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Abstract

An understanding of how the beliefs of domestically violent offenders might influence their abusive behavior is central to the development and delivery of any intervention program that aims to reduce the risk of further violence against women and children. This article reports the results of a preliminary investigation into the core beliefs of a sample of domestically violent men. Three major themes emerged from an analysis of the accounts of their violence, which were understood in relation to three implicit theories that participants held about themselves, their relationships, and the world. These are discussed in terms of previous studies of offender cognition, how domestic violence programs might be conceptualized, and their implications for practice.

Keywords

domestic violence, implicit theories, rehabilitation

During the past decade, research evidence has accumulated that violent offenders are heterogeneous in terms of both their offending behavior and their treatment needs (Howells & Day, 2002; Ward & Beech, 2006). Serin (1994), for example, has argued that violent offenders are sufficiently heterogeneous, that endeavors to distinguish among types of offenders should be strongly encouraged, and that strategies that assign all violent offenders to the same type of program are both inefficient and ill-advised. McGuire's (2008) recent review of interventions to reduce aggression supports this position, concluding that different subgroups of violent offenders are likely to

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be differentially responsive to existing treatments. One group of violent offenders who are commonly identified as requiring specialist intervention programs are those who commit acts of violence against intimate partners. Within this group, considerable heterogeneity can also exist (for an overview, see Holtzworth-Munroe, Bates, Smutzler, & Sandin, 1997). For example, a sequential analysis of reports of violent arguments at home by Babcock, Jacobson, Gottman, and Yerington (2000) highlighted some of the individual differences that exist between perpetrators of domestic violence. They described the dismissing batterer as one who uses authority and control, while the preoccupied batterer reacts aggressively to partner withdrawal. Whereas the dismissing husbands used distancing behaviors (stonewalling, active tuning out of the partner, contempt, or what the authors referred to as an "icy distancing stance"), the preoccupied group tended to try engage their wives by using belligerence; they were anxious; expressed strong feelings of love, anger, and guilt toward their partner; and were particularly sensitive to real or imagined threats of abandonment. Such descriptions suggest that there is a need to tailor intervention strategies to the needs of individual offenders if they are to effectively manage risk.

At the same time, however, there is a body of research that suggests that violent offenders tend to hold similar sets of core beliefs about themselves, the world, and their violence that can help to explain their aggressive behavior and inform attempts at intervention (Beech, Fisher, & Ward, 2006; Polaschek & Gannon, 2004; Tilley & Brackley, 2005). These have been described in relation to what has been termed implicit theories, or theories about the world that affect thinking, actions, and the way in which the behavior of the self and others is perceived (Ward, 2000). Such theories are networks of beliefs that support, facilitate, or legitimize offending and are thus considered to be key risk factors for offending. They are thought to play an important role in the development and maintenance of *cognitive distortions* (for a full discussion of the role of cognition in offending, please refer to Gannon, Ward, Beech, & Fisher, 2007), a term that refers to maladaptive beliefs and attitudes, and problematic thinking styles such as excusing, blaming, and rationalizing. Cognitive distortions are thought to emerge from "underlying causal theories (schemas) about the nature of their victims rather than stemming from unrelated, independent beliefs" and "these implicit theories function like scientific theories and are used to explain empirical regularities (e.g., other people's actions) and to make predictions about the world. They are relatively coherent and constituted by a number of interlocking beliefs and their component concepts and categories" (Ward & Casey, 2009, p. 3). Implicit theories thus unconsciously influence the way information is interpreted, leading to distorted interpretations of the self, other people, and the world. An important aspect of any attempt to rehabilitate offenders is identifying such cognitive distortions and their related theories, bringing these into conscious awareness, and changing or modifying those cognitions that facilitate offending.

Implicit theories can be identified by examining statements and inferences made during interviews about the offense and the circumstances leading up to the offending, and can be directly linked to offense pathways and etiological explanations for

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Table 1. Themes From Batterer's Description of Violence

Male violence was effective and explosive
Equating violence with respect
Emphasis on the incompetence of females in terms of violence
Women's violence was hysterical, trivial, and ineffective
Presented themselves as cool and rational
Displayed a cultural construction of male violence as volcanic, natural, lethal, impossible to stop
Described female partners as controlling, demanding, and dominating
The violence resulted from them feeling emasculated
They were victims of gender politics
The legal system overreacted or was biased
They protected their partners from arrest (the oppressor is the legal system)
Possessing, protecting, owning their partners

Source: Adapted from Anderson & Umbertson (2001).

offending (Ward & Beech, 2006). Ward and Keenan (1999), for example, have identified five types of implicit theories in child molesters: children as sexual beings, nature of harm, entitlement, dangerous world, and controllability. Polaschek and Gannon (2004) proposed that rapists typically held theories that women are essentially unknowable and exist primarily for sexual purposes, that the male sex drive is uncontrollable, and that men are entitled to seek sexual fulfilment, and that the world is a dangerous place in which to live. Research with child sexual offenders has suggested that these offenders often hold similar beliefs (e.g., that children are sexual beings, that adults are entitled to have their needs served by those younger than them, that the harm caused by sexual activity is seen as minimal, and that the world is dangerous and uncontrollable; Ward & Siegart, 2002).

Gilchrist (2009) has recently suggested that there are likely to be marked similarities between the implicit theories of domestically violent men and those who are sexually violent, although little previous empirical research of this nature with domestically violent men has been reported. In one of the few studies conducted in this area, Anderson and Umberson (2001) found that domestically violent men constructed their violence as a rational response to extreme provocation. They excused, justified, rationalized, and minimized their violence, seeing it as a loss of control or a minor incident that was blown out of proportion. The main themes identified from these interviews are shown in Table 1.

This work has direct relevance to the development of intervention programs. The last decade has seen significant attempts to target men who perpetrate domestic violence, both through legal and criminal justice responses and the development of interventions such as therapy and education (Gondolf, 2004). Many of the interventions offered are psychoeducational in nature, although they typically incorporate some features of cognitive–behavioral work (Gondolf, 2007) and aim to examine and

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change what Pence and Paymar (1993) refer to as a belief system of masculinity. What is less clear is how such belief systems relate to the offending, and which specific beliefs might form the most appropriate targets for change. The aim of this study is to examine the implicit theories held by perpetrators of domestic violence. Based on the existing literature on domestic violence, rape, and general violence, it was hypothesized that consistent themes would emerge in the way in which domestically violent men described their offenses, and that these could be grouped into a core set of implicit theories that would provide a useful framework for conceptualizing the cognitive–behavioral components of program delivery.

Method

Participants

Participants in this research were eight community corrections clients, interviewed at an intervention center in Western Australia, Australia, in August 2008. Three had self-referred to a domestic violence program, and five were legally mandated to attend. Their ages ranged from 28 to 43 years. Each participant had undergone, or was currently completing, treatment through a domestic violence program administered through the Department of Corrective Services, Western Australia. The methodology for this research was subject to the normal ethical approval processes, and as such all research participants were required to give their informed consent to be interviewed.

Design

Grounded theory is a qualitative research methodology that is designed to generate theory in areas where few or inadequate theories exist (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). It was selected for use in this study given that it has previously been shown to be a viable methodology for identifying the implicit theories of violent offenders (e.g., Polaschek & Gannon, 2004). The analytic process involves moving from examining the transcripts of the interviews, line by line, for emerging themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). These themes are then coded into core categories on the basis of the frequency with which they occur. Saturation is reached when new material in the interviews adds nothing to what is already known about a category, and it is at this point that coding ceases for that particular category.

Procedure

Telephone contact was made with 56 male program participants, of whom 14 volunteered to be interviewed. Follow-up phone calls were made a week before and during the week of the interviews to confirm attendance, and of the 14 potential participants, 8 attended interviews of approximately 1 hr duration. They were not coerced or pressured in any way to participate.

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Table 2. Summary of Major Categories and Themes

Category	Theme
Threat	Violence is normal
	Trust no one
	Women are unknowable
	I am always right
	Emotional volatility
Retreat	Drugs and alcohol
	Avoid intimacy
	Avoid abandonment
	Depression/hopelessness
Perfect world	Create a better life
	I'm a good person
	The male is the provider and protector

The interviews were conducted by the first author, a female psychologist with a feminist perspective on gendered violence. They were semi-structured, with questions focusing on childhood history, current relationships, feelings about life in general, and the circumstances surrounding the domestic violence. The interviews were digitally recorded or audiotaped, and diary notes were taken by the researcher during the interview. The audiotapes were then transcribed, coded, and entered into the N-Vivo software package for analysis.

Results

Three major core categories were identified from the interviews, which were labeled Threat, Retreat, and Perfect World. Within each category, a number of themes were identified. These are presented in Table 2.

Threat

Each of the interviewees described beliefs about their position in the world, which suggested that they felt threatened by others. These beliefs extended to their relationships with their partners, with many describing these women as demanding, hysterical, or manipulative. The need to always win an argument (even when they knew they were wrong) was a prominent feature of these accounts. A number of themes in this category were identified, including the belief that violence is normal, that the world is untrustworthy, that women are unknowable, that "I am always right," and others related more generally to emotional volatility.

All of the participants reported that violence had been a significant influence on their upbringing, whether as part of their family or peer group. Many described abusive

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fathers or male role models and expressed the belief that this was the model from which they learned about relationships. The resulting beliefs acted to justify violence as a normal and as an effective way of settling disputes. Terry, for example, described his childhood as follows: "I was probably about 6 so it was a long time ago, late 70s and my grandfather would beat my grandmother and I think it was instilled in me that it was the right thing to do." Violence was also seen as a way of belonging to a social group, gaining acceptance with peers, and as an expression of power. Bill described how violence was a way of belonging to a social group and gaining the acceptance of his peers:

> It was definitely a power thing and you like to think you can handle yourself and you know it's a bragging thing like "you know that fight we got into the other night!" We all played footy together, we all drank together, and we all did the fights together.

The belief that the world is untrustworthy was held by all participants. Participants expressed a suspicion and distrust of the motivations of others that permeated their social relationships with the outside world. Gary's view on trusting others is indicative of many responses:

> I've gone from the sort of person who would trust everybody and give them the benefit of the doubt from the word go to trusting nobody and nobody gets the benefit of the doubt and you're going to earn that f***ing respect.

This extended to a lack of trust in their relationships and jealousy surrounding their partners. Bill described his inability to trust his partner as follows:

> Like if I was in a relationship the things like that would go through my head then are like, um, I'd get visions of her sleeping with somebody else or things like that would just churn around in my head over and over and over and yeah, after a while you start hating the person and I guess they don't understand that. She didn't understand it anyway. It was hard for me to explain it to her.

All of the participants expressed the view that women were mysterious and unknowable in some form. Three expressed the belief that their partners were trying to control them. They felt that they were being attacked for not being good enough or for not measuring up to an ideal. In recalling details of his previous relationship, Steve described his feelings as: "It is being trapped, it is trapped. It's like wow! But I thought I could handle it but then I thought 'She's trying to get me away from my friends and change me and dress me differently.'"

The belief that it was important to maintain a position in an argument, even when they knew they were wrong, was a theme that was present in all of the interviews. Terry described his need to be right and to always win arguments:

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> I would basically get to the point where I get angry, try to prove myself I was right and prove to them I was right even if I was wrong and then if it was proven I was wrong I wouldn't apologize afterwards. I'd just growl again and there'd be no apology or anything like that and the anger would just stay where it was.

The participants described feeling attacked if anyone disagreed with them, and the need to defend their position led them to the point of resorting to anger and aggression. This was the case in both intimate and in social relationships.

The belief that emotions controlled them was another prominent theme. Bill described his inability to control his anger as: "I do know that I see red and get the blinkers on and it's pretty hard to stop yourself once you've gone past a point." The participants all described situations where they believed that frustration or hurt would cause them to lose their temper and react violently. Steve related his violent actions against his partner to feelings of sadness: "Yeah because I didn't know how to suppress it. Not suppress it but how to control that anger boiling into rage where I can . . . where I've turned sadness into anger." They all described this as affecting their relationships with their partners. Joey described it in this manner: "But you know you treat them like s**t, use them . . . it's not nice. But anger makes people do stupid things. Say things that make you feel like shit you know."

Retreat

A second theme (present in seven of the eight interviews) was of a dysfunctional abusive childhood in which the men felt misunderstood, abused, or abandoned. This was manifest in beliefs surrounding their own intimate relationships, a fear of abandonment, and a sense of hopelessness in adult life and appeared to lead to a need to retreat from life stressors by substance abuse, avoiding intimate relationships or abandonment, or descending into depression and hopelessness. The one interviewee who denied any history of abuse or abandonment also described a long period of substance abuse and avoidance in intimate relationships.

All of the participants relied on drugs and alcohol. Gary described his need to use alcohol as a way of soothing his emotions as follows:

> I like a drink . . . um . . . and I went through a stage of nearly 2 years where I basically wasn't falling asleep as a . . . I was basically passing out nearly every night. It was after I split up with [name of victim] and you basically get a self-loathing for yourself and you question your worth and all that.

There was also a belief that interaction with their partner was more successful when they were intoxicated. Michael was only able to communicate with his partner when they were under the influence of drugs:

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> The usual, yeah party drugs and the reason I did that? Why I took them was because for me it was the time we could actually talk to each other. Yeah and we could speak, you know, and whatever you were feeling, that anger, that hate, at that point of time.

Ambivalence and confusion regarding intimacy was evident in all participants. Three of the participants expressed a belief that they could have relationships without commitment but had difficulty with the resulting behavior of their partner. Bill described wanting his relationship with his partner to be sexual only, without emotional ties. He subsequently expressed difficulty coping with her perceived promiscuity:

> I think the thing was that I told her in the beginning that I really didn't want a relationship and um that we could just be friends, and she was like, "Well, we can just have a casual relationship, we can sleep together and that," and I said "Well, I don't want to be held back in terms of meeting other people and I don't want you to do that either." Now when I said that um . . . I've got a couple of friends that are fairly good friends but um I don't know, alcohol and what not I don't know, I guess they're . . . it's hard to say but they slept with her.

All of the participants reported a discomfort with closeness and a difficulty in expressing love. They expressed the belief that simply providing for their partner and being with them was an expression of intimacy.

Fear of abandonment was another prevalent theme and seemed to also relate to the notion of threat. Five of the participants reported a fear that their partners may leave them for someone better. Despite only wanting a nonintimate sexual relationship with his partner, Bill described his feelings as: "Just a fear that, um, yeah, that they'd leave me and find someone that will suit what they want." This often led to a belief that their partners were untrustworthy and that they need to keep them away from others. Wayne described his fear of abandonment as follows:

> Rejected jealous, she's got a lot of male friends and I was always very jealous of that, not knowing what she was up to or where she was going. And I believe that when all this happened, it was a lot of problems for both of us because we both had our own separate lives with our marriage.

Six of the participants reported symptoms of depression and expressed a sense of hopelessness about their position in life. Wayne described his feelings of hopelessness in this way:

> Honestly, some days when I wake up I wonder what the day's going to be. So you don't know. You know it may . . . you think it's going really well and then something clicks in your head and you get all upset and then you think I've got to get over this shit, get back to work, get through the day.

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All reported having few goals for the future, with many expressing the view that setting goals would only lead to disappointment.

Perfect World

Seven of the participants expressed a belief that they could create a better world for their partners and children than the one they had experienced themselves in childhood. They saw their role as provider and protector in the family. They expressed a view of themselves as moral people, who were profoundly misunderstood in their attempts to do the best that they could. All had difficulty reconciling their abusive behavior with these beliefs.

Many of the participants saw their role as the breadwinner and their partner's role as providing meals and domestic duties. Joey described his views on male–female roles as follows:

> The provider. The provider and the protector. She's supposed to be the housewife. Not the male chauvinistic "get in the kitchen" yep, keeping the house clean, feed. Like it's changed now 'cos she has to work but that's the way in my eyes, that's the way it should be.

They believed that they had the right to be dominant in their relationships because they "brought in the money."

After describing his own abusive childhood Gary stated: "How do you get over that? You don't pass it on that's how I look at it. You don't pass it on." Those with children often seemed to overcompensate in their approach to child rearing and wanted everything to be perfect. Joey described his feelings toward his son as:

> He's got to want to be there you know? At first I was like when we first got divorced and he never wanted to be with me, I thought to myself, "My dad always used to make me do things for him and look at the relationship now." What do we do? Anything he wants to do, whatever I can afford.

Separation from their children was seen as painful and unjust.

All of the interviewees expressed strong moral views about relationships. Wayne described his feelings toward members of his family who he believed had acted immorally:

> And then we heard that he was having an affair with another woman and that really made us part company because I'm straight down the line with things like that, I don't believe in extramarital affairs. That's something my sister, my second eldest sister, and my youngest sister's husband, they had an affair together and like I said I'm just not . . . just straight down the line.

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Table 3. Comparison of Implicit Theories Between the Current Study and Gilchrist (2009)

Implicit theories identified in the current study	Implicit theories proposed by Gilchrist (2009)
Violence is normal	Violence is normal
Trust no one	Uncontrollability
Women are unknowable	Women are unknowable
I am always right	Grievance/revenge—need to control
Emotional volatility	Uncontrollability
Drugs and alcohol	Uncontrollability
Avoid intimacy	Uncontrollability
Avoid abandonment	Uncontrollability
Depression/hopelessness	Uncontrollability
Create a better life	Need to control
I'm a good person	Nature of harm
The male is the provider and protector	Real men/entitlement

Discussion

The results of this study offer some preliminary empirical support for Gilchrist's (2009) contention that the implicit theories of domestic violence perpetrators are likely to be similar to those that have been identified in studies of other types of violent offender. The three main categories (Threat, Retreat, and Perfect World) identified in this analysis suggest that as with other violent men, domestic violence perpetrators are deeply ambivalent about their place in the world, and have difficulty coping with its expectations, relationships, and social interactions.

Although the sample in this study was small and possibly self-selecting (given that each participant volunteered to be interviewed), there was a marked consistency in their accounts. This suggests that some homogeneity exists among men who are domestically violent, at least at the level of their core beliefs. The small number of participants means, however, that it is difficult to know conclusively whether saturation had been achieved, and a degree of caution is required before attempting to generalize these findings to the broader population of domestically violent men. Nevertheless, most of the implicit theories suggested by Gilchrist (2009) as potentially characteristic of domestic violence offenders were identified in this analysis (see Table 3). The implicit theory of uncontrollability was extended to include beliefs surrounding the participant's ability to cope in a world that was considered to be outside of their personal influence. This included emotional volatility and depression as well as an inability to control external events such as work pressure.

One theme not posited by Gilchrist (2009), but that has been identified in both the literature on violent (e.g., Collie, Vess, & Murdoch, 2007; Lopez & Emmer, 2000) and sexually violent offenders (e.g., Beech et al., 2005; Ward & Keenan, 1999), is that referred to as "dangerous world." Polaschek and Gannon (2004), in their study of the

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implicit theories of rapists, described this as a theory that presented the world as a threatening place where the individual must be on guard against exploitation by others. It is one theory that permeates every one of the interviews in the current study, although equates most closely to the theme of "trust no one." The interviewees all expressed ways in which they dealt with a dangerous untrustworthy world by attempting to control it, attack it, or retreat from it. The three main categories of Threat, Retreat, and Perfect World could all be interpreted as a manifestation of this implicit theory.

Gilchrist (2009) has hypothesized that the implicit theories of domestically violent men may be influenced by previous exposure to violence, suspicion and distrust of others, the need to control the relationship, and perceived cultural and gender roles. This study offers some support for these suggestions. Many of the beliefs identified in the current study can be understood as arising from a history of early attachment difficulties, shaming, and exposure to trauma in childhood (Dutton, 1999). In one study that compared the attachment patterns of violent versus nonviolent husbands, violent men were shown to be more likely to have experienced an insecure attachment (Holtzworth-Munroe, Stuart, & Hutchison, 1997); they reported having a high need for nurturing from their wives and were prone to jealousy and mistrust of their partners, yet also reported a tendency to experience discomfort with closeness. Such descriptions are reminiscent of many of the implicit theories described here, particularly in relation to difficulties in controlling negative emotions (Raine, Brennean, & Sarnoff, 1997), and a sense of hopelessness and feelings of depression (Goldstein & Rosenbaum, 1985).

All of the participants described exposure to violence within the home or among their peers throughout their childhood. Abuse in childhood has been linked to hostile attributions and violence in later life and is likely to be linked to the formation of the "violence is normal" theory. Chemtob, Novaco, Hamada, Gross, and Smith (1997) found that children from abusive homes were more likely to overreact to potential threats from their peers and to use aggression as a response. Abuse in early childhood has also been linked to overreactions to perceived insult and the need to protect one's honor. Dutton (1999) has described the process by which shaming and witnessing violence as a child toward self and mother can lead to shame proneness in adulthood, which results in the use of anger as a defense. The inability to control anger or to recognize its early manifestations was a common theme among all participants in this study and resonate with the theories of emotional volatility and the belief in always being right.

Finally, many of the participants seemed to construct their worldview based on the beliefs of the male as the provider and protector. They saw themselves as morally good people, although many did not possess the emotional capacity or relationship skills to achieve their ideal. When opposition occurred, they were, as a result, prone to react with explosive anger and violence driven by a sense of injustice and toward the person with whom they were attempting to build their "better world," their intimate partner. Such gender-role beliefs and views about masculinity may be considered to be risk factors for offending, in general, and domestic violence more specifically (Beesley & McGuire, 2009).

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So what does this study mean for the development of intervention programs for perpetrators? A number of different types of intervention are currently offered to men who are violent in their intimate relationships, although many of these have been influenced by feminist and interagency approaches, such as that developed in Duluth, Minnesota (Pence & Paymar, 1993). These programs have been subject to some criticism on the grounds that they are political and activist driven, rather than empirically or clinically derived. Detractors cite a lack of attention to psychological risk factors such as the link between anger and violence, the dysregulation of emotions through trauma, paternal rejection, and attachment disorders (Dutton & Corvo, 2005). Supporters of the Duluth approach to perpetrator programs have responded that addressing the belief systems of justification and rationalization from within a framework of a political and gender-driven theory is necessary (Gondolf, 2007).

Whichever approach to intervention is preferred, however, there is clearly a need to improve the effectiveness of intervention programs that are offered to perpetrators of domestic violence. Babcock, Green, and Robie's (2004) meta-analysis showed that the effect sizes associated with different types of approaches to domestic violence intervention were typically small, regardless of the type of intervention offered ($d = 0.35$ for Duluth programs; $d = 0.29$ for cognitive–behavioral programs). We would suggest that interventions derived directly from empirical research into the implicit theories of domestically violent men have the potential to help unify the field, at least in relation to how perpetrator programs should be conceived. The implicit theories described here can be readily translated into descriptions of dynamic risk factors (treatment targets) that can directly inform program content and delivery in a clinically meaningful and empirically defensible way. They provide an avenue for understanding the behavior of perpetrators that considers both the moderating role of culture and patriarchy (e.g., "provider and protector," "women are unknowable"), and the mediating role of psychological determinants of violence (e.g., trust no one, emotional volatility). It is our conclusion from this preliminary study that further research in this area involving larger samples and quantitative research methodologies could significantly advance the current understanding of domestic violence and assist in the development of more effective interventions to improve the safety of women and children.

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