Abstract

Research exploring domestic abuse victims has primarily focused on the shorter term avenues of support for victims and the risk factors which put women at risk of victimization. There is limited research exploring the belief systems of domestically abused women that need to be targeted to achieve longer term effects. The present study therefore explored the association between the beliefs of abused women and their experiences as victims. Twenty-one women with a history of domestic abuse were asked about their attitudes towards authority figures and perceived opportunities around the time of their abusive experience. Data were analyzed using Smallest Space Analysis (SSA). Four distinct belief themes (personal responsibility, antisocial attitudes, environmental factors, and negative police attitudes) were found in the analysis. The findings highlighted not only the importance of considering the long standing and personalized beliefs of abuse victims, but also demonstrates the need for support services to offer more personalized support to abuse victims to help change their belief systems. Although this research sets the groundwork in understanding the beliefs of domestic abuse victims, these results need to be built upon with future research examining the wider implications of targeting the belief systems of domestically abused women.

Exploring the belief systems of domestic abuse victims using Smallest Space Analysis (SSA)

Each year over two million women are victims of domestic abuse, with one in four women experiencing abuse in their lifetime (Office for National Statistics, 2013). Domestic abuse transcends gender, social status, age and sexual orientation, and is defined by the Home Office (2013) as violence of any description that occurs between partners who are, or were, in an intimate relationship. The abuse includes (but is not limited to): physical, sexual, emotional, and verbal. The staggering rates of domestic abuse comes at a high financial price to the Criminal Justice System, health and community services, with, for example, the United Kingdom (UK) spending an estimated £3.1 billion every year in these areas and a further loss of £2.7 billion to the economy due to women's inability to work while recovering from injuries (Walby, 2004). In addition to the economic costs, the personal cost to victims is also substantial, often impacting on victims psychological, emotional and social lives (Cohen, Miler & Rossman, 1994). In essence, the overarching impact of domestic abuse has substantial ramifications for both the economy and victims of abuse, as a result, finding the most effective and cost efficient approaches to supporting victims of domestic abuse, is an ongoing and imperative area to explore.

With that, although there are a number of support service provisions which provide victims with immediate emotional, practical and professional assistance (Spruin, Alleyne, & Papadaki, 2015), there is a lack of specialised support (Coy, Kelly, & Foord, 2007), whereby victims can be provided with more individualized help. Nonetheless, a major barrier with providing more person-centre support, is the cost involved to individualise such services (Hester & Westmorland, 2005). As such, there is a need for further research to explore more individualised and long-term strategies for helping victims of abuse. Investigating the thoughts and beliefs of these women could be one pathway in developing these strategies. More specifically, cognitive therapist have devoted much attention to understanding beliefs,

which are thought to play a key role in the maintenance of long-term problems (Beck et al., 1990). Research has further found that some of the most effective treatment outcomes credit positive results to changing maladaptive beliefs and building more adaptive ones (Padesky, 1994). As such, if significant beliefs could be identified and clustered within domestic abuse victims, support services could develop treatment strategies to help victims challenge and build alternative beliefs, thereby providing effective and more long-term support.

The purpose of the current study is therefore to: (1) identify key thoughts and beliefs most associated to women who have experienced domestic abuse; and (2) identify whether these beliefs cluster into broader categories that could help tailor support services to maximize meeting the needs of women who are victims of domestic abuse.

Support Service Provision

Henning and Klesges (2002) explored the utilization of support services and found that out of a sample of 1756 women who identified themselves as having been a victim of domestic abuse, only 14.9% of women reported using the services that were available. They reported that the reasons for not accessing support services related to the type of support available, specifically, many women felt that it would be more beneficial if services provided varied and individual lines of support, rather than the generic, one-size-fits-all services, which are often available. In addition, Powell and Smith (2011) emphasized the importance of understanding the individual experience of domestic abuse, as victims will all have different experiences, and the impact of these experiences will differentiate individually. It is therefore vital for support services to provide sources of support which are person-centred and relates to victims unique experience of domestic abuse.

In the UK, support services for victims of domestic abuse are primarily focused on immediate and professional support (Spruin et al., 2015). Immediate support encompasses a number of instrumental services such as: emergency helplines, refuges, temporary

accommodation and support workers (Refuge, 2015), whilst professional support encompasses services such as legal and counselling support (Henning & Klesges, 2002). However, this support appears to lack longer term provision that targets long-standing factors known to play key roles in the occurrence of domestic violence and abuse. For instance, previous research highlights the strong relationship between the entrenched negative beliefs of abused women as risk factors that impact their recovery long-term (Martin et al., 2000).

More specifically, research has shown that many victims show negative attitudes towards police officers, often viewing them as unsympathetic or lacking empathy (Stalans & Finn, 2006). Similar research has found that victims hold negative beliefs about themselves, believing that they are helpless (Tan et al., 1995) or to blame for their victimisation (Street & Arias, 2001). Russell and colleagues (2015) contended that even though there are numerous sources of support available for victims, such as; advocacies, hot lines, support groups, and shelters, these resources do not meet the long-term needs of all victims of domestic abuse. Further research has indicted that some of the most pervasive risk factors to long term problems are presented through negative beliefs, as such, the most effective support to creating long-term change results from adapting negative beliefs (Padesky, 1994). Despite the evidence suggesting the greater need to explore and treat the negative beliefs of victims, support services continue to provide assistance towards the most immediate issues. It could therefore be argued that current support services are in need of an evidence base for understanding some of the entrenched negative beliefs of abuse victims, which could result in providing more long-term support to a greater number of victims. The current study therefore examines the beliefs of domestic abuse victims, exploring the various clusters of beliefs that these women may present. These results could then be utilised by support services to help victims challenge and build alternative beliefs.

Risk Factors

Researchers have worked towards understanding individual risk factors which make women more likely to become victims of domestic abuse. For example, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2015) identified individual factors such as low academic achievement, unemployment and economic stress, coupled with community factors such as unwillingness of the community to intervene and sanction the perpetrator. Along a similar line of inquiry, research investigating risk factors for intimate partner violence and abuse discovered that child abuse, growing up in a household where domestic violence occurred and experiencing other forms of violence were all factors that increased the risk of domestic violence and abuse (Garcia-Moreno et al., 2006; Abramsky et al., 2011).

Researchers have further explored how the presence of such risk factors perpetrates the on-going cycle of abuse (Walker, 1979). This cycle highlights common pattern of abuse, which consists of three stages; Tension building, acute battering and the honeymoon phase. During the tension building phase, strain builds over common domestic issues (i.e., money, children, jobs), which eventually boils over to the acute battering episode. This eventually leading to the honeymoon phase, where the abuser apologies for their behaviour, convincing the partner it will not happen again. This contrite behaviour strengthens the bond between partners and convinces the victim of their generosity. This cycle continues over and over, each time, strengthening the victim's false beefs about the relationship (Engel, 2005).

The cycle of abuse concept and the risk factors attached to the cycle, has been widely used as the basis for the amenities offered by support services, as most services provide immediate assistance in breaking the cycle of abuse (Spruin et al., 2015).Critics have thus argued that this approached is drastically flawed (Dutton & Golant. 1997), as research and support services have focused on identifying and assisting victims on the factors that put individuals at risk of domestic abuse. This method therefore fails to address how these factors can be targeted by support services; that is, the dynamic factors that services can affect

change via the support they provide. Accordingly, further research needs to be carried out on how individual risk factors inform the cognitive processes and beliefs of abuse victims, thereby allowing for more individualized support strategies to be developed and implemented (Stith, Smith, Penn, Ward, & Tritt, 2004).

There have been studies with the aim of identifying the specific thoughts and beliefs that facilitate the traumatic cycle of domestic abuse. For example, Hyde-Nolan and Juliao (2012) examined the relationship between remaining in and/or returning to an abusive relationship and the theory of learned helplessness (i.e., attempts to escape/avoid future instances of abuse are learned to be no longer effective after having past experiences of abuse), as experiencing repeated abuse may lead a woman to become passive as they feel that there is nothing they can do to avoid the abuse (Hyde-Nolan & Juliao, 2012). Learned helplessness is therefore seen as a factor contributing to women staying in abusive relationships as well as returning to abusive relationships as the beliefs associated with their helpless thoughts are entrenched in their developed schemas (McPherson Halket, Gormley, Mello, Rosenthal & Mirkin, 2014).

Along with the research showing the impact that victims beliefs have on their cycle of abuse, researcher has further found that the perceived opportunities of victims can impact their decision to stay in an abusive relationship. For instance, using qualitative interviews, Spruin and colleagues (2015) identified three themes that are characteristic of domestic abuse victim experiences: (1) the quality of their first intimate relationship, (2) their perceptions of their quality of life prior to the domestic abuse, and (3) their perceptions of the support services available post- and/or during abusive experiences. One particular factor that emerged in this study was the need for more support that focused on education and occupational matters. These findings suggest that the likelihood of leaving and/or returning to an abusive relationship is inter-twined with perceived opportunities. It could therefore be argued that the

beliefs which abuse victims have about their opportunities, along with the negative beliefs they hold, have an immense impact on their long-term survival as a domestic abuse victim.

Despite this emerging evidence highlighting the long-term impact that beliefs and attitudes can have on victims of domestic abuse, research remains focused on the immediate risk factors which contribute to the cycle of violence, whilst support services continue to provide immediate resources to break this cycle. For that reason, research needs to explore more contemporary viewpoints in the cycle of domestic abuse (Dutton & Corvo), for example, investigating the beliefs of domestic abuse victims and how these beliefs play a part in the cycle of abuse. Once this area is explored further, support services can develop and implement more long-term strategies to infinitely stop the cycle of abuse.

The Current Study

Research within the disciplines of health and social science have provided a succinct understanding of the lived experience of domestic abuse, often captured through the use of a phenomenological framework (Baird, 2012). The phenomenological framework allows for a detailed description of domestic abuse and the experience of it (Oliveira et al., 2015). For example, Oliveira and colleagues (2015) focuses on women's experiences of fear in violent relationships. Despite such detailed approaches to understanding domestic violence and through this the support needs of women experiencing this (Murray et al., 2015), there is little research that focuses on the belief systems of those subjected to domestic abuse (Spruin et al., 2015). Further understanding of the thoughts and beliefs of victimized women could help to tailor interventions to provide individualized support for them (Murray et al., 2015).

Accordingly, the current study focuses on exploring the belief systems of domestically abused women. Smallest Space Analysis (SSA; Lingoes, 1973) was introduced to allow for a test of hypotheses concerning the co-occurrence of every variable with every other variable, thereby allowing for the underlying structure of the participants' beliefs to be

identified, and enabling an investigation of the relationship (if any) that the participants' beliefs may have with their domestic abuse experience and their willingness to seek help. Therefore, the overall aim of the study is to conceptualize the association between the beliefs of abused women and their experiences as victims. Understanding the entrenched beliefs of these women is one pathway for providing domestic abuse victims with more effective long-term support. More importantly, support services can be redesigned to offer abused women more than just immediate provisions and counselling. Instead, they can provide women with individual tools to help them recover and rebuild their lives over the course of a lifetime.

Methods

Design

This study is a cross-sectional study using Smallest Space Analysis as a profiling tool to identify the belief systems of women who have experienced domestic abuse.

Participants

Twenty-one women with a history of domestic abuse were recruited for the current study. Participants were recruited via a local university ($n = 9$) and local support centres ($n = 12$) in South East England. At the time of data collection, participants recruited from local support services were attending a support group for their past abuse. The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 55 ($M = 28.95$, $SD = 10.67$), with ethnicities including White European ($n = 11$; 52.0%); White British ($n = 6$; 28.8%); Black British ($n = 2$; 9.6%); Mixed British ($n = 1$; 4.8%) and Asian ($n = 1$; 4.8%). The employment status of participants was varied, with 42.8% ($n = 9$) classifying as students, 28.6% ($n = 6$) were unemployed and the remaining participants stating some form of employment ($n = 6$; 28.6%). The highest level of educational achieved was less varied, with the vast majority stating that they obtained a university qualification ($n = 15$; 71.4%), whilst the remaining participants indicated completion of secondary school or equivalent ($n = 6$; 28.6%). Close to half of the participants

reported being single ($n = 9$; 42.9%) with an equal number of participants in a relationship ($n = 9$; 42.9%), whilst the remaining participants were either married ($n = 2$; 9.6%) or divorced ($n = 1$; 4.8%). The majority of participants indicated that they had no children ($n = 13$; 61.9%), whilst the remaining participants stated they had 1 ($n = 3$; 14.3%), or 3 children ($n = 5$; 23.8%).

Materials

Participants were asked to complete the following questionnaires. Upon completion, participants were asked if they would like to elaborate on any of their answers to the questionnaires, or provide any further information about the time of their abusive experience. The majority of participants ($n = 12$; 57.1%) took the opportunity to elaborate on their abusive experience and/or provided answers.

The *Attitude Towards Formal Authority Scale (Reicher and Emler, 1985)* is a 17-item questionnaire assessing attitudes towards authority figures, such as school officials and the police, along with perceptions on rules being broken. In this study, the five items specifically assessing attitudes towards the police (e.g., "The police pick on me and give me a bad time"), along with the three items related to breaking the rules (e.g., "It is alright to do something against the law, or that you know is wrong, like stealing, if you can get away with it"), were used from the scale. All responses were assessed using a 5-point Likert-type scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree). The scale was scored such that a high score represents less trust and respect for institutional authority. For the current sample, reliabilities for attitudes towards police ($\alpha = 0.71$) and breaking the rules ($\alpha = 0.81$) were good.

The *Perceived Opportunity Scale* is a 10-item questionnaire devised for the purpose of this study. The measure assesses participants' beliefs about two areas: (1) past opportunities (e.g., "The schools I went to were not good enough to get me a job I'd like"), and (2) perceived opportunities at the time of their abusive experience (e.g., "There is a lack

of good job opportunities in or near my community"). Each item is scored on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The overall scale for the current sample was deemed to be reliable ($\alpha = 0.72$).

Procedure

Data were collected from local support centers and a local university. To be eligible to participate in the study, women had to be aged 18 years or older, emotionally stable, fluent in English and willing to answer questions about an episode of domestic abuse (in the past or currently). Participants were advised that the operational definition of an 'episode of domestic abuse' was defined as any violence perpetrated by an intimate partner; including, physical, verbal and sexual violence (Shrivastava & Shrivastava, 2013). Emotional stability of participants referred to their ability to remain calm and unprovoked when discussing personal incidence of domestic abuse. This criteria was assessed by ensuring all participants felt able and comfortable to disclose details of their incident of domestic abuse. If any participants felt that disclosing these details would provoke a stressful and/or unstable state, they were asked not to participate in the study.

Participants who met the inclusion criteria were provided with a full verbal briefing regarding the purpose of the research. If participants agreed to take part in the study, they were asked to read and sign a consent form and were allocated a participant number to ensure confidentiality. In addition to the information sheet provided, the researcher also verbally explained to all participants that their responses were completely confidential and only the researcher would have the key to indicate which number belongs to which participant. Upon signing the consent form, all participants were asked to complete the *Attitude Toward Formal Authority Scale* and the *Perceived Opportunity Scale.* Both questionnaires took approximately 10–20 minutes to complete. Once participants had completed the questionnaires, they were then asked if they would like to verbally elaborate on any of their

answers to the questionnaires, or provide any further information about the time of their abusive experience. Once this portion of the study was completed, all participants were debriefed verbally and thanked for their assistance with the research.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Smallest Space Analysis (SSA; Lingoes, 1973), which is a form of multidimensional scaling (MDS). The use of the SSA procedure allows for a test of hypotheses concerning the co-occurrence of every variable in relation to every other variable, visually displaying the correlations between variables as distances in a statistically derived geometric space, allowing for the underlying structure of the data to be identified. The visual display provides further opportunity to explore individual items, allowing for inferences to be drawn from the patterns or themes that emerge.

The SSA procedure was used as an alternative to other algorithms, as it is considered a very flexible methodology to use because emphasis is placed on helping to systematize data in areas where organizing concepts and underlying dimensions are not well-developed (Schiffman, Reynolds & Young, 1981). Moreover, the procedure attempts to find the best fit between the ranks of the association coefficients and the ranks of the distances within the geographic space, thereby producing solutions in the smallest dimensionality and compensating for noise found within the data (Guttman, 1968). This method of matching ranks has been found to produce more efficient solutions, along with being less sensitive to extreme values and limited sample sizes (Lingoes, 1973). With that, information about the structure is contained in the order of similarities among the variables in the association matrix. This contrasts to similar forms of analysis, such as factor analysis, which considers the linear combination of the factors, failing to reveal the qualitative nature of the inter-relationships between variables (Donald, 1985).

Ultimately, the SSA configuration is developed from relationships among variables; therefore, the configuration can be examined directly without assuming underlying orthogonal dimensions, allowing for the underlying structure of the data to emerge (Canter & Heritage, 1989). Moreover, the method has been used to investigate similar data, such as the structure of personality beliefs (e.g., Kumar, Ryan & Wagner, 2012), police attitudes (e.g., Rafky, 1975) and perceptions of opportunities and inequalities (e.g., Turner, 1992). The SSA method was therefore used as it is often seen as a different approach to more traditional methods of analysis when flexibility is required within the data set. A number of studies have discussed (e.g., Borg & Lingoes, 1987; Salfati & Canter, 1999; Shye, Elizur & Hoffman, 1994) that the overall fitness of the SSA plot heavily depends on a combination of factors; including sample size, number of variables and the logic and validity of the interpretation framework, as such, there are less set rules attached to using the SSA method, as long as the SSA plot can be interpreted in a meaningful way (Borg & Lingoes, 1987).

After specific themes were generated by the SSA, the qualitative data collected from participants ($n = 12$; 57.1%), were used as descriptive elements to help highlight the individual items and overall patterns which emerged from the results. This notion of using qualitative data to enhance SSA outcomes, allows researchers to capture the underlying beliefs that are distilled within the SSA structure. This allows for further understanding of the items falling within those themes, thereby providing further clarity to the SSA structure (Canter & Youngs, 2012; Youngs & Canter, 2011).

Results

A 2-dimensional SSA was carried out on 18 items from the *Perceived Opportunity* and the revised *Attitude Towards Formal Authority Questionnaires*. The resulting analysis showed a coefficient of alienation of 0.20 in 10 iterations, indicating an adequate fit for these data (Guttman, 1968). In Figure 1, you can see a point and corresponding label representing

each belief presented by the abused women. The closer any two points are together, the more likely it is that the belief will co-occur in similar overarching themes, that is, if a woman holds one belief she is also more likely to hold the one close to this on the SSA. In contrast, the further apart any two points are, the less likely they are to co-occur in themes.

Insert FIGURE 1 about here

The first step was to examine the SSA configuration to investigate the regional hypothesis that items which have similar facet elements will co-occur in the same region of space. Visual examination of the SSA configuration revealed that the plot could be partitioned into four distinct regions representing the distinct belief systems in domestically abused women (see Figure 1). The top left quadrant encompassed 5 items, all from the *Perceived Opportunity Scale*, these included; *not prepared, scarce jobs, not clever, ethnicity,* and *don't know enough,* which indicate a 'personal responsibility' belief system. The top right quadrant included 3 items from the *Attitude Toward Formal Authority Scale,* including: *stealing, break law with friend* and *break law,* indicating an 'antisocial attitude'. The bottom left encompassed 5 items from the *Perceived Opportunity Scale*, such as; *no opportunities, bad schooling, no college nearby, no support* and *no college,* indicating a process of 'environmental factors'. The bottom right included 5 items from the *Attitude Toward Formal Authority Scale*: *posh accent, restrict freedom, pick on me, easy life* and *police brutal,* indicating a 'negative police attitude'. Cronbach's alpha was carried out for the items within each of the proposed four themes to obtain an indication of the adequacy of the split. The analyses confirmed that all scales had moderate to high internal consistency: personal responsibility, $\alpha = 0.71$; antisocial attitudes, $\alpha = 0.81$; environmental factors, $\alpha = 0.73$ and negative police attitudes, $\alpha = 0.74$.

Belief system themes

Personal responsibility. This theme was rooted in the individuals' beliefs that they were personally responsible for their abusive experiences. The theme was therefore based on the idea that they had instigated or somehow facilitated their abusive experience. Within this belief system the individual feels they are *not prepared* in life or able to find adequate employment (*scarce jobs*) due to their own self belief that they are *not clever* enough or as knowledgeable as everyone else (*don't know enough*). These maladaptive thoughts lead to feelings of guilt, shame, and inadequacy. For example, as one participant responded: *"I used to blame myself because I used to be told it's my fault... My dad would tell me I did something during the day or I bullied my sister so... that was my punishment..." (P1).* Another participant continued to explain how she began to blame herself for other events in her life; for example, when her child was born she was deeply concerned about the baby's wellbeing, stating that *'...if he comes out with something wrong with him, it's my fault' (P10).* She went on to talk about how these self-blaming thoughts led her to wonder *"...is he ok, is he all right? Is he this? Is he that? And wasn't like that I needed to hold him but that had to make sure that he's ok" (P10).*

Antisocial attitudes. The general framework of this belief system is embedded in the individual's law-breaking attitudes (i.e., *stealing*, *break law with friend*, and *break law*) and their lack of compliance in prevailing rules and moral standards. These women felt let down by the institutional authority and as a result, refuse to follow conventional standards, replacing them with personal authority. In the context of domestic abuse, these women will place blame on the circumstances which society has forced upon them, believing that societal and conventional norms have failed them. These women are therefore most likely to adopt unconventional and illegitimate approaches to achieve their goals. For example:

> *"I got expelled from school at the age of 12 and then I never went into education*
>
> *afterwards. No school would let me in for what I was expelled for, and from then, I*

started getting into trouble all the time… I got a prison sentence at 15 and then left home at 16" (P12).

Similarly, when talking about the circumstances leading up to her abuse, another participant explained:

"I got in with the wrong crowd and met these boys and I was seeing one of them and there was another and they were into like…bad things really, like criminal activity, drugs and stuff like that and I got myself into that and that's how I ended up in prison and yeah…" (P2).

Environmental factors. Some women endorsed beliefs that they were powerless to change the environmental factors which created their predefined fate. An extension of this powerlessness can be seen in the women's generalizations about the lack of opportunities (*no opportunities)*, support *(no support)* and experience (*bad schooling* and *no college)* available to them. These distorted thoughts lead to an overall negative outlook on their environment and the world, as they felt like they were unable to help themselves and powerless to escape their abusive environment. In particular, one participant explains:

"I am out of work at the moment, because a lot of places don't want to take a single parent with school aged children. So because she is not in secondary school I am deemed not responsible enough…they are constantly sick according to most employers" (P4).

Negative attitude toward police. This theme is rooted in the negative cognitive evaluation of police-related attributes when dealing with the public; such as fairness (*pick on me*), courteousness (*easy life*), values (*restrict freedom*) and de-escalation (*brutal force*). It could therefore be argued that these types of individuals have a negative perception of the police, stemming from past negative interactions which were generalized to all contact with law enforcement agencies. It was anticipated that these women were also most likely to have

15

previous convictions and/or cautions with the police, resulting in the development of negative beliefs associated with police encounters and authority figures. For example, one participant explained that she tried to explain to teachers that she was being bullied but the teachers seemed uninterested: *"no one understood but I was trying to talk with them, I was just another colored book…All my life I've been picked on" (P1).* Similarly, another participant described how she was unfairly targeted by the police, which lead to her arrest:

>*"Yeah and then there was one day where they just picked me up on the street and said they had me on surveillance and they had a lot of evidence against me and when I went to court and was found guilty, that was it, I got 5 and a half years" (P9).*

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to identify whether there were distinct themes in the beliefs of women who experience domestic abuse. It was argued that further understanding of the beliefs of these women could aid in the development of more long term support for domestic abuse victims. The results indicated that the beliefs of abuse victims cluster into four themes: (1) *personal responsibility,* (2) *antisocial attitude,* (3) *environmental factors* and (4) *negative attitudes towards police.* Although this research sets the groundwork to further understand the beliefs of domestically abused women, there are a number of limitations which need to be addressed before the value of the research can be discussed further. In particular, the sample size of the current study was small and homogeneous, additional research needs to be carried out to replicate the findings in larger and more diverse sample sizes, thereby allowing more generalizable results to be established. The next step is, therefore, to build upon the foundations created within this study, which could eventually lead to support services to have an evidence base to develop more long-term psychological provisions. Despite the future research that still needs to be carried out, the findings from the current study, provide the initial step towards understanding not only the various facets of

distorted beliefs held by abuse victims, but also the risk that these beliefs may play in contributing to domestic abuse.

Firstly, many abuse victims often believe they are personally responsible for the abuse they endure (Gangoli, Razak, & McCarry, 2006), and while support services (e.g., Women's Aid, 2015) continually remind victims that they are never to blame for the abuse, little emphasis is placed on developing the psychological tools abuse victims need to understand why they feel personally responsible and more importantly, how they can change their feelings of self-blame (Gracia & Tomas, 2014). Accordingly, it could be argued that victims of abuse need more psychological assistance to help them counteract their distorted feelings of self-blame. A programme facilitating a change in their self-blaming mentality may contribute to these women developing more long-lasting positive self-attitudes.

Secondly, many women who have suffered abuse also hold long standing antisocial attitudes. For example, research undertaken by the Prison Reform Trust, Brighter Futures (2014), found a link between women's offending and their experiences of domestic abuse. A significant proportion of the women that had committed criminal offences, often had a history of domestic abuse. Yet whilst this information is known, the link between female offending and domestic abuse is often not considered. The Brighter Futures report suggests a screening or assessment process undertaken by the Criminal Justice System that could identify vulnerabilities such as domestic abuse or coercive relationships as treatment targets early. Programmes such as Women in Prison and Eaves (the Beth Centre, 2015), which addresses the factors related to women's offending behavior including past experiences of domestic abuse. Figures show that 50-80% of women who are in prison have experienced some form of domestic abuse (Corston, 2007), yet the problem of domestic abuse in the female prison population is typically overlooked and under researched (Greene, Haney, & Hurtado, 2000).

Thirdly, many victims of domestic abuse struggle with feelings of helplessness within their enviornment, these feelings are often learnt through repeated incidences of abuse and control brought on by their abuser (Hyde-Nolan & Juliao, 2012). As a result, support services often emphasize the social support networks as a fundamental factor in victims' ability to be able to recover from intimate partner abuse and violence (Tan et al., 1995). Social support has been empirically shown to improve the mental health of domestically abused women (Kocot & Goodman, 2003) and increase an individual's level of self-esteem, which helps these women overcome their feelings of helplessness (Mitchell & Hodson, 1983). Otherwise, the likelihood of victims returning to their abusive relationship is 63% if they do not have access to the structural support they need (Johnson, 1988). Yet, even if women who have been domestically abused seek social support, they may not receive the support they require. One reason is the perceived victim blaming by the organization providing the support (Coker et al., 2002), or that resources are limited and victims of chronic, long term abuse may need more than what can be offered. Both of these barriers to social support reinforce the belief systems of these women, in particular the feeling of helplessness within their enviornment.

Finally, another theme to consider with regard to abuse victims' experiences, is their belief and attitudes towards police officers involved in their domestic abuse case. Prior research has indicated that victims are often sceptic of police (Lonsway, Archambault, & Lisak, 2009) and fear that they will be shamed, disbelieved, coerced, retraumatized, or dismissed (Ahrens, Campbell, Ternice-Thames, Wasco, & Sefl, 2007; Patterson, Greeson, & Campbell, 2009) by police. Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC, 2014) conducted a study of over 500 victims of domestic abuse. While 79% of victims who had reported an incident to the police were satisfied with the initial police response, a third felt no safer or less safe after the initial response. With the majority of victims contributing these

feelings to the poor attitudes of police, feeling judged and the considerable lack of empathy and understanding.

Most recently, the City of London (2014) report on domestic violence stated that the response to domestic abuse was not up to standard, with one of the major contributing factors relating to officers lacking the skill and knowledge necessary to engage competently with victims of domestic abuse (HMIC, 2014). Subsequently, HMIC developed a set of recommendations for the police service, which aim to make a long term difference to the way the service prioritises and responds to domestic abuse. One of the recommendations includes working with partnering organisations to help support victims through the criminal justice process. It could therefore be argued that if support services could work with the police more closely with these new recommendations, the negative attitudes of abuse victims will be transformed into more positive perceptions.

Overall, the value of this study extends further than highlighting the importance of considering the long standing and personalized beliefs of abuse victims. This study also begins to demonstrate the need for support services to offer more than just immediate provisions and counselling, but rather provide personalized support that will help victims develop the tools they need to change their belief systems. In particular, if a victim of domestic violence holds a certain set of belief systems, as this research has showed, then challenging those beliefs and battling for change could help decrease recidivism rates and improve the quality of life for the victims.

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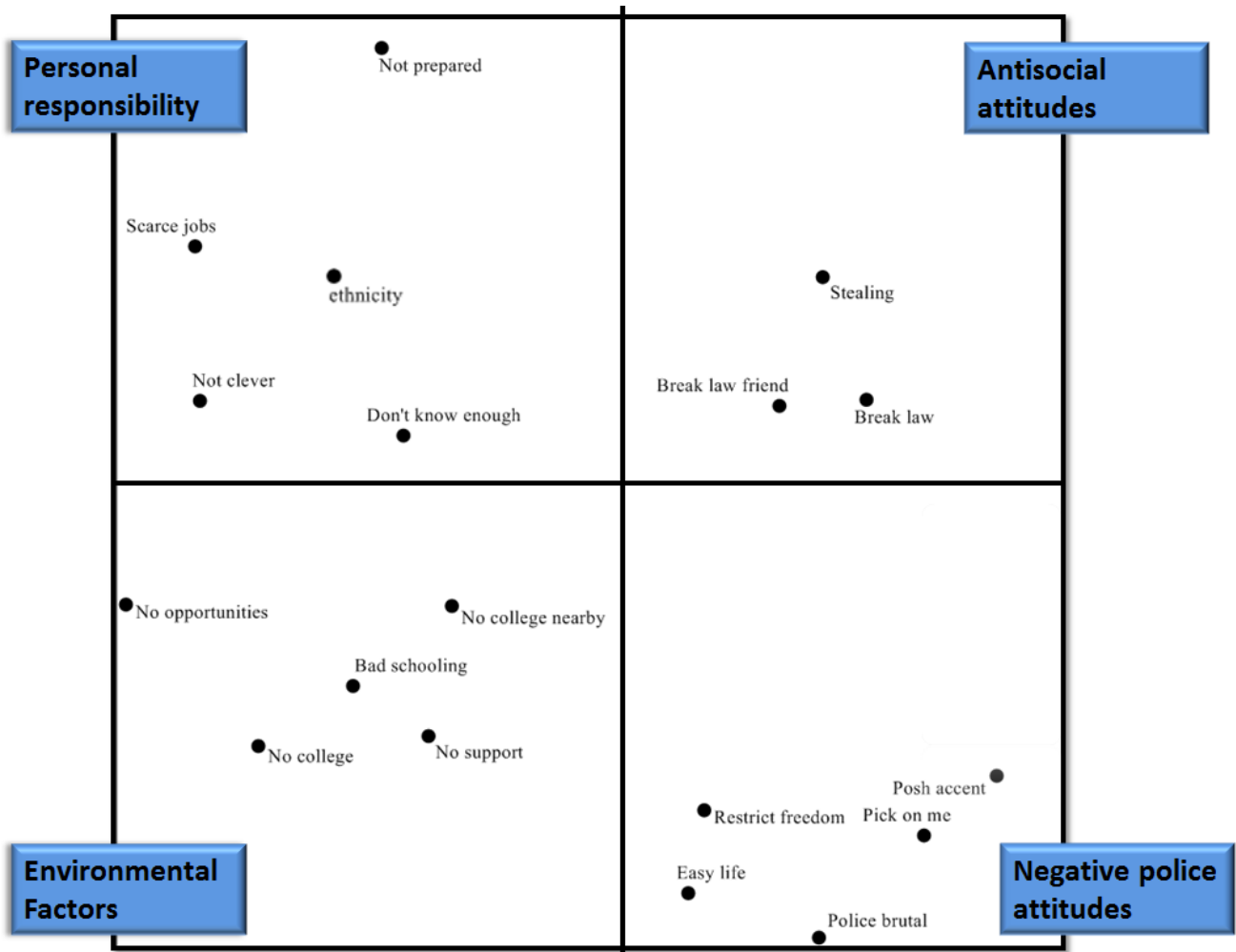
FIGURE 1. A two-dimensional SSA of 18 belief statements in 21 domestically abused women with set interpretation regions. *Coefficient of Alienation = .201* in 10 iterations. Variable labels are brief summaries of full questions.