Diverse perceptions and experiences of domestic abuse

Published on 14 August 2020 Written by Commander Dr Alison Heydari, formerly with Hampshire Constabulary

Research on the factors influencing how frontline officers meet the needs of domestic abuse victims

Going equipped 13 mins read

In October 2019, I was awarded a doctorate based on research in which I examined the experience of domestic abuse from different perspectives. My interest in domestic abuse has spanned many years, during which I have worked closely with survivor support agencies, as well as other strategic partners, to improve the policing response to victims of domestic abuse.

In my role as a detective sergeant in CID, I supervised the investigation of some impactful and wretched assault cases. Later, as a district commander, I was very interested in understanding how officers managed those high-risk, emotionally charged situations. I wanted to know the impact that dealing with those incidents had on officers, and how officers could be better supported.

The aim of my research was to analyse domestic abuse victims' experience of the initial face-to-face policing response. I tested two theories. The first related primarily to a researcher called William Muir. In 1977, Muir published a book called 'Police: Street corner politicians', in which he described different types of officers. He argued that 'good policing' could be identified in the behaviour and values of a certain type of officer, who he called the 'professional'. I combined this theory with procedural justice theory, which Epstein (2002, p 1876) has summarised as follows:

> *[P]rocedural justice theory holds that allowing a person to state his case, taking his opinions seriously, communicating that officials maintain an open mind about him and his case, and treating him with respect, all enhance his perceptions that authorities are moral and legitimate. Compliance, even if it is counter to one's immediate self-interest, then stems from a sense of duty or morality.*

I wanted to understand both the victim and the police officer experience of policing domestic abuse, and to answer three research questions:

- Can characteristics of 'good policing' be identified in the police response to domestic abuse?
- What are the issues and barriers that prevent officers from being consistently ‘good’?
- Can the experience of procedural justice for victims of domestic abuse be enhanced?

I used mixed research methods to address the research questions, with a particular focus on generating and analysing qualitative data through interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). This is described as being ‘committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences’ (Smith & Flowers, 2009, p 1). Data was generated in the following ways: surveys completed by 20 domestic abuse survivors and 157 police officers; two police officer focus groups; and semi-structured interviews with four domestic abuse survivors, five senior officers, one police constable and two Independent Domestic Abuse Advocates (IDVAs).

The large number of research findings were divided into five intertwined research themes. In this article, I will focus on the challenges of responding to domestic abuse, the impact of doing so and what we can do to support officers to provide the best service possible to victims.

The challenges

My research found that victims associated good policing with high levels of satisfaction. Characteristics of good policing were associated with ‘softer’ skills including empathy, understanding, respect and civility. Signposting to support was highly valued. However, victim satisfaction was inconsistent and officers faced a number of challenges that made delivering good policing difficult.

Expectations of the police are also constantly changing, which is challenging for officers. In their own words:

‘It's the feeling of ever changing policy or systems that confuses people. […] Individual policies change and we seem to be in constant flux.’

‘Change is good, too much change is just counterproductive, and it’s like just shaking the whole system up.’

Austerity has hit policing hard. More work for less people can result in difficulty in prioritising tasks. Officers commented:

‘Staff are constantly doing that juggling act. […] I don’t think we provide the best service that we can do because there’s always conflicting priorities.’

‘There are some people who are incredibly well intentioned, but their workloads are too high.’

A significant number of officers and IDVAs commented on the small amount of time that officers have to commit to meeting victims’ needs and assessing risk. Time pressure includes high workloads and service requests from the control room. As one officer explained:

> *I will listen to the victim and the more you listen, the more idea you get about what has happened in the past, and they might make a flippant comment which is to them normal. But to you, you then realise, ah, actually that’s ringing a few alarm bells.*

Victims consistently commented on the importance of spending time with officers. This was given as a factor that resulted in disclosure being more likely and a positive experience of procedural justice. For one victim, investing time resulted in the generation of police legitimacy, compliance and prosecution of the perpetrator, as well as a significant reduction of future call-outs.

Some officers felt that regular training would help officers keep up with legislation, policy and procedure, and would influence their behaviour. An officer explained that opportunities to reduce risk were missed, because of a lack of training:

> *We went to domestics, we recognise there was no evidential criteria met, therefore we didn’t arrest. However, we could have secured a DVPN [domestic violence protection notice] and then lead onto a DVPO [domestic violence protection order]. So there was [sic] missed opportunities […] If the officers were equipped with that knowledge then we might have arrested more.*

This officer reflects the theory of ‘working rules’ established by a researcher called Carolyn Hoyle and how those ‘rules’ can be shaped over time. Hoyle (1998) argued that there are a number of factors that affect officers’ decisions on how to use their powers and that these ‘working rules’ act as a framework for decision making.

The actions that officers take are linked to their experience of observing patterns of behaviour, which act as benchmarks that assist in decision making. An officer may decide to arrest based not on bias or stereotype, but as a result of an assessment of many factors, including availability of evidence, training or willingness of the victim to cooperate.

The focus on task and measurable ‘outcomes’ means that an officer may use the power of arrest, based on whether the action taken will contribute to what gets measured. If an outcome includes the number of DVPNs, would that have an impact on officer behaviour?

The impact of responding to domestic abuse

Existing research shows that professionals who work with victims who have suffered from traumatic events can suffer trauma even when they have not directly experienced the event. This is referred to as vicarious trauma. This impact is starkly reflected in the comments from one officer:

‘I think the organisation has knocked the stuffing out of those officers a little bit to do that just one job, one job, one job, one job.’

This sensation is exacerbated by the feeling of not always being successful in protecting victims, impacting the way they see themselves (their ‘self-legitimacy’). A senior officer commented that:

‘[Victims] may not support prosecution but for lots of complex reasons, we can find that quite difficult. Because we’re focused on catching bad people and stopping bullying.’

Officers draw on their emotional resilience to manage challenging domestic incidents. One officer likens self-protection to ‘encasing’ the mind in a ‘shell’ reminiscent of a vulnerable creature being shielded by a protective barrier. The following comments from a frontline officer make a convincing argument for the presence of vicarious trauma:

> *You do start going to [incidents] and form pre-conceptions and you sort of stereotype and you know, sort of you make yourself making [sic] your mind up about things before you get to certain jobs. But that is, you know, the way I see it that is your mind kind of encasing itself in a shell that says, “I’m not going to allow you to be, you know, have your blood pressure sort of sent through the roof by doing this, you know ten times a*

> *day, for six days in a row or you know whatever it is" […] We do go to just job after job after job, it's just weighing you down 'cos obviously we're people as well you know, [we] have got the same limitations and frailties and everything else.*

Another officer said that, 'unfortunately we are all human, we're not robots', and called for understanding and recognition of how difficult policing is. One frontline officer described a disconnect with senior officers, and perception of organisational and procedural injustice:

'It feels like you are being hit with a big metaphorical stick. But at the same time, and I think unfortunately, some senior managers need to realise that we try our best'.

Any perception that the frontline role is not supported can result in an experience of organisational and procedural injustice, lack of legitimacy for policing and a lack of buy-in to organisational goals. An organisation that provides support to officers could create greater perceptions of self-legitimacy. If an officer feels that they are being supported, they will be better equipped to have a positive impact on victims' experience of procedural justice.

Supporting officers to provide a better service for victims

My research indicates that if policing wants to meet the needs of victims of domestic abuse, officers need to be supported in their role.

Both sergeants and constables expressed a need for training and education to build capacity to help victims of domestic abuse. Speaking of the importance of communication through training, one officer said, 'I need regular inputs to prevent myself being overcome by compassion fatigue'. This view was supported by an officer who recounted the positive impact of effective training on her future policing response, linking with the concept of 'working rules':

'Hearing from a victim herself about the issues she encountered with officers who had dealt with incidents involving her […] was particularly hard hitting and certainly made me consider my approach'.

One IDVA went further, recommending joint training with victim support agencies to help develop long-term thinking in policing.

Respite from the traumatic and repetitive nature of domestic abuse through a rotation policy was cited by one officer as a positive move for mental health: ‘I needed a rest from response patrol personally. Did this and I feel great again.’

Muir (1977) refers to the influence that the sergeant has in educating and mentoring team members, schooling them in policing and forming them into professional police officers. The importance of the sergeant was evidenced in my research.

All participant groups felt that effective leadership at all levels of the organisation was required to enhance officers’ experience of organisational and procedural justice. Scrutiny was welcomed by junior ranks, with a plea from a police officer that poor practice is addressed when it occurs: ‘please deal with the supervisors and staff who do not take it seriously and let the rest of us get on with it’. Muir spoke about the pivotal role that sergeants play in supporting their staff, negotiating moral dilemmas and mentoring their staff to be good police officers. For this reason, I believe that we need to ensure that our sergeants are well equipped for the important role that they play.

Team performance was considered within the constraints and influence of organisational culture, typified as short-term, task-focused and crisis-led. One senior officer said, ‘there is a sense where everything has to be done yesterday’. In order to optimise opportunities to break the cycle of abuse, the organisation must present opportunities for development, promoting a mind-set that encourages officers to think about safety in the long term, as well as the here and now.

Conclusion

Many factors influence and impact the ability of the frontline officer to meet the needs of domestic abuse victims.

Characteristics of good policing could be found in the police response to domestic abuse, but there were a number of issues, including high workloads and continuous change, that made it difficult for officers to deliver a victim-focused service. Officers want to protect others but find their intentions are seemingly thwarted by victims, so are sometimes unable to achieve a positive criminal justice

‘outcome’. This can lead to feelings of powerlessness, resulting in a negative impact on self-legitimacy.

Vicarious trauma can trigger survival mechanisms, resulting in a ‘hardening effect’ on emotions over time. A lack of support leading to organisational and procedural injustice may be an issue that prevents officers from being effective.

A central finding of my research was the importance of leadership in the sergeant role, as that position appears to be very influential, setting the expectations for service delivery. Sergeants are key to establishing ‘working rules’, driving an uplift in performance and effectiveness through scrutiny, mentoring and education.

My theory is that the experience of procedural justice for victims of domestic abuse can be enhanced by supporting officers to be professional and demonstrate ‘good policing’. This results in the victim experiencing procedural justice, which in turn legitimises police authority to the extent that the victim is more likely to engage with the police. However, in order to be ‘good’, police officers need support. They need clear communication, mentoring, effective leadership, training and scrutiny to improve their ability to identify, assess and manage risk. This will have a positive impact on their own perception of organisational justice and self-legitimacy, which will help them to treat victims well. This, in turn, leads to an enhanced experience of procedural justice for survivors of domestic abuse, increasing the likelihood of victim compliance. This has a very positive impact on the officers, increasing self-legitimacy, as they see that their intention to protect is being fulfilled.

If you are interested, please dip into my thesis on the **experience of domestic abuse from different perspectives** to learn more about the findings.

Recommendations

1. That the Domestic Abuse Matters training, which many forces will have delivered, is followed up by a long-term training plan, facilitated face-to-face as recommended by HMICFRS (2014).
2. That the concept of the psychological contract is explored in order to transparently account for the obligations of leaders and followers, in terms of provision of training, guidance, expectations and leadership. The psychological contract could form the basis of strengthening a leadership commitment at all ranks, reducing the rift between junior and senior ranks, and formulating a

suite of expectations at sergeant rank to address inconsistency in service provision.

3. That further IPA studies are carried out to investigate the impact of domestic abuse trauma on police officers and other staff (such as PCSOs). How this impacts their ability to respond to victims of domestic abuse appropriately, and in accordance with policy and legislation, is an important component of cultural change. There is an increasing interest in wellbeing in police forces, and the results would be valuable to feed in to police force wellbeing strategies.
4. That forces consider discussing the findings of this thesis and agree on how the findings can be used to inform a number of issues, including wellbeing strategies, the response to victims of domestic abuse and leadership initiatives.

References

Epstein D. (2002). **'Procedural Justice: Tempering the State's Response to Domestic Violence**'. William and Mary Law Review, 43 (2001-2002), 5(3), pp 1842-1905.

Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary Fire & Rescue Service. (2014). **'Everyone’s business: Improving the police response to domestic abuse**'.

Heydari, Alison Claire. **'Enhancing the Experience of Procedural Justice for Domestic Abuse Survivors by Improving the Policing Response: A Mixed Method Study Utilising Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis'**. PHD, Portsmouth University. Portsmouth: University Of Portsmouth, 2019.

Hoyle C. (1998). 'Negotiating Domestic Violence: Police, Criminal Justice, and Victims'. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Muir WK. (1977). 'Police: Street corner politicians'. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Smith JA, Flowers P and Larkin M. (2009). 'Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis'. London: Sage.

About the author

Alison’s varied 19-year police career has included working in CID, holding three District Command roles, being seconded to Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary Fire & Rescue Service

(HMICFRS) and teaching at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York. She has previously carried out research on the police response to managing domestic abuse in the public housing complex in Brooklyn, New York and, more recently, in the UK for her Doctor of Philosophy. Since contributing this article, Alison has joined the Metropolitan Police Service as a commander.

Download Going equipped

- **Going equipped: Issue 1 Summer/Autumn 2020 (pdf) 2.17 MB**

Tags

Domestic violence Going equipped