

Analysis of selected personality characteristics of perpetrators and victims of intimate partner violence

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Abstract The present study explores selected personality characteristics of perpetrators and victims of intimate partner violence (IPV), utilizing projective techniques such as the Rorschach Inkblot Method and the Hand Test. The primary aim is to analyze similarities and differences in personality traits between these groups, with the research sample comprising individuals assessed for forensic purposes. This unique perspective sheds light on the psychological profiles pertinent to IPV cases. Key findings reveal distinct patterns in emotional regulation, aggression, impulsivity, and coping mechanisms. Perpetrators exhibit increased impulsivity and aggression, while victims demonstrate higher emotional instability and anxiety. These findings enhance our understanding of IPV dynamics and support the development of tailored interventions for each group. The study underscores the significance of a dyadic, interactive approach to IPV, focusing on both partners' roles within relationship dynamics. It expands the existing knowledge on IPV in the Slovak context, providing valuable insights for forensic assessments, therapeutic strategies, and prevention efforts. The results highlight the need for multidimensional frameworks to address the complexity of IPV and its broader societal implications.

Keywords Intimate Partner Violence, Projective Methods, Forensic Assessment

1. INTRODUCTION

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a significant societal problem with profound and multifaceted consequences for individuals, families, and communities. This phenomenon encompasses a range of abusive behaviors, including physical violence, emotional abuse, sexual violence, and coercive control, each leaving lasting psychological, physical, and social impacts. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), IPV is one of the most widespread forms of violence, affecting millions globally each year and transcending cultural, economic, and social boundaries.

Although its global relevance is widely recognized, IPV is not a uniform phenomenon; instead, it exhibits diverse patterns influenced by cultural, psychological, and social factors (Straus, 1990; Johnson, 1995). Within Slovakia, research on IPV remains scarce, underscoring the need for studies that explore the unique dynamics and psychological characteristics of both perpetrators and victims in this context.

This study adopts a dyadic perspective, emphasizing the interactive patterns between partners to understand the complexities of IPV. Previous research, such as Fortis (2018), has highlighted the utility of projective techniques like the Rorschach Inkblot Method and the Hand Test in examining aggression and dysfunctional behaviors in intimate relationships. Her findings revealed comparable levels of aggression across genders, with men demonstrating a slightly higher tendency toward aggressive behavior. Similarly, Rode et al. (2015) and Čírtková (2020) have stressed the importance of understanding psychosocial characteristics, attachment styles, and motivations for violence, while distinguishing between different types of IPV to tailor effective interventions.

Societal and cultural norms further shape the expression and acceptability of IPV. Often, violence within intimate relationships is driven by a desire to maintain control, exert power, and influence the partner. Both male and female perpetrators display these dynamics, as evidenced by studies like Prakash et al. (2018) and Mazza et al. (2021). The psychological toll of IPV is substantial, with victims frequently experiencing depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder. These findings reinforce the importance of tailored approaches that address the psychological, relational, and cultural dimensions of IPV.

This research seeks to expand the understanding of IPV by analyzing selected personality characteristics of perpetrators and victims within the Slovak context. By employing projective techniques such as the Rorschach Inkblot Method and the Hand Test, the study provides a detailed examination of psychological profiles relevant to IPV cases. This work aims to inform forensic assessments, therapeutic interventions, and policy development, contributing valuable insights to the field of IPV research and prevention.

2. METHOD

2.1 Research Design

This study employs a cross-sectional forensic research design to investigate selected personality characteristics of victims and perpetrators of intimate partner violence (IPV). The research focuses on individuals who underwent forensic psychological assessments related to IPV cases in Slovakia between 2019 and 2023.

2.2 Participants

The study sample consisted of 169 individuals, including 87 victims (86 women and 1 man, mean age = 47.34 years, SD = 15.62) and 82 perpetrators (81 men and 1 woman, mean age = 46.85 years, SD = 11.78). All participants were assessed as part of court-ordered forensic evaluations conducted during criminal investigations into domestic violence offenses. Eligibility criteria included documented victim or perpetrator status in IPV cases and age under 65 years. Exclusion criteria encompassed individuals involved in same-sex relationships or cases that did not meet the criteria of an intimate partnership.

2.3 Measurement Methods

To evaluate psychological characteristics, two projective techniques were employed: 1) Rorschach Inkblot Method: Administered and interpreted according to Exner's Comprehensive System, this method was used to assess emotional regulation, impulse control, and personality dynamics; 2) Hand Test: Applied to evaluate aggressive tendencies, coping mechanisms, and interpersonal functioning.

These tools were selected for their ability to provide nuanced insights into the psychological profiles of individuals involved in IPV and their consistency in forensic psychological practice.

2.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the Rorschach Inkblot Method and the Hand Test were analyzed using SPSS. Normality testing revealed non-normal distributions, necessitating non-parametric methods. Chi-square tests and Mann-Whitney U tests were used for group comparisons, while multivariate logistic regression identified predictors of group membership. Effect sizes (e.g., Cohen's *d*) provided practical significance, with results interpreted through a clinical lens.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

The use of data complied with § 13(3) of Act No. 382/2004 Coll. on Experts, Interpreters, and Translators, which permits the processing of data for scientific and educational purposes. Data processing adhered to principles of personal data protection and anonymization, with all analyses conducted exclusively at an aggregate level.

3. RESULTS

From the extensive statistical data collected, we present only the most statistically significant findings, focusing on five key variables from the Rorschach Inkblot Method: Lambda, CDI, WSumC, Afr, and EA. These variables provide critical insights into the psychological characteristics of IPV victims and perpetrators. For each result, Cohen's *d* is reported as a measure of effect size, with values of *d* = 0.2 indicating small effects, *d* = 0.5 moderate effects, and *d* = 0.8 large effects.

Lambda measures the tendency to simplify complex stimuli. Higher values indicate a defensive coping style aimed at reducing psychological stress. Perpetrators had significantly higher Lambda scores (mean = 2.00) compared to victims (mean = 1.57; $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.57$), reflecting their reliance on simplifying strategies to manage stress.

CDI (Coping Deficit Index) assesses the ability to cope with stressful situations. Higher scores suggest difficulties in adaptation,

limited social maturity, and weaker coping mechanisms. Perpetrators exhibited significantly higher CDI scores (mean = 4.15) than victims (mean = 3.77; $p = 0.004$, $d = 0.51$), indicating greater deficits in coping strategies.

WSumC (Weighted Sum of Color Responses) reflects the ability to regulate emotions and process emotional stimuli. Lower scores indicate limited emotional regulation capabilities. Perpetrators demonstrated significantly lower WSumC scores compared to victims, highlighting their weaker capacity for emotional regulation ($p < 0.05$, $d = 0.48$).

Afr (Affective Ratio) measures emotional reactivity, with higher values representing greater emotional engagement and more intense emotional responses. Victims had significantly higher Afr scores ($p < 0.01$, $d = 0.52$) than perpetrators, indicating their heightened emotional reactivity.

EA (Experience Actual) represents the breadth of available psychological resources for coping with environmental demands. Scores below 6 suggest limited adaptive capacity. Both victims (mean = 4.53) and perpetrators (mean = 4.29) demonstrated significantly lower EA scores compared to normative data, indicating reduced resources for managing stress and challenges ($p = 0.310$, $d = 0.16$).

4. DISCUSSION

This study highlights significant psychological differences between IPV victims and perpetrators, emphasizing their distinct coping styles and emotional capacities. Perpetrators rely heavily on defensive mechanisms (elevated Lambda) and exhibit limited emotional regulation (low WSumC). Their elevated CDI scores indicate maladaptive coping strategies, which may exacerbate aggressive behaviours. In contrast, victims display heightened emotional sensitivity (higher Afr) and slightly better emotional regulation but still face deficits in adaptive capacity (lower EA). These findings align with prior research, underscoring the psychological toll of IPV on both victims and perpetrators.

Lambda and Defensive Strategies

Perpetrators' significantly higher Lambda scores indicate a pronounced reliance on simplifying complex stimuli as a defensive coping mechanism. This tendency aligns with maladaptive responses to stress, enabling perpetrators to distance themselves from the emotional complexities of their actions. Victims, while scoring lower, also exhibited elevated Lambda values, reflecting a defensive response to chronic stress within abusive relationships.

If IPV is viewed as primarily motivated by a desire to exert control and dominance, often stemming from fear of abandonment or failure to elicit desired behaviour, perpetrators' elevated Lambda values highlight the narrowed perception through which they interpret their circumstances. This narrowed cognitive framework leads perpetrators to act on immediate impressions or "cues," often without deeper reflection on the context or long-term consequences of their actions. Such behaviour is less indicative of inherent violence and more representative of immature and restricted personality traits.

Coping Deficits and CDI

The elevated CDI scores among perpetrators highlight difficulties in managing interpersonal relationships and coping with stress. These findings point to their limited social maturity and less developed adaptive strategies, which may exacerbate violent behaviours. Victims, despite scoring lower than perpetrators, also demonstrated

coping deficits near the clinical threshold, suggesting that prolonged exposure to abuse undermines their ability to adapt effectively.

The motivations driving perpetrators often include enforcing control, eliciting desired behaviour, punishing perceived disloyalty, and asserting dominance. These patterns align with the maladaptive mechanisms associated with high CDI scores.

Emotional Regulation: WSumC and Afr

Perpetrators' lower WSumC scores underscore their limited capacity for emotional regulation, which likely contributes to impulsive and aggressive behaviour. In contrast, victims' higher WSumC values indicate relatively better emotional regulation, albeit still below normative expectations.

Afr scores further differentiate the groups: victims' heightened emotional reactivity, as indicated by higher Afr values, reflects intense emotional engagement and sensitivity. This vulnerability may amplify the psychological toll of abuse and perpetuate cycles of victimization.

EA and Adaptive Capacity

Both groups demonstrated lower-than-normative EA values, suggesting limited psychological resources for managing environmental demands. While victims scored slightly higher, the results emphasize significant deficits in adaptive capacity for both groups, underscoring the need for targeted interventions.

Implications for Practice

These findings emphasize the necessity of tailoring interventions to address the distinct psychological profiles of IPV victims and perpetrators. Therapeutic approaches for perpetrators should focus on enhancing emotional regulation and developing adaptive coping strategies, targeting defensive patterns reflected in high Lambda and low WSumC scores. Interventions could also address perpetrators' reliance on violence as a maladaptive strategy to manage insecurity and maintain control within the relationship.

For victims, interventions should aim to bolster emotional resilience and expand adaptive resources, such as increasing EA scores and addressing vulnerabilities related to heightened Afr values. Addressing the psychological nuances of both groups is essential for breaking the cycle of IPV.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study offers valuable insights, it is not without limitations. The reliance on forensic samples may restrict generalizability to the broader population. Additionally, the exclusion of same-sex relationships limits the applicability of findings to this demographic. Future research should aim to validate these findings in diverse populations and explore longitudinal effects to capture the evolution of psychological patterns in IPV dynamics.

5. CONCLUSION

By elucidating distinct psychological patterns among IPV victims and perpetrators, this study advances the understanding of IPV dynamics. These findings provide a foundation for developing more effective, evidence-based forensic assessments, therapeutic interventions, and prevention strategies. Addressing the psychological nuances of IPV is essential for mitigating its profound impact on individuals and relationships.

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