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Perceptions of female-perpetrated intimate partner homicide – construction and initial validation of a novel scale

Introduction

Women who commit intimate partner homicide (IPH) are often described in stereotypical ways. Seal (2010) discusses the homicidal women's 'transgression' of the typical feminine norm and the resulting resistance to categorisation as being viewed as unacceptable. Stereotyping serves to provide an explanation for behaviour that is deemed as unfeminine and therefore beyond explanation. The act of homicide is at odds with the typical expected behaviour of femininity. As a society, our reaction to female violence echoes the dichotomy of good or bad. The female homicide perpetrator is framed as other, as evil, as a witch or a monster, as sexually promiscuous (Pelvin, 2019). By labelling the female killer something other than 'woman', we distance ourselves. This phenomenon is known as 'double deviance,' in which the violent woman is not only viewed as guilty of the crime she has committed, but additionally of the 'crime' of stepping out of the feminine norm (Naylor, 1990). Contrastingly, the act of homicide may be reframed via the mechanisms of mental illness, control, or oppression, placing the locus

of blame outside of the individual. By stereotyping female perpetrators of IPH in this way, an explanation is provided for their violent actions and the female killer is no longer ‘other’.

Previous research suggests that prior stereotypical viewpoints are utilised by jurors in trial situations (Pennington & Hastie, 1988) where sentencing can be influenced by the characterisation of female IPH defendants, with jurors looking for, or creating, stories that fit their prior worldview. Stereotypical viewpoints are found to influence decision-making, not only by laypeople, but also legal professionals (Kang *et al*, 2012). There is a disparity in sentencing in that women generally receive lesser sentences than their male counterparts (Pina-Sanchez & Harris, 2020). However, if the female defendant is characterised as committing a crime that falls outside of the typical female stereotype, she will receive a comparatively harsher sentence (Gavin, 2015). Female violent crime defendants characterised as bad wives or mothers are also treated harshly by the judicial system (Weare, 2013). The prevalence of stereotyping may have implications in intimate partner homicide cases in which victim precipitation is a factor – a prior history of domestic violence or controlling behaviour by the victim may be lessened or disregarded if the defendant is characterised as unfeminine. It is important to accurately present prior history to ensure fair treatment for both perpetrator and victim, rather than relying on stereotypical characterisations in the courtroom which, as shown, may have further reaching implications than first imagined.

To investigate the extent to which stereotypical beliefs play a part in sentencing, a scale has been developed, to measure attitudes towards female perpetrators of IPH. The aspiration is for the scale to assist in investigation of the role stereotyping plays in jury verdicts. The scale will also be of use in education and training scenarios, academia, and research, as well as in jury selection procedures.

Aim

The current project aims to test the developed scale, which measures attitudes towards female perpetrators of intimate partner homicide in the United Kingdom.

Methodology

Following a review of the literature, five themes were identified relating to the stereotyping of women who have committed intimate partner homicide: abnormal mental state;

breaks out of the female stereotype; not responsible for her actions; self-defence, and mythologisation/othering. Stereotypical categories have commonly been described in the literature by the moniker of Mad, Bad and Sad (Gavin, 2015), providing a representation of the first three themes identified from the literature. Further extrapolating from the literature, the categories 'self-defence' and 'mythologisation/othering' were also added to ensure all potential stereotypes were included, considering both positive and negative potential viewpoints.

Data sources

Following an extensive review of the academic literature, a total of 107 items were generated overall, reflecting the stereotypical categories. Item generation was additionally informed by reading across media articles, comment sections on websites, YouTube videos, social media, and news reports.

Expert Pool

An expert pool analysed how well each item reflected the category to which it was assigned. Generated items were rated for accuracy via a pool comprised of experts in criminal psychology, forensics, criminology, and investigative psychology, recruited from the USA and the United Kingdom. Items with a low mean and/or a high standard deviation were discarded. After analysis, a total of 61 items were removed and an initial questionnaire was compiled, comprising of 42 remaining items reflecting the five categories.

Comprehension Validation

The 42 remaining items were subjected to a comprehension evaluation in which 15 anonymous participants suggested improvements to the layout, wording, and clarity of the statements, as well as identifying spelling and grammatical errors.

Internal Validity

Following comprehension validation, item statements were re-organised so that statements reflecting the same category were not grouped sequentially, to reduce the risk of participants responding in a socially desirable manner. Participants took part anonymously and indicated that they met initial requirements for UK jury service, namely that they were over 18 and below 76 years of age, were registered to vote in the UK, and had resided in the UK for a

continuous period of five years since the age of 13. Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with each statement on a 5-point Likert scale.

Participant Recruitment

Participants were recruited via social media, research networks, and posters placed at various venues. After removal of incomplete responses, the total number of participants (N) was 103 (see table 1 for demographic information).

Table 1. *Participant demographics*

Category	Subcategory	Frequency (N)	Percent (%)
Age	18-24	51	49.5
	25-34	19	18.4
	35-44	15	14.6
	45-54	14	13.6
	55-64	4	3.8
Gender	Male	85	82.5
	Female	15	14.6
	Non-Binary	1	1
	Male Cis-Adjacent	1	1
	Prefer not to say	1	1
UK Ethnic Origin	White	79	76.9
	Black/African/Caribbean	2	1.9
	Asian - Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Chinese or any other Asian background	18	17.5
	Mixed two or more ethnic groups	1	1.9
	Other – Arab or any others	1	1
	Prefer not to say	1	1

Results

Forty-two items were subjected to exploratory factor analysis. As correlation between factors was expected, the data were analysed by means of a Maximum Likelihood analysis, with Direct Oblimin rotation with Kaiser normalisation, an oblique solution, selected to allow for correlation of factors. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin test of sampling adequacy showed adequate sampling for exploratory factor analysis $KMO = .823$. Bartlett's test of sphericity $X^2(136) = 790.001, p < .001$, indicating data is appropriate for exploratory factor analysis.

Four components with an Eigenvalue of greater than 1.0 were found; the scree plot also indicated a four-component solution as the best fit for the data. In accordance with Cattell (1994), a combination of screen plot and Eigenvalue lend credibility to the retention of factors in the analysis. Items with a loading of .6 indicate a high factor loading, with items above .3 indicating a moderately high factor loading (Kline, 1994). Subsequently, items with a loading of $\leq .03$ were ignored, with 17 items retained. The retention of four factors was considered considering a review of the literature in addition to examination of the scree plot, factor plot and Eigenvalues. The four-factor solution is responsible for the common variance constituting 63.98 % of the total variance (see table 2 for details).

Table 2. Factor loadings after exploratory factor analysis

Items	Factor 1 $\alpha=.869$	Factor 2 $\alpha=.803$	Factor 3 $\alpha=.828$	Factor 4 $\alpha=.618$
The Evil Woman				
Pub_Shm	.567			
Nst_Wom	.560			
Mnt_Ill	.555			
Kill_Evil	.807			
Kill_Ashm	.578			
Kill_Vile	.803			
The Victim				
Batt_Opt		.853		
DV_Chc		.927		
Abu_Lres		.527		
The Other				
Diff_Kill			-.499	
Wrng_Kill			-.592	
Nt_Nrml			-.931	
Kill_Crzy	.432		-.381	
Kill_Trbl			-.519	
The Nurturer				
Norm_Nviol				.579
Less_Viol				.635
Not_Ntr				.470

Note. Variable Kill_Crzy cross loads onto factor 1 and factor 3, respectively. As the term crazy may have multiple meanings, the variable was retained at this stage. It is intended for the items to undergo further testing.

Discussion

As previous research suggested not only the existence of stereotypes relating to female homicide perpetrators, but that these stereotypes play a role in justice scenarios, this study aimed to create a tool to measure the effect of this phenomenon. The results of this study identified four factors relating to female homicide perpetrators: The Evil Woman, The Victim, The Other and The Nurturer. These findings lend support to previous research that suggests women who commit violent crime, specifically intimate partner homicide, are viewed in stereotypical ways (Ali & Adshead, 2022), and that this stereotypical thinking may have far-reaching implications

in scenarios such as jury decisions, where a juror's prior knowledge is utilised alongside previous ideas about the crime category and trial information to construct a story (Pennington & Hastie, 1992). Additionally, stereotypical views may affect the ways in which first responders react to intimate partner homicide scenarios in which the defendant is female (Young, 2011), which has specific relevance in cases in which victim precipitation of domestic violence or controlling behaviour is a salient factor.

This study investigated whether stereotypes identified in the literature could be measured, an initial step in identifying stereotypical attitudes towards female IPH perpetrators. The results from exploratory factor analysis suggest an initial underlying structure in the scale, representing four factors describing stereotypical views towards women who commit intimate partner homicide. The identification of specific stereotypes correlates with previous research which has identified certain stereotypes associated with women who kill their intimate partners, however, this scale builds on this by potentially identifying a method with which to measure the extent to which these stereotypes have real-world implications in differing scenarios. The measurement of stereotypical attitudes may be criticised as an attempt to construct a direct representation of a concept which may be defined as abstract; however, the results suggest that such measurement is possible. This proposes a potential use in future research concerned with the impact of stereotyping on female violent crime defendants in addition to the development of training programs across sectors.

Future research

Future stages of research will encompass development, testing and validation of this initial scale to further test factor structures. The area of female perpetrated homicide is an under-researched area and, as such, future research focusing on female perpetrators of violent crime, stereotyping, and prior experience of female offenders will add to our understanding of female violence.

Conclusion

This research has identified four factors associated with stereotyping of female intimate partner homicide perpetrators, suggesting that specific concepts do exist in relation to attitudes towards female homicide perpetrators. Importantly, the results of this study suggest that

measurement of these attitudes is achievable, and future research must evaluate the extent to which prior stereotypical attitudes may affect legal outcomes for female homicide defendants.

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