create trust amongst participants in a safe supportive working environment, and so that participants can explore issues surrounding trust in their own lives.

Trust in interpersonal relationships allows for cooperation. Cooperation is the process of working together for a common purpose or benefit. This can mean offering and accepting help from others. Within conflict, cooperation involves working together to find a solution in the trust that, despite conflicting needs or opinions, both parties having an interest in solving the conflict. Trust allows each individual be confident that cooperation will be met with respect and mutual effort, rather than humiliation or exploitation. In an AVP workshop, cooperation is addressed through participants' experiences with each other in exercises, and reflecting on their personal lives. Another form of cooperation explored is participants' abilities to help and cooperate with others to improve the wider communities they live in.

EVALUATION FINDINGS

Results from a survey of all workshop participants in 2010-11 showed that 91% of participants thought that the AVP workshop they attended had helped them to trust other people and work with them better.

Bitel et al. (1998) found that, based on participant feedback, AVP was ‘highly successful’ at helping participants to develop and experience trust in a supportive community environment.

Research Findings

Research shows that high levels of trust are important factors for security and cooperation within close relationships. High social trust is considered to be a key factor in social capital, and found to be both a cause and result of positive social engagement.

Academic research shows the importance of trust in close relationships. In their theoretical model of commitment and trust in close relationships, Weiselquist et al. (1999) propose that trust, dependence and commitment are key aspects of pro-social behaviours that perpetuate each other. They argue that trust increases the willingness to become reliance on the relationship, strengthening commitment and promoting pro-social acts (including cooperation). Collins and Read (1990) report that individuals in ‘secure’ relationships were significantly more likely to feel others were available when needed, believe others were altruistic and show other aspects of general trust (p.656).Uslaner (2001) found that people with higher levels of trust also show higher levels of optimism (defined here as holding the view that the future will be better than the past, and the belief that we can control our environment to make it better).

Central to current academic thinking on social wellbeing, and healthy and engaged communities, is trust. Social scientists consider trust to be a central tenet of social capital. This concept describes the extent of civic engagement (or cooperation) and social connectedness within a society. Drawing on evidence from the 1991 World Values Survey, Putnam (1995) found that across 35 countries, social trust and civic engagement are strongly correlated. The greater the tendencies of individuals to partake in collectively beneficial activities, the higher the levels of general trust amongst citizens.

6.a(iv) Conflict Handling and Problem-solving Skills

Definition and Rationale

The ability to handle conflict relies upon the ability to solve problems between oneself and others. Having practiced their abilities to respect themselves and others, communicate well, trust and cooperate with others, AVP participants are challenged to solve problems in order to reach mutually beneficial solutions. In doing this, participants must recognise the problematic conflict and how it has arisen, understand the other person’s needs and feelings, and use creativity to ensure that both their own and the other persons needs are met. As violence can be seen as a method in handling conflict, then increasing cooperative problem solving skills are a central part in building the capacity to solve conflicts without using or suffering from violence. This is indeed the key alternative to violence.

EVALUATION FINDINGS

Results from a survey of all workshop participants in 2010-11 showed that 93% of participants thought that the AVP workshop they attended had helped them to handle conflict and solve problems better.

Bitel et al. (1998) found that, based on participant feedback, AVP was ‘highly successful’ in helping participants to explore their own role and responsibility in confrontational situations and see possible alternatives. It was also found to be ‘moderately successful in helping participants to resolve familiar problems in non-violent/non-destructive ways by changing patterns of behaviour.

Research Findings

Research shows that both individuals with high aggression and individuals who are regularly a victim of abuse display low problem-solving skills. Training designed to improve problem-solving skills has been found to effective in reducing violent behaviour.

Extensive research shows a link between low problem-solving skills and violent behaviour. Cohen et al (2003) show that men who commit domestic violence are more likely to display deficits in cognitive problem-solving skills than non-violent men. A study by Guerra and Slaby (1989) found that schoolboys with high aggression were more likely to define social problems purely in terms of the other person’s hostility towards them, and choose ineffective solutions to social problems.

Research has also shown a high prevalence of poor problem solving skills amongst victims of violence. Clarehout et al (1982) found that women who were not victims of domestic abuse generated significantly more and more effective alternatives in problems scenarios than those who were. The researchers suggest that these victims’ deficits in problem solving skills limit their ability to prevent and /or effectively deal with abusive incidents.

Importantly, training designed to improve problem-solving skills has been found to be effective in reducing violent behaviour. Ang (2003) found that young offenders with high aggression levels undergoing such training showed a significant decrease in aggression compared to those who had not undergone training. In their evaluation of a treatment programme for male spouse abusers, Faulkner et al. (1992) found that those individuals who participated in group-based problem-solving skills training significantly decreased their violent behaviour, including in both physical violence and passive aggression.

7. Conclusion

The presented model of change is well supported by wider research into the causes of interpersonal violence and contributory factors in developing low aggression levels and pro-social behaviour. Evaluations also show that AVP has much success in helping participants develop what the model proposes to be key components to nonviolence.

Bitel et al.’s evaluation shows a degree of discrepancy between outcomes that are of high and moderate success. It should be acknowledged that this evaluation was carried out some time ago, and that since then development of workshop structure has taken place, and training, support

material and self-evaluation for facilitators have all been improved. A general consistency in positive outcomes shown by the participant evaluation supports this. However, AVP may benefit from a new in-depth evaluation using similar methods of Bitel et al. (1998), to assess the consistency of AVP's success in fulfilling its main and subsidiary aims based the theory of change.

Relating the theory of change to wider research does highlight a possible need to look closer at AVP's success in helping participants develop self-awareness. Current academic thinking on the role of self-esteem and self-awareness suggests that the latter should be a clearer point of evaluation for AVP workshops. Experience may inform facilitators, and it would appear intuitive, that if participants are successful in the other building blocks it is inevitable that they will have increased their self-awareness in many contexts. However, it would be beneficial for AVP to find a way of measuring the effectiveness of this outcome more thoroughly. Self-awareness may, for example, be a key skill in adjusting from the supportive environment of the workshops back in to the everyday setting in which conflict may be common.

This transition, in fact could be a clearer focus of evaluation for AVP. The participant evaluation suggests that many participants finish workshops with high satisfaction. What is less clear is the lasting beneficial effects. The fact that many participants return frequently to workshops, and attend Level 2 sessions and Training for Facilitators suggests that for many there are lasting benefits. However, it would be beneficial for the follow-up participant evaluations already carried out by some regions to be widely and consistently used.

Beyond these recommendations, this overview suggests that AVP's development through practice has had much success in delivering a beneficial and theoretically supported programme of training.

Chris Walker, June 2011

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