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Di Marco, M.H.; Jiménez-Ribera, A.

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Negotiating Truths to “Pass Through the Hoop”: How Men’s Trajectories Shape Their Stories in Batterer Intervention Programmes

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Martín Hernán Di Marco¹  and
Adrián Jiménez-Ribera² 

Abstract

Narrative criminology has highlighted the role of storytelling in criminal behaviour and processes of change. In studies of intimate partner violence desistance, micro-social scholarship shows that therapeutic success often depends on negotiations between offenders’ narratives and institutional narratives. Yet this literature has paid limited attention to the material and institutional conditions shaping such negotiations. Drawing on repeated life story interviews conducted with 41 men attending batterer intervention programmes in Argentina and Uruguay, this study compares participants’ institutional trajectories and evolving narratives of change. Through the analysis of three cases, we show that men’s accounts of desistance are shaped by their familiarity with institutional logics (such as programme expectations, timelines, and evaluative practices) as well as by their access to material resources that support change. We argue that the capacity to adapt and stabilise narratives of change is unevenly distributed and rooted in prior life trajectories and social resources, generating unequal possibilities of “successful” desistance (of *passing through the hoop*) across social backgrounds.

¹Leiden University, Netherlands/National University of La Matanza, Argentina

²Catholic University of Valencia, Spain

Corresponding Author:

Martín Hernán Di Marco, Institute of Security and Global Affairs, Leiden University, Turfmarkt 99, Den Haag, DP 2511, The Netherlands.

Email: m.h.di.marco@fgga.leidenuniv.nl

Plain Language Summary

How Men in Batterer Intervention Programmes Experience Change: The Role of Life Circumstances and Support

This study looks at how men who have used violence against their partners experience programmes designed to reduce that behaviour. We explored the stories men tell about themselves and their efforts to change, and how these stories are shaped by both the rules of the programme and the men's everyday life circumstances. We conducted repeated interviews with 41 men in Argentina and Uruguay who were attending batterer intervention programmes. We focus on three cases to illustrate how men's experiences can differ. Some men were familiar with institutions and procedures, had steady work, and had support from family or friends. These resources made it easier for them to follow programme requirements and to think about their behaviour in new ways. Other men faced unstable work, financial pressure, or limited support. For them, attending sessions and meeting programme expectations was much harder, and their stories of change were more difficult to maintain. Our findings show that the ability to succeed in these programmes is not only about motivation or willingness to change. It is also shaped by the men's social and economic conditions and their previous experience navigating institutions. In other words, men from different backgrounds face very different chances of "passing through the hoop" of the programme successfully. These results suggest that interventions need to consider the broader life context of participants. Programmes may be more effective if they provide practical support and recognise the challenges faced by men with fewer resources, rather than assuming all participants have the same capacity to engage and change.

Keywords

batterer intervention programme, narratives, social trajectory, serious games, material conditions, Argentina, Uruguay

Introduction

Men entering batterer intervention programmes (BIPs) quickly learn that change is assessed not only through their behaviour but through the stories they tell. To "pass through the hoop," they must navigate waiting rooms, attendance sheets, legal timelines, and the expectation of speaking a language of responsibility and emotional insight. However, not all men arrive with the same resources or institutional familiarity. Their biographies (sometimes marked by precarious work, disrupted schooling, or long-standing contact with state institutions) shape the narratives they can construct and the ease with which they align themselves with institutional scripts. This raises the question: how do their social trajectories shape the truths they are able to negotiate and present within these programmes?

Narrative criminology has focussed on understanding the role of storytelling in criminal behaviour and its cessation (Presser & Sandberg, 2015). Within studies of rehabilitation, micro-social scholarship has argued that change involves a negotiation

between offenders' narratives and those of professionals (Mullins & Kirkwood, 2021). Yet, with the rise and institutionalisation of the *what works* approach – which seeks to identify and implement evidence-based interventions aimed at reducing reoffending (Martinson, 1974), often through the acritical comparison of programmes across different contexts (Hughes, 2025) – research has indicated that completion of BIPs is heavily conditioned by social class (Bennett et al., 2010; Morrison et al., 2018). As Holtrop et al. (2017) have shown, engagement and change within group-based interventions are uneven processes shaped by interpersonal dynamics and broader contextual conditions. However, the precise mechanisms through which this occurs remain underexplored, underestimating the sociocultural contexts that shape desistance (Farrall et al., 2025) and its underlying narratives.

In this paper we examine repeated life story interviews conducted at different stages of treatment with 41 men convicted of intimate partner violence (IPV), participating in BIPs in Argentina and Uruguay. Our aim is to analyse how the socio-economic trajectories of men shape the stories they tell and their change process within these programmes. Drawing on interpretive approaches that distinguish between lived experience and narrated life (e.g., Rosenthal, 2018), we compared their trajectories with their narratives regarding the violence they committed. In particular, we focussed on how alignment with institutional discourses varied according to differing social backgrounds.

We argue that participants' trajectories (specifically their familiarity with institutional guidelines, timelines, and demands) and material realities (the resources available to support the change process) influence the types of narratives they are able to construct about their experiences within the context of BIPs. Participants' ability to successfully adapt and negotiate their "truths" is shaped by prior institutional experiences and resources, reproducing disparities in the successful navigation of men from different social backgrounds. These findings are especially salient in socio-culturally diverse contexts, where men entering BIPs arrive with markedly different life trajectories and resources. By foregrounding the role of material conditions in shaping narratives of desistance, this analysis contributes to theoretical debates on change. Ultimately, the construction of "aligned truths" with institutions may reflect and reinforce underlying social inequalities.

Rather than taking for granted the impact of material reality on discourse and trajectories, we treat these relationships as an empirical question. In doing so, we contribute to the critical development of narrative criminology. This approach, thus, renders three key contributions: (a) theoretically, by developing the nexus between narratives and the material trajectories of people; (b) empirically, by examining an understudied and often overlooked context – BIPs in Latin America; and (c) critically, by analysing the interventions themselves.

Background

Narrative Criminology, Desistance and Intimate Partner Violence

Narratives are not merely descriptive accounts of reality, but constitutive forces that actively shape experience. They guide criminal behaviour – whether fostering it, sustaining it, or contributing to its cessation (Sandberg & Ugelvik, 2016). Over the past

decade, narrative criminology has become particularly influential in the study of desistance: the process by which individuals gradually reduce the frequency and intensity of their criminal behaviour (Maruna & Liem, 2020). Individuals who cease their criminal behaviour broadcast narratives reinterpreting their criminal past, imagining alternative life trajectories, and cultivating a sense of agency (Maruna, 2001). Such narratives provide coherent frameworks to sustain desistance in the face of strain (Vaughan, 2006).

The relational and contextual nature of these stories has become central in this scholarship (McNeill & Schinkel, 2024). Desistance narratives are shaped not only by individual processes, but also by broader interpersonal dynamics (Nugent & Schinkel, 2016). They are cultural products, built upon the meta-narratives available in different cultural, historical, and demographic settings (Farrall et al., 2025), shaped through social interactions with family, peers, or institutions (Mullins & Kirkwood, 2021; Weaver, 2016). These contexts can either reinforce or confront existing self-stories, triggering processes of negotiation for a change (Simonsson et al., 2025). This dual nature of narrative co-production underscores the socially embedded character of desistance and highlights the complex interplay between individual agency and structural constraints in the reconstruction of identity (Weaver, 2016).

Not all desistance processes follow the same narrative pathways (Maruna & Liem, 2020). In particular, narratives of desistance from IPV differ from other accounts of change in violent offending, as they are situated within relationship-specific dynamics (Giordano et al., 2015; Weaver et al., 2023) and heavily shaped by sociocultural contexts (Cuevas & Bui, 2016). Unlike violence against strangers, IPV entails sustained contact with the victim – introducing a dyadic component to the behaviour – and encompasses the emotional, relational and cultural complexities characteristic of intimate partnerships (Walker et al., 2015).

IPV desistance involves the development of narratives forecasting new ways to behave, motivation for a change, acceptance of responsibility for the violence perpetrated and enhanced self-awareness of the factors underlying IPV (Walker et al., 2018). However, such narratives do not emerge in isolation; they are shaped through individuals' social networks, interpersonal relationships, and the confrontation of their stories with those of others (Giordano et al., 2015; Walker et al., 2018).

In this context, group-based BIPs attempt behavioural change and critical reflection through peer challenge and facilitated dialogue. These dynamics foster narrative reconstruction of prior discourses that legitimised or minimised the use of violence, ultimately recognising them as harmful (Di Marco et al., 2025). Such subjectivising processes are implemented through a range of socio-educational and/or therapeutic-oriented interventions, which may be different from one programme to another – for example, psychodynamic approaches, systemic or family-informed models, cognitive-behavioural therapy, etc. (Sousa et al., 2024).

However, the outcomes of BIPs remain heterogeneous and, at times, limited (Cheng et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2021). This variability can be attributed not only to the differences across programmes – that is, settings, duration, intervention goals, frameworks, voluntary or court-mandated participation, etc. (Pinto et al., 2023) – but also to

the fact that interventions normally do not account for individual differences among their participants (Sousa et al., 2024), overlooking a fundamental principle of intervention: one size does not fit all (Easton & Crane, 2016).

Narratives and Material Conditions

While narrative criminology has highlighted the constitutive role of discourse in shaping criminal action and desistance (Presser & Sandberg, 2015), the material conditions that constrain or enable storytelling are still overlooked in some strands of this field (Farrall, 2019; Smith & Monforte, 2020). Critical criminology and social anthropology, for instance, stress that narratives cannot be disentangled from the structural conditions within which they emerge, as they condition the availability and legitimacy of narratives that support or dissuade from criminal behaviour (Bell et al., 2021; Taussig, 1997).

Unsurprisingly, most empirical discussions that integrate material conditions have emerged from practice-oriented fields such as social work (Butters et al., 2021). However, IPV-focussed criminological research in highly socio-economic unequal regions remains limited in this regard (Weaver et al., 2023). Authors like Farrall et al. (2011, 2025) further highlight the importance of connecting social context to theoretical discussion, rather than reproducing abstract models detached from local realities.

At the same time, although intersectionality is prominent as a conceptual lens for analysing how class, gender, age, and other axes of inequality interact, it is still often employed superficially. While class and other power structures are acknowledged in studies regarding IPV rehabilitation (Cuevas & Bui, 2016), they are rarely integrated into empirical work that examines how aggressors' trajectories and narrative practices interact (Weaver et al., 2023). Instead, the emphasis on identity risks obscuring the material conditions that shape which narratives are available in the first place.

The gap this study addresses is therefore twofold. First, there is a need for a theoretical contribution that reconnects narrative criminology with materialism. Second, Latin American studies of IPV and desistance, although recognising class as a factor, rarely integrate it systematically into either academic analysis or practice. Addressing this gap enables a richer understanding of desistance – not simply as a matter of identity or discourse, but as a process embedded in economic, social, and institutional landscapes that make particular narratives possible.

Material Narratives and Serious Institutional Games

Our framework draws on three complementary perspectives: Farrall et al.'s (2011) emphasis on structural contexts in desistance, Smith and Monforte's (2020) take on new materialism and narratives, and Ortner's (2006) conceptualisation of agency as strategic negotiation within structured fields of power. Through this approach, our study rests on four premises: (a) material and institutional contexts shape which stories are possible and socially recognised; (b) biographies condense the interplay between material conditions and narrative work; (c) narrative construction is strategic, as

participants actively negotiate “truths” and meanings within structured institutional fields; and (d) stories are co-produced through reflexivity and thematisation, shaped by personal experiences, social expectations, and material realities.

Farrall (2019) argues that desistance cannot be reduced to cognitive shifts or individual willpower; it must be understood in the broader structural contexts that constrain opportunities for change. Desistance is, thus, embedded in material realities (such as employment, housing, and family support) that either enable or hinder their plausibility (Cid & Martí, 2016). Disparities in these circumstances mean that not all individuals can access or sustain the same types of conditions that enable change (Bell et al., 2021; Farrall et al., 2025). In the context of IPV – where individuals often face socioeconomic precarity and strained family relationships – this perspective is crucial for understanding the uneven distribution of a “successful rehabilitation.” Cultural materialism (Sidky, 2004) has also reinforced this view by emphasising more broadly that any cultural form is rooted in material bases. Narratives of desistance are not only discursive acts but also reflections of men’s positions within broader fields of inequality.

Ortner’s (2006) has argued that there is a dynamic interplay between structure and agency (serious game). Individuals are not passive recipients of institutional constraints; rather, they are active players negotiating positions, meanings, and strategies within structured fields of power. Applied to BIPs, this perspective would indicate that participants’ narrative work as a form of serious game, in which men manoeuvre institutional logics – that is, the formal and informal rules, expectations, timelines, and evaluative criteria through which programmes define what counts as “change.” Success in such a game requires not only adopting institutionally recognisable narratives but also aligning them with the material conditions of one’s life – an endeavour that is more feasible for some than others.

By combining these perspectives, we hypothesise that narratives of IPV desistance not merely as expressions of identity but as situated practices shaped by cultural scripts and material realities. Men’s stories in BIPs could be best understood as negotiated truths: discursive constructions that emerge through serious games with institutional logics, constrained by uneven access to resources and opportunities. This framework bridges narrative criminology and materialist approaches, highlighting how structural inequalities are inscribed in the stories men tell about change.

Methodology

This paper derives from the multi-sited, mix-methods project “Relational desistance: narratives and relationships surrounding change in gender-based violence interventions” (CyTMA2 C2SAL-105, La Matanza National University, Argentina), that combined narrative interviews with aggressors and their close networks, followed by a broader quantitative (ongoing) survey of their broader social networks. In this paper, we focus on the narrative analysis of interviews conducted with participants in Buenos Aires (Argentina) and Montevideo (Uruguay).

Contextual and Institutional Setting

Argentina and Uruguay follow broadly similar institutional procedures for men charged with IPV. After a complaint is filed, cases are transferred to violence-focussed offices; judicial authorities subsequently contact the aggressor and mandate their participation in a community-based BIP. Admission typically begins with an initial assessment interview, followed by a 1 year compulsory attendance. However, the overall process usually lasts about 18 months, as programme completion is determined by staff based on participants' progress and readiness to exit.

Programmes in both countries draw primarily on psychoeducational and cognitive-behavioural methods. While there are not national standardised models, these programmes are based on Latin American gender-responsive frameworks and feminist perspectives that question dominant masculinities and emphasise emotional regulation (Iniciativa Spotlight, UNFPA, Promundo-US, & EME-Fundación CulturaSalud, 2021). Interventions include role-playing, self-monitoring of emotional reactions, and structured group discussions aimed at reframing harmful cognitive patterns. Weekly group meetings are complemented by individual sessions addressing gender roles, social construction of masculinity, recognition of abusive behaviours, anger management, nonviolent communication, and empathy development. Programmes may be delivered by public or private institutions and can be complemented by other legal measures, such as restraining orders or electronic monitoring.

Despite local institutional differences between Buenos Aires and Montevideo, the overall structure, referral pathways, and approaches of the programmes are highly similar. Both operate under similar legal frameworks and are shaped by regional professional networks. Consequently, we did not differentiate interviews by location.

Sample and Recruitment

Convenience sampling was used due to the limited institutional access and the impracticality of assembling a broad or randomised pool of participants. Participants were cisgender men who: (1) had been enrolled in a BIP for at least 6 months; (2) lived in Metropolitan Buenos Aires or Montevideo; and (3) acknowledged physically assaulting their female (ex-)partner.

Recruitment followed two approaches. In some instances, programme staff referred men who expressed willingness to take part; in others, we visited group sessions, introduced the project, and invited volunteers to participate. This approach yielded a sample that included men at different points in the intervention process: those in mid- or late-stage treatment, individuals who had already completed the programme, and participants who started but dropped out mid-treatment. Including these varied pathways aligns with previous research showing that engagement and change within group-based BIPs are uneven and shaped by relational and contextual dynamics.

The sample comprised 41 men from 13 institutions (approx. 3–4 per institution): 37 from Buenos Aires and 4 from Montevideo. The predominance of Argentine participants reflects the geographical location of the research team. Participants' ages ranged

from 18 to 59 (mean 39). At the time of the interview, 37 were employed, 2 unemployed, and 2 did not provide employment information. Importantly, employment did not necessarily indicate economic stability, as many held informal or precarious positions. Most participants had completed secondary education (approximately 79%), while smaller proportions had primary (11%) or university-level education (11%). This distribution reflects the typical educational profile of men attending court- or community-referred BIPs in the region (Iniciativa Spotlight, UNFPA, Promundo-US, & EME-Fundación CulturaSalud, 2021).

Around 30% of participants had finished the programme, 11% had dropped, and about 60% remained enrolled. Participants who completed the programme were classified as “desistants,” as this status was formally recognised by the staff. Among those still attending, 46% had participated from 6 to 12 months, and 54% from 1 to 2 years. None were in custody, and programme staff reported no indications of ongoing abusive behaviour.

Procedure

We conducted narrative interviews (Rosenthal, 2018). The interview format was intentionally open-ended. Each interview began with a single narrative-generating question: “Can you tell me the story of your relationship and how you came to participate in this programme?” Participants were encouraged to respond without interruption and to structure their account in their own way. After this initial uninterrupted narrative phase, we used prompts to encourage elaboration and clarification (e.g., rephrasing’s of participants’ own words, requests for further detail, or invitations to expand on specific moments they had mentioned), while avoiding the introduction of new thematic directions.

Most (37) interviews were done in participant-selected locations (cafés, restaurants, or via videocall); 10 took place in private rooms at programme venues. Participants were invited to provide an uninterrupted, detailed account of events, focussing on intimate relationships and personal changes experienced while attending the programme. Interviews lasted approximately 80 min and were audio-recorded.

The study received approval from the Ethics Review Board of the Department of Health Sciences, La Matanza National University. Participants were provided with written information detailing the study’s purpose, the expected duration of participation, and the voluntary and unpaid nature of involvement. Participants could withdraw at any point, and non-participants were treated identically. To prevent potential feelings of coercion, all communication (aside from the initial study presentation) was conducted individually. Pseudonyms were used in place of participants’ names.

Analysis

Transcribed interviews were analysed with attention to both stories (the meaning-making, storytelling, and narrated experiences of participants) and trajectories (the structural and sequential patterns in their life histories). All transcripts were read multiple

times to preserve their sequential and biographical structure. The analytical process unfolded in three steps: (1) identifying and clustering social trajectories, (2) examining narratives of institutional engagement, and (3) analysing how trajectories shaped narrative constructions of change.

In the first stage, open coding was used to inductively organise the data around key dimensions such as institutional contact, material conditions, and narrative positioning (how they presented themselves in relation to the institution and the therapeutic process) in Atlas.Ti. During this stage, we also “raised red flags” (Corbin & Strauss, 2014) to mark inconsistencies, tensions, and analytically significant moments in the data requiring further conceptual attention. In the second stage, a coding framework was developed by integrating emergent themes with sensitising concepts from the literature (e.g., narrative alignment, institutional logics; see Hughes, 2025; Mertens & Myrntinen, 2019). This framework was refined iteratively through constant comparison across cases.

Coding was conducted collaboratively in the research team. An initial subset of interviews was independently coded by two researchers (a sociologist and a criminologist) to calibrate the framework. Discrepancies were discussed until consensus was reached, after which the framework was applied to the full dataset with ongoing refinements. Analytical rigour was supported through memo writing (including both analytical memos and those focussed on international cues in the interviews), regular team discussions throughout 3 years, and systematic comparison across cases. Interpretations were grounded in repeated returns to the data and systematic cross-case comparison. Reflexive discussions were also held within the research team to consider how disciplinary backgrounds may have shaped the analysis.

Results are presented through three illustrative cases that exemplify interpretative patterns found across the sample.

Results

Participants differed markedly in how they experienced the BIPs. For some, the BIP offered a space for reflection and reorganisation; for others, it was primarily a bureaucratic or sentence requirement. These contrasts reflected broader inequalities in employment, housing, social support, and familiarity with institutional logics. Men with greater stability and relational resources tended to reproduce the language of change expected by practitioners; those facing precarity and exclusion often focussed on mere compliance.

To illustrate these dynamics, we present three contrasting cases (Fernando, Sebastián, and Andrés), each exemplifying a distinct engagement trajectory. Fernando, who completed the programme, represents a successful compliance with institutional narratives, achieved through alignment with practitioners’ expectations, and integrating change into daily life. Sebastián embodies narrative resistance: while having finished the intervention, he rejected both the programme and its discourse. Lastly, having dropped out, Andrés illustrates narrative exhaustion, in which fatigue and

structural misalignment prevented him from sustaining engagement and producing a coherent story of desistance.

Fernando: “I knew what to do, and I did it”

Narrated Life: Strategic Engagement and Change. Fernando (42 years old) began his account by framing the BIP not as a punishment but as a structured opportunity: “I knew from the start what I had to do, how to do it, and what it meant if I didn’t. I wanted this over without more trouble.” From the outset, he narrated his story around agency, responsibility, and pragmatism. Fernando presented the weekly sessions, documentation requirements, and legal timelines as elements to be navigated deliberately rather than endured.

He described the programme in practical, concrete terms: “I organised my schedule around the sessions. I even spoke to my boss so I wouldn’t lose shifts. It cost money, yes, for transport and paying the lawyer, but that was part of the deal. I knew I did wrong and I had to invest to get this done.” Fernando foregrounded accountability: he acknowledged the harm he caused and recounted the incidents without deflection. Change, in his narrative, was framed as achievable through concrete steps rather than a vague moral requirement: “Every week I reflected on what I learned and how I could handle situations differently at work, with my family, with my ex. It’s hard work, but it works.”

Fernando’s engagement with peers was narrated as an experience of selective openness rather than simple participation. He framed collective reflection as meaningful only insofar as it resonated with his own biographical concerns, emphasising the need to maintain boundaries shaped by past disappointments: “I listen, I share when it matters, but I’m careful who I trust. Some guys just want to vent; others help you see things you miss.” In his account, group exercises became lived moments of interaction and experimentation in which he tested ways of speaking, rehearsed non-violent responses to conflict, and observed his own emotional reactions as they unfolded.

What stood out in Fernando’s narrative was his ability to weave his social world into the story of change. He often mentioned his family: his sister, who “kept him in check”; his teenage son, who told him he was “more patient now”; and his mother, who reminded him of the consequences of returning to court. These people appeared in his narrative as mirrors, shaping his sense of progress and reinforcing his motivation to change. Rather than being isolated, Fernando’s story was populated by others whose recognition of his efforts lent legitimacy to his transformation.

Friends also played a role in this narrative, though in a different way. Fernando described how he had deliberately distanced himself from drinking companions who mocked his participation. Instead, he began spending more time with colleagues from work who “had families and didn’t want trouble.” He explained that this shift was crucial: “You need people who take you seriously when you talk about change, not the ones who laugh.” Through these relationships, he found spaces where his new narrative – of being calmer, more responsible, more in control – could take root and be echoed back to him: “My colleague says that coming here [programme] does me good.

He says that ever since I started coming, I look wiser [laughs]. Sometimes he even asks if he could join as a guest someday.” Fernando’s process of thematisation unfolded not only through introspection but through recognition by significant others who reflected his emerging self-story.

This relational dimension was narrated as inseparable from Fernando’s sense of material and institutional stability. He emphasised that the availability of childcare and occasional financial support from his family enabled him to attend sessions regularly, avoid conflict with his employer, and meet the programme’s bureaucratic requirements. These supports were not described merely as background conditions but as anchors that made it possible for him to narrate change as both feasible and meaningful: “My brother has been my rock during this process.” Alignment with the institution thus emerged in his account as materially sustained rather than purely rhetorical.

Financial literacy and planning occupied a similarly central place in Fernando’s narrative. He described deliberately setting aside part of his income to cover legal and programme-related expenses, aware that missed payments or absences could jeopardise his position. As he put it, “I knew if I wanted to finish the programme, I had to have my documents in order, my money ready, and my attitude straight.” In this telling, foresight and administrative discipline became experiential proof of commitment, reinforcing his capacity to comply with institutional expectations and to sustain a coherent story of responsibility and control.

Trajectory: Institutional Fluency and Relational Support. Fernando’s biography reflected a life of partial institutional familiarity. He had previous experience navigating bureaucracies through employment, civic participation, and minor legal conflicts, giving him insight into timelines, procedural expectations, and the actors to contact. He also benefitted from relational and professional support: his lawyer guided him through legal requirements, while his family provided reminders and encouragement.

Economic stability, though modest, enabled Fernando to meet programme requirements. Steady employment and some savings allowed him to absorb the costs of transport, legal fees, and session attendance. This stability, combined with institutional familiarity, equipped him to construct a narrative aligned with the programme’s objectives: a “negotiated truth” acceptable to both himself and the institution.

Within this alignment, Fernando’s trajectory illustrated the capacity to manoeuvre within institutional logics without simply surrendering to them. He was aware that certain discursive forms (e.g., acknowledging responsibility, demonstrating insight, adopting the vocabulary of change) were institutionally rewarded. Yet he mobilised these strategically while integrating them into his everyday practices and relationships. “At first, I said what they wanted to hear,” he admitted, “but after a while, it started to make sense. I could see the difference when I talked to my son or when my ex said I was calmer.” His narrative therefore oscillated between adaptation and genuine reflection, showing how self-reconstruction can emerge through the performance of compliance.

His network continued to sustain this process. Family members reinforced his commitment through recognition and accountability, while a few close friends and

colleagues validated his progress, describing him as “more patient” and “different now.” This social confirmation provided emotional and moral scaffolding that allowed his new self-story to stabilise. In this sense, Fernando’s desistance narrative was not an individual product but a co-authored account, shaped within an environment that rewarded responsibility and offered tangible support.

Fernando’s trajectory demonstrates how strategic understanding of legal and institutional expectations, combined with material resources and supportive networks, enables successful participation in BIPs. His narrative exemplifies how institutional fluency and relational embeddedness facilitate the production of “negotiated truths”: stories that align personal change with institutional demands while remaining grounded in lived experience.

Sebastián: “I just endured it. I didn’t need to change”

Narrated Life: Enduring, Not Changing. Sebastián (34 years old) began his account by insisting that what had happened between him and his partner was being exaggerated. From the very first sentences of his story, he emphasised the injustice of being forced to attend the BIP. “I lost days of work, money I never got back, all because she exaggerated,” he repeated.

His narrative focussed on his precarious social position, foregrounding his role as victim of institutions, rather than perpetrator of violence. His life was structured around informal jobs that provided no security, and every day in the programme meant a day of lost income. “Who’s giving me back all the lost money?” he asked rhetorically, stressing that participation was not simply an emotional burden but a material one. For him, the institution was not a supportive structure but another drain on already limited resources. This economic framing infused the whole of his story, reinforcing his conviction that the programme represented an injustice rather than an opportunity.

When speaking about the programme itself, Sebastián described it as a place for “other” men, those who needed help, not someone like him. “Therapy is for crazy people; I was just having an argument,” he explained, positioning himself outside the category of individuals requiring intervention. Change was not a category he engaged with as transformation, but rather as unnecessary compliance. He told the story of his attendance as something endured rather than experienced, framed by scepticism and minimal investment: “I’m only here because the judge is making me. I’ll show up, do my hours, serve the sentence, that’s it. Don’t expect anything else from me.”

The group sessions, rather than providing a space for reflection or solidarity, appeared in his account as an arena of mistrust. Sebastián depicted the other participants as dishonest, men who acted their way through the sessions in order to satisfy facilitators. “They cry in front of the professionals just to get points,” he said with laughter, “messing around to get out earlier.” By mocking peers who tried to share personal experiences, he cut himself off from one of the programme’s intended mechanisms of change: the recognition of one’s story in another’s, and the possibility of collective narrative reworking.

The victim of his violence appeared only briefly in his storytelling, referred to as “the one who made the report.” Contrary to Fernando’s account, she remained nameless, mentioned only as the origin of his institutional troubles. In this way, Sebastián erased the harm he had inflicted and reconstructed events so that he alone occupied the position of the injured party. His story was presented not as of accountability, but of grievance and resistance.

Sebastián’s life story, then, was one of rejection and alienation. He narrated his engagement with the BIP as an intrusion on his autonomy and livelihood, mocked peers who embraced the therapeutic framework, resisted the very idea of change, and displaced attention away from the victim or his own violent actions. His storytelling positioned him as someone who had endured an unnecessary punishment, rather than someone responsible for violence.

Trajectory: Precarity, Mistrust, and Disconnection. Sebastián’s life history provides the context within which this narrative of resistance becomes more intelligible. His relationship with institutions was consistently marked by exclusion and mistrust. He had dropped out of secondary school after repeated conflicts with teachers whom he described as treating him “like I was stupid.” Encounters with bureaucratic systems were similarly frustrating: when he once applied for unemployment benefits, he abandoned the process midway, complaining that “they ask for ten papers just to tell you no.” These repeated failures limited his familiarity with institutional logics, timelines, and categories, leaving him with little bureaucratic capital. Entering the BIP, he faced a structure that demanded engagement with precisely these logics – attendance, compliance, documentation – yet his past had prepared him only for rejection and disappointment.

Economic precarity deepened these dynamics. Since adolescence, Sebastián had moved between construction, street vending, and temporary jobs. With no savings or stable income, he described his schedule as dictated by opportunity and necessity. The programme’s weekly sessions translated directly into lost earnings. “Two days a week, gone,” he calculated, folding in transport time and waiting. For men with more stable employment (like Fernando), the disruption was manageable; for Sebastián, it was catastrophic. His sensitivity to these losses was not imagined but materially grounded in the fragility of his livelihood. Resistance, in this sense, was not simply obstinacy but an expression of structural constraint.

His limited engagement with therapeutic or self-reflective discourses further shaped his inability to understand the demand for “change.” Raised in environments where conflict and aggression were common and rarely questioned, Sebastián regarded violence as something “normal,” part of everyday disputes, rather than as something requiring intervention: “What’s the deal? Everyone loses their temper from time to time. Nowadays, they [politicians] just automatically call everything ‘gender violence.’ It’s ridiculous.” The programme’s language of transformation, responsibility, and emotional regulation was foreign to his biographical repertoire. As he put it: “I am not ill. I don’t need them telling me how to talk.” Without the cognitive tools to map his actions onto the framework of the programme, he resisted not only its categories

but the very premise that his behaviour needed to be narrativised differently: “Why should I tell the story differently? Nothing changed.”

His social networks reinforced this stance. Most of his friends were men from the neighbourhood, sharing similar experiences of precarious work and institutional mistrust. When Sebastián explained that he had to attend the programme, they teased him: “You’re wasting time, idiot. Just stop going and nothing happens [they say].” Far from supporting him, in his story these peers validated disengagement. He lacked the relational capital – family members, mentors, supportive peers – that often sustains men in reframing their narratives and embracing change.

The broader socio-political context of Sebastián’s life was one of marginalisation. Living in a peripheral urban area with irregular access to services, his relationship with the state oscillated between neglect and control. Police surveillance was common, social support rare. Against this backdrop, the BIP did not appear as a resource but as another extension of punitive state power: “[This programme] is just a state excuse to please women and get more votes. [. . .] ‘We want to help you’, they [facilitators] say, but the truth is they don’t give a shit about us. The only thing they really care about is getting paid at the end of the month.” His unsuccessful trajectory is not reducible to personal refusal but emerges at the intersection of precarious economic realities, limited institutional literacy, and unsupportive networks.

Sebastián’s life trajectory, read alongside his life story, highlights the deep entanglement of narrative and materiality. His story of grievance is not merely a rhetorical choice but can be interpreted as a product of his biography: repeated institutional failures, fragile economic standing, absent trust networks, and the broader inequalities of his social world. These conditions constrained his ability to craft a narrative that professionals would recognise as progress. While having completed the intervention (just like Fernando), he failed to “change,” but his failure cannot be understood apart from the structural dynamics that shaped which truths he could tell, and which he could not.

Andrés: “I tried, but it wasn’t for me”

Narrated Life: Fatigue, Disconnection, and Return. When asked how he felt about the programme, Andrés (49) exhaled deeply before responding: “I went, I did what they asked for a while. But after some months, it was too much. I couldn’t keep up.” His account was marked by fatigue rather than defiance, resignation rather than resistance. Unlike Sebastián, he did not mock the process; unlike Fernando, he did not frame it as an opportunity. Instead, his narrative centred on a gradual erosion of hope and energy. “They talk about change, about control, but when you don’t even have a place to sleep sometimes, what kind of change are they talking about?”

Andrés’ narrative was punctuated by a sense of confusion and mismatch. He spoke of the sessions as “too fast,” “too many words,” “too much theory.” “They want you to talk about feelings all the time, but sometimes I didn’t even know what to eat that day.” He often described himself as trying to follow along but failing to understand what was expected. “The woman [facilitator] asked me to write what I felt before hitting her [my ex-partner]. I told her: miss, I don’t write; I can tell you I was angry, but that’s it.”

His story oscillated between compliance and disengagement. He did not deny the violence, nor did he fully take responsibility for it. "I know I messed up," he stated, "but they treat you like a criminal forever. I said I was sorry, what else do they want?" The repetition of this phrase ("what else do they want?") captured the heart of his narrative: a sense that the institution's demands were endless, unattainable, and disconnected from his daily life.

Andrés attended the sessions irregularly. "Sometimes I had a job in construction. You take it or you lose it. So, I missed the group. Then they say I'm not committed. But tell me, who's going to pay for the groceries if I sit there talking about gender?" The programme's weekly schedule clashed with the instability of informal labour. Over time, the missed sessions accumulated, and his presence grew sporadic. Eventually, he stopped going altogether. "They sent a document to the court, I think. After that, I just didn't go back."

When he spoke about Tatiana, his former partner, his narrative turned to their interactions. "She says she wants me to change, but she also needs me there. I help her with things. We fight, yes, but we've been together for years." His relationship with her remained volatile and interdependent: she reported him, then let him stay; he hurt her, then apologised. "Sometimes she says I scare her, sometimes she says I'm calmer. I don't know what to believe anymore." In his account, emotional and material entanglements blurred the line between dependence and violence. The story ended abruptly: "After I stopped going, things got bad again. I lost my temper."

Andrés' narrative lacked the coherence of a redemptive arc. Instead, it oscillated between justification and defeat. His words carried a weary recognition that he could neither meet institutional expectations nor fully reject them. "I wanted to do things right," he said at the end of the interview, "but that place wasn't for me. Maybe if I had work, or a house. . . maybe then I could think about all that change they talk about."

Trajectory: Structural Misalignment and Narrative Exhaustion. Andrés' biography reveals why the programme's institutional and discursive demands proved so difficult to meet. Raised in a working-class neighbourhood of the Buenos Aires periphery, he left school at 14 to work with his uncle in construction. He later spent years moving between temporary jobs, often interrupted by short periods of incarceration for theft and assault. Most institutional encounter (school, welfare, prison, therapy) followed a similar pattern: initial compliance, confusion about rules, and eventual withdrawal. "It's always the same," he said. "They say it's to help, but it's just another way to tell you what to do."

Substance use was a recurring element in his life. Andrés spoke openly about alcohol, sometimes framing it as self-medication. "When you live with so much noise in your head, a drink helps," he explained. Efforts to address his addiction had failed, largely due to the same structural reasons that derailed his participation in the BIP: precarious housing, unstable work, and absence of sustained support. In this sense, his dropout was not an isolated event but part of a broader trajectory of interrupted institutional engagement.

Compared with Sebastián, Andrés was less oppositional; compared with Fernando, less equipped to “play the game.” He neither resisted nor negotiated effectively. His language lacked the institutional vocabulary that might have made his story intelligible to facilitators. Concepts like “emotional regulation” or “responsibility” appeared foreign, abstract. “They [facilitators] say you have to control anger, but anger comes when everything else falls apart,” he explained. The programme’s emphasis on introspection and cognitive reframing clashed with his immediate survival needs. What could be interpreted as resistance to the intervention often reflected a deeper misalignment between his lived reality and the discursive world of the programme.

This misalignment was reinforced by the absence of a supportive social network. Estranged from most relatives and friends, Andrés oscillated between isolation and dependency on his partner: “I’m a lonely guy. . . [. . .] It’s just the two of us [Tatiana and me] . . . And, well, even that, things aren’t the best right now.” Without stable ties to sustain his participation, he lacked the relational scaffolding necessary to stabilise new narratives. As Rosenthal (2018) suggests, thematisation (the process by which new meanings take hold) requires an audience capable of recognition. In Andrés’ case, that audience was missing. His few remaining connections were with peers who faced similar instability and mistrust, offering little encouragement to persist in a process perceived as alien and humiliating.

Economically, Andrés lived at the edge of subsistence. The programme’s demands – regular attendance, transportation costs, documentation – became heavy burdens. “You can’t change if you don’t have time to breathe,” he said. This material strain translated directly into narrative fatigue. The more he struggled to meet basic needs, the less energy remained for self-reflection. His dropout thus reflected not a refusal to change but the collapse of narrative possibility under structural weight.

Andrés’ life trajectory and narrative together illustrate a third mode of institutional engagement: not resistance (as in Sebastián) or strategic alignment (as in Fernando), but narrative exhaustion. His dropout was the culmination of accumulated mismatches: between discourse and experience, rule and reality, aspiration and survival. Through him, we see how desistance may fail not because individuals reject change, but because their biographies offer no stable ground to put in practice.

Discussion

This study explores how men’s social trajectories shape their narratives regarding the therapeutic process in BIPs. Achieving “success” in a BIP was neither linear nor homogeneous, highlighting how intermittence of engagement is more a central feature of desistance processes, rather than an abnormality (Piquero, 2013). Interviews with men from diverse backgrounds revealed that “jumping through hoops” is not equally easy for all: some are adept at navigating institutional demands, while others carry heavier burdens, have less flexibility, and struggle to meet structured requirements. This challenge is not merely a narrative exercise: it is materially grounded. For example, attending sessions is far simpler for someone with stable employment who does not risk losing income, whereas for men like Sebastián or Andres, whose daily

survival depended on informal labour, such demands became material obstacles rather than opportunities for reflection. Similar patterns of fatigue also appeared among employed men, showing that engagement is influenced by the working conditions, not employment alone.

This variation can be understood through the lens of material-discursive interplay (Smith & Monforte, 2020). BIPs demand engagement with institutional narratives, legal timelines, and emotional reflexivity, but not all men are equally positioned to navigate these expectations. Taussig (1997) argues that symbolic forms (myths, rituals, and culturally sanctioned narratives) operate alongside material power to shape what is legible and enforceable within a social system. Similarly, in BIPs, institutional narratives of change are embedded in both cultural and material structures: they are not neutral prompts but mechanisms whose intelligibility and attainability are conditioned by men's biographies, economic resources, and social networks. In what follows, we examine how these factors shaped the ways Fernando, Sebastián and Andrés narrated change, resistance, or disengagement. Importantly, resistance should not be understood as the opposite of negotiation, as men may resist specific institutional demands while still engaging in the process of change.

Anchoring participants' experiences in their economic and social realities allows for a more nuanced and ethically responsible interpretation of their trajectories (Bell et al., 2021; Farrall et al., 2011). It operationalises Farrall's (2019) call to "embed desistance in material contexts" and reflects Sidky's (2004) argument that cultural forms are inseparable from their material bases. Success, therefore, cannot be understood purely as a matter of individual effort or motivation, a critique of the neoliberal framing of therapeutic cultures, but depends on access to the resources needed to absorb, negotiate, and enact institutional narratives (Ortner, 2006; Smith & Monforte, 2020). Even the capacity to imagine change as achievable is unevenly distributed across social strata, as is the willingness to trust institutions and practitioners, which further shapes engagement and outcomes (Epele, 2007). Our study provides insight into what Holtrop et al. (2017) described as the uneven processes of engagement and change within group-based BIPs, where men's ability to participate meaningfully and develop reflexivity is shaped by both interpersonal dynamics and broader contextual conditions. Parenthood, for instance, could constitute a relevant relational axis in these processes. Men's negotiations with BIPs may be shaped by the presence or absence of children and supportive family ties influencing how institutional discourses of change are received and mobilised.

Viewed through the lens of class, this represents a form of hermeneutic injustice (Fricker, 2007): not all participants possess the interpretative frameworks or material support required to render their own transformation intelligible within the institutional vocabulary of "change." Narrative agency is thus always mediated by material and institutional position. Knowledge of the "rules of the game" (Ortner, 2006) is uneven: participants vary in their dexterity at recognising, interpreting, and performing the implicit norms governing institutional interaction and in adjusting their conduct to align with expectations of "appropriate" self-work. In this sense, success in BIPs can be conceptualised as a serious game: participants engage strategically with

institutional expectations, but the stakes (e.g., freedom, belonging, legitimacy) are profoundly real. Their ability to “play” effectively is shaped by differential access to linguistic, emotional, and social capital, as well as prior experiences navigating bureaucratic or institutional regimes.

From a critical standpoint, these findings also raise questions about knowledge, policies, and professional practice. Despite acknowledgement in academic discourse (Bell et al., 2021; Farrall et al., 2025), cultural materialism and more broadly power are often ignored in policy and training: a paradox whereby scholarly insights fail to inform interventions (Cuevas & Bui, 2016; Hughes, 2025; Mertens & Myrntinen, 2019). If political and economic inequalities shape participants’ lives, similar disparities influence the capitals necessary to navigate BIPs. Moreover, the analysis invites reflection on how programme success is constructed: which skills and strategies are valued, and how do these reproduce broader social inequalities.

It is equally important to acknowledge variation and complexity. Not all men from lower strata struggled, nor did all men with greater social capital navigate institutions smoothly. These categories represent ideal types rather than universal patterns, reminding us that desistance processes are shaped by contingent intersections of biography, contingency, and relational support (Cid & Martí, 2016). Similarly, the experiences of men excluded from BIPs or who were not involved in one remain largely unexamined, raising ethical and practical questions about how interventions might better accommodate participants whose forms of engagement fall outside conventional frameworks of reflection and change.

These findings have direct implications for the design and delivery of programmes. As discussed by Walker et al. (2015), interventions must be sensitive to cultural and community contexts while also attending to individual-level factors (e.g., by accommodating structural constraints such as working hours, transport costs, and precarious employment; adapting language to participants’ communicative repertoires). Programmes need to be relevant to participants, taking into account both individual and community norms and attitudes about IPV. Accordingly, treatment should be tailored to the individual, considering factors such as learning styles, motivation, and capacity for engagement, rather than relying on a one-size-fits-all approach (Cuevas & Bui, 2016). Embedding biographical insights into programme design and evaluation, while restrained to available resources, can help ensure that interventions recognise the diversity of experiences, capacities, and constraints participants bring to the process, thereby promoting more equitable and effective pathways to change. Crucially, programme development and policy-making must also involve a deliberate examination of the assumptions, blind spots, and normative frameworks embedded within interventions, in order to avoid privileging certain social trajectories over others.

Distinguishing analytically between trajectory and story, as discussed by Rosenthal (2018) proved particularly productive. This separation allowed us to identify moments where participants’ self-narratives aligned with – or conflicted with – the material and institutional conditions of their lives. It also made visible the processes through which certain narratives became institutionally recognisable as “truths,” while others were marginalised, discounted, or rendered unintelligible.

This perspective highlights an often-overlooked dimension of desistance: mainstream approaches rarely examine systematically how social background and access to capital shape programme outcomes (Cuevas & Bui, 2016). In line with recent critiques of the discourses guiding BIPs (Cuevas & Bui, 2016; Hughes, 2025; Mertens & Myrntinen, 2019), we advance two main arguments. First, the uncritical application of a what works paradigm risks obscuring structural inequalities and misrepresenting the barriers participants face. Evaluations detached from men's life courses – focussing instead on punctual indicators of “progress” – fail to capture how professionals' expectations, rooted in institutional logics of accountability, emotional reflexivity, and linear transformation, interact with participants' capacities and constraints (McNeill & Myrntinen, 2019; Weaver, 2016). These dynamics shape who can align successfully with programme demands and who cannot, revealing that “success” is as much about navigating institutional cultures as it is about internal change. Paradoxically, this insight sheds light on the limited effectiveness of BIPs: programmes continue to rely on a liberal notion of therapeutic “success” (Nehring et al., 2024; Taussig, 1997), yet their impact is inevitably conditioned by the broader social, economic, and relational structures within which participants live.

Second, this critique raises the question of for whom such institutional discourses are designed. As Connell (2007) reminds us, the geopolitics of knowledge privileges theories and intervention models developed in the Global North, where welfare systems, labour markets, and gendered expectations differ substantially from those of Latin America. The mechanical transfer of these frameworks' risks imposing normative assumptions about responsibility, agency, and emotional expression that may not align with participants lived realities, thereby reproducing epistemic hierarchies within intervention practice.

Ultimately, while this study has focussed on men deemed who in some degree navigated BIPs, it leaves open critical questions about those who were excluded from the outset of the programme. Understanding their experiences remains crucial, as it would illuminate the limits of current programmes and highlight how institutional, social, and material inequalities shape who can engage meaningfully with mandated interventions. Addressing these gaps is essential for designing more inclusive, equitable approaches that account for the diverse realities of all participants.

Conclusion

Participants attending BIPs engage in a process to “pass through the hoop” of institutionalised procedures. Desistance unfolds neither as a purely introspective transformation, nor as a process exclusively driven by social changes, but rather as an ongoing negotiation of truths. The capacity to participate effectively in this process, however, is unevenly distributed: men with greater cultural and material resources are better equipped to understand and perform the programme's discursive and bureaucratic logics, whereas those facing structural disadvantage often experience the intervention as coercive, opaque, or alienating. Hence, the ability to “play the game” of change is deeply conditioned by their social position and access to resources.

Recognising this uneven terrain is essential for moving beyond homogenising intervention models and for developing approaches that are socially responsive, contextually grounded, and attentive to the material foundations of narrative transformation. Such understanding advances a more critical and materialist narrative criminology – one that situates stories of change within the structural inequalities that shape who can, and who cannot, successfully “pass through the hoop.”

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ORCID iDs

Martín Hernán Di Marco  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0568-0581>

Adrián Jiménez-Ribera  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0285-3352>

Ethical Considerations

The project was evaluated and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Department of Health Sciences at the National University of La Matanza, complying with the ethical standards of the Declaration of Helsinki of 1964, in its 2013 revision.

Consent to Participate and Consent for Publication

Informed consent (verbal and written) was obtained from all individual participants included in the study, both for their participation and publishing.

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Data is not available due to ethical and legal restrictions.

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