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Offending competency and coercive control in intimate partner violence

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers some of the ways in which intervention approaches for perpetrators of intimate partner violence (IPV) might be enhanced through the explicit consideration of the offense process. It is suggested that those who are experts in perpetrating this type of violence routinely use coercive controlling violence in intimate relationships. This group, for whom violence is instrumental, are not only likely to be at highest risk of offending, but also the most difficult to treat. They are more likely to have long developmental histories of violence, hold entrenched attitudes, and utilize knowledge about the effects of intimidation to avoid detection. It is suggested that specific consideration of what is known about the causes and correlates of IPV in those who follow this approach-explicit pathway can improve the outcomes of current perpetrator behavior change programs.

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1. Introduction

Fifteen years ago Tony Ward published an article which drew attention to the skills or competencies that sexual offenders develop over time that allow them to successfully offend (Ward, 1999). The paper was one of the first to propose that treatment should not only seek to address major risk factors (or criminogenic needs), but also take account of the skills required to successfully execute an offense. It was followed by the publication of a series of qualitative studies that described the sequence by which sexual offending occurs, illustrating the multiple pathways that it follows (e.g., Webster, 2005). This work highlighted the considerable heterogeneity that exists within the sex offender population and established, for example, that the core issues for at least some offenders are less to do with a failure to self-regulate (e.g., the effects of stress, intoxication, low empathy, or impulse control) than they are to a conscious and purposeful decision to offend in the pursuit of self-gratification (see Ward, Yates, & Long, 2006). This new understanding of the offense process has proved helpful in the development of approaches to sex offender treatment that are more closely matched to the needs of individual participants and their specific offending patterns (see Yates & Kingston, 2006).

The aim of this paper is to consider how an understanding of offense pathways and, in particular, the notion of 'offending competency' might

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help to inform the further development of treatment approaches for perpetrators of intimate partner violence (IPV). It is reasonable to suggest that there is some room for improvement here (see Babcock, Green, & Robie, 2004; Feder & Wilson, 2005), particularly in relation to the treatment of the highest risk and most dangerous offenders (see Pascual-Leone, Bierman, Arnold, & Stasiak, 2012). However, there is considerable disagreement about how this might be best achieved (see Dutton & Corvo, 2005; Gondolf, 2007, 2011, 2012); whether it be through the adoption of different methods of assessment (e.g., risk assessment), of treatment (e.g., CBT), through the targeting of particular treatment targets (e.g., substance use), or through improved interagency and partnership working practices (see Day, Chung, O'Leary, & Carson, 2009). The underlying premise of this paper, consistent with developments in the field of sex offender treatment, is that those with most 'expertise' in IPV will require different interventions and that a better understanding of the processes by which offending occurs will facilitate the development of more effective perpetrator intervention programs. We start, however, by briefly considering the different typologies of IPV offender that have been proposed, before arguing that the notion of 'offending competency' has most meaning in relation to the subgroup of IPV perpetrators for whom violence is both conscious and purposeful and occurs within the context of a broader pattern of coercive control. We then consider what is known about the offending pathways of this group and the theoretical, research and clinical implications – and advantages – of this approach.

1.1. IPV offender typologies

A relatively large body of empirical work now exists which identifies different subtypes of adult IPV perpetrator. This generally classifies IPV in terms of either the severity, frequency, or the generality of the abuse, although some studies have also considered characteristics of the perpetrator. Tweed and Dutton (1998), for example, differentiated between the 'impulsive' and the 'instrumental' perpetrator, with the impulsive group made up of those who commit less serious violence in the context of borderline personality and anxious attachment traits. Chase, O'Leary, and Heyman (2001) similarly distinguished 'proactive' from 'reactive' aggression in IPV. The term reactive aggression is widely used to refer to aggression that occurs in response to a triggering event (often a frustration) and produces an internal state of emotional arousal and an impulse to hurt or harm the provoker. In contrast, proactive (or instrumental) aggression does not involve emotional arousal, as the primary goal is to obtain some reward. In practice, however, many aggressive acts contain elements of both, and can be difficult to categorize in these terms (see Babcock, Tharp, Sharp, Heppner, & Stanford, 2014; Barratt & Slaughter, 1998).

Other typologies have focused on the nature of the violence itself. One of the most important, and potentially most useful, classification schemes has emerged from the work of Michael Johnson (see Johnson, 1995; Johnson & Cares, 2014). Johnson identifies four discrete types of IPV. First, *Coercive Controlling Violence* describes a pattern of emotional abuse, intimidation, coercion, and control that is commonly associated with persistent and serious physical violence. The origins of this term lie in the notion of 'patriarchal terrorism', originally defined as "a form of terroristic control of wives by their husbands that involves the systematic use of not only violence, but economic subordination, threats, isolation, and other control tactics" (Johnson, 1995; p. 284). Thus, this type of violence is characterized by the use of a wide variety of other methods of asserting power and control in intimate relationships, in addition to physical violence. The second type, *Situational Couple Violence,* describes partner violence that is not based on coercive control and has also been referred to a 'common couple violence'. Johnson and Cares (2014) describe this as particular conflicts that escalate into violence, either in relation to idiosyncratic incidents or patterns of relating that produce repeated conflict. This is the most frequently identified form of adult IPV, is thought to be perpetrated equally by women and men, and is theorized to arise from stress and maladaptive communication styles. Third, *Violent Resistance* is violence that occurs as a direct response to high levels of coercive control, and can also be understood as a form of self-defense. Finally, *Separation-Instigated Violence* describes violence that first occurs following separation, but which can be differentiated from continuing violence that also occurs in the context of a separation (see Johnson & Cares, 2014).

These typologies complement those proposed by Holtzworth-Munroe and Stuart (1994) who used the term *Family-Only Violence* to refer to male perpetrated domestic violence that occurs primarily in response to environmental triggers, such as substance abuse, extreme stress, loss of jobs, or severe work challenges. Such individuals do not typically endorse the use of violence and exhibit empathy and positive attitudes towards women. Within this typology a distinction is made between the *Primarily Violent* offender who engages in some violence outside of the family, and those who are *Generally Violent* and have extensive criminal histories. This latter group displays sporadic and extreme violence against a variety of targets, often with little provocation. Generally violent individuals are thought to have low levels of empathy and hold more pro-violence attitudes.

1.2. Intimate Partner Violence and Self-Regulation

Ward and Hudson's (2000) Self-Regulation Model of sexual offending identifies four distinct offense pathways which can be distinguished from each other in relation to a) the goals, and b) the self-regulation styles of offenders. Two of the pathways are labeled 'avoidance' pathways which describe the behavior of those who wish to abstain from offending. The 'avoidance-passive' pathway characterizes those who lack sufficient coping skills and self-awareness to not offend, whereas the 'avoidant-active' pathway describes those who try to manage their risk but use ineffective strategies which are ultimately counterproductive. In contrast, the two 'approach' pathways describe those who are motivated to offend. The 'approach-automatic' pathway describes offenders who have impulsive and poorly planned behavior, whereas the 'approach-explicit' pathway characterizes those who use effective self-regulation to create and exploit opportunities to sexually offend. They may not only carefully select potential victims and plan their offending, but also carefully consider how to best avoid detection (see also Yates, Prescott & Ward, 2010).

In the context of IPV, the Self-Regulation Model has the capacity to enhance our understanding of the different types of violence that are captured in the Johnson and Holtzworth-Munroe and Stuart typologies. It is likely, for example, that while those who perpetrate situational or family-only couple violence typically follow an 'avoidant' offense pathway (this group is characterized by anti-violence attitudes, appropriate levels of empathy, and pro-women attitudes), the behavior of those who routinely use coercive control (the generally violent/antisocial) might be better understood in terms of the 'approach-explicit' pathway. They create and exploit opportunities to exert power in their intimate relationships, and consciously use a combination of different control tactics to achieve their goals, using violence in a hostile manner that is manipulative, callous, and instrumental (Ross & Babcock, 2009).

The Self-Regulation Model suggests that for those who use the avoidant-passive pathway, the primary problems that require intervention are inadequate coping skills and a lack of offense process awareness. Thus interventions for this group should include a significant focus on increasing awareness of the steps in the offending chain and developing a range of skills to help them deal more appropriately with problems (see Ward et al., 2006). In contrast, the core problems for approach-automatic pathway offenders reside in their positive beliefs about abusive behavior. These are likely to prove more difficult to change. Although approach-automatic individuals also fail to self-regulate, it is suggested that enhancing skills in this area should only occur after a fundamental shift in motivation to offend has occurred. In other words, improving the ability to regulate behavior in the absence