

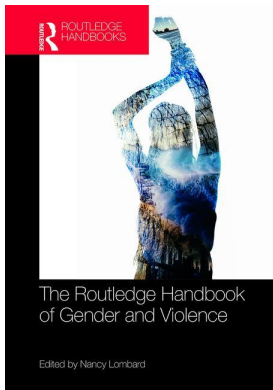
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Nancy Lombard

On the limits of typologies

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David Gadd, Mary-Louise Corr

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On the limits of typologies

Understanding young men's use of violence in intimate relationships

David Gadd and Mary-Louise Corr

While much national and international policy on domestic violence points to the need to tackle perpetrators as if they are a relatively homogenous group, there is relative consensus among those who undertake practice interventions with men who use violence against women that they are not all the same. Within the academic literature two approaches to recognising heterogeneity have gained ascendancy: one focused on the nature of the violence; the other on the psychological profiles of perpetrators. The two approaches are not mutually exclusive, though their emphases differ. The first approach has come to be closely associated with Michael Johnson's (2006) book, *A Typology of Domestic Violence*, and its re-elaboration in Kelly and Johnson's article (2008). The second approach begins, not with the categorisation of violent incidents, but instead with the classification of the psychological characteristics found among perpetrators in treatment programmes. Holtzworth-Munroe and Stuart's (1994) typology is currently the most well known of these.

Both approaches are founded upon distinctions that have been reproduced in numerous studies using comparable data sets and can thus be deemed 'reliable' in the social-scientific sense of the word. And there is thus good reason for exploring some conceptual synthesis between the two approaches, as their exponents have argued (Holtzworth-Munroe and Meehan, 2004; Johnson, 2006). We wish, however, to caution against overstating the validity or meaningfulness of such distinctions, for categorisations that appear bold in aggregated data often look more blurred at the individual level. Both models, we argue, capture snapshots that are undynamic in their conceptualisations of perpetrator psychology and abusive relationships. This shortcoming is perhaps beside the point in a policy debate that continues to assume that perpetrators are mostly the same in terms of their personalities and motives, but in the world of practice, where full knowledge of what has happened in a client's past is rarely accessible and what is known is open to contestation, there are dangers in suggesting that domestic violence generally takes one of three or four forms.

One core danger is the potential to miss the specific meaning of domestic violence for perpetrators. Missing this meaning, as we wish to illustrate in this chapter using a single case study, makes two undesirable outcomes more likely: first, that danger signs will go unnoticed by those trying to support men who have used violence; and second, that opportunities

to perceive non-violent futures will be missed by former perpetrators whose violence has damaged relationships upon which they were dependent. This is especially the case with younger groups of adult men – the subsection of the population survey research consistently shows to perpetrate the most disproportionate amount of domestic violence relative to other age bands, as well as the age band most likely to report having been assaulted by a partner themselves (ONS, 2014) – who perhaps have most opportunity to do things differently in subsequent relationships.

Patterns of violence

Of course, it is the very need to find more responsive solutions to domestic violence that has inspired efforts to differentiate patterns of domestic violence more precisely. As Kelly and Johnson (2008: 477–478) explain it:

The value of differentiating among types of domestic violence is that appropriate screening instruments and processes can be developed that more accurately describe the central dynamics of the partner violence, the context, and the consequences. This can lead to better decision making, appropriate sanctions, and more effective treatment programs tailored to the different characteristics of partner violence.

The risks of attempting such differentiation, as Kelly and Johnson also acknowledge, include the ‘the reification or misapplication’ of categories, with ‘potentially lethal results’ for women and children as safeguarding decisions are made on evidence that is ‘too limited’ (p. 478). Through a synthesis of the research literature Johnson (2006) has attempted to resolve a long-standing disagreement between those family violence researchers, like Straus (1993), who perceive gender symmetry in domestic violence, i.e. that men and women perpetrate it at roughly similar rates, and those feminist researchers who point to the predominance of male to female violence (e.g. Dobash *et al.*, 1992). Johnson argues persuasively that the debate is largely a methodological artefact – derivative of the sampling frames of community studies and national victimisation surveys – and that, were the data to be synthesised, one would be able to delineate four broad types of domestic violence: ‘Situational Couple Violence’, ‘Coercively Controlling Violence’ (sometimes also referred to as ‘intimate terrorism’ or ‘patriarchal terrorism’) ‘Violent Resistance’ and ‘Separation-Instigated Violence’. Critically, Johnson (2006) and Kelly and Johnson’s (2008) position is that we should respond differently to violence that has ‘its basis in the dynamic of power and control’ (p. 479) and that which does not. Like Stark (2007), they describe Coercively Controlling Violence as entailing a ‘pattern of emotionally abusive intimidation, coercion, and control coupled with physical violence against partners’ (p. 478). It is asymmetric in its nature and often severe in its physical and psychological consequences for victims trapped in relationships where they are perennially fearful for their own and/or their children’s safety. Kelly and Johnson argue that ‘Situational Couple Violence’, by contrast, ‘is not based on a relationship dynamic of coercion and control, is less severe, and mostly arises from conflicts and arguments between the partners’ (2008: 481). In the family violence literature Situational Couple Violence is sometimes conceived as ‘mutual combat’, done by both parties to each other in some kind of complementary pattern. It includes the kind of verbal arguments that spill into physical ‘fighting’ in times of crisis or conflict, that may cause one person, usually the man, to respond to a push or a slap with more forceful violence or battery (Straus, 1993). Once such escalation has occurred it is a moot point as to whether the violence can be characterised merely

as ‘mutual’ or ‘reciprocal’ (Dobash *et al.*, 1992), much hinging, it seems, on whether one party becomes fearful of subsequent reprisals.

Fear of the partner is not characteristic of women or men in Situational Couple Violence, whether perpetrator, mutual combatant, or victim. Unlike the misogynistic attitudes toward women characteristic of men who use Coercive Controlling Violence, men who are involved in Situational Couple Violence do not differ from nonviolent men on measures of misogyny.

(Kelly and Johnson, 2008: 485)

Citing Holtzworth-Munroe *et al.* (2000), Kelly and Johnson (2008: 486) argue that violence and jealousy ‘may also exist as a recurrent theme in Situational Couple Violence, with accusations of infidelity expressed in conflicts’. Such violence, they say, is ‘initiated’ at similar rates by men and women and is unlikely to ‘escalate’ over time (p. 486). Likewise, in cases where violence is Separation-Instigated, Kelly and Johnson posit that it is often the trauma and or humiliation of being left or losing one’s home or children that prompts acts of aggression. Although usually limited to ‘one’ or ‘two’ episodes (p. 479) these aggressive acts can leave ‘partners . . . stunned and frightened by the unaccustomed violence’ making it harder to resolve childcare issues. By contrast, in Coercively Controlling relationships the threat of escalating violence is used to intimidate partners into compliance. Where victims do use violence in these Coercively Controlling relationships it can be conceived as Violent Resistance, geared towards thwarting their entrapment. It is important, Kelly and Johnson suggest, that the predominantly male perpetrators of Coercively Controlling Violence are monitored and exposed to programmes that successfully ‘explore the destructiveness of such authoritarian relationships, and challenge men’s assumptions that they have the right to control their partners’ (p. 491). By contrast, men and women whose violence is Situational or Separation-Instigated might not be a continued threat once the initial source of the conflict has passed or the relationship has concluded. Such perpetrators are thus more likely to benefit from interventions that teach the ‘interpersonal skills needed to prevent arguments from escalating to verbal aggression and ultimately to violence’: such as ‘anger management techniques’, like ‘taking timeouts’, ‘communication skills’ and learning to recognise ‘negative attributions’ (p. 491).

Personality types

A core question that Amy Holtzworth-Munroe and her colleagues have explored is whether the nature and severity of domestic violence can be correlated with measurable personality traits. Their answer, which Johnson (2006) endorses, is that it can. Taking account of the severity and frequency of violence against spouses, whether or not the violence was exclusive to the family context or something the offender was more pervasively engaged in, and measures of psychopathology and personality disorders, Holtzworth-Munroe and Stuart (1994) identified three subtypes of ‘batterer’ with different styles of violence usage. They named these (1) ‘Family-Only’, (2) ‘Dysphoric-Borderline’ and (3) ‘Generally Violent-Antisocial’. The Family-Only batterers were regarded as the group of men most likely to be engaged in Situational Couple Violence for, as Holtzworth-Munroe and Stuart’s research shows, they are rarely violent outside the home, unlikely to engage in psychological and sexual abuse, and score low on levels of psychopathology. The violence of this group of men tends to occur at times of stress when low-level domestic conflicts escalate, but is short-lived in part because of the

offenders' generally positive attitudes towards women and negative attitudes towards violence (Holtzworth-Munroe, 2000).

The other two groups of men identified by Holtzworth-Munroe and Stuart were more likely to be coercively controlling in the ways described by Johnson (2006), Kelly and Johnson (2008) and Stark (2007). According to Holtzworth-Munroe and Stuart, the Dysphoric-Borderline group engaged in violence that could be severe and occasionally extra-familial. These were, by definition, men who could be intensely fearful of rejection and liable to sudden mood changes. They suffered anxiety and depression, in what became intense, unstable interpersonal relationships; relationships that they hoped would alleviate feelings of worthlessness that had often arisen out of the absence of positively trusting relationships in their childhoods. Donald Dutton's (2007) research identifies a similar group who tend to go through cycles of loving and hating their partners as their hopes of feeling more worthy are met and then dashed when their irrational jealousies mobilise defences against feeling emotionally dependent. By contrast, Holtzworth-Munroe's and Stuart's Generally Violent-Antisocial batterers are men who engage frequently in severe forms of violence at home and in their work or social lives. This group tend to have histories of arrest, involvement in crime and/or substance abuse, poor records of conformity in school and employment, features which psychologists take – somewhat tautologically – as indicators of antisocial personality disorder (Jones, 2008). They have quite conservative attitudes towards women, though this may make them appear similar to jealous Dysphoric-Borderline men. Consistent with the work of Johnson and Kelly and Johnson, Holtzworth-Munroe and Meehan (2004) show that the violence of Family-Only batterers tends to be less intentionally controlling and more contextually driven than that of domestic violence perpetrators with antisocial or borderline personality disorders; a finding UK researchers have also replicated (Dixon and Browne, 2003). Meanwhile, Stuart *et al.* (2006) provide some support for Kelly and Johnson's (2008) observations about the way in which Violent Resistance emerges as a response to coercive control. Levels of physical and sexual victimisation among women arrested for assaulting their partners tend to be comparable to those found among women in the refuge population.

In sum, one might merely conclude that there is Situational Couple Violence that arises out of family conflicts in which gender, sexism and psychopathology play no or little part. And there is Coercively Controlling Violence perpetrated by men with one of two core constellations of sexist values, psychopathology and criminal involvement. However, the picture is rarely so neat and tidy. UK-based research notes a substantial minority of men engaged in low-level abuse who do not fit easily in Holtzworth-Munroe and Stuart's threefold typology (Johnson *et al.* 2006). Indeed, Holtzworth-Munroe *et al.* (2000) consider whether there is a fourth group of men, comprising up to a third of the perpetrator populace, whose use of violence falls between the Family-Only and Generally Violent clusters. This fourth, understudied, group were more likely to be 'newly wed' or at the early stages of long-term relationships and 'not seeking therapy', engaged in low levels of domestic violence and antisocial behaviour, and unknown to the police as domestic violence perpetrators. Expressed in the language of psychological research one might ask if this unclassifiable section of the population are a discrete group, how heterogeneous they are, and how they might be better differentiated. But viewed more sociologically, one might consider whether their existence reveals something of the limits of typological conceptualisation. Might this fourth group comprise those men who, at the moment when the data were gathered, were in relationships that were in a state of flux, whose mental well-being was in a state of transition, or who realised that while their use of violence accrued them the power to intimidate it also put them at risk of becoming defined as 'perpetrators' whose subsequent violence can no longer be construed as a 'one-off' and is instead an unmanly abuse of power, likely to lead to estrangement and criminalisation?

Method

In what follows, we want to show how such contingencies matter using a case study pertaining to a man – we call ‘Glen’ – who took part in our *From Boys to Men Project*.¹ As with most young men involved in domestic violence in the UK, the information we have about Glen derived primarily from his own account of himself, elicited in an in-depth interview that lasted over an hour and generated a 26-page transcript. The interview with Glen was just a small part of a three-year, multi-method study which aimed to explore why some boys become domestic abuse perpetrators when others do not and to establish what can be done to reduce the number of young men who become perpetrators. The first two phases of the *From Boys to Men Project* involved a survey of 1,203 13–14-year-olds measuring their experiences of and attitudes towards domestic violence, an evaluation of a schools-based domestic violence prevention programme and focus groups exploring the contingencies through which young people deem domestic abuse acceptable and unacceptable (Gadd *et al.*, 2015). The third phase of the project involved in-depth interviews with 30 young men, aged 16–21, who had experienced domestic violence either as a victim, perpetrator or witness. Although a range of national and local organisations working with young people and families were contacted, it was youth offending teams and regional probation services that provided the most access to these interview participants, producing a sample skewed towards young men in trouble for their violence and with troubled backgrounds to match.

Young men were asked to participate in one in-depth interview, being invited at the outset to tell their life-stories. Following this, interviews elicited stories from participants using narrative-focused questions and active reflection to explore the opening ‘story’ and move beyond defences and denials. The interviews focused on exploring how young men had come to understand violence through the examples they recalled as well as their feelings towards family members and partners, their expectations in relationships and experiences of seeking help in relation to the violence they had experienced. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, after which a ‘pen portrait’ of each participant was constructed, reflecting the complexity of the stories they told. Glen was one of these participants. As we show, Glen’s story can be conceptualised as fitting with many of the categorisations found in the literature about domestic violence perpetrators, depending on what part of his story is focused on and how one connects those together.

Glen

Glen was a 21-year-old, white British man who was recruited to the research through a regional probation project and interviewed by Mary-Louise Corr. None of his violence in relationships had come to the attention of the courts – his three girlfriends not having reported any abuse by him to the police – until Glen himself, after grabbing his girlfriend by the throat, sought to ‘get help’ while on post-imprisonment probation. Glen had been in prison ‘about eight times’ since he was 15 for a range of convictions which included carrying offensive weapons, assaulting a police officer, affray, attempted robberies, assaults, burglary, arson and theft. At the time of the interview, Glen had been engaged in a groupwork programme for perpetrators for a ‘couple of weeks’, an Integrated Domestic Abuse Programme (IDAP) designed to reduce reoffending by adult male domestic violence offenders.

Glen had been dating his current girlfriend – who we call ‘Michelle’ – for three years ‘on and off’, a relationship ‘better than any’ he had previously been in, despite controlling and violent behaviour featuring. Elements of Glen’s account of this relationship could be construed as Situational Couple Violence, Glen having been on the receiving end of assaults from Michelle as well as having instigated some. On one occasion when they were arguing, for example, Glen

'took it out on the dog' and 'threw' their puppy across the room, Michelle then 'hitting' him. A second time, Michelle challenged Glen – 'tell me what you've been up to' – for having 'got off' with another woman. An argument followed and Michelle 'started hitting' Glen who insisted that he did not hit her back, although he did restrain her in a highly intimidating way.

I would never hit her back. Even though I grabbed her by the throat that time . . . I never hit her back . . . I just have to hold her down . . . put her where she couldn't hit me so that like restrain her really. But I have been tempted to [laughs].

When asked about sexual aggression, Glen 'didn't know' whether it was an issue in his relationships, but being 'rough' was something that he and Michelle apparently 'liked' in a reciprocal way.

I am rough. Both of us are rough . . . We like it [laughs] [MLC: yeah]. We grab each other by the throat and pull each other by the hair but we like that.

Outside of what is portrayed here as consensual sexual aggression, Glen did think it was 'sick if someone's done it like to force someone into sex', something which Michelle had 'been through before'. When Glen was in prison a 'smackhead' who 'lived downstairs' 'got Michelle on to whizz' and Michelle 'kissed him', 'slept in the same bed but . . . done nowt'. Glen's telling of the story, however, revealed some suspicion. He thought the relationship 'weird', and having questioned Michelle, found out that 'she did have sex' with the 'smackhead' but that this was only when he 'raped her'. This sexual assault was part of a continuum of abuse Michelle suffered at the hands of a man who had been 'battering her, setting the dogs on her, taking money off her', keeping 'her hostage in the flat' and who 'smashed her phone' and 'ripped' up the letters Glen had sent to her from prison. On hearing about the abuse, Glen 'went mad' and did not know what to believe: 'it fucked with my head because she had loads of chances to get away . . . I don't know if it was a relationship or not, if she was lying to me or not'. It baffled Glen further that Michelle did not want him to challenge this man as he 'can't hurt' her now, which was 'not the point' for Glen.

In addition to physical and sexual aggression, Glen revealed that he engaged in controlling behaviours both with Michelle and past girlfriends, and that he became 'wound up' if they wore 'short skirts' or received attention from other young men. He assuaged his 'paranoia' by keeping a close watch over his girlfriends.

Always . . . be with them, like I wouldn't let them out of my sight 'cos I used to get paranoid and seeing, thinking what they're fuckin' up to or whatever . . . I used to force them to change . . . Like say 'you better flippin' change or I'll change you myself'.

Such challenges would 'probably' end in a physical row or Glen asserting 'Fuck it. You won't be going out'. Controlling behaviours and violence on his part were often precipitated by suspected or actual infidelity on the women's parts or humiliation and threats to leave Glen. Fearing that one girlfriend, 'Hannah', 'fancied [his] stepbrother', Glen challenged her – 'You fancy my stepbrother, don't you?' – before he 'ended up hitting her . . . in the face'. Glen's abuse of another girlfriend, 'Karen', was 'worse' still, he having 'headbutted' her one night for making him wait outside a nightclub, thrown food 'in her face' and pouring a drink over her when she tried 'to make [him] look a dickhead in front of [his] mates'. On another occasion when Karen overheard Glen tell an ex-girlfriend that he still loved her, Karen threatened to leave him. Glen responded by strangling her and keeping her hostage, threatening to kill her

and instructing his cousin to fetch some petrol; a threat which he said he was 'intending to' fulfil 'at the time'.

I grabbed her by the throat, threw her on to the bed, like shut the door. And my cousin and his girlfriend was in the room . . . Told them none of them were leaving. Then told my other cousin to come round and get me. When he come round to the back of the house went to the window and [I] said 'get me some petrol . . . I'm going to kill them all' . . . Then I just remember hitting her and stuff. And then, because I have anxiety attacks as well when I get stressed . . . I had an anxiety attack and . . . then I lashed out at the ambulance people as well.

Michelle was also the subject of life-threatening violence when she tried to leave Glen.

She was still saying she was going . . . And then she tried to leave so I grabbed her by the throat. But obviously I was upset crying when I grabbed her by the throat so I sat back down and tried speaking to her.

Though he 'tried to speak' to Michelle, they continued to argue so Glen 'ran off, got drunk . . . and got on to this girl'. Having then cheated on Michelle he started to feel 'really guilty'. Thinking that Michelle might be pregnant, Glen went back to her and 'sorted it out that night'. He explained his reaction as follows:

I've got paranoia and I end up thinking things and then if I think they're true I end up hurting them. Lashing out and stuff like that or when they try and take the mick out of me I end up hurting them.

Glen expected his partners to be sensitive to his 'paranoia' and 'anxiety'. On one occasion Glen had challenged Michelle for not wanting to dance with him in a nightclub – 'if a guy comes over to you I'm going to go mad'. An argument followed which ended with Glen grabbing Michelle, being kicked out of the club and, on the street, having 'hold of her like that on her two arms'. Michelle told the police who attended the scene that she did not want Glen 'done' for it. Glen also directed his anger towards those young men who gave his girlfriends attention. With these men Glen had got into 'loads of fights', on one occasion, at least, 'going mad' at a young man Michelle had 'kissed'.

Glen's paranoia intensified when in prison. During one sentence his mother revealed on a visit that Glen's girlfriend 'Hannah' had been unfaithful. Glen went 'mad' in his cell: 'throwing things around, going mad'. But sexual jealousies were not the only threats to Glen's mental well-being while in custody. While in prison he had twice tried to kill himself – once following what sounded like a miscarriage – described as having 'lost a child to a girl' – and another time on his grandad's birthday – 'I tried to kill myself thinking that I wanted to be with him'. On a third suicide attempt, outside of prison, Glen had taken an overdose after arguing with Michelle, presumably about her 'sexual' relationship with the 'smackhead' who was actually raping her and had kept her hostage.

The history of Glen's involvement in crime and subsequent imprisonment owed much to his family life.

My brother used to take me out shoplifting . . . when I was younger. And violence and stuff, and then just messing like with the wrong crowd as well. All my friends, when they get in trouble, I get in trouble . . .

The boys' parents had separated when Glen was aged two. Glen never 'knew' his dad, leave alone 'bonded' with him, not least because his father was so often 'in and out of jail'. Glen wasn't sure if his father had ever been violent towards his mum, but knew that his mum had been 'hit' and 'dragged by the hair' by a later male partner. When Glen was 13 – or 16, he wasn't sure – his dad got back in contact. Glen was initially 'excited' about this, but his mother's boyfriend was 'pissed off' and wanted to 'batter' Glen's dad for having 'never been there'. Glen saw his father for a while when he was 'trying to make an improvement', but never let go of his bitterness for the years of absence: 'I just think like he didn't give a shit when I was younger, so why should I give a shit now?' Recently, Glen's father had helped him by providing him with a rented house on his release from prison, but Glen 'blew it', 'messed up again' and 'ran off', abandoning the property and leaving his dad £250 in debt.

Violence and abuse in the family home seemed a recurrent feature in Glen's life. In recent times, Glen and his brother – seven years Glen's senior – had directed violence towards his mother, on one occasion his brother throwing 'hot coffee' over her while Glen 'sort of hit' his mum and 'bit her'. This incident started with Glen's brother's girlfriend calling Michelle 'a dog' (perhaps because his brother 'used to like fancy Michelle'), a fight then erupting.

I heard her slagging my girlfriend off so I went down with a metal pole to her, threatened her, said 'what the fuck are you saying about my girlfriend?' And then . . . my brother's woke up off the settee and started fighting with me. So . . . he bit my thumb. I pushed my fingers into his eyes. I was dragging his girlfriend around by the hair. I had him, his girlfriend and my mum on top of me. I bit my mum, but I can't remember biting her. And then the police come and took me and my girlfriend to my uncle's.

The police subsequently dropped the case because both brothers were at fault. The tensions between Glen and his brother had a long history, dating back to when Glen was 'around six'. Both boys were always 'winding each other up' and 'fighting' in attempts to seek attention from their mother. Aged seven or eight, Glen needed his appendix removed because his brother had hurt him so badly.

he kept punching me and kicking me and that and then I felt like all the pain in my stomach . . . I got rushed to hospital and they said I was there five minutes before it burst so it nearly killed me.

From the age of 13 Glen's brother 'tried to boss' him about and 'make' him 'do things' to 'make [him] a tougher person', his brother knowing that Glen would go 'on a mad one' due to his Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD): 'if we're walking down the street and he didn't like someone or whatever he would point out someone and say "go and hit them" and I would go over and just hit them'. It was only when Glen 'flipped out' after one fight – aged somewhere between 16 and 18 – putting his brother unconscious did his brother stop trying to boss Glen about.

Prior to this Glen had been put in care after he disclosed to a Youth Offending Team worker – when he was aged between 14 and 16 – that his brother had masturbated in front of him years earlier. Having been put into care following this disclosure Glen implied that he felt he was punished for being honest – 'I got put in foster care because of that'. He ran back home eight weeks later after his brother was imprisoned. Glen was also the victim of sexual abuse when he was six years old. This abuse was perpetrated by his grandad's stepson who 'used to touch [him] while [he] was in the bath and mess about with [him]'. Glen told his mum who 'went mad' and

reported it to the police, but because Glen was ‘too young and scared’ to talk ‘no one believed’ him, including his mother.

At the time of his interview, Glen was ‘trying to get help’ through probation but was frustrated his behaviour and been taken ‘the wrong way’. His probation officer thought Glen intended to ‘hurt’ Michelle – when he grabbed her by the throat – but Glen was insistent he did not. Despite accusations of infidelity and what he presented as reciprocal aggression, Glen still wanted to be in a relationship with Michelle. He had recently moved into Michelle’s mother’s home to be with her after his own mother refused to have Michelle in her house.

Just ‘cos we moved out of my mum’s because we kept like, my mum didn’t want us, well didn’t want her being there, and I didn’t want to be there without her so we moved in with her mum.

Whilst probation had helped him ‘think like which is the better way to go’ and to know what he ‘wants in life’, like settling down, having a job and getting a house, Glen’s future did not look particularly promising. He left school with no qualifications and his history of employment amounted to little more than the four weeks prior, during which he had picked up casual work as a cleaner. He nevertheless regarded the last two weeks on the perpetrator programme as having been useful because: ‘When we argue now we talk about it . . . don’t run off or nothing’. Together with a short spell of counselling in prison, engagement with his probation key worker had helped Glen ‘open up’ about some of his problems. It had also helped that both Glen and Michelle were now working, this providing them with more of their ‘own space’. Until recently they had been ‘spending 24 hours a day with each other’, this generating the potential for ‘arguments’, Glen thought, ‘because’ they had ‘nothing to say to each other’.

Interpretations

As is by now hopefully apparent, categorising a case like Glen’s is no easy task. Read only at certain junctures – as any practitioner not previously acquainted with him might have to – and interpreted in particular ways the violence in some of his relationships appeared highly contextual. Looked at with a sceptical eye through a wider lens that takes in incidents across many relationships it begins to look more like a dangerous pattern of abusiveness for which he is primarily responsible. Let us begin by considering how, then, one might be drawn to conclude that Glen’s violence was merely Situational or Common Couple. As he remembers it, the first blow was not always struck by him, but sometimes by Michelle in the course of a relationship that has been ‘on and off’ for three years. Being on and off means that there have been other women involved with Glen. Michelle hits him over suspected infidelities. He ‘restrains’ her, because he thinks that men who are violent towards women are ‘sick’. But mostly they want to be together and she, it would seem, benefits from some form of protection from him that she was lacking when he was in prison. But like many a young couple they are struggling, both to find a place of their own to exist, to find also their own space and to cope with the insecurities and sexual jealousies that intimacy can entail, and which are inevitably raw for young people on the brink of settling down. Finding that space and learning to be more open about problems seemed to be helping, but sometimes the arguments spill over in what appears to be a fairly fraught dynamic, leading to violence, not only between Glen and Michelle, but also between Glen and his brother, mother, other men Michelle is acquainted with and professionals who come to intervene. On some occasions, the police had clearly concluded this was merely ‘family-only’ violence, or just a ‘domestic’, mostly between Glen and his brother, meriting no further action.

Read with an eye to Glen's trajectory over many relationships, however, there is no doubting his potential to be both exceptionally controlling and dangerously out of control. His violence is intimidating because of his potential to be lethal and because, as Glen himself concedes with a curious laugh, when he has been restraining Michelle by the throat he has 'been tempted' to hit her too, just as we know he was intent on holding a previous girlfriend hostage and threatening to burn her alive. Routinely, it might be little things like telling his girlfriends what to wear or when to dance – controlling the behaviours that are most likely fairly commonplace. But Glen's tendency to perpetrate strangling, headbutting, hostage-taking and death threats place him at the most dangerous end of the spectrum and capable of behaviours that are hardly normal for men his age. Moreover, Glen is a man with a reputation for violence dating a very vulnerable woman previously subject to a form of modern slavery, though he is sceptical as to whether or not the sex she experienced at the hands of the person who held her hostage was actually 'rape'. It is hard to imagine how they can talk things through without her becoming fearful, and hard to imagine that a woman who has been raped previously and who knows Glen might throttle her, understands his attempts to restrain her as merely containing attempts to calm a dispute. In other words, Common Couple rows, with reciprocal elements, when strung together in a very unequal context begin to look like intimate terrorism of the most coercive kind.

To Glen, however, this is not the full story for he does not mean to be – or perhaps more likely does not want to have to be – controlling. He behaves that way because he gets anxious and paranoid. These feelings – which for him should compel his partner to work around his emotional needs – are never fully articulated, but if one looks closely they appear to be about a fear of losing the relationship, being made to look a fool, and the sense of worthlessness that might be exposed. Glen's two most lethal-looking attacks on partners – threatening to burn Karen alive and grabbing Michelle's throat – were both preceded by threats to leave him. To see these merely as separation-instigated violence would be to miss critical elements of Glen's character that are unlikely to rescind following break-ups with his partners. The insecurities of intimacy are *maddening* to Glen. He does not trust his partners around other men, since he cannot believe that they truly want to be with him. He is not willing to let his partners go, even when he has been unfaithful or is declaring his love to previous partners. In his rage he strangles them to stifle their words and keeps them hostage until they agree to take him back.

It is tempting then to read such 'madness' – a feature of his behaviour Glen referred to nine times during the interview – as evidence of borderline personality, for he has a strong fear of abandonment and appears to have many conflicted relationships. Glen was very uneasy in himself – dysphoric – hence his history of suicides and self-harm. But one could easily construct him also as being involved in generalised and serious violence, having a history of antisocial tendencies and academic failure. By the age of 21 this was apparent from a criminal record that included multiple assaults (on men who had looked at his girlfriends, police officers and ambulance workers), attempted robberies, burglary, arson and theft. Before this, his poor concentration – understandably given the physical violence and sexual abuse at home and the confusing experience of being disbelieved and placed in care – was medicalised as ADHD. But it is relatively easy to see why Glen struggled to concentrate, becomes paranoid easily, and has problems with trust. His relationship with his father was marked by absence and insecurity; his relationship with his brother is one of an abusive, life-threatening rivalry; his mother has lost patience with him and has 'slagged' off his girlfriend; and behind all this Glen's own sexuality was forged in the context of early experiences of sexual abuse that once disclosed saw him discredited and excluded from his family for telling the truth. His reaction to threats is one of fight or flight. The fighting brought him numerous prison sentences before the age of 21. This makes him look Generally Violent-Antisocial. But note also how many times Glen also 'ran off'

from problems he could not confront: running away from foster care, running away from the home his father offered him, and running away to another woman before running back to his girlfriend the same night in the heat of an argument. Glen takes his partners hostage so they cannot run away from him, while imagining the real threats to come from other men – ‘sick’ smackheads – who do the same. However general his violence, his personality could easily be cast as borderline and insecurely attached, perhaps predictably so, given the emotionally confusing contexts in which he was variously abused as a child.

Conclusion

Such observations do not necessarily negate the need for typologies for they can, as we have shown in our own analysis, illuminate aspects of domestic violence that might be missed if one looks only for what is ‘normal’ or ‘pathological’, ‘coercive’ or ‘reciprocal’. But they should not lead us to neglect the complexity of particular cases either, for as we have seen with Glen, his state of mind and the network of relationships in which he was embedded, defy neat categorisation. Take, for example, Glen’s concern with what his girlfriends wear. This can be read as sexism or about everyday insecurities in heterosexual intimacy. Alternatively, we might read it as symptomatic of misogyny and coercive control, Glen expecting his girlfriends to be sensitive to his paranoia. This paranoia, in turn, might be read as the product of his own guilty conscience, the expectation that these women will be unfaithful to him as he has been to them. But it might also be read as evidence of a complex psychopathology deriving from a childhood in which relationships of trust were routinely breached and fault was often attributed to Glen’s own failings. These explanations are not mutually exclusive nor are they an alternative to considering the role of masculinity in permitting some men to punish women for violations of expectations conferred through offers of physical protection from other more dangerous men. But they do underline the importance of interpretation in reading particular cases and the need to get to the meaning of violence and control for particular men in particular relationships.

Perhaps most critically, it is important to recognise that even the most abusive of men – like Glen – are not unchanging types. By his own account, Glen was recognising some commonalities in his behaviour across different relationships; a recognition that, in the right hands, had the potential to challenge him. Likewise the maddening doubts he had about whether or not Michelle was lying to him when she claimed to have been raped are a window of opportunity for the key worker in whom he trusts. The kind of situation Michelle described as entrapping her was not all that different to the fear of violence – restraint, strangling and hostage-taking – Glen had exposed Michelle to. If he could be made to see this, he would then have to confront what it means to be the better man. Being open in academic theorising to such contingencies can only make for better practice with men who are violent towards women. If typologies remain necessary in this work and in the development of policy, they must surely also identify the mechanisms through which men, especially those as young as Glen, might change, and what kinds of types they might become along the way to relationships in which conflicts are more peacefully resolved and a healthy sense of being in control can be maintained without the need for coercion. The critique we offer of the main typological approaches is offered in this spirit: not to negate the need for schematic thinking, but to use it to expose, wherever possible, the potential for men who have used violence to leave it behind.

Note

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