



An overview of partner violence risk assessment and the potential role of female victim risk appraisals[☆]

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ABSTRACT

The requirement for accurate appraisals of risk for intimate partner violence has increased with the implementation of pro-arrest policies in the United Kingdom and elsewhere. During the last 10 years, there has been some progress made in terms of the development of actuarial risk assessment instruments, thus providing alternatives to the previously available structured professional judgment approach. In light of these developments, practitioners need information regarding the reliability and validity of such approaches. In addition, research highlights the potential validity of victim appraisals of risk. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to review the existing literature regarding the practice of risk assessment in this field, with emphasis placed on the validity of currently available risk assessment tools, as well as the predictive validity of victim's own appraisal of this risk. Directions for future research are examined along with the implications of the current evidence base for risk assessment practice.

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1. Introduction

Intimate partner violence (IPV) represents a constellation of physical, verbal, psychological, emotional, sexual, and financial abuses that occur within the context of a current or former intimate relationship (Home Office, 2005). Although official British statistics suggest that the rate of IPV is falling, it is still estimated to account for 15% of all violent crime (Walby & Allen, 2004). Details from victim surveys around the world testify that IPV is an ongoing, serious, and global issue for women and men.

A recent multi-national survey conducted on behalf of the World Health Organization identified 'current' prevalence rates of women's victimization (experienced in the last 12 months) ranging from between 15% and 71% across 24,097 respondents in ten different countries including Bangladesh, Brazil, Ethiopia, Japan, Namibia, Peru, Samoa, Serbia and Montenegro, Thailand, and the United Republic of Tanzania (Garcia-Moreno, Jansen, Ellsberg, Heise, & Watts, 2006). Of the six European surveys reported between 1992 and 2003, Kury, Obergfell-Fuchs, and Woessner (2004) found that IPV rates varied as a function of how IPV was operationalized and measured, the samples used and the time-frames employed. Consequently, prevalence estimates ranged from 18.7% (identified from self reports using the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS, Straus, 1979) during last five years: West Germany, 1992), 16.6% (CTS during last five years: East Germany, 1992), 2.4% (lifetime experience of partner violence: Bavaria, 2002); 8–20% depending on age (lifetime experience, female only sample: Sweden, 1999); and 12.9% (CTS experience during last year: Spain, 2003). British data collected in 2007–2008 for the British Crime Survey, indicated that since the age of 16, 27% of women and 17% of men had experienced partner abuse. In the previous 12 months, 5% of women and 4% of men reported such victimization (44% and 32% respectively; Povey, Coleman, Kaiza, & Roe, 2009). Overall, therefore, current international prevalence estimates ranging from 3 to 71% depending on the country, the definition of IPV adopted, and the timeframe employed.

In England and Wales, as in the USA, during the last 10 years there has been increasing emphasis placed on mandatory and victimless arrest and prosecution policies, and specialist court services have emerged in order to more sensitively process cases of IPV (Bowen, 2011). These legislative and policy changes have resulted unsurprisingly in an increase in the number of perpetrators (predominantly men) of IPV who have been sentenced to both custodial and community sanctions. Within this context the ability to accurately determine the likelihood that an individual will re-offend is vitally important; as such appraisals inform all sentence planning activities at all stages of the British criminal justice process. Moreover, with increasing pressure to provide rehabilitation programs for IPV perpetrators informed by the principles of risk, need and responsivity (Andrews & Bonta, 2006), judgments of risk are used to determine which intervention program an individual should be referred to (Bowen, 2011; Hilton, Harris, & Rice, 2010). Consequently, such judgments carry with them considerable responsibility for public safety as well as the human and civil rights of the offender (Hilton & Harris, 2007), and have been described as 'the most important judgments society asks clinicians to make' (Elbogen, 2002, p. 591).

During the last 15 years, increasing attention has been paid to identifying empirically valid risk factors, and developing risk assessment instruments with a view to aiding clinician accuracy when making risk judgments, albeit at a slower rate than has been observed in the general

violence, crime and sexual offending arenas (Kropp, 2004). Dutton and Kropp (2000) published a review of domestic violence risk instruments, which detailed the only two IPV specific risk assessments available in the published literature at that time, the Danger Assessment (Campbell, 1995) and the Spousal Assault Risk Assessment (Kropp, Hart, Webster & Eaves, 1999). In their conclusion, the authors observed that until the late 1990s there were few guidelines for practitioners regarding IPV risk assessment, but that 'this has changed with the proliferation of spousal assault risk assessment instruments in production' (pg. 178). A decade later, it seems timely to review the IPV risk assessment literature in order to determine the amount of progress made. To this end, therefore, the present review has three main aims. First, the main approaches to risk assessment and the formal IPV risk assessment instruments published in the international literature are described. Second, the empirical evidence regarding the reliability and validity of these instruments is reviewed. Finally, the potential role and contribution of victim appraisals to risk assessment is examined with reference to formal assessments, and the empirical literature that explores the validity of victim risk predictions.

2. Literature search methodology

A systematic search of five electronic databases (ASSIA, PsycINFO, Medline, Academic Search Premier, and Scopus) was conducted using all possible combinations of the following keywords and phrases: 'risk assessment', 'risk prediction', 'risk judgment', and 'clinical prediction' were combined with 'intimate partner', 'wife', 'spouse' and 'domestic' which were combined with 'aggression', 'assault', 'violence', and 'abuse'. In addition, 'victim', 'battered women' and 'survivor' were combined with 'risk factors', and 'prediction'. A separate search was conducted for literature pertaining to the use of specific risk assessment instruments, through using the instrument names and acronyms: 'Spousal Assault Risk Assessment', 'SARA', 'Danger Assessment', 'DA', 'Domestic Violence Risk Assessment Guide', 'DVRAG', 'Ontario Domestic Assault Risk Assessment', 'ODARA', 'Brief Spousal Assault 'B-SAFER' and 'Domestic Violence Screening Instrument', 'DVSI'. The inclusion criteria employed were: published in the English language, published in peer reviewed journals and adult (18+) samples. The publication date range was not limited. Finally, all relevant abstracts were examined, duplicates removed and the reference lists consulted in order to identify additional sources not returned by the electronic database search. Citation reports were also examined to identify relevant articles published subsequently to those already obtained.

3. The nature of risk

It is acknowledged that the concept of risk is shrouded in ambiguity, with little consensus in the empirical and theoretical literature regarding what is meant when we refer to the risk of IPV (Kropp, 2004). Most commonly, studies that examine the risk of IPV recidivism define risk as the *likelihood* of an incident of violence occurring at some point in the future, although studies vary considerably in their operationalization of 'future' and include follow-up periods ranging between months and years. Such a conceptualization of risk places great emphasis on the prediction of behavior without considering the individual context involved.

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