Assessing intimate partner violence risk: Challenges and possible solutions

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1. What can we expect of risk assessment

2. The challenges in applying risk assessment to IPV with any accuracy

3. Some ways to think about IPV risk assessment that might help to overcome challenges
What can we expect of risk assessment?
What is ‘risk’ and ‘risk assessment’?

• Risk = likelihood of a negative outcome

• A risk factor is something that is associated with the risk outcome you’re interested in
  • Not necessarily causal

• Risk assessment is:
  • assessing the presence or absence of risk factors that are known to be associated with the outcome of interest
  • Making a judgement about likelihood of the outcome
A science or an art?

• Requires structure and evidence to do well – it needs the science
• Requires informed judgement about when to depart from the structure – it benefits from some art, sometimes
• Best practice is probably science with a little bit of scope for artistic judgement on occasion
A good risk assessment procedure is:

- Reliable
- Valid
- Practical
- Structured professional judgement tools
- Actuarial tools
- Unstructured judgement
What can a good risk assessment tool do?

• Put people in a box that contains other people with similar numbers and types of risk factors

• Different boxes have different likelihoods of recidivism, but a given person in the box it may or may not reoffend
High Risk

Moderate Risk

Low Risk
• Prevention focus
• Reassessment of risk as required

• Urgent response
• Resource intensive risk management
• Regular reassessment of risk and adjustment of management in response

• Prevention focus
• Some management of identified risk factors
• Less urgency to management response
• Semi-regular reassessment of risk
Even the best risk assessment tool can’t:

• Say whether or not a specific person is going to reoffend
• Accurately determine whether or not someone is high or low risk of a very unlikely behaviour (e.g., homicide)
• Say why a person behaves in a particular way
• Reduce risk
Challenges when assessing IPV-related risks
What kind of risk?

- Confusion about what risk is being assessed
  - Homicide risk?
  - Risk of physical violence?
  - Risk of sexual violence?
  - Risk of coercive control? (and associated psychological and physical harm)
  - Risk of any future abuse within relationship?
  - Risk of post-relationship stalking?

- Over how long is risk being assessed?
  - Over short/medium/long term?
  - In this relationship?
  - In future intimate relationships?

- Who is the risk to?
  - Primary victim
  - Other family members
ALL OF THESE THINGS AT DIFFERENT TIMES!

A single tool/approach to risk assessment is probably not going to be very effective
Where can our assessment be guided by accurate instruments?

- Reliable
- Valid
- Practicable

Any future abuse

Physical violence

Psychological harm

Sexual violence

Homicide

Coercive control

Post-relationship stalking
| Any abuse (police reported) | VP-SAFvR  
|                           | Amended FVRAT  
|                           | Amended DVSAT  |
| Physical violence – actuarial (male only) | Ontario Domestic Assault Risk Assessment (ODARA)  
|                                          | Domestic Violence Risk Appraisal Guide (DVRAG)  |
| Physical violence – Structured prof. judgement | Spousal Assault Risk Assessment (SARA v1, 2, 3)  
|                                          | B-SAFER  |
| Homicide                      | Danger Assessment  
|                              | Lethality Screen  
|                              | } CAVEAT!!!
None of the existing tools are outstanding

• AUC ranges below similar tools for other types of violence

• Inter-rater reliability often untested

• Significant gaps in the literature on situational risk factors, victim vulnerability factors

ODARA: .64 - .79
Danger Assessment: .61-.69
B-SAFER: .54 - .70
SARA: .61 - .72
VP-SAFER: .66 - .67

Graham et al., 2019
Some possible solutions
- Evidence-based and evaluated tools
- Shared understanding and language
- Practicable approaches that can be applied across large numbers
- Graduated responses that are matched to assessed risk

Systemic
• Prevention focus
• Some management of identified risk factors
• Less urgency to management response
• Semi-regular reassessment of risk

• Urgent response
• Resource intensive risk management
• Regular reassessment of risk and adjustment of management in response
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• Reassessment of risk as required
- Evidence-based and evaluated tools
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Systemic

Assessing risk in the most sophisticated way possible for your role
- Being as evidence-based as you possibly can be, given your role

Individual
Thinking about risk/concern in an individual case

**What**
- What outcomes are you concerned about based on your current knowledge?
- What additional information is required to make an informed risk assessment (and can you get sufficient information to make a risk assessment)?

**How**
- Are there validated tool that can give you a baseline to start from?
- What risk factors are known to be associated with the kinds of risk you’re concerned about?
- Are there specific patterns in this case that can guide assessment of current risk?

**Who**
- Who is the risk to?
- Over what time / in what context?

**Next**
- What kind and amount of intervention does the apparent level of risk warrant?
- How urgent does it need to be?
- Who is responsible for ensuring management takes place and is reviewed?
Future abuse

This relationship

Other relationships

Psych. harm

Coercive control

Post-relationship stalking

Physical IPV

Any (including sexual)

Homicide
Future abuse

This relationship

Physical IPV

Any (including sexual)

Homicide

Coercive control
Non-fatal strangulation
Prior rape of victim
Threat with weapon
Access to gun
Recent/imminent separation
Threats to harm/kill
Homicidal ideation
Last-resort thinking

Spencer & Stith, 2018; MacKenzie, McEwan et al., 2009; Monckton-Smith, 2019
Future abuse

This relationship

Psych. harm

Coercive control

Post-relationship stalking

Threats

Sexual coercion

Victim isolation

Victim fear

Sub-lethal violence

Controlling behaviour

Myhill & Hohl, 2016
Future abuse

This relationship

Physical IPV

Any (including sexual)

Homicide

Past physical/sexual violence

Threat to harm/kill victim

Substance abuse

Barriers to support

General criminality

Jealousy/Controlling

Assault while pregnant

Apply a validated tool if you can!

Hilton et al., 2004; Messing et al., 2015
Future abuse

This relationship

Psych. harm

Coercive control

Post-relationship stalking

Separation

Coercive control

Severe physical IPV

Personality disorder

Reasons for contact

Senkans, McEwan & Ogloff, 2016; McEwan, Shea et al., 2017
Future abuse

This relationship

Stressors
Past IPV
Substance use
Mental illness
Barriers to support
General criminality
Controlling behaviour

Apply a validated tool if you can!

General offending tools will likely work here - LSRNR

McEwan et al., 2019; Williams, 2012
From risk factors to overall level of concern

• Think about each outcome separately
• How concerned you are about THAT outcome based on presence/absence and nature of risk factors relevant to that outcome
• Generally a linear relationship; more risk factors = higher risk
From risk factors to overall level of concern

• BUT in unusual cases there may be indicators that vastly increase or decrease your current concern, e.g.;
  • Homicidal ideation
  • Specific symptoms of mental illness (e.g., morbid jealousy, suicidality)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONCERN</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LOW CONCERN</td>
<td>Low for all outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MODERATE CONCERN</td>
<td>Mod/high any future abuse OR Mod for stalking or physical violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HIGH CONCERN</td>
<td>High stalking or physical violence OR Multiple indicators for coercive control or homicide</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• Prevention focus
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• Semi-regular reassessment of risk and adjustment of management

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Conclusions
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• We need to assess risk because it’s the only way we have to tailor responses that can effectively prevent harm, given volume means we can’t do the same in every case

BUT

• Risk in intimate partner violence risk is enormously complex, perhaps more so than other forms of offending risk
  • Multiple outcomes
  • Targeted violence
  • Situational factors

• Relative lack of evidence-base and validated instruments for different risk outcomes

• Current models of risk assessment in many jurisdictions and agencies do not meet basic standards of validity and reliability
Moving towards solutions

• We can work with what we have to make evidence-based decisions, but we need to be extremely cautious given the consequences for BOTH victims and perpetrators

• We need to evaluate the reliability and validity of existing risk assessment tools as a matter of urgency

• We need to build systems that allow us to easily:
  • Assess risk in comparable ways
  • Have common language for types of risk
  • Have a common understanding of what different risk judgements mean
  • Match the level of preventative response/risk management to the assessed risk
Questions?

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References


