

High heels and high tempers: a study into female violence

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Draft, not for quotation

Abstract

This paper provides a critical account of a small-scale study around the issue of women who perpetrate violence towards intimates, acquaintances and strangers. This non-probability, purposive sample of female perpetrators was taken from two sources in West Yorkshire: a women's self-help perpetrator counselling group (S.T.O.P) and a women's centre which provides wide-ranging support for females with a history of offending or at risk of offending (Together Women). Using qualitative data collected from counselling group observations and in depth interviews with both female perpetrators and key informants who work with violent women, this paper investigates what influence 'treatment' has had upon the lives, relationships and behaviours of female perpetrators. Exploring in particular the service provision supplied by both facilities, this paper highlights what impact the criminal justice system has upon female perpetrators and how counselling group members govern themselves in order to protect their own interests under state surveillance. Aware that participant's understandings of violence are heavily influenced by the matrix of care and control that surrounds them, this paper explores how female perpetrators struggle to retain and articulate 'their' own definitions of violence. In spite of its small scale, this research is important in order to make known the overlooked viewpoints and perspectives of violent women. Utilising both the practitioner and client perspective, it is the objective of this research to help social science and the wider community to understand the position, perspectives and experiences of women who have been defined or define themselves as violent.

Background

Domestic abuse has long been a policy priority within the UK; generally understood as a grave social problem, numerous policy initiatives have been expanded to put the 'victim at the heart of the system' (Home Office 2003; Parmar & Sampson 2007). In today's society men are conventionally perceived as 'perpetrators', women as 'victims'. However, in line with the inauguration of dual arrest policies and increased media attention, women's involvement in all reported violent crime has grown in recent years (Martin, 1997). This increase has generated a resurgence of interest around the issue of violent women and has caused a strong public outcry (Nash 2009). Female aggression has conventionally been a

taboo subject within policy, practice and feminist literature (Fitzroy, 2001); it is men after all who perpetrate the majority of violence, whether on the street or in the home (BCS 2007/08). Evidence of female aggressiveness challenges established interpretations of domestic violence and contests long-standing conceptions of gender (Fitzroy 2001; McHugh *et al.* 2005; Morrissey 2003; Myers & Wight 1996).

Receiving little consistent, organised intervention from the criminal justice system and official agencies (see Cook 1997; Parmar & Sampson 2007); female perpetrators of violence find little sympathy and support in the courtroom, the media and public mind (Berrington & Honkatukia 2002). Often portrayed as ‘doubly deviant’, female perpetrators are stigmatised for their lack of femininity and deviation from expected gendered norms (Gill 2007; Lloyd 1995; Richardson 2005). Women who do not meet the ‘victim’ stereotype face judgement from all fields; they are often simply branded ‘mad’ or ‘bad’ (Appignanesi 2008; Myers & Wight 1996). Deemed a rarity, female violent offenders are mythified and made monstrous; they attract far-reaching public attention and interest (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002). The recent reported increase in female ‘binge drinking’ (JRF 2009; Saner 2008) and apprehension surrounding girl gangs (Curtis 2008; Campbell 1993; Bell 2009) are but a few examples of society’s rising anxiety concerning female aggressiveness. The proposition that women are less violent than men by nature raises worrying conclusions about the innate moral superiority of women (Lloyd 1995) and essentialism of men. Evidence suggests that in intimate relationships women are physically, emotionally, psychologically and financially violent (Archer 2000; Clements *et al.* 2007; Gormley 2005; Straus & Gelles 1995). However, stereotypically, women are seen to be driven to violence by jealousy, express aggression indirectly, to suppress their anger, exhibit irrationality and employ aggression only in defence (see Campbell 1993; Lloyd 1995). However, women in addition to men can and do control, manipulate and exert power.

Despite society’s growing politicisation and publicisation of domestic violence, stereotypes and assumptions continue to dominate theory and practice, as female violent offenders are measured against a ‘male standard’ of rationality and objectivity (Appignanesi 2008; Lloyd 1995; Morrissey 2003; Pearson 1997). The classification of women as either ‘mad’ or ‘bad’ fails to encompass the ambiguities and multiple ‘realities’ of women’s lives (Dobash & Dobash 2004). This way of categorising violent women simplifies female violence; the voices of violent women have rarely been listened to. Research has failed to adequately account for the nature of female offending. The discourses already in place are too crude and one-dimensional, as domestic violence is complex and multifaceted. Much of our understanding of interpersonal violence is founded upon research conducted with ‘victims’ rather than ‘perpetrators’ (Tilly & Brackley 2005). What is missing in the literature is an analysis of the ways in which female aggressiveness and violence manifest themselves and are problematised by female perpetrators. ‘Feminist and cultural theory proliferates with theories of identities and subjective constructions, but few of these theories explore the processes by which ‘real’ women negotiate and understand themselves’ (Skeggs 1997: 1).

Aims and Objectives

In order to help bridge this gap in knowledge, this paper explores some preliminary findings from my PhD study into the issue of women who perpetrate violence towards intimates, acquaintances and strangers. For the purposes of this paper, I shall draw upon qualitative data

collected from S.T.O.P counselling group observations and in depth interviews with female perpetrators in order to examine the following:

- 1) What influence 'treatment' has had upon the lives, relationships and behaviours of female perpetrators
- 2) How the talk therapy approach and counselling agencies are seen by those who use them or are made to use them
- 3) How female perpetrators struggle to retain and articulate 'their' own definitions of violence under state surveillance

It is my intention that this paper will address women's lives and experiences in their own terms, and create theory grounded in the understandings of marginalised women.

Definitions of violence

Researching violence is fraught with problems; defining and quantifying what constitutes violence is a notoriously hard task. Researching the ways in which women conceptualise, experience and perpetrate violence raises a number of issues due to the sensitive nature of the topic and gender of those taking part. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus upon physical, emotional, psychological, financial and sexual violence perpetrated by women. Although employing a general, broad definition of domestic violence, it is my epistemological belief that participants should define violence and aggression themselves; that a bottom-up approach should be taken and autonomy given to women to describe their own judgements, experiences and beliefs surrounding violence. However, I am aware that the participant's understandings of violence will likely be heavily influenced by the matrix of care and control that surrounds them. Participants may struggle to retain and articulate 'their' own definitions of violence, and may disclose only what they think key informants want to hear. However, the voluntary nature of the S.T.O.P perpetrator groups may mean that this effect may be decreased when compared to court mandated programmes (see Babcock *et al.* 2003; Miller & Meloy 2006).

The Sample

Due to the fact that many violent women remain hidden, obtaining a true random sample was problematic. It was necessary to compromise with the ideal and use a non-probability, purposive sampling frame. Through accessing women who attend anger management counselling, I am aware that I am obtaining the experiences of potentially the most distressed and 'serious' violent offenders. To include women referred by support groups severely restricts generalisation and suitability. Results may not be indicative or representative of the entire population of violent women. In spite of this, snowball sampling allowed me to research five perpetrators who had never been referred to perpetrator groups (see Fig.1). In addition, working with S.T.O.P allowed me to come into contact with female perpetrators who had not been involved with the criminal justice system.

Although increasing the rate of response, this research was conducted in an artificial situation, where violence was separated from the context of the women's lives. This study did not

follow women over time. Participant’s reports of violence were not corroborated, which potentially could have oversimplified the phenomenon and provided limited, sometimes biased narratives. However, this decision was justified in terms of it being better to have some knowledge that is restricted, than to have no knowledge at all. In focusing upon the small-scale, this sample adds to existing knowledge by supplying an intensive, richer understanding of female violence.

Fig. 1: Number of participants included in the study

Total number of S.T.O.P clients observed during fieldwork period	23
Number of newcomers who joined S.T.O.P during fieldwork period	16
Number of S.T.O.P clients observed who attended one session only	5
Number of S.T.O.P group sessions observed	16
Number of S.T.O.P clients interviewed	11
Number of Together Women clients interviewed	3
Number of women interviewed who have never attended perpetrator group sessions	4

Methods

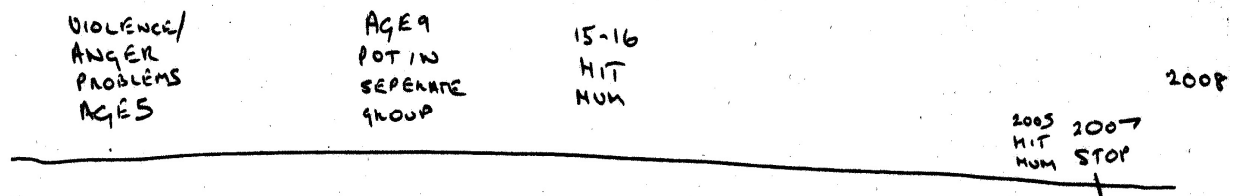
The S.T.O.P self help group sessions operated on an open enrolment basis whereby women could start the programme any week rather than wait until a new group formed. This meant that women who were at various stages of the ‘treatment’ process were able to raise numerous issues and offer different insights into the weekly discussions, with many of the longer term participants offering emotional and practical support for newcomers. The women used the self-help counselling groups to utilise new knowledges and understandings of events they had largely experienced individually. The self help group observations offered the opportunity to analyse the women and social context as a whole, while semi-structured in depth interviews provided a detailed investigation of individual perceptions, attitudes and behaviours. By combining participant observation with interviews and visual methods (see Figs. 2 and 3), the data from each was used to illuminate the other.

Mapping time

During the interview situation the women were invited to generate a timeline of their lives and reflect upon what they had written. Timelines were employed to facilitate the storytelling process; they offered a tool through which participants could convey their own experiences and understandings (Gauntlett & Holzwarth 2006). Embracing the creativity of respondents, initially it was over-ambitiously hoped that this visual method would be empowering for participants (Gauntlett & Holzwarth 2006). Nevertheless, the use of timelines did hold value

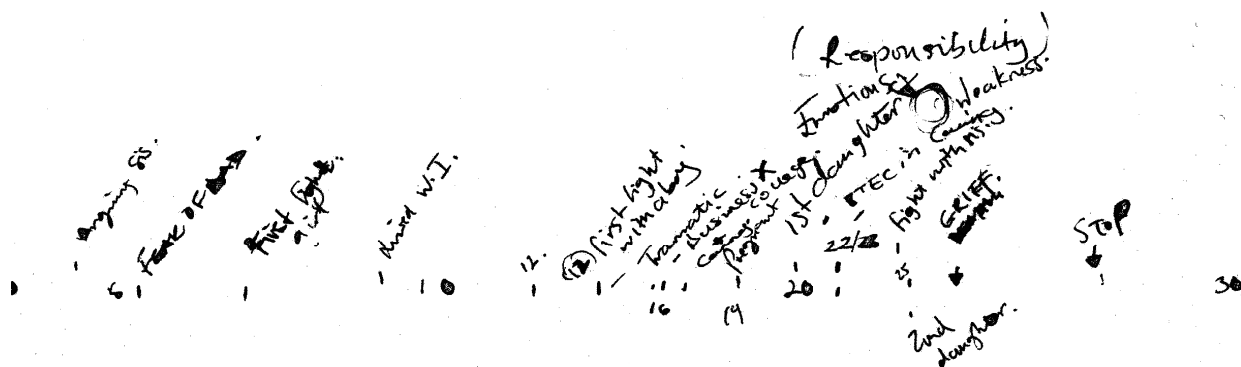
for some women, for example Jane talked of 'how participation had changed her way of thinking about her experiences' (field diary 01.10.2008). I cannot conclude that this research necessary empowered the women I interviewed, however in line with previous research I found that some women felt pleased that they were being listened to, that they were able to share their experiences with a sympathetic listener (Meth & Malaza 2003). I found that the timelines touched upon very interesting and revealing subjects that were not mentioned verbally later on, possibly because some topics were too raw, too painful to discuss. However, in reality the visual was not central to my research, as conversations often veered from the timelines, and comments were not always added. Nevertheless, this method served as an excellent tool to promote discussion, even for those with learning difficulties who did not want to record their lives in writing. This was true for Anne, a Dyslexic participant who during the interview pointed towards a line on blank paper to indicate and highlight important events at different stages of her life.

Fig. 2: Timelines



Emily (age group 46-55, group attendee)

Fig. 3



Bela (age group 26-35, group attendee)

Preliminary Findings

Group therapy as a cathartic experience

The vast majority of group members interviewed described S.T.O.P in a very positive light. Participants expressed how coming to the perpetrator group sessions served as a cathartic experience. The women explained how they first entered group sessions with apprehension, but grew increasingly comfortable with each other. The group sessions were described as a non threatening environment, an indispensable weekly get-together:

‘Erm, I do say that it’s like my little oasis, it really is. I’ll walk out of here on a Wednesday after dumping all the crap and I feel as though I’m ready to go on with the next week’

Jane (age group 26-35, group attendee)

In line with previous research (Farrell (1996) it would seem that building new friendships with others and creating a sense of community were vital components of the therapeutic process for these women:

‘They’re really friendly. I’ve got to know quite a few people and you meet new people every week, like today, we’ve got three new people. And you get to know people and it’s really good, to, you get to make friends as well’

Emma (age group 18-25, group attendee)

The women shared similar background characteristics, were on familiar terms and somewhat knew each other’s problems. As a result, the group sessions gave rise to private, in depth discussion and its supportive, non-judgemental atmosphere may have encouraged self-report. For many of the participants the services provided at S.T.O.P replaced the care given by family and friends. Sometimes a lack of trust and broken relationships with intimates meant that it was difficult for the women to gain the support and understanding needed to overcome aggression. Bela described refraining from ‘dumping’ her problems on her family for fear of forfeiting relationships (field diary 15.10.2008). In the eyes of many participants the group sessions provided a safe environment to voice frustrations and obtain non-judgemental viewpoints:

‘Erm, and also, because I’ve been through such a lot with [facilitator], I sort of feel as if I *really do* trust her judgement. But it’s weird because I don’t just get it from [facilitator], I could say the same things to my friends and family and all the rest of it, and they would give me the same kind of reaction. But because it’s not (pause) I don’t know, because it’s out of my circle if you know what I mean, and erm, I don’t feel as if [facilitator] has any ulterior motives really, you know what I mean?’

Jane (age group 26-35, group attendee)

Often during group sessions the roles between facilitators and group members were interchangeable; with many of the longstanding clients offering emotional and practical support for newcomers. When asked about relationships between group members, Sue proclaimed ‘like Jane, she’s really good for giving advice (smiles) erm and you just don’t feel alone’. Some longer term members had completed or were in the process of completing group facilitator training courses provided by S.T.O.P. At times facilitators also shared their own

stories with the group, and it seemed an environment of mutuality and reciprocity was created. However not all participants found the group therapy approach beneficial, as one client who had desisted maintained:

'I think coming to the group and talking about being raped and abused or whatever, it's like, it's *deep* stuff (getting upset). If it's like a one to one session then that's a different thing, but if it's with a group I just think no'
Afia (age group 36-45, group attendee)

One limitation of this study was that the women self selected to participate and all participants claimed to have a relatively positive experience of S.T.O.P. In reality it would have been interesting to explore and uncover the attitudes and behaviours of more clients who had desisted.

How perpetrators struggle to retain and articulate 'their' own definitions of violence

The majority of participants had violent reputations and/or came from families with a violent tradition:

'It's hard you know, cos I'm from an Irish background I've got the Irish temperament, you know. If there was trouble or whatever, my mother used to learn us that we had to fight, and if you didn't fight, you'd get beaten up at home. It would be one or the other'
Afia (age group 36-45, group attendee)

Reputation for some participants was all important; it served to ensure that these women would no longer be 'walked all over' and seen as a 'doormat'. It would seem that participant's use of violence reinforced their capacity 'to affect positive outcomes and serve as a tool for survival and resistance' (Jack 1999: 29):

'Yeah I did feel in control. I was this sixteen year old girl fighting women in their early twenties, mid twenties erm, it were really quite rough and I was like a sixteen year old girl, seventeen. And they were bleeding on the floor and I were stood there, and like 'I'm fucking sixteen, I've got the self control to fight back'. I felt (pause) I felt quite powerful because I got quite a reputation as someone kind of not to mess with'
Jess (age group 26-35, non group attendee)

Often the women had witnessed violence when growing up, from both mother and father, their families and friends used violence and violence for them was a 'normal' way of life. Most participants had been involved with the criminal justice system; seventy six per cent had been arrested, the vast majority for violent offences. In this paper I argue that these women had entered into a therapeutic world where they were told to behave in a non-violent way; a way that was often very different from familiar, learned behaviour.

When interviewing S.T.O.P group attendees and non attendees it became apparent that the images these two groups of women presented of their lives were very different. Often group attendees presented some uncertainty about their present and future association with violence. Some group members claimed that they had learned to control any angry tendencies:

‘Er, coming to the group makes me feel a better person. Before I didn’t know how to express myself, because of things that happened in my past, I was a person that kept things bottled inside. I didn’t know *how* to express things, or how to explain myself if you know what I mean. Erm, since coming here, it’s like I’ve opened my barrier now, I had a barrier before, because of everything that happened, like I said, but now it’s like the barrier’s gone down’

Sally (age group 26-35, group attendee)

Reading the compulsory ‘Be Safe’ self-help book which accompanied the course, the women were brought into close contact with the ideas of S.T.O.P. Many participants were facing child custody issues and were involved with social services, consequently the women were likely anxious to comply with the centre, and bring their narratives more fully into harmony with the centres ideas. This in all probability affected the way stories were told, both during group sessions and in depth interviews:

‘Well the children were put on the child protection plan in (pause) December two thousand and six. Erm and I didn’t really engage with them, it’s only been since the last six months that I’ve really engaged with them, and they advised me to come to S.T.O.P to sort my anger out. And you know, I’ve stopped drinking and everything like that. So basically (pause) it were them that pushed me, well they didn’t push me into coming, but I realised in the end that I obviously needed to get my anger sorted out, to get my children taken off’

Emma (age group 18-25, group attendee)

Group attendees were more likely to admit to using violence in their past. When answering questions on current attitudes and violent behaviours, group attendees would tend to direct the conversation away and highlight how their behaviour had dramatically improved since attending perpetrator groups:

Sarah: What do you do?

Jo: Punch them and head butt them. *I wouldn’t do that now* though, no, do you know, I can’t remember properly because it were, I was young, I’ve stopped doing it

Jo (age group 18-25, group attendee)

The sample is filled with ‘over processed’ women who have been/are involved with the criminal justice system; arguably they are used to speaking about their lives and possibly know what answers to give in order to present themselves in a better light:

‘It’s really good, at first I thought ‘no it won’t work’ but as I say, I’ve only been coming for a couple of months, and it does help, really, really helps. Especially that ladder, cos obviously when I were drunk I didn’t realise any of the signals, but now I do. And I know if I’m going to get angry with anybody, I know how to calm myself back down. So, yeah it’s really good’

Emma (age group 18-25, group attendee)

The women's experiences were framed by the meanings provided by S.T.O.P. Clients were given a label for their experiences, and as a result, the participant's understandings were directed by the centre (McHugh *et al.* 2005). During group sessions and interviews the women adopted a language of change; they adopted the language and buzz words utilised by S.T.O.P (S.T.O.P Talk):

'When we both started S.T.O.P Project, erm, sort of (pause) yeah (pause) he er, I guess I'm pretty easy going, and I wouldn't allow him most of the time to wind me up, it's my choice isn't it (laughing)'

Jane (age group 26-35, group attendee)

Unlike S.T.O.P clients, non group attendees were less likely to admit to having a 'problem' with violence:

'You know cos I've always had a bit of an attitude. Cos I don't see like, I know it's classed as anger management, but I just think that I've got a bad attitude problem'

Kim (age group 18-25, non group attendee)

'Just in a way I think it's cowardly to walk away from a fight, I'm a very like *proud* person, headstrong. I will always like fight my corner if I believe in something, if I believe that something should be said then I'll say it'

Zoe (age group 18-25, non group attendee)

Non group attendees were more likely to admit to enjoying violence; often seen as 'a release', participants described taking pleasure in the buzz of the fight, an adrenaline rush. Kim even described that she could not feel the pain of the punches received until twenty minutes later:

'But it's when I tremor, I'm losing it and I can feel my *blood boiling*, and I feel like, like it's my birthday next day, you know like I'm *excited*. And then that's it, and then my jaws shake and I look like I'm crazy. But I know what I'm doing. You know, it's just that little voice telling me not to, it just isn't there. In don't care'

Kim (age group 18-25, non group attendee)

Interestingly, non group attendees were more likely to admit that their use of violence was calculated and rational:

'I felt I always had to be on guard. You know I always had to, like I wouldn't drink that much, just in case, what if I got too pissed and then somebody beat me cos I were drunk?'

Kim (age group 18-25, non group attendee)

Afia, who had only attended two sessions maintained:

Afia: And over the years, I do say *if* I was out and someone started then I would proper loose it, but it takes a lot to do that. I'd rather wait til I was sober

Sarah: What do you mean?

Afia: I mean I'll try and override it or I'll laugh, I don't wanna fight when I'm drunk. It's in the morning when I wake up and I want trouble now, I'll come up to you. Come outside, and it's a shock

Conclusion

As the number of women arrested for domestic assault increases (Martin 1997; Miller & Meloy, 2006; Saner 2008), it is remarkable that female perpetrator treatment programmes and the context of women's use of violence have not been analysed in the UK (see Mahoney, 1994; Miller & Meloy 2006). In spite of its small scale, I am convinced of this study's usefulness as a starting point for helping to understand female violence. These preliminary findings suggest that the voices of female perpetrators are not unitary; participant's narratives were varied and complex. Women's backgrounds are unique; often the women had their own agendas for attending the perpetrator programme. Violence is not exclusively the reserve of men, the participants of this study conducted serious physical, psychological and in one case even sexual violence. As I continue writing my PhD I am left with the question 'what is the relationship between gender and violence?'

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