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Abstract | Finding ways to reduce repeat domestic violence requires an understanding of both violent relationships and what happens during violent incidents. The current study uses crime script analysis to describe incidents of men's violence against women.

The results provide new insights into the situational factors present when arguments escalate to violence.

These findings highlight the important role of third parties (eg friends and other family members) and the potential for bystander intervention. They also show the significance of emotion and intoxication. The ability of police to de-escalate violence is highlighted.

Most importantly, the findings illustrate how crime script analysis can be applied to domestic violence to help identify ways to intervene to prevent repeat violence and reduce harm to victims.

Understanding domestic violence incidents using crime script analysis

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There is now widespread acknowledgement that reducing domestic violence requires government, non-government and the broader community to work together to target risk factors at the individual, relationship, community and society level (COAG 2011; Heise 1998). Common responses to domestic violence have included supporting victims to leave abusive relationships safely (eg shelters, safe at home initiatives; Breckenridge et al. 2016), integrated responses involving case management, information sharing and multidisciplinary service delivery (Trimboli 2017), men's behaviour change programs (Mackay et al. 2015) and addressing gendered norms and broader cultures of violence through awareness campaigns and school-based education programs (COAG 2011; VicHealth 2007). This is in addition to criminal justice reforms that aim to better support victims and ensure perpetrators are held accountable for their actions (State of Victoria 2016).

Recent research has identified the potential benefits associated with situational approaches to preventing domestic violence, particularly in reducing the risk of further violence in the period immediately following an incident (Morgan, Boxall & Brown 2018; Prenzler & Fardell 2017). Situational crime prevention approaches aim to ‘prevent, constrain or disrupt criminal activity’ by reducing opportunities for crime to occur (Cornish 1994a: 153). This can be achieved using approaches that increase the risk, increase the effort, reduce the rewards, remove provocations and remove excuses for offending (see Cornish & Clarke 2003 for a catalogue of situational responses). This includes measures such as:

- GPS tracking of offenders in the community (Carter & Grommon 2016; Erez et al. 2012);
- duress alarms (Breckenridge, Walden & Flax 2014; Lloyd, Farrell & Pease 1994);
- pre-programmed mobile phones (Natarajan 2016; Taylor & MacKay 2011); and
- target hardening (eg changing the locks on doors; Hester & Westmarland 2005; Prenzler & Fardell 2017).

Criminal justice responses, including arrest (Vigurs et al. 2016) and protection orders (Dowling et al. 2018), are also geared towards removing opportunity for crime, as are less obvious situational measures like women’s shelters.

Situational responses have been implemented in isolation or in combination with other initiatives to address domestic violence reoffending risk. For example, Safe at Home programs involve the delivery of a number of strategies, including target hardening and protection orders and proactive policing, which work together to support women to remain in their homes after they have left their violent partners (see Breckenridge et al. 2016 for a review of Safe at Home programs).

Situational approaches to domestic violence need to be underpinned by an understanding of how crimes occur—or what Cornish (1994a) calls the procedural aspects of crime. Crime script analysis provides a framework for identifying the sequential stages of the crime commission process, from start to end, and for mapping the interactions between an offender, a victim and their immediate environment (Chiu, Leclerc & Townsley 2011; Leclerc, Wortley & Smallbone 2011). Cornish suggests that most crimes typically involve the key stages of preparation, entry into the setting, preconditions, instrumental preconditions, initiation and actualisation, doing (the offence), post-conditions and exit from the setting (Cornish 1994a). However, this script has been modified by others to better reflect and accommodate different crime types. As described in Table 1, different levels of analysis allow for more precise descriptions of crimes that share certain features or occur in similar circumstances.

Level of analysis	Description
Metascript	Describes all crimes within the same broad classification (eg domestic violence)
Protoscript	Describes subgroups of crime types that share similar features (eg domestic violence involving a male perpetrator and female victim)
Script	Describes subgroups that are further subdivided into categories according to certain features or circumstances that have implications for prevention (eg domestic violence involving a male perpetrator and female victim when there are other parties present during the offence)
Script track	Details about the circumstances of individual offences

Source: Leclerc, Wortley & Smallbone 2011

Capturing the chronological sequence of actions involved in the crime commission process is important for understanding different crime types (Chiu, Leclerc & Townsley 2011) and identifying possible intervention points for situational responses (Smith 2017). Similarly to how actors learn lines in a play, successful crime scripts are learnt and repeated by offenders (Hutchings & Holt 2014). Crime script analysis can help identify weak spots, where the process of crime can be interrupted (Chiu, Leclerc & Townsley 2011).

Script analysis is underpinned by a rational choice perspective, which focuses on the decision-making processes that lead to an offender choosing to commit crime, including weighing up the risks, rewards and effort associated with offending (Clarke & Cornish 1985). Reflective of its economic origins, rational choice theory was initially used to understand acquisitive crimes that are motivated primarily by financial gain (Walters 2015). Crime scripts have been developed for offences such as robbery (Cornish 1994b; Smith 2017), vehicle theft (Cornish 1994a, 1994b), cheque forgery (Lacoste & Tremblay 2003), stolen-vehicle resale (Morselli & Roy 2008; Tremblay, Talon & Hurley 2001), organised crime (Hancock & Laycock 2010), online black markets and stolen data (Hutchings & Holt 2014) and crimes against passengers on public transport (Smith & Cornish 2006).

The rational choice perspective can also be used to explain expressive (or irrational) crimes like vandalism, child sexual assault and domestic violence. A major difference between acquisitive and expressive crimes is that the latter are primarily motivated by non-financial goals, like control of another person, a boost in self-esteem, status, peer acceptance and kudos, thrill or excitement and emotional release (Farrell 2010). Critics of opportunity theories, especially the rational choice perspective, have argued that they have limited applicability to expressive crime, because offenders are less likely in these circumstances to act rationally (Hayward 2007). This argument has been strongly refuted (Farrell 2010), on the basis that offenders committing expressive crime still make decisions that they think will benefit them in some way. This holds true even if only some of the decisions made by offenders (and there are many) can be described as seemingly rational (Cornish 1994a; Farrell 2010; Felson 2013; Jacobs & Wright 2010; Tedeschi & Felson 1994).

In recent years, script analysis has been used to describe expressive crimes like vandalism (Cornish 1994a, 1994b) and suicide bombing (Clarke & Newman 2006). The sexual abuse of children has also been explored using crime scripts, demonstrating how it can be used for complex expressive crimes that involve repeated interactions and the development of relationships between victims and offenders (Beauregard et al. 2007; Leclerc, Wortley & Smallbone 2011). Commentators have argued that all forms of expressive crimes could, in theory, be subjected to script analysis (Farrell 2010).

As Leclerc and Wortley (2013: 5) said:

If an individual who commits an armed robbery, a sexual offence or an act of terrorism can be treated as a reasoning criminal then any crime can be studied within a rational choice framework.

To date, domestic violence has not been the subject of script analysis. This reflects a broader lack of research focused on domestic violence incidents, relative to studies that have attempted to describe offenders and victims. In the mid-1980s, Dobash and Dobash argued that understanding domestic violence requires describing how these acts take place, in particular 'its concrete nature, its dynamic development and its location within the wider social context' (1984: 269). In what could be seen as an early attempt to apply something like crime scripts to the analysis of domestic violence, they

interviewed 109 female victims of domestic violence and asked them to describe the sequence of events immediately preceding a violent incident. Analysis of the interview transcripts identified a number of common precursors to the violence, particularly the female victim 'challenging' the male partner in some way.

Since this study, there has been little research examining the nature of domestic violence incidents in this level of detail. However, if the potential of situational responses to prevent and de-escalate domestic violence is to be realised, a better understanding of what happens during incidents of violence and the stages involved in the crime commission process is essential. While these incidents may occur within the broader context of an abusive relationship, identifying ways to prevent the occurrence of domestic violence incidents remains a valuable exercise. One incident can have significant consequences for a victim and their family, including serious injury, trauma and death. Further, there is evidence that the risk of domestic violence reoffending is cumulative, meaning that the likelihood of reoffending increases with each new reoffence (Morgan, Boxall & Brown 2018).

Aim and method

The current study aimed to determine whether crime script analysis could be used to better understand domestic violence incidents and, if so, to generate a preliminary protoscript for domestic violence. A protoscript was developed using administrative data extracted from the Family Violence Management System (FVMS) maintained by Tasmania Police. The FVMS is a purpose-built database that stores information on all domestic violence matters reported to Tasmania Police that result in a call-out. Domestic violence matters that do not result in an arrest or charge are included in the FVMS, as are 'argument only' offences—call-outs that do not meet the threshold for domestic violence as defined under the *Family Violence Act 2004* (Tas), s 7. Under the Act, the following types of conduct committed by a person, directly or indirectly, against their past or current spouse or partner are classified as domestic violence:

- assault (including sexual assault);
- threats, coercion, intimidation or verbal abuse;
- abduction;
- stalking;
- economic abuse (eg withholding money);
- emotional abuse or intimidation; or
- contravening an external Family Violence Order (FVO), an interim FVO, an FVO or a Police Family Violence Order (PFVO).

The Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC) was provided information recorded by police in the FVMS over a 12-month period. This sample contained domestic violence cases involving first-time offenders—offenders who came into contact with police for the first time (n=1,206). Random sampling methods were used to select 100 cases for more detailed analysis. Among the data provided for this smaller sample was the responding officer's description of the incident(s) as it occurred from start to finish (hereafter referred to as police narratives). Responding officers use multiple sources of information to develop narratives, including victim, offender and witness statements and official records.

Script analysis requires accurate and detailed information about individual criminal incidents. Cases were therefore removed from the sample if:

- the responding officer had concerns about the truthfulness of the account provided by the victim (n=7);
- there was insufficient information to allow script analysis (n=21); or
- it was an 'argument-only' offence (n=2).

The remaining 70 cases were coded in accordance with a framework developed specifically for this study, with information extracted on the parties involved, the characteristics of the violent incident and each stage of the protoscript. This framework was informed largely by the protoscript of child sexual offending developed by Leclerc, Wortley and Smallbone (2011)—one of the best examples of how script analysis has been used to describe expressive violent crime. To account for the role of emotion in offender decision-making, which is particularly relevant to domestic violence but often overlooked in environmental criminology (Hayward 2007; Walters 2015), information on the emotional state of the victim and offender was recorded for different stages of the commission process.

The focus of this study was on male-perpetrated violence against female victims. Therefore, of the 70 cases coded, four were excluded from analysis because they involved mutual violence, 14 because they involved a female offender and two because they involved male offender domestic violence within a homosexual relationship. This recognises that female-perpetrated and same-sex domestic violence may require their own protoscripts, to reflect the unique characteristics of these different forms of violence.

It is important to note that there are two units of analysis for this study—episodes and incidents of domestic violence. Episodes could involve multiple acts (incidents) of violence perpetrated against victims. Episodes started at the point of the victim and offender having contact with one another and ended with police notification. The period of time that elapsed between these two points ranged from a few minutes to a few days.

The final sample included 50 episodes of domestic violence involving unique couples (Table 2). The majority of episodes involved a victim and offender who were in a relationship with one another (n=30, 60%), and/or had biological children together (n=31, 62%). Almost half of the episodes (n=24, 48%) involved partners who were cohabiting. The majority of cohabiting couples were in a relationship with one another (n=21, 88%), although three were in the process of separating. Another three couples were in a relationship but were not cohabiting.

Table 2: Relationship characteristics of the final sample

	n	%
Relationship status		
In a relationship	30	60
In the process of separating	17	34
Separated	3	6
Relationship length^a		
<12 months	2	4
1–5 years	27	55
6–10 years	7	14
10+ years	13	27
Mean length of relationship (years (standard deviation)) ^b	8.2 (9.1)	
Children		
Couple has biological children together	31	62
Children living with the victim or offender either part-time or full-time ^c	6	12
Victim is pregnant	1	2
Cohabitation status		
Living together	24	48
Separate residences	20	40
Unclear	6	12

a: Excludes one episode where this information was missing

b: Mean calculated from continuous age variable

c: Children other than biological children shared by the victim and offender

Source: AIC, Scripting domestic violence dataset 2010–2011 [computer file]

Limitations

Police narratives provide information about incidents that can be used as part of an investigation and to prepare a brief of evidence. As such, police prioritise collecting and recording information that is most relevant to the investigative process. This means that certain details about the crime commission process may not be recorded and so could not be included in the current analysis. For example, information about what happened after a violent incident was much less detailed than the information about what happened before and during the violent episode. Importantly, the absence of information was not taken to mean something did not occur or was not present in the incident, and was instead treated as missing data.

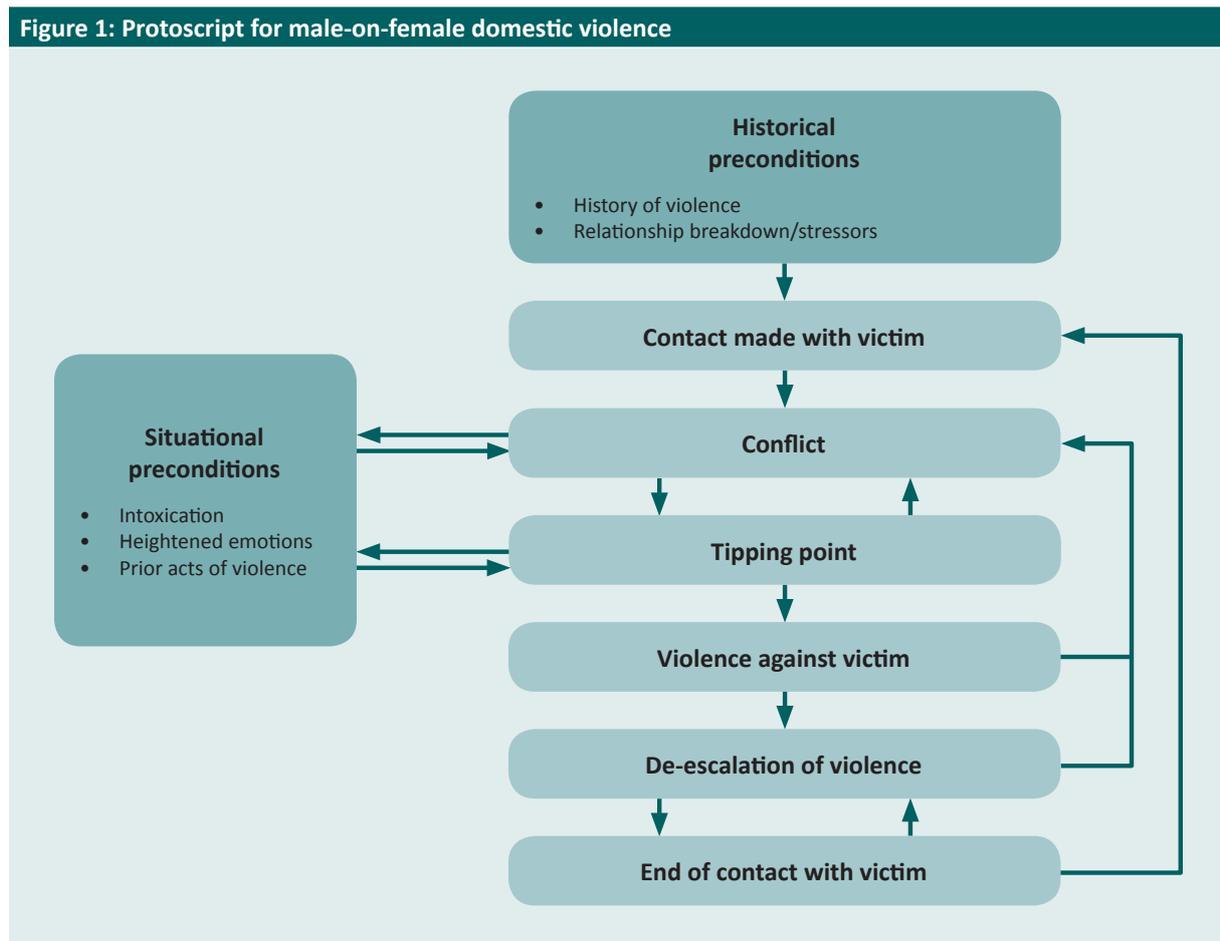
However, a strength of police narratives is that they are based on multiple sources of information—statements provided by the victim, witnesses and offender, information provided to the officer (eg voice messages or emails), observations and physical evidence collected from the crime scene and official police records. This provides officers with an opportunity to cross-reference information and assess the truthfulness of the accounts given by those involved. Including victim accounts is particularly important given that offender accounts have previously been found to ‘excuse, rationalize, justify, and minimize the violence against female partners’ (Anderson & Umberson 2001: 362).

Finally, the focus on first-time offenders provided the best opportunity to develop a protoscript for a group of offenders and victims at similar stages in their contact with the justice system. It also arguably represents the best opportunity to intervene in some way to interrupt or change behavioural patterns (Boxall, Rosevear & Payne 2015). However, many of the incidents attended by police involve repeat offenders (Boxall, Payne & Rosevear 2015), and the generalisability of this protoscript to offenders who frequently come into contact with police is unclear. Likewise, limiting the analysis only to male perpetrators means that the protoscript described in this paper may not be immediately applicable to other populations.

Findings

Figure 1 describes the protoscript for male-on-female domestic violence. It is comprised of six stages—contact being made with the victim, conflict with others, a tipping point, violence towards the victim, de-escalation of the violence and the end of contact with the victim. The final components of the protoscript are historical and situational preconditions, which influence the crime commission process at different stages. These are described below.

Figure 1: Protoscript for male-on-female domestic violence



Historical preconditions

Although crime scripts include information about ‘preconditions’ necessary for crime, they typically do not situate crime incidents within the broader historical context or acknowledge the ‘baggage’ that offenders and victims bring with them when they enter the setting. Recognising historical context is important when scripting domestic violence because these incidents occur as part of a relationship between two parties (be they current or former partners), and are often situated within broader patterns of controlling and abusive behaviour (Dobash & Dobash 1984). Rather than describing individual domestic violence incidents as isolated events, it is necessary to provide some context for the behaviour.

Two contextual factors were particularly prominent within the narratives—prior violence between parties and relationship instability. The majority (n=29, 62%) of episodes involved offenders with a previous history of violence towards their partner, despite it being the first time they had been in contact with police for domestic violence. Most of the episodes occurred within broader patterns of violence within the relationship which had previously not been reported to police.

Relationship instability was present among couples involved in 20 domestic violence episodes (41%, excludes one episode with missing data). This typically involved a separation between the two parties in the past six months, while some couples had recently reconciled after a period of separation. Others described their relationship as ‘on-and-off’, and there were instances where the offender had stalked or harassed the victim during the breakdown of the relationship or after they had separated.

In addition to relationship instability, many of the couples involved in domestic violence episodes had experienced other stressors which had impacted on their relationship. In three episodes, police described an ongoing dispute about custody and visitation arrangements for shared children. Notably, in all three matters police indicated that there were no Family Law Orders in place to provide guidelines around issues relating to custody, including pick-up and drop-off arrangements. Seven domestic violence episodes involved couples where the offender had alcohol and/or drug abuse issues, including addiction. Other stressors were also present, although the data were less reliable in terms of regular recording by police. These included the mental health of the offender (n=10) or victim (n=4), or a recent move, typically interstate (n=4). Other issues which were not included in the analysis but appeared to be present in a minority of cases included historical grief and trauma related to the loss of a child, financial stress and child behavioural problems.

Contact made with victim

The start of domestic violence episodes typically involved the victim and offender coming together in one location at the same time—making contact. Unsurprisingly then, a shared residence (n=19, 39%) was the most common setting for violence, as this space is routinely occupied by both parties (see Table 3). However, while sharing the same space provides an opportunity for violence to occur, abuse does not always occur. This is true of even the most violent couples. Indeed, many of the couples had been in the same space without incident for a period of time before the offender became violent. This means that other factors, not just the location, play a role in the abuse of victims at a particular time and place.

One in five episodes of violence occurred within the victim’s private residence (n=10, 20%). In comparison, violence at the offender’s premises was relatively rare (n=2, 4%). The majority of episodes that occurred in the victim or offender’s residence involved a couple who were in the process of separating or were separated (n=8, 80%), and so were not living together. In some cases, the couple were meeting to discuss issues relating to the separation, or shared costs and responsibilities (eg shared children, mortgages), or had even been discussing the possibility of getting back together. These discussions gave rise to conflict and, in turn, violence. In other episodes, the offender was an unwelcome visitor to the property and the violence started when the victim told the offender to leave or blocked their entry. What this suggests is that, in cases where the couple were separating or separated, the violence was triggered in part by the offender attending the victim’s premises.

Although domestic violence is typically regarded as a ‘hidden crime’ occurring behind closed doors, it is notable that over one-quarter of episodes (n=14, 29%) played out at least in part in a public or semi-public location. Semi-public locations included spaces immediately outside of private residences where the violence was or could have been witnessed by another person (eg hallways in apartment buildings, verandahs). Further, other adults were present during the lead-up to and during the violent incident in 36 percent of episodes (n=18). Third parties were typically friends or family of the victim or offender, while members of the public, a new partner, housemates or police were present in a minority of incidents. Children were present in one-third of all episodes (n=16, 33%).

Episodes did not necessarily involve the victim and offender meeting in person, with 11 (22%) occurring over the phone. One other episode did not require the victim and offender to be in the same place at the same time, as it involved the victim reading historical threats made against them on their ex-partner’s public Facebook profile page.

	n	%
Location^a		
Victim’s residence	10	20
Offender’s residence	2	4
Shared residence	19	39
Other private residence	8	16
Public or semi-public place	14	29
Phone	11	22
Social media	1	2
Presence of third parties		
Other adult(s) present	18	36
Child(ren) present ^b	16	33

a: Non-mutually exclusive categories—episodes of violence could move between different venues

b: Excludes 1 episode where this information was not available

Source: AIC, Scripting domestic violence dataset 2010–2011 [computer file]

Conflict with others

Once the victim and offender came into contact, a conflict arose. This conflict often took the form of an argument (n=27, 59%), the topics of which ranged from the significant (eg child custody arrangements), through to the seemingly banal (eg the misplacement of an item). The conflict almost always involved 'hot button' issues specific to the couple—matters that were points of contention or disagreement between them. Arguments could start relatively mild and become increasingly heated over time, or they could be volatile almost immediately—dependent on the context in which the conflict took place.

In some cases, the victim may have been present during the conflict but not directly involved (at least from the beginning). In these situations, the conflict was between the offender and another person, such as a family member or friend (n=7, 14%). Despite there being no preceding argument or conflict between the victim and the offender, these episodes typically escalated to violence directed towards the victim.

Notably, conflict could have been 'brewing' for a period of time between the couple, and so could actually have preceded their coming together in the same place.

Tipping point

Not all arguments between couples lead to violence. Within the sample there was frequently a 'tipping point' within the argument, when the conflict reached a stage where it transitioned to violence. Consistent with the findings of Dobash and Dobash (1984), this tipping point usually involved the victim 'challenging' the offender or asserting their independence from them in some way (n=33, 66%; see Table 4). The most common challenges were:

- one party ignoring the other (usually the victim ignoring the offender), which included ignoring or directly refusing the other party's commands or requests, not validating their feelings and not responding when spoken to (n=15, 31%);
- one party attempting to leave the location occupied by both parties (n=12, 24%); and
- one party accusing the other of being disloyal, such as accusations of infidelity or of taking someone else's side in an argument, including in instances where violence was initially directed to a third party (n=11, 22%).

In those episodes where violence was initially directed to a third party (n=7; see *Conflict with others* section), victims sometimes became a target of domestic violence when they attempted to intervene, physically or verbally. However, in three of these episodes the victim was attacked even though there had been no direct challenge. In these episodes, the conflict may have escalated because the offender was emotionally heightened and highly motivated ('primed') to use violence against others, including his partner.

Table 4: Common challenges in domestic violence episodes

	n	%
Victim and/or offender ignored the other party ^a	15	31
Victim and/or offender attempted to leave the location	12	24
Victim and/or offender accused the other party of being disloyal ^a	11	22
Victim and/or offender threatened to leave the other party ^b	6	21
Victim threatened to call the police ^a	6	12
Victim and/or offender limited the other party's access to children ^c	3	10
At least one of the above	33	66

a: Excludes 1 episode where this information was not available

b: Excludes 20 episodes where the couple were already separated and 2 where this information was not available

c: Excludes 19 episodes where the couple did not have children together and 2 episodes where this information was not available

Source: AIC, Scripting domestic violence dataset 2010–2011 [computer file]

In situations that did not involve an identifiable challenge to the offender, there was no discernible act that constituted a tipping point. However, in many of these episodes, it appeared that the offender became increasingly emotional or angry—typically as a result of the conflict escalating or continuing for a period of time—to the point where they became violent. Offenders may have become frustrated or angry that the conflict was not being resolved to their satisfaction, or because the victim was behaving contrary to their expectations or desires. In these episodes, violence became a means by which the offender could maintain control over the situation and the victim.

It is important to note that the use of the term 'challenges' to describe the actions of victims is not an attempt to blame victims for the abuse that they experience. Rather, the term is used because it describes how victims' actions at this stage of the protoscript are perceived and interpreted by offenders. There are various explanations for why male offenders react to these perceived challenges with violence. One explanation draws on feminist theory, which suggests the underlying causes of domestic violence are situated within broader social structures that support a culture of violence and gender roles and stereotypes that encourage men to be dominant, in control and powerful and women to be passive and supportive (Dobash & Dobash 1984; Stark 2009). Male domestic violence offenders therefore use violence to regain control of the victim and re-establish their own perceived authority and dominance (Anderson & Umberson 2001; Gage & Hutchinson 2006; Krishnan et al. 2010). Another explanation is that male offenders possess distorted thinking about the use of violence, increased trait anger and interpersonal deficits, and respond to anger-inducing stimuli with violence (Babcock et al. 2016).

Situational preconditions (emotion and intoxication)

Emotion played a significant role in the escalation of the conflict from a verbal disagreement to violence. The victim or the offender showed evidence of being in a heightened emotional state in four out of five incidents (n=40, 83%). Typically, this involved one or both parties describing themselves to police as having exhibited signs of strong emotional responses during the episode, including raising their voice, screaming, yelling or crying. Less overt signs of emotion, as described by parties and witnesses, were more difficult to detect.

Victims and offenders often became emotionally heightened as a direct reaction to the conflict or tipping point. They might have become emotional during the argument between the offender and the victim, or in response to the offender getting into a physical altercation with another party (eg a friend, n=7), requests by the victim to separate (n=6) and recent prior violence between the couple (n=7). In other episodes there was no immediate explanation for the heightened emotional state of the victim and/or offender. For example, in a small number of cases the victim described the offender as having woken up or having come home from work in an aggressive and angry state. It is important to note that in all of these cases, there was a history of violence between the couple.

Alcohol also played a significant role. Offenders were intoxicated in one-third of episodes (n=15, 31%), and both the victim and offender were affected by alcohol in 10 incidents (21%). No episodes involved an intoxicated victim and sober offender. Other drug use was rare, with only one offender identified as having recently used drugs. Given that parties may not report their own or their partner's use to avoid criminal sanctions, this may be an under-representation of the extent of drug use within the sample.

Although the role of emotion and intoxication differed between incidents, there was consistent evidence of a reciprocal relationship between these factors and the 'conflict with others' and 'tipping point' stages of the protoscript (see Figure 1). For example, in some cases the victim and offender's emotional state became heightened as a result of the conflict and tipping point, which in turn escalated or sustained the episode. Alternatively, the conflict and tipping point may have come about in part because the offender and victim were emotionally heightened to begin with. Unfortunately, due to insufficient detail in the narratives, additional analysis of the different emotions experienced by victims and offenders was not possible.

Violence towards victim

At this stage in the protoscript, the offender has been in conflict with others, which may have been exacerbated by the offender and/or victim's emotional state or intoxication or may have led them to becoming even more emotionally heightened. The offender has reached a tipping point, which often involved the victim 'challenging' them and which may have involved a threat to their control over the victim or the situation. It is at this point that verbal disagreements escalated to violence towards the victim.

Physical violence was the most common form of violence used by offenders against their partners (n=31, 62%). The severity of violence varied significantly, ranging from pushing or restraining the victim through to punching them in the face or strangling them. Over half of incidents that involved the offender using physical violence (n=18, 56%) resulted in a physical injury to the victim. Injuries ranged from slight marks and soreness through to visible bruising (including on the throat), cuts and abrasions.

Non-physical violence was also common, present in over half of all episodes (n=29, 58%). This frequently involved verbal abuse such as calling the victim names, verbally berating the victim or threatening to kill or harm the victim or their family (including shared and/or step-children).

In seven episodes, the victim reacted to the abuse with physical violence (14%). In each case, the offender had been physically violent towards the victim. In four of these episodes, victims used violence as a means of escaping the offender. For example, in one episode the offender had pushed the victim to the floor and was physically restraining her. The victim bit him to make him release his grip. In another episode, the victim used violence as a means of getting the offender to leave the premises (eg by pushing him out the door). These findings are consistent with other research which has shown that some female victims react to abuse with physical violence as a means of protecting themselves and their families (Hamberger 1997; Stuart et al. 2006). In this way, the violence used by victims should be seen as self-defensive. Notably, none of the incidents in which victims used self-defensive violence resulted in injury to the offender.

Fourteen percent of episodes (n=7) involved multiple incidents of violence within a relatively short period of time before the police were contacted. In these cases, offenders were often still emotionally heightened and in an aggressive state as a result of the previous violent interaction, regardless of the amount of time that had passed or what else had happened. For example, in one episode that involved multiple incidents, the offender left the premises and went for a walk after the first incident. When he returned, he was immediately violent towards his partner again. In another episode, the offender was extremely violent towards his partner. The next day he went to work, returned home in the evening and was immediately abusive again.

De-escalation of violence

Given these episodes of domestic violence are based on police narratives, each episode concluded with police involvement. After the violent interaction, the violence could de-escalate:

- prior to police being contacted;
- when police were called;
- when police arrived; or
- due to police intervention.

While the level of detail provided by police about the events that took place after the violent interaction was limited compared with information on other components of the protoscript, it was still possible to identify some of the potential catalysts for the de-escalation of the violence.

In the majority of episodes, de-escalation was triggered by an action taken by the victim or the offender that had the impact of preventing further immediate harm. The most common action was the police being called—usually by the victim (n=88%). This was more effective in some cases than others. In many cases, police reported that the offender had left as soon as the victim called the police or when they realised the police were at the scene. But, in others, police notification did not immediately result in the reduction of violence. In some cases, it was the catalyst for non-physical violence to escalate to physical violence (see Table 4) and, in others, the violence continued until police arrived at the scene. In these situations, police were required to physically intervene and separate the parties and/or remove them from the scene so that the violence could subside.

Two in five episodes resulted in the offender being arrested (n=21, 41%) and, of these, the vast majority (88%, data were unavailable for 5 episodes) resulted in the offender being detained and charged (84%, data were unavailable for 2 episodes). Regardless of whether the offender was arrested, the majority of incidents resulted in the offender receiving a Police Family Violence Order (n=33, 67%). While information was available for only 31 episodes, two-thirds (n=21, 68%) of victims were willing to press charges against the offender following the violence. One-third (n=10, 32%) of victims explicitly stated that they did not want charges to be laid.

Reporting to police was rarely the only action taken by victims and offenders that appeared to have the effect of de-escalating the violence—whether this was the intention or not. Other actions taken by victims and offenders included the offender going to sleep, the offender going for a walk or drive, or the victim or offender otherwise leaving the premises (see below). As such, there is a clear overlap between the end of contact and de-escalation stages of the domestic violence protoscript (Figure 1), whereby the end of contact may have resulted in the reduction of violence, or vice versa.

In a small number of episodes (n=3), further violence was avoided through the intervention of a third party such as a family member or friend. In two of these episodes, the third party intervened directly and attempted to calm the offender down. In the third, the appearance of a friend at the scene caused the offender to leave. Visible physical injuries to the victim may also have been a catalyst for the de-escalation of the violence, particularly where the offender was shocked by the impact of their actions and remorseful for the behaviour (Walker 1979), although this was difficult to discern from the narratives.

In seven episodes, an initial period of de-escalation was followed by further violence. The time that elapsed between violent interactions ranged from a few minutes to 24 hours. In these situations, the subsequent violence may have been associated with the same situational stressors as the initial violence, such as the same argument or conflict, or may have involved a new set of circumstances. This demonstrates again the cyclical nature of violence experienced by victims (Stark 2009; Walker 1979).

End of contact with victim

Domestic violence episodes usually ended when the victim and offender were no longer in contact with each other. The end of the contact was frequently brought about by the victim or offender exiting the setting. Information about how victims and offenders left the scene was sometimes unclear or incomplete. Where information was not available, it was assumed that parties remained at the premises unless police actions, such as charging, made it clear they had been taken by police to the station.

After the violence, the majority of victims remained at the scene (n=23, 55%), while over two-thirds of offenders left the scene, either on their own (n=16, 38%), or as a result of being detained by police (n=14, 33%). In only three cases did the victim and offender both remain at the premises (5%), and in another six the offender remained at the premises while the victim left on their own, typically to stay with a friend or family member. Again, as demonstrated in Figure 1, a small number of offenders (n=3) who exited the setting after the violent interaction returned later and resumed the violence.

Discussion

The protoscript developed in this study is an important step forward in the application of crime science to domestic violence. Equipped with a procedural understanding of domestic violence incidents, it is possible to begin to identify both potential intervention points and situational crime prevention techniques that can disrupt violent episodes, prevent repeat offending and reduce the harm to victims. Although the purpose of this article is not to identify these strategies, a small number—specifically, protection orders, bystander training, strategies that prevent unwanted contact between parties (ie target hardening) and men’s behaviour change programs—are discussed briefly below.

The findings from this study showed that it was possible to identify several key stages in a domestic violence episode. Although the current study focused on male-perpetrated domestic violence against female victims, there was considerable variation in the patterns and characteristics of violence episodes. Nevertheless, it was possible to develop a protoscript that characterises the stages involved in many incidents (see Figure 1). The purpose of the protoscript is not to inform interventions that will work for all cases of domestic violence. Rather, the protoscript should be used to understand individual cases and develop targeted responses that work for individual couples, victims and offenders.

As demonstrated in Figure 1, the stages in a domestic violence incident may not always occur in a linear process. Rather, the violence was often cyclical in nature, with certain stages being repeated within each episode. The most common pathway that emerged from the analysis was as follows: the victim and offender came to be in the same place at the same time, after which a conflict between the two began, often in the context of prior violence and relationship problems, which culminated in a challenge and the offender reaching a tipping point and becoming violent. This was followed by a period of de-escalation and one or both parties (typically the offender) leaving the scene. Variations on this baseline pathway included:

- episodes that began with conflict between the offender and a third party (typically a friend or other family member) but resulted in violence towards his partner when she tried to intervene;
- conflict escalating to violence as a result of a tipping point that was not a discernible challenge, but involved an offender becoming so emotional or angry that he acted out aggressively;
- the violent interaction being immediately followed by further conflict with the victim, which could then lead to further violence; and
- the period of de-escalation being followed by a return to the conflict, or additional violence.

Although the sequence of events does not necessarily follow a neat and linear sequence, in most instances episodes involved the stages identified through the analysis.

Both the context and setting in which violence occurred were important factors in domestic violence episodes. There was evidence across nearly the entire sample that couples entered a domestic violence episode with history, including prior violence, relationship problems or stressors that impacted on their relationship. This context helps to explain why the argument leading to the violence occurred and why the topic of that argument was a ‘hot button’ issue for that couple.

All violence requires the victim and offender to have contact and interact, not necessarily face-to-face, combined with other factors that can increase the likelihood of violence. Almost half of the episodes in this study involved partners who were no longer in a relationship or living together. In these instances, prevention measures that increase the effort required to access victims and their residences may prevent further violence. These prevention measures include improvements to physical home security and duress alarms that allow instant police notification (Hester & Westmarland 2005; Lloyd, Farrell & Pease 1994; Natarajan 2016; Taylor & MacKay 2011) and protection orders with conditions that require an offender to stay away from the victim (Dowling et al. 2018). Similarly, given one in five episodes of violence in the current sample occurred via phone or social media, measures that prevent access to victims (eg blocking calls and social media profiles, changing phone numbers or phones) may also be effective in certain circumstances.

A surprising but important finding was the high proportion of violent episodes that occurred in public or semi-public settings, and in which third parties were present. In some cases, these third parties were the initial victim of the violence, and in others they were a witness to the violent episode. In any case, this highlights the potential role of bystander programs, which have proven an effective response to other forms of violence, including sexual assault (Cook & Reynald 2016; Ullman 2007) and school/college-based violence (Salmivalli 2010). These programs give participants the skills to appropriately and safely intervene in different forms of crime (Shorey et al. 2012). Recent research points to the impact of the mere presence of other parties—who can act as capable guardians—on repeat domestic violence victimisation (Hayes 2016). Research has also explored the effectiveness of bystander programs in reducing the occurrence of domestic violence (McMahon & Dick 2011; Peterson et al. 2016). Capable guardians are people whose presence may discourage a potential offender from committing an offence. In some situations, the mere presence of guardians may be sufficient to discourage domestic violence, while in other cases they may intervene directly. Guardians may have a formal role in preventing or responding to crime (eg police or security guards), but are more often family members, neighbours, friends or strangers (Felson 2008).

There was strong evidence of both emotion and intoxication playing a key role in the escalation of incidents from arguments to violence. Most of the cases involved victims and offenders who were showing clear signs of heightened emotions, while one in three episodes involved an offender who was intoxicated. The impact of emotion on offender decision-making generally has received relatively little attention. However, anger has been shown to impact decisions to aggress and to undermine the deterrent effect of sanctions (van Gelder 2017). The role of intoxication is consistent with evidence showing the impact of alcohol on self-control and forward thinking and its relationship with aggression and violent crime (Boles & Miotto 2003; Exum 2006; Exum, Austin & Franklin 2017). Even more importantly, emotion (especially anger) and alcohol have been shown to interact to increase aggressive decision-making, over and above their independent effect (Exum 2002).

This highlights the importance of measures to reduce alcohol consumption by offenders—for example, the inclusion of conditions in domestic violence protection orders relating specifically to alcohol consumption, brief interventions to reduce alcohol misuse and other forms of counselling. While the findings in relation to emotion and its impact on self-control, particularly anger, reiterate the important role of programs targeting perpetrators, measures to reduce situational precipitators may also be effective. Enabling bystanders and providing duress alarms, for example, may be effective in supporting

victims who remain in a relationship (or in contact) with the offender during periods of heightened emotion. Family law orders, which provide a set of rules in relation to the care of shared children, may help reduce the risk of conflict between separated couples in relation to custody issues, including visitation and pick-up and drop-off arrangements. Effective techniques will likely vary based on the unique characteristics of individual couples, as well as the nature of their relationship going forward.

The finding that the majority of episodes involved a discernible tipping point at which the conflict escalated to violence reinforces the importance of men's behaviour change programs, although the evidence shows these must be part of a broader response to domestic violence (Babcock et al. 2016). These programs encourage men to take responsibility for their aggressive behaviour, identify those situations in which they become aggressive and develop strategies to control their use of violence (Babcock et al. 2016; Mackay et al. 2015). The value of crime script analysis is that it can help to highlight the situational cues to which offenders have reacted with violence in the past (Babcock et al. 2016). This acknowledges that, even at times of extreme emotion, perpetrators are still making the decision to be violent and these decisions are situationally dependent (Felson 2013).

While contacting police was the catalyst for violence in a relatively small number of cases, police involvement facilitated the de-escalation of the violent episode in the majority of cases. The majority of victims were supportive of police action against the offender, including arresting and detaining offenders, charging them with offences and issuing a protection order. In addition, only three episodes ended with the victim and offender remaining in the setting together. This further highlights the crucial role of police in de-escalating domestic violence episodes and preventing their recurrence.

The inability of the protoscript to fully describe all of the cases in this sample may indicate that additional information about why offenders use violence and under what circumstances, including from sources besides police narratives, is necessary to further develop the framework in Figure 1. Alternatively, these divergences could reflect actual differences between offenders. A large body of research has identified distinct domestic violence offender groupings that are differentiated based on the nature of the violence used against their partners, as well as the underlying motivations for the violence (see, for example, Holtzworth-Munroe & Stuart 1994; Johnson 2010; Johnston & Campbell 1993). Future research should focus on the stability of domestic violence protoscripts across offender groupings and across different episodes of domestic violence involving the same victim and offender, and whether these protoscripts can be used to describe incidents that do not involve a police response.

Conclusion

This study has, for the first time, used crime script analysis to better understand domestic violence incidents. This involved the development of a protoscript for male-perpetrated domestic violence against female victims. What this has shown is that domestic violence incidents are characterised by a number of distinct stages—contact made with the victim, conflict with others, a tipping point, violence towards the victim, de-escalation of violence and end of contact with the victim—but also that these stages do not always follow a neat, sequential order. Further work is needed, including exploring the applicability of this protoscript to other samples, or to multiple incidents of violence experienced by the same victim and perpetrated by the same offender. Nevertheless, there are implications for responding to domestic violence, particularly through situational measures, while further development of this protoscript will continue to identify new ways to reduce the impact on victims.

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