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Domestic Violence Homicide: Validating a Scale to Measure Implicit Collusion with Murder

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Abstract

Despite infusions of federal funding and legislation, intimate partner violence (IPV) persists regardless of preventive efforts. Improved rates of IPV awareness and attitudes have not translated into less violence. Novel research and interventions are necessary to address this gap. This pilot study develops and validates a tool to measure implicit collusion with IPV at the macro societal level in an ecological framework. Using test-item construction techniques, the authors developed a preliminary measure of media consumers' implicit collusion with fatal IPV perpetration reported in newspapers. The present experiment investigates whether the provision of various information influences collusion. The implicit collusion measurement tool was constructed using item analysis principles and techniques. A purposive sample was created using four sites in three states, and included a range of demographic characteristics including income, race, gender, and education. Analysis of covariance procedures and standard scaling techniques including Cronbach's Alpha were used. Test-item construction demonstrated implicit collusion could be reliably measured in testing the effects of IPV news media "frames," "labeling," "extraneous information," and "negative information." When negative information was included about victims of fatal IPV ($F(2,67) = 17.8$, $p < 0.001$), research participants were significantly more likely to implicitly collude with the murderer. Implicit collusion with fatal IPV perpetration represents a potentially important construct heretofore not examined in the literature that can positively or negatively impact the public's health. Provision of seemingly benign details of fatal IPV incidents in news accounts has a negative impact on media consumers by inducing implicit collusion with homicide.

1. Introduction

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a significant threat that is pervasive[1-3] and has deleterious effects on the public's health.[4, 5] IPV victimization may result in chronic medical and behavioral problems, in addition to acute injury and sometimes death.[6-9] Despite gains in scientific knowledge, prevention professionals struggle to reduce IPV occurrence. The media have the power to improve the public health[10] and prevent injuries,[11] but they also have the potential to mislead and damage the public health.[12] In light of such challenges, there is growing recognition of the need for collaboration

among diverse stakeholders in the design, implementation, and evaluation of multilevel prevention initiatives.[13-15] The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention[16] and others have used a multilevel social-ecological framework that considers the interplay between factors that influence IPV perpetration and victimization.[17] Intervening at the outermost (societal) level is relatively rare yet attractive, as it encompasses determinants situated at the innermost levels. One societal-level IPV determinant with high-leverage potential is *news media coverage of IPV*.[18]

2. News Media Coverage of IPV

Over two-thirds (68%) of adults in the US consume newspaper content (print, e-edition, or website) each week.[19] Media consumption has increased significantly as "new media" makes content more readily available.[20, 21] The impact of this information consumption is that public perceptions of issues are shaped by what is encountered in the media,[22-24] which holds true in the case of IPV.[25, 26]

News media coverage of IPV can be characterized in two primary ways: (a) by the level of coverage and (b) by the nature of coverage. Regarding *the level of coverage*, although the number of nonfatal IPV police reports filed by female victims[27] has *increased*, the media views relatively few of these incidents as newsworthy; accordingly, nonfatal IPV goes largely unreported in the media.[28] It has long been argued that information regarding IPV typically comes to the forefront in media sound bites, a disproportionate share of which are about homicides.[29, 30] The most frequently heard IPV sound bites, therefore, pertain to intimate partner homicide (IPH).[31]

When reporting IPHs, *the nature of coverage* is often episodic and focuses only on the homicide event rather than the broader context of IPV.[26, 30, 32, 33] This episodic focus can even be found in news reports of IPV. For example, in a content analysis of all news reports of IPV published in the *San Jose Mercury News* and the *Los Angeles Times*, the Berkeley Media Studies Group[31] found that, compared to other types of violence, IPV was treated more frequently as a single unpreventable episode rather than as an issue amenable to collective action. Such episodic reporting (i.e., a narrow focus on the "what, where, when, and who" of an event) without regard to the context (i.e., the "how and why" of the incident) does nothing to increase the reader's understanding[34] or sense of a phenomenon's preventability.[35, 36] The present study defines a new concept—*implicit collusion*—in order to examine the effects of such coverage.

3. Implicit Collusion Framework

Researchers have consistently demonstrated that news media coverage of IPV contains biased reporting patterns.[37-40] This bias is evident in the article framing, labeling of the incident, and information included in the report, as discussed below. By inaccurately depicting the dynamics of IPV, news media providers might unintentionally enable their consumers to implicitly collude with the perpetration of IPV. As defined here, *implicit collusion* refers to a news media consumer's inherent endorsement of IPV by concluding that a suspect's behavior was an atypical event perpetrated by an otherwise regular person in a context that ignores that abuse is ongoing, cumulative in effects, comprised of multiple strategies, and oriented towards power and control. This misperception can sometimes even lead consumers to believe that the perpetrator had an understandable reason for committing the violence, or that the victim deserved or "asked for" the violence.

At least four characteristics of IPV/IPH news media coverage may have an effect on implicit collusion. First, a *frame* is a schemata of interpretation[41] that supplies an answer to the question, "What is going on here?" For example, providing information on a history of IPV ("thematic frame") might prompt readers to believe an IPH was the final of many violent acts committed by an abusive partner. Conversely, framing an IPH as a singular incident ("episodic frame") might lead the reader to impute causation to, for example, uncontrollable anger on one or both persons' part.

Second, the concept of *labeling* derives from newspaper accounts whereby journalists report on IPV in such a manner that it is not clear the incident was perpetrated by an intimate partner. For example, in a newspaper account of a "person" who entered the house of a woman and her children and murdered them, the reader may assume that a stranger committed the crime. This may lead the reader to feel more sympathy for the victims while holding the perpetrator accountable, in contrast to a scenario where the reader learns that the woman was married to the perpetrator and begins imputing some underlying rationale for the murders. By not labeling the perpetrator as an intimate, the connection of the event (murder) is disconnected from the context (IPV). The how and why are lost to the reader. This approach hides the devastating consequences of IPV and the heinous acts that perpetrators of IPV are willing to carry out. As this pattern of reporting is more pervasive, the public may form ideas about intimate partner violence as a non-preventable act.

Third, whereas some newspaper stories include very little information about victims (e.g., "white female, 31, dead…"), journalists often include *extraneous information* about the perpetrators' private lives (e.g., details about the perpetrator's religiosity, side interests, and hobbies), which gives perpetrators a relatable breadth of character with which readers might empathize.

Lastly, a news media consumer's understanding of IPV might be conditioned on the information presented about the victim and perpetrator's personal characteristics. For example, reader perceptions may differ depending on whether the victim was a reported alcoholic or the perpetrator a suspected drug dealer. An alcoholic victim may engender less sympathy and possibly more suspicions of culpability from readers. A drug dealing perpetrator may not only lead

readers to believe that those who commit this type of violence are different from themselves, but this information may also lead the reader to assign blame for the homicide to both the victim (e.g., through moral judgments about why the victim stayed with a drug dealer) as well as the perpetrator. Thus, *inclusion of negative victim or perpetrator characteristics* may impact the way in which news readers interpret and possibly assign blame in IPV incidents, particularly when irrelevant positive characteristics about the perpetrator are emphasized.

While researchers have conducted observational studies regarding IPV news media coverage and noted its flaws,[28, 30, 38, 42-50] there is a notable gap regarding the actual impact of news media coverage on consumers. There is a concomitant lack of guidance for researchers in defining and measuring relevant constructs. To these ends, our primary objective was to develop a tool to measure the degree to which media consumers either collude with or hold perpetrators accountable. Our secondary objective was to assess the construct validity of this measurement tool in an experiment looking at the potential impact of IPH coverage on readers' implicit collusion.

4. Method

Participants. We recruited 72 participants from four different sites: Yale University (n=24), Loyola University (n=15), University of North Dakota (n=20), and the Michigan Department of Community Health (n=13). This purposive sample represented a wide range of education and experience levels, including persons without a high school diploma, as well as those with advanced degrees and working in the field of public health. Participants also represented a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. This study was approved by the institutional review boards of the participating sites, which included three universities and one state health department.

Procedure. This study involved four single-factor experiments: 1) framing, 2) labeling, 3) extraneous perpetrator information, and 4) negative victim or perpetrator characteristics. Each experiment was based on a vignette from an actual IPH newspaper article modified into three conditions: two treatments and one comparison. Study participants were given a pretest that assessed baseline perceptions regarding IPV and then took part in one condition from each of the four experiments in random order. The IPH incident was held constant for the three conditions within the given sub-experiment, with the exception of the factor under study (Table 1). Questionnaires with items for assessing participants' implicit collusion were administered immediately after reading each vignette.

Table 1. Study design for the four experiments

Experiment	Condition 1	Condition 2	Condition 3 (Comparison)
Framing	Episodic	Thematic	Neither
Labeling	DV label	Assault label	No label
Extraneous Information	Perpetrator positive non relevant	Perpetrator neutral non relevant	No extraneous information
Victim/Perp Characteristic	Negative victim	Negative perpetrator	No characteristic information

Regarding the "framing" experiment, the hypothesis was that if the participant were provided with a vignette framed in an episodic manner, there should be an increase in score on the implicit collusion index relative to participants receiving the other two conditions (thematic frame and no frame). This step was performed to indicate construct validity. For the "labeling" experiment, participants who read homicide articles labeled as domestic violence were expected to score higher on implicit collusion than other participants who read an article labeled as general murder or no frame, providing another indication of construct validity. Participants exposed to positive "extraneous perpetrator information" were predicted to score higher on collusion, as were participants provided with information about "negative victim characteristics" when compared to articles that contained no extraneous information.

Participants were read a consent statement that included deception of the study's objective: they were told that the purpose of the study was to create a new tool to measure people's opinions about crime news reports. It was believed that knowledge of the objective of developing a tool to measure collusion with perpetrators of intimate partner homicide based on the reading of news reports would bias participant responses. Participants were given a pencil-and- paper questionnaire that they completed with no assistance from the researchers. The sequence of events for each participant was as follows: 1) read the participation instructions; 2) respond to the baseline measures of IPV perceptions; 3) read a newspaper vignette about an IPH, modified for one of three experimental conditions; 4) respond to the posttest collusion items; and 5) repeat steps 3 and 4 for the remaining experiments. After completion of the questionnaire, the participant was debriefed regarding the study's purpose.

5. Measures

Baseline measures. In the first section of the questionnaire, research participants responded to baseline measures aimed at assessing general perceptions of IPV pervasiveness and acceptability.[51, 52] Participants were first provided with a definition of "domestic violence" and asked several questions about how often they believed it occurred. Next, to measure participants' normative views of IPV, we asked them to indicate the extent to which it was understandable for an intimate partner to engage in a number of acts; e.g., "A wife to be slapped by her husband when she won't stop nagging him." Due to low frequencies of endorsement, however, these

latter items were discarded from further analyses.

We next asked participants to indicate their extent of agreement with statements designed to measure their perceptions about what *should* happen in cases of domestic violence (DV).[1] These statements involved intervention from police (e.g., "If police have evidence of domestic violence, they should make an arrest.") and intervention by third parties (e.g., "Friends and neighbors should not call the police unless the person involved wants them to."). This section also contained statements that elicited participants' beliefs regarding the role of anger, alcohol, drugs, and poverty (e.g., "Abuse of drugs and alcohol by the victim is often the primary cause of domestic violence.") in the occurrence of domestic violence. A Likert scale ranging from 1 ("Very strongly disagree") to 6 ("Very strongly agree") was used with reverse coding where appropriate.

Drafting the collusion items. The collusion items appeared after each newspaper vignette about IPH. "Implicit collusion" was operationalized as research participants not holding perpetrators accountable; tolerating and accepting IPH in certain contexts; identifying and empathizing with perpetrators; justifying and accepting the crime as logical or legitimate; and/or victim blaming. Two types of non-comparative scaling techniques were used in the collusion measurement tool: continuous rating scales (e.g., "On a scale of 1–10, to what extent do you believe that…") and 6-point Likert scales ("Very strongly disagree" to "Very strongly agree").

A multidisciplinary group of IPV and media experts—representing sociology, criminal justice, social work, communication, public health, and statistics—was convened to identify limitations in news media coverage of IPH. Some items were derived from previously validated measures of attitudes and perceptions of IPV, and other items were modified from media studies to fit the IPV topic; however, several new questions were developed by our expert panel. Even though the original instrument was tested for 4th grade Flesch-Kincaid readability, some questions required further modification for optimal respondent. The survey was administered by the research faculty from four universities and one department of public health. These persons are all experts in survey research, IPV, and media. Our multidisciplinary team both identified media constructs to be tested and drafted items to be included in the measure of implicit collusion. The instrument was piloted multiple times and revised before administration.

Selecting the collusion items for the final scales. The implicit collusion scale was intended to be homogeneous. Thus, it was checked for internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha. We calculated α by eliminating one item at a time and discarding any item where α significantly increased. We then combined remaining items into a summated-rating scale without item weighting.

6. Analytic Approach

Each of the four experiments was treated as a single-factor experiment. Pretest items were combined into sub-measures through a post-hoc process of item analysis based on coefficient α. Summated rating scales for each sub-measure were subsequently combined through principal component analysis to arrive at a singular pretest value for each participant.

The final set of collusion items for each sub-experiment was identified through a process of item analysis based on coefficient α. In the presence of a statistically significant Pearson correlation coefficient between pretest scores and implicit collusion scores for each sub-experiment (α = 0.05), we used analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) models to determine whether collusion means were the same for each condition. Post-hoc pairwise comparisons of conditions were performed using a Bonferroni correction. All analyses were performed in SPSS version 19.0.[53]

7. Results

As described above, the final set of collusion items for each experiment was identified through a process of item analysis based on coefficient α (e.g., Table 2). The implicit collusion reliability-indices for the framing (α = 0.74), labeling (α = 0.83), extraneous perpetrator information (α = 0.79), and negative victim (or perpetrator) characteristics sub-experiments (α = 0.88) were all above acceptable levels.[54] In terms of construct validity, there were no significant differences in the implicit collusion scores among the treatment-comparison groups in the "framing" sub-experiment after controlling for pretest scores ($F(2,62) = 2.68$, $p = 0.077$) (Table 3). Thus, newspaper articles presented with either an episodic, thematic, or neutral type of frame (comparison) did not result in significant differences of collusion.

Table 2. *Item analysis results for implicit collusion measurement tool: "Framing" sub-experiment (N = 66)*

Item	Mean	Std. Deviation	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha
"Indicate your level of agreement with the following statement: In the news story I just read, there could be a justifiable explanation, other than self-defense, for why Jason Wright acted in the way he did."	1.92	1.74	0.26	
"What do you think Jason Wright's sentence should be? (1) no prison sentence (2) <5 years in prison ... (9) death penalty"	2.00	1.69	0.47	

1 While the authors use the word *intimate partner violence* for purposes of describing our research, the term *domestic violence* was used during the experiment because during the pilot pre-testing, the term *intimate partner violence* did not resonate with our audience.

Item	Mean	Std. Deviation	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha
"I believe that Angela Smith did something that caused Jason Wright to kill her."	2.30	1.81	0.38	
"I believe that Angela Smith could have prevented her death by acting differently."	2.53	1.82	0.47	
"I can identify with how Jason Wright felt."	1.86	1.19	0.37	
"I can understand why Jason Wright was violent toward Angela Smith."	1.76	1.28	0.43	
"Jason Wright's shooting of Angela Smith was justified."	1.23	0.65	0.43	
"Some believe that things happen to people for a reason. On a scale of 1-10, to what extent do you believe that Angela Smith's actions led to her own death, with 1 being 'her actions had nothing to do with her death' and 10 being 'her actions alone led to her death'?"	2.88	1.87	0.59	
"If Angela Smith had done something differently, on a scale of 1-10, to what extent do you believe Jason Wright would still have killed her, with 1 being 'no chance of killing' and 10 being 'definite killing'?"	4.05	2.56	0.45	
"On a scale of 1-10, how responsible is Jason Wright for what happened, with 1 being 'not responsible at all' to 10 being 'totally responsible'?"	1.23	0.52	0.45	
"On a scale of 1-10, rate how you feel toward Jason Wright, with 1 being 'I would not want to associate with this person at all' and 10 being 'I can see myself being friends with this person'."	1.80	2.04	0.32	
Scale Statistics (No. of Items = 11)	23.56	9.64	0.24	α = 0.74

Table 3. ANCOVA tests of between-subjects effects and estimated mean responses for news media sub-experiments

Factor	Level	n	F	Mean[‡]	95% CI
Framing	Episodic framing	21		20.0	(16.3, 23.7)
	Thematic framing	24	F (2, 62) = 2.68	25.3	(21.9, 28.8)
	Neither frame type (comparison)	21		25.1	(21.4, 28.8)
Labeling	Domestic violence label	22		23.1	(19.4, 26.9)
	Assault label	21	F (2, 61) = 0.089	23.7	(19.9, 27.5)
	No labeling (comparison)	22		22.6	(18.8, 26.3)
Extraneous information	Positive information about perpetrator included	21		25.54	(21.3, 29.7)
	Neutral information about perpetrator included	24	F (2, 62) = 0.014	25.06	(21.2, 29.0)
	No extraneous information (comparison)	21		25.3	(21.1, 29.4)
Negative characteristics	Negative victim characteristics included	24		32.29	(28.6, 36.0)
	Negative perpetrator characteristics included	23	F (2, 67) = 17.8[†]	21.22	(17.5, 25.0)
	No personal characteristics (comparison)	24		17.31	(13.6, 21.0)

[†]$p < 0.001$
[‡]Adjusted estimated treatment means

We did not detect significant differences in the implicit collusion scores among the three treatment-comparison groups in the "labeling" sub-experiment ($F(2,61) = 0.089$, $p = 0.92$). That is, participants did not significantly differ on colluding with the perpetrator between the newspaper articles with labels of domestic violence, assault, or no such label (comparison). In the "extraneous information" experiment, there were no significant differences in the implicit collusion scores among the three treatment-comparison groups ($F(2,62) = 0.014$, $p = 0.99$). Thus, providing either positive or neutral information versus no extraneous information about the perpetrator did not result in significantly different collusion scores.

After controlling for pretest IPV scores, different collusion scores were observed between the three negative-characteristics experiment conditions ($F(2,67) = 17.8$, $p < 0.001$). There was a significant difference ($p < 0.001$) in the estimated means of condition 1 (inclusion of negative victim characteristics; adjusted mean = 32.3) versus condition 3 (no inclusion of personal characteristics; adjusted mean = 17.3) (Table 3). Thus, newspaper articles that included negative victim information resulted in significantly more implicit collusion in comparison to the story without negative victim information.

8. Discussion

There is a growing appreciation among IPV prevention professionals that partner violence can be ameliorated only if all segments of society work in concert, which has resulted in a wide range of primary and secondary prevention initiatives.[55, 56] Despite these important efforts, there is mounting concern that the infusion of funds for IPV prevention and control programs has had limited impact.[57-60] One potential reason why IPV has proved intractable is that normative tolerance for abusive behavior remains widespread. For example, while most Americans—including a majority of males—overtly voice opposition to IPV,[61] the persistence of high levels of coercion and control in relationships[62] suggests that major obstacles remain to creating the normative sea-change needed to elicit widespread behavior change.

One such obstacle may be the nature of IPV news media coverage. As noted above, research on such coverage has revealed biased reporting patterns. By providing inaccurate accounts, news media coverage may unintentionally perpetuate social norms supportive of IPV. According to

Witte and Mulla,[63] "Mounting evidence for the role of social norms in IPV underscores their potential value in prevention strategies."[63]

The use of the provocative term "collusion" was intentional. The term *implicit collusion* was used here to describe a news media consumer's inherent endorsement of IPV by concluding a suspect's behavior was an atypical event perpetrated by an otherwise regular person in a context that ignores abuse as ongoing, cumulative, multidimensional, and oriented towards power and control. This implicit collusion is damaging as it serves to buttress the already harmful norms and beliefs that perpetuate IPV in our society. The concept of "collusion" has received scant attention in the batterer treatment literature.[64-66] This study is the first to develop a measurement tool for implicit collusion.

The present findings suggest that implicit collusion can be reliably measured. The reliability indices for the framing, labeling, extraneous perpetrator information, and negative victim (perpetrator) characteristics sub-experiments were all above acceptable levels. When negative victim- and perpetrator-characteristics were examined for effects on implicit collusion, differential responses were observed (as hypothesized). In summary, though framing, labeling, and including extraneous information about the perpetrator is biased and does little to inform the public about the dynamics of IPV, it does not necessarily impact media consumer's implicit collusion with murder. Conversely, including irrelevant negative information about the victim has a significant impact on the consumer's ability to identify with the perpetrator and blame the victim for her murder. Given the dearth of funding in preventing IPV, focusing on those aspects that cause society at large to find any form of IPH acceptable may be helpful in reducing IPV.

9. Limitations

The present study has some potential limitations. The purpose of this study was to develop measures of implicit collusion rather than to determine if labeling, framing, including extraneous perpetrator information, or providing negative victim information in IPH articles influences implicit collusion. As this study involved a four-site purposive non-probability sample, the data are not representative of the general population of newspaper readers. However, the purpose of this study was to derive the data constructs to measure implicit collusion and thus a random sample was unnecessary. Rather this analysis will inform the next phase of experimental research on this topic that will involve random sampling and power analysis. In addition, the contrived nature of our experimental conditions may limit the external validity of our findings. However, our media vignettes were based on actual IPH newspaper articles.

This research is best characterized as a preliminary item tryout.[67] Following additional scale development, the next step is a full-fledged field test of a revised measurement tool. Also, this study was subject to the typical limitations of preliminary research. For instance, there may have been insufficient statistical power to detect some differences. The lack of significant differences in the framing, labeling, and extraneous perpetrator information experiments may have been a function of sample size.

Construct validation is not a one-step activity. Rather, it is an ongoing process of research, learning, revision, and continued development,[68] which the authors intend to continue.

10. Conclusions

Stakeholders are often disheartened by news media coverage of IPV because of perceived underreporting as well as biased reporting. In response, national and state coalitions have developed news media toolkits, training, and technical assistance programs for journalists to address what is perceived as suboptimal coverage.[68, 69] While such advocacy work is well-intentioned, it could benefit from a more complete scientific base. Specifically, even though news media reporting may be flawed, it is not known which aspects of IPV reports influence consumers. The present study represents a step forward in the development of a measurement scale to assess such effects. This research found strong support that the inclusion of negative victim characteristics in a newspaper article about an intimate partner homicide has negative consequences on readers' perceptions, even among readers who otherwise believe all forms of woman abuse are wrong. This study indicates that readers begin to tolerate and accept IPH in certain contexts, including not holding the murderer accountable for killing the victim, identifying and empathizing with the killer, justifying and accepting the crime as logical or legitimate, and blaming the victim for her own murder. If an individual can be manipulated to collude with killing by reading one newspaper article, the social ramifications are astounding.

Further research is needed to continue investigating these effects with hopes of changing the practices of crime news reporting, particularly with IPH events. Accurate and responsible media coverage of IPH can positively affect social awareness and concern for IPH and, ultimately, can lead to lower rates of tolerance and acceptance of these acts, and to lower rates of IPH in general. Research is needed to inform the reporting of IPV because the media is a powerful tool that can be leveraged to improve the public health.[70]

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