

Psychopathological profile of men convicted of gender violence:
A study in the Spanish prisons

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ABSTRACT

In this paper a description of the demographic, penal and psychopathological characteristics of 54 men, who are in prison because of having committed a serious offence of gender violence, was carried out. Furthermore, a comparison in all the variables studied among the subjects with homicide and those without homicide was done. The results showed the existence of irrational beliefs both about women and about violence as a strategy to cope with everyday difficulties, as well as of general inadaptation to daily life. However, from a psychopathological point of view, in spite of not being observed a high degree of symptomatology in the whole sample, the psychiatric and penal antecedents and current emotional instability were much more frequent and severe in people that had not committed homicide. Therefore two possible differential profiles among the violent men are presented.

Key words: Gender violence. Prison. Psychopathology. Homicide.

INTRODUCTION

Gender-based violence is a problem that is on the increase and one that is currently reaching alarming proportions. A study of domestic violence carried out in 2000 by the Ministry of Social Affairs involving a sample of more than 20,000 Spanish women, for instance, revealed that at least 4% of those over 18 (around 640,000) are abused in the home. However, there is also a further 12% (around 1,865,000) who, while not regarding themselves as abused, suffer degrading or humiliating behaviors that are inconsistent with a healthy relationship as a couple (Echeburúa, Fernández-Montalvo & De la Cuesta, 2002). Studies carried out in the United States indicate that between 15 and 30% of women undergo some type of aggression in their relationship as a couple (Goldman, Horan, Warshaw, Kaplan & Hendricks-Matthews, 1995; O'Leary & Arias, 1988; Stith, Williams & Rosen, 1992; Straus & Gelles, 1990).

These disturbing figures have led to a greater interest on the part of the scientific community in studying the perpetrators of this violence, and this has resulted in a greater knowledge of the clinical characteristics of men who are violent towards women (Echeburúa & Corral, 1998). These aggressors usually present significant psychological deficits such as cognitive bias, mainly distorted thoughts as to sexual roles and the inferiority of women, but also communication difficulties, irritability and a failure to control impulses, as well as other specific difficulties (mainly alcohol abuse and pathological jealousy) (Corsi, 1995; Dutton & Golant, 1999; Fernández-Montalvo & Echeburúa, 1997a).

Moreover, personality disorders have frequently been identified among aggressors (Bernard & Bernard, 1984; Dinwiddie, 1992; Hamberger & Hastings, 1986), the most commonly encountered being antisocial, borderline and narcissistic disorders (Hamberger & Hastings, 1988). There have even been attempts to establish an aggressor typology as a function of personality disorders and to suggest specific lines of therapeutic intervention in accordance with that typology. The idea is, ultimately, to design tailored programmes of intervention depending on the type of personality disorder involved (White & Gondolf, 2000).

From a therapeutic perspective, a growing interest has also been observed in psychological treatment for aggressors, particularly within a community environment. The outcome has been a number of specific intervention programmes for this type of aggressors, and the results in some cases are decidedly hopeful, especially with men who have completed the full programme (Echeburúa & Fernández-Montalvo, 1997). Psychological treatment, then, is currently seen as the most appropriate option, although one of the difficulties that exists is that of aggressors denying or at least minimizing the problem, as well as putting the blame for

the cause and perpetuation of the conflict onto their partners.

These results, hopeful as they are, refer largely to male abusers who have received no punishment or sentence for their violent behaviors. It may be assumed that the profile of aggressors imprisoned for acts of gender violence (bodily harm, homicide, sexual assault and so on) is quite different. This type of cases, although more serious, has in general terms received less attention, as prisoners serving sentences for violence against women represent a relatively small proportion of the total prison population and they usually adapt well to prison rules.

The task of detecting both risk and protection factors pertaining to violence against women is now a priority (Schumacher, Feldau-Kohn, Smith & Heyman, 2001). The aim of this study is to present the demographic, penal and psychopathological characteristics of those aggressors serving time in prison for an offence involving gender violence, with a view to designing specific intervention programmes for this type of offender at a later stage. This is a preliminary work that forms part of a wider study into treatment in prison of men who show violence towards women.

METHOD

Subjects

The sample for this study consists of 54 subjects imprisoned for a serious offence of violence against their intimate partner. These subjects are part of a research about the effectiveness of a pilot programme of psychological intervention with prisoners convicted of violence against women that is currently running in 7 Spanish penal institutions in 2001 and 2002.

Those selected for the sample were required to be: a) adult males (between 18 and 65); b) serving a sentence for a serious offence in relation to gender violence; c) not suffering from any serious mental disorder or disabling physical disease, and d) taking part voluntarily in the programme, having been properly informed of its characteristics.

Assessment Measures

a) Abuse variables

The *Inventory of Distorted Thoughts about Women* (Echeburúa & Fernández-Montalvo, 1998) comprises a checklist of 13 binary items aimed

at detecting irrational thoughts in the aggressor that are related to sexual roles and the inferiority of women. These thoughts are of great interest insofar as they are conducive to the display of violent behaviors. The subject has to state which ideas in the inventory correspond to his normal way of thinking. Each affirmative response scores one point, so that the inventory score ranges between 0 and 13 points. The higher is the score, the greater is the number of women-related cognitive distortions.

The *Inventory of Distorted Thoughts on the Use of Violence* (Echeburúa & Fernández-Montalvo, 1998) comprises a checklist of 16 binary items aimed at detecting irrational thoughts in the aggressor that are related with the use of violence as an acceptable way of resolving conflicts. These thoughts are extremely relevant to the extent that they are conducive to the display of violent behaviors. The subject has to state which ideas in the inventory correspond to his normal way of thinking. Each affirmative response scores one point, so that the inventory score ranges between 0 and 16 points. The higher is the score, the greater is the number of cognitive distortions connected with the use of violence as an acceptable way of resolving conflicts.

The *Interpersonal Response Index* (Davis, 1980) consists of 28 items that assess four components of empathy: *fantasy* (capacity for imagination and identification with fictional characters), *awareness of perspective* (capacity to appreciate the point of view of others), *empathic interest* (capacity for showing concern for persons who have negative experiences) and *personal grief* (capacity to feel the negative emotions of others as one's own). Each of the 28 items is marked on a Likert type scale which ranges from 0 (*absolute disagreement*) to 4 (*absolute agreement*). The full range of the scale is, therefore, from 0 to 112. The higher is the score, the greater is the empathic capacity. In this study, the Spanish version of Garrido & Beneyto (1995) was used.

b) Psychopathological and personality variables

The *SCL-90-R* (Derogatis, 1975; Spanish version of González de Rivera, 2002) is a self-administered general psychopathological assessment questionnaire. It comprises 90 items with 5 alternatives for each on a Likert type scale, ranging from 0 (*none*) to 4 (*very much*). The aim of the questionnaire is to reflect a subject's symptoms of psychological disturbance. As it has been shown to be sensitive to therapeutic change, it may be used for either single or repeated assessments. The *SCL-90-R* consists of nine areas of primary symptoms (somatization, obsessive-compulsive, interpersonal sensitivity, depression, anxiety, hostility, phobic anxiety, paranoid ideation and psychoticism). It also provides three overall indices that reflect the subject's overall level of severity. The cut-off point

of the global symptoms index (*GSI*) is 63.

The *State-Trait Anger Expression Inventory (STAXI)* (Spielberger, 1988; Spanish version of Miguel-Tobal, Casado & Cano-Vindel, 2001) consists of 10 items related with state-anger (the intensity of the emotion of anger in a specific situation) and a further 10 related with trait-anger (the individual disposition to experience anger habitually). The range of scores is from 10 to 40 on each scale. The *STAXI* also has a third subscale of 24 items connected with the form of expressing anger (anger expression-out, anger expression-in and anger control).

The *Impulsivity Scale (BIS-10)* (Barratt, 1985) consists of 33 items aimed at assessing how impulsive subjects are. Scores from 0 to 4 on a Likert type scale provide a total scale range of between 0 and 132. This instrument has 3 subscales of 11 items each, giving a range from 0 to 44. The first subscale assesses motor impulsivity, the second cognitive impulsivity, and the third assesses improvisation and failure to plan ahead. The higher is the score, the stronger is the presence of each trait measured on each subscale. The sum of all the subscales gives the total score. In this study, the Spanish version of Luengo, Carrillo de la Peña & Otero (1991) was used.

The aim of the *Self-esteem Scale* (Rosenberg, 1965) is to assess the feeling of satisfaction that a person has about him or herself. There are 10 general items, each carrying a score of between 1 and 4 on a Likert type scale, giving a questionnaire range of 10 to 40. The higher is the score, the greater is the level of self-esteem. The cut-off point for the adult population is 29. Test-retest reliability is .85, and the internal consistency *alpha* coefficient is .92. Convergent validity and discriminant validity are likewise satisfactory (*cf.* Zubizarreta, Sarasua, Echeburúa, Corral, Sauca & Emparanza, 1994). The Spanish version used in this study can be found in Fernández-Montalvo & Echeburúa (1997b).

c) *Adjustment variables*

The *Inadpatation Scale* (Echeburúa & Corral, 1987) reflects the extent to which the subject's current problems affect different areas of daily life: work, social life, free time, relationship with partner and family life. This instrument also has a subscale which takes account of the overall level of maladjustment in everyday life. The self-report comprises a total of 6 items, each carrying a score of between 0 and 5 in accordance with a Likert type scale. The full range of the instrument is therefore 0 to 30, with 12 points representing the overall cut-off point. The higher is the score, the greater is the level of inadpatation. The psychometric properties of this

scale can be found in Echeburúa, Corral & Fernández-Montalvo (2000).

Procedure

All the subjects completed the questionnaires individually in the psychologist's presence during pre-treatment assessment before the intervention programme.

This assessment was carried out during September and October 2001 by prison psychologists under the direction of the authors of this study.

RESULTS

The paragraphs below present first the results for demographic and penal characteristics. These are followed by the cognitive distortions and psychopathological, personality and adjustment variables relating to the subjects studied. Similarly, a comparison is drawn for the scores obtained for all the variables studied between subjects who have killed (or attempted to kill) their partner, and those who have not.

Sociodemographic and penal characteristics

The sociodemographic and penal characteristics of the sample are shown in *tables 1* and *2*. It may be seen that the mean age of the total sample is 40 (range: 27-58). The number of divorced men (57%) and widowers (20%) far exceeds that of married men (17%). This prevalence is associated with the type of subjects studied.

PLACE TABLES 1 AND 2 HERE

The level of education of most subjects is rather low, with a clear predominance of subjects who left school at the minimum leaving age (81%) and only 4% with university education. This means that the socio-economic level of the cases studied varies between the lower and middle classes.

Moreover, a previous history of psychiatric problems is observed in 22% of the sample, a percentage that is slightly higher than that of the general population (15-20%) (Klerman, 1986). The main disorders for which psychological or psychiatric attention has been administered are, in decreasing order, depression (54%), addictive behaviors (33%) and

personality disorders (13%) (*figure 1*).

PLACE FIGURE 1 HERE

From a penal point of view, the sample subjects had spent an average of 2.5 years in prison, the great majority serving the sentence for the crime committed under level two imprisonment conditions (without permissions for going out from prison). One significant aspect of this section is that almost half (46%) of the sample have killed their partner (or attempted to do so). Furthermore, 31% have a previous prison record, chiefly for bodily harm or threats (47%), theft (41%) and, to a lesser degree, for breach of the peace (6%) and illegal possession of arms (6%) (*figure 2*).

PLACE FIGURE 2 HERE

A comparison of results for demographic variables between those who have committed (or attempted) homicide and those who have not, reveals significant differences in marital status, with a larger percentage of widowers among the former and a larger percentage of divorced men among the latter. A further significant difference is that those who have not committed or attempted homicide are more likely to have a previous history of psychiatric problems (*table 3*).

PLACE TABLE 3 HERE

In terms of penal variables, significant differences between the two groups of subjects are evident in the longer sentences served in the case of the homicide group and the higher frequency of a previous criminal record among those not involved in homicide. No significant differences were found for the remaining variables studied.

Cognitive bias and psychopathological, personality and adjustment variables

The results for the total sample in regard to the main variables studied were subdivided into two subsamples (with and without homicide), as shown in *table 4*. In respect of cognitive bias, the subjects in the whole sample are characterized by a high presence of distorted ideas about women and the use of violence as an acceptable way of resolving conflicts.

Comparing the two subsamples reveals no significant differences for any of these variables.

PLACE TABLE 4 HERE

Results for personality variables are not highly enlightening: they show a low anger intensity in terms of both state-anger and trait-anger, as well as a moderate empathic capacity. Nevertheless, differences may be observed between the two subsamples in regard to anger, the score for which is significantly higher in the non-homicide subjects.

The subjects do not score significantly for impulsivity, nor are there any discernible differences in this variable between the two subsamples.

The subjects in the sample slightly exceed the cut-off point on the scale for self-esteem (set at 29 points). No alterations are therefore observed on this point. Nor are there any significant differences between the two subgroups.

However, aggressors show a high degree of maladjustment to everyday life, far exceeding the cut-off point on the scale (12 points), although there are no significant differences between the two subsamples.

On a psychopathological level, the results of the *SCL-90-R* symptoms inventory may be seen in *table 5*. The subjects studied show only a moderate level of psychopathological symptoms. In fact, as a group, their score is positive in 46 ($PST=45.7$) of the 90 items contained in the inventory. Furthermore, according to the *Global Symptoms Index (GSI)* ($X=46.2$), the symptoms do not appear with any great degree of intensity, as the cut-off point is not exceeded for any of the overall indices or even any of the specific dimensions.

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In terms of differentiating between the two subgroups for the *SCL-90-R*, significant differences may be noted in the three overall inventory indices, as well as in the dimensions of *depression*, *anxiety* and *paranoid ideation* (suspicion, hostility, grandiosity, etc.). Although neither of the subgroups exceeds the cut-off point for these dimensions, the homicides present less symptoms than the non-homicides.

Correlation between psychopathological variables and

sociodemographic and penal characteristics

The psychopathological variables studied are significantly correlated with only two variables: age and prison sentence served (*table 6*). More specifically, the older subjects present fewer distorted thoughts on the use of violence as a reasonable way of resolving conflicts, and a higher degree of inadaptation. Moreover, subjects serving longer prison terms have fewer distorted thoughts about women and show a lower predisposition to anger. They also show a lower severity of psychopathological symptomatology in the *SCL-90-R*, particularly with respect to depression and paranoid ideation.

PLACE TABLE 6 HERE

CONCLUSIONS

The psychopathological profile of men who are violent towards women has already been the focus of other studies carried out in a community environment (*cf.* Fernández-Montalvo & Echeburúa, 1997a). The aim of this particular research was to delimit this profile to concentrate on men who have committed serious offences of gender-based violence and who are serving long prison sentences.

From a sociodemographic perspective, the subjects have a mean age of around 40, only a very basic education and are of lower-middle and lower social class. The most characteristic feature of this group is the high percentage of divorced men (among those who have not committed homicide) and widowers (among those who have), which is directly related to the type of offence committed (violence against women). The incidence of past histories of psychiatric problems in the sample is only slightly higher than in the population as a whole. This proves that perpetrators of aggression against women cannot strictly be described as *mentally ill* (White & Gondolf, 2000), though it must be pointed out that subjects with serious mental disorders were excluded from the study.

In criminological terms, almost half of the subjects have killed their partners (or attempted to do so), which is why the prison sentences are rather long. More than two-thirds of the sample had no previous prison record, an indication of the specific nature of gender-based violence outside the course of a criminal career.

From the psychopathological viewpoint, the symptomatology currently presented is not very high, especially among those who have spent a long time in prison. It is as if prison *smoothes* the subjects out,

freeing them from further stressful situations and resigning them to their situation. The only aspect that stands out with these subjects is the degree of maladjustment to everyday life, probably derived from their prison term, and the extent among them of distorted thoughts about women and the use of violence as a means of tackling confrontations. The older is the subject, however, the less severe the cognitive bias tends to be, perhaps because such subjects have become more mindful of the situation and more aware of the inadequacy of the pattern of behavior in question.

Comparison between those subjects who have committed or attempted to commit homicide and those who have not provides some enlightening results. Previous psychiatric and prison records are much more common and current emotional instability more intense in those who have committed *minor* offences as compared with those who have committed serious ones. That is to say, the profile of those involved in homicides equates with that of a relatively normal person without a previous criminal career who loses control in a fit of rage or passion and commits a serious offence or, as Huss & Langhinrichsen (2000) also state, that of a psychopath who without any previous emotional instability commits the offence in a non empathic manner. The profile of non-homicides sentenced for causing bodily harm, on the other hand, corresponds to that of a person with a previous history of psychiatric problems (depression and addictions), who is at the time irascible and emotionally unstable and has a long criminal record (particularly bodily harm, threats and theft), reflecting the existence of a career of delinquency (*cf.* Schumacher *et al.*, 2001). In short, murderers were more adjusted to everyday life before being involved in homicide. The establishment of these profiles would appear to be especially useful since they are more precise than those obtained in other studies (*cf.* Holtzworth, 2000).

The weight of social desirability in the low level of psychopathology encountered cannot be disregarded in this study. Such desirability may be greater than expected since we are considering subjects who are prison inmates. In short, affecting a degree of *normality* in front of assessors may be one way of gaining faster access to probation.

Finally, future research ought to focus on replicating typology shown in this study, on monitoring the social desirability of these subjects and on comparing the profiles of these violent men in prison with those of aggressors studied and treated within a community-based programme.

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TABLE 1
DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF SAMPLE

VARIABLES	TOTAL SAMPLE (N=54)	
	N	(%)
Mean age (range)	40.2 (27-58)	
Marital status		
Married	9	(16.6%)
Single	3	(5.5%)
Divorced	31	(57.4%)
Widowed	11	(20.3%)
Education		
None	2	(3.7%)
Primary studies	44	(81.4%)
Secondary studies	6	(11.1%)
University	2	(3.7%)
Socioeconomic status		
Low	11	(20.3%)
Middle-low	20	(37.1%)
Middle	21	(38.8%)
Middle-high	2	(3.7%)
High	0	
Previous psychiatric history		
Yes	12	(22.2%)
No	42	(77.7%)

TABLE 2
PENAL CHARACTERISTICS OF SAMPLE

VARIABLES	TOTAL SAMPLE (N=54)	
	----- N (%)	
Months in prison (range)	29.8 (1-100)	
Penal situation		
Punished	48	(88.9%)
Preventive	6	(11.1%)
Crime type		
Gender violence with homicide	25	(46.3%)
Gender violence without homicide	29	(53.7%)
Penitentiary classification		
First degree	0	
Second degree	45	(83.3%)
Third degree (probation)	0	
Preventive	4	(7.4%)
Without classification	5	(9.2%)
Criminal records		
Yes	17	(31.5%)
No	37	(68.5%)

TABLE 3
COMPARISON AMONG SUBJECTS WITH HOMICIDE AND WITHOUT HOMICIDE IN
THE SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC AND PENAL VARIABLES

	With homicide N=25 ----- Mean (SD)	Without homicide N=29 ----- Mean (SD)	<i>t</i>
Age	42.4 (8.8)	38.3 (7.7)	1.75
Months in prison	43.1 (23.6)	19.2 (14.1)	4.51 *
	With homicide N=25 ----- N (%)	Without homicide N=29 ----- N (%)	χ^2
Marital status			
Married	2 (8%)	7 (24.1%)	11.82 **
Single	1 (4%)	2 (6.9%)	
Divorced	12 (48%)	19 (65.5%)	
Widowed	10 (40%)	1 (3.4%)	
Education			
None	1 (4%)	1 (3.4%)	3.84
Primary studies	18 (72%)	26 (89.7%)	
Secondary studies	4 (16%)	2 (6.9%)	
University	2 (8%)	0	
Socioeconomic status			
Low	4 (16%)	7 (24.1%)	3.93
Middle-low	11 (44%)	9 (31%)	
Middle	8 (32%)	13 (44.8%)	
Middle-high	2 (8%)	0	
Previous psychiatric history			
Yes	2 (8.3%)	10 (34.5%)	5.12 *
No	22 (91.7%)	19 (65.5%)	
Criminal records			
Yes	3 (12%)	14 (48.3%)	8.19 **
No	22 (88%)	15 (51.7%)	

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

TABLE 4
COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS AND PERSONALITY AND
ADJUSTMENT VARIABLES

	Total sample N=54 -----	With homicide N=25 -----	Without homicide N=29 -----	<i>t</i>
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	
Cognitive bias about women	4.7 (2.3)	4.1 (2.2)	5.1 (2.4)	1.75
Cognitive bias about violence use	6.6 (2.2)	6.5 (2.3)	6.6 (2.1)	0.05
Empaty	61.8 (13.7)	60 (13.6)	63.3 (13.9)	0.89
State-anger	13.5 (4.6)	12.1 (3.1)	14.8 (5.3)	2.28 *
Trait-anger	15.8 (5.1)	14.3 (3.8)	17.1 (5.5)	2.09 *
Impulsivity	46.2 (17.3)	41.5 (16.1)	50.1 (17.7)	1.83
Self-esteem	29.8 (4.5)	30.1 (3.8)	29.6 (5.1)	0.31
Inadaptation	17.8 (7.6)	17.8 (7.7)	17.8 (7.6)	0.01

* $p < .05$

TABLE 5
RESULTS IN THE SCL-90-R (Derogatis, 1975)

	Total sample N=54		With homicide N=25		Without homicide N=29		<i>t</i>
	Mean	(SD)	Mean	(SD)	Mean	(SD)	
GSI	46.2	(11.1)	42.5	(8.7)	49.4	(12.1)	2.35 *
PSDI	46.2	(11.6)	41.3	(7.7)	50.4	(12.8)	3.07 **
PST	45.7	(14.6)	41.5	(13.9)	49.4	(14.3)	2.05 *
Somatization	50.8	(12.9)	48.4	(10.1)	52.8	(14.8)	1.26
Obsessive-compulsive	44.4	(11.1)	42.1	(8.1)	46.4	(12.8)	1.47
Interpersonal sensitivity	41.2	(15.7)	39.2	(14.1)	42.8	(17.1)	0.83
Depression	46.7	(9.5)	43.2	(7.3)	49.7	(10.1)	2.64 **
Anxiety	43.5	(13.4)	39.7	(11.9)	46.9	(13.9)	2.01 *
Hostility	40.3	(18.1)	36.5	(18.3)	43.6	(17.4)	1.46
Phobic anxiety	39.6	(20.2)	38.8	(18.1)	40.4	(22.2)	0.29
Paranoid ideation	46.8	(15.5)	42.2	(17.8)	50.8	(12.3)	2.10 *
Psychoticism	41.6	(19.2)	36.4	(18.4)	45.9	(19.1)	1.83

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

TABLE 6
SIGNIFICATIVE CORRELATIONS BETWEEN DEMOGRAPHIC AND
PENAL CHARACTERISTICS AND PSYCHOPATHOLOGICAL
VARIABLES

VARIABLES	AGE	MONTHS IN PRISON
Cognitive bias about women		-.31 *
Cognitive bias about violence use	-.28 *	
Trait-anger		-.27 *
Inadaptation	.28 *	
GSI		-.29 *
PSDI		-.38 **
Depression		-.32 *
Paranoid ideation		-.28 *

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$



