

PUNITIVE ATTITUDES TOWARDS ABUSE OFFENDERS

Individual determinants of punitive attitudes towards sexual and domestic abuse offenders

Abstract

Purpose –individual factors predicting punitive attitudes toward sexual and domestic offences and offenders have received little attention, which this paper aims to address.

Design/methodology/approach - in *Study 1*, 137 participants completed a 25-item online questionnaire exploring individual factors hypothesised to predict punitive attitudes towards four sexual crimes: rape, paedophilia, incest and bestiality. In *Study 2*, 100 participants completed a similar questionnaire exploring individual factors hypothesized to predict punitive attitudes towards male and female emotional, physical and sexual abusers.

Findings - the standard multiple regression models of *Study 1* found that *Age* (i.e., being older), *Belief in a Just World* and *Gender* (i.e., being female) were predictors of harsher punitive attitudes. The models of *Study 2* found that the low score on the *Social Dominance* scale was the most common predictor.

Research limitations - this survey-based project presents a nuanced picture that could be complemented by the inclusion of a wider range of more complex factors and follow-on qualitative studies.

Practical implications – the key message from this study is to inform the public on the role of personality factors in developing punitive attitudes.

Social implications – it is vital to increase the legislators’ and the people’ awareness of the factors shaping the public impressions of criminal justice processes and evidence-based treatment effectiveness.

Originality/value - this relatively modest article offers insight of personality factors into people’s punitive attitudes shaping actual legislation.

Keywords: attitudes; domestic abuse; perception of crime; sexual abuse

Individual determinants of punitive attitudes towards sexual and domestic abuse offenders

Punitive attitudes held by members of the British public have played a significant role in creating and guiding penal policies and practices in the legal system (Chung, O’Leary & Hand 2006; Shackley, Weiner, Day, & Willis, 2014). These punitive attitudes are also reflected in governmental spending and have given rise to the so-called ‘penal populism’ (Pratt, 2006), leading to the country’s worst prison overcrowding crisis since 2008 (Leftly, 2014). In other words, the public attitudes concerning offenders shape and tone crime prevention policies, and it seems that the desire for retribution is the main stimulus reinforcing punitive attitudes towards sentencing, leading to a criticism of the justice system (Gerber & Jackson, 2013). This punitive, rather than rehabilitative, method of dealing with offenders lies behind attitudes held by the public which are often shaped by the lack of readily available information on effective long-term treatment of offenders and the exposure to the tabloid mass media advocating a punitive stance. This emphasis on punitiveness has also given rise to concerns about potentially facilitating re-offending (Hough & Kirby, 2013; Matthews, 2005).

Although there is some literature on what factors might lie behind punitive attitudes in general showing, for example, that individuals in support of dispositional attribution tend to be more punitive in their response to crime over individuals who support situational attribution (Cochran, Boots & Heide, 2003), related personality factors have received little attention with regard to specific sexual and domestic offences (Harper & Hogue, 2015). Taking this into account, and given that sex offender groups tend to be higher in neuroticism and lower in extraversion and conscientiousness (Dennison, Stough, & Birgden, 2001), for example, this paper, then, addresses this gap. Also, negative public attitudes toward sex offenders greatly hinder their treatment and integration with the society, potentially facilitating re-offending (Liu, 2014). The exploration of factors behind them, therefore, might

facilitate their better understanding and potentially inform the measures aimed at adjusting existing policies to the recommendations made by professionals interested in long-term effective treatment programs rather than by sensationalist media that overwhelmingly tend to demonise offenders (Malinen, Willis, & Johnston, 2014).

Study 1

In *Study 1*, we explore what factors predict punitive attitudes towards some of the most controversial and underreported crimes – sexual offences: rape, paedophilia, incest and bestiality. In previous studies, female adults reported significantly more negative attitudes towards rape than males (Holcomb, Holcomb, Sondag, & Williams, 1991), which is probably down to the majority of rape victims being predominantly female. Figures suggest that around 3% of males between the age of 16 and 59 fall victim to sexual assault in comparison to one in every five females (Burn-Murdoch, 2013). It is also argued that due to the emotionally charged nature of such an offence, women tend to be more emotive in their feeling towards punishment than men (Edwards, 2001; Gault & Sabini, 2000).

Not surprisingly, perhaps, existing research has also long concluded that individuals who molest children receive longer sentences in contrast to rapists and other violent offenders (Mancini & Mears, 2010). Arguably, victimisation from family members accounts for the majority of sexual victimisation against children, which is further exacerbated by the culture of ‘shameful silence’ and under-reporting (Roberts, 2003). The data on incest, however, is quite scarce, with intra-family abuse being ignored (Roger & Levesque, 2000). It has already been suggested, for example, that incest tends to stem from family dysfunction rather than from males abusing their power (Jackson & Sandberg, 1985; Heath, Donnan & Halpin, 1990). With reference to incest being regarded as somewhat less severe than other sexual offences, public support for rehabilitation appears to be more popular (Brown, 1999). However, challenging this view is the idea that regardless of the crime, the public tend to favour lengthy

prison sentences over any other method of 'treatment' (Zimmerman, Alastyne & Dunn, 1988), suggesting that the public are generally punitive, rather than rehabilitative. Although data on public attitudes towards incestual and zoophilic offenders is largely missing, some campaigners claim that the legislation surrounding this taboo subject is not harsh enough (Peakman, 2013). Interestingly, despite bestiality contradicting the conventionally accepted standards of sexual behaviour and violating animal rights, there is some data suggesting that bestiality can be viewed similarly to masturbation, and less harshly if the zoophilic is single.

Predictor factors

To date, studies have not systematically explored the relationship between the age of the individual and their perspectives on punitive punishments for sexual offenders (Brannon, Levenson, Fortney & Baker, 2007), focusing instead on demographic characteristics. Although Payne, Gainey, Triplett and Danner (2004) found strong correlations between punitive attitudes in relation to older participants and men, they argue that demographic characteristics are unreliable predictors of correctional attitudes. Whilst some researchers argue that older age is associated with an increase in punitiveness (Gerber & Engelhardt-Greer, 1996; Indermaur & Roberts, 2005), others suggest that the relationship is inconclusive (Kury & Ferdinand, 1999). Given the more recent findings (Indermaur & Roberts, 2005), however, it is hypothesised that *Age* is a good predictor of punitive attitudes towards sexual offenders, with the elder population being more punitive than the younger.

Gender

It seems that women demonstrate more negative attitudes to sexual offenders on both affective and behavioral measures compared with men (Willis, Malinen, & Johnston, 2013). However, men appear to be more supportive of punishment over treatment than women (Whitehead & Blankenship, 2000; Kury & Ferdinand, 1999). Relatedly, Gelb (2011) found higher levels of general punitiveness in male (and older) participants.

Right Wing Authoritarianism

Early research suggested that right wing authoritarianism was a generally reliable predictor of the public's punitive attitudes (Altemeyer, 1988). Later studies found that right-wing authoritarian men were less punitive towards physical or sexual assault of women (Benjamin, 2006) and less punitive in their general attitudes, possibly due to their 'traditional' view on gender roles (Whitley, 1999). However, more recent studies did not confirm that (McKee & Feather, 2008). Given this ambiguity, it was hypothesised that with the exception of rape, right wing authoritarian men would be more punitive in their attitudes towards sexual offenders than women.

Belief in a Just World

The established connection between the support for government institutions and belief in a just world (Rubin & Peplau, 1975) is not new. It also appears that in English speaking countries the punitive responses of the criminal justice system are increasing (Allen, Komy, Lovbakke & Roy, 2005), and the idea of just is closely linked up with punitiveness (Tyler & Boeckmann, 1997), giving rise to the hypothesis that individuals scoring highly on the *Belief in a Just World* scale will be more punitive in their attitudes towards sexual offenders.

Mortality Salience

Previous research has found that making individuals aware of their mortality creates the need for them to maintain and defend their subjective cultural worldviews (Lieberman, Arndt, Personius, & Cook, 2001). As a result, mortality salient participants typically strive to uphold legal sanctions and also tend to react negatively to those who promote alternative worldview beliefs (Arndt, Lieberman, Cook and Solomon, 2005). An individual's awareness of their own mortality was also found to activate their political attitudes (Burke, Kosloff & Landau, 2013) and to make them regard crime as a threat to their worldview beliefs (Koski &

Clinkinbeard, 2008), giving rise to the hypothesis that mortality salient individuals will be more punitive towards sexual offences than individuals who are not.

Religiosity

Despite the move towards modernity and secularism, religion is still seen to be a salient feature shaping punitive attitudes (Baumer & Martin, 2013). Christianity has been understood to play a substantial role in predicting individual support for corporal punishment and punitive criminal justice policies (Grasmick, Bursik & Kimpel, 1991; Grasmick, Morgan & Kennedy, 1992; Grasmick & McGill, 1994). It also appears that Christians have more correctional attitudes than individuals who are less associated with religion (Applegate, Cullen, & Fisher, 2000; Unnever, Cullen & Applegate, 2005). This is in line with the finding that individuals who are active church-goers tend to be more punitive. Drawing on the link between fundamentalism and dispositional attribution (Grasmick & McGill, 1994), it was hypothesized, then, that participants scoring higher on the religiosity scale would be more punitive in their attitudes towards sexual offenders.

Methodology

A standard multiple regression correlational design was adopted. The outcome variable, Punitive Attitudes, was split into four different types of sexual offence - *Rape*, *Incest*, *Paedophilia* and *Bestiality* (All measured on a scale of 1-7, where the higher scores indicated more punitive attitudes), which were hypothesised to be predicted by six independent variables. An opportunity sample was employed where 137 participants (71 Females; 66 Males) of various backgrounds aged 18+ ($M=30.5$; $SD=13.6$) completed an online questionnaire. Data was collected through the Internet using various social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter and also via email.

Questionnaires covered predictor factors using the 1-7 Likert-type scales: *Belief in a Just World* ($\alpha=.796$), *Mortality Salience* ($\alpha=.755$), and *Right Wing Authoritarianism* ($\alpha=.853$).

Whereas *Belief in a Just World* and *Right Wing Authoritarianism* were pre-validated scales, *Mortality Salience* was formulated and tailored specifically to this study. The other predictor variables included; *Gender*, (Measured on 3 levels; 1=Male, 2=Female and 3=Transgender), *Age* (Numeric Value) and *Religiosity* (our pilot study found that including an additional item-based religiosity scale resulted in low survey completions, possibly due to the length – that a simple item was used - *how religious are you* 1 -7).

Results

Rape

The total variance explained by the model as a whole was 9%; $F(6,137)=2.203$, $p=.047$, $R^2=.092$. Only one predictor variable, (older) *Age*, was a statistically significant ($\beta=.221$, $p=.025$) predictor of *Punitive Attitudes towards Rape*.

Pedophilia

The total variance explained by the model as a whole was 7%, $F(6,137)=1.702$, $p=.125$, $R^2=.073$. Only one control measure, *Gender*, was a statistically significant ($\beta=.193$, $p=.027$) predictor of *Punitive Attitudes towards Pedophilia*, with men being more punitive than women.

Incest

The total variance explained by the model as a whole was 5%, $F(6,137)=1.244$, $p=.288$, $R^2=.064$. However, the model itself was not statistically significant.

Bestiality

The total variance explained by the model as a whole was 9%, $F(6,137)=2.107$, $p=.057$, $R^2=.089$. Only one control measure, *Belief in a Just World* ($\beta=.292$, $p=.002$) was a positive predictor of *Punitive Attitudes towards Bestiality*.

Study 2

Taking the findings of *Study 1* into account, *Study 2* is focused on exploring the factors shaping people's perception about laws around a related, very common but much less outcry-evoking type of offending – domestic abuse. Across the world, domestic abuse is on the rise (Engel, 2014; Reddy et al, 1997) and in general communities agree that it is an offence. Pavlou and Knowles (2001), for example, asked participants to report the level of punishment suitable for a number of male to female domestic abuse scenarios, showing that most respondents agreed that the offender should receive a punishment of some sort, with 27% saying he should go to jail and 34% suggesting community service or a fine. That said, there was no overall consensus on the deserved punishment. Most related research has focused on perception of male perpetrators of domestic abuse (Smith, 2011), predictors of recidivism among them (2004) or the role of alcohol (McMurran & Gilchrist, 2008), and responses (Part, 2006), largely ignoring individual factors that may shape attitudes to domestic abuse, which *Study 2* aims to address.

Methodology

Like in *Study 1*, a standard multiple regression correlational design was adopted, but this time it was used to assess the predictability of each factor towards punitive attitudes towards emotional and physical domestic abuse by men and women. As the roles of *Age* and *Mortality Salience* were not very clear in *Study 1*, it was decided that including a measure that appears to be more related to hierarchy-based gender roles, *Social Dominance* (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) would be more appropriate. As Social Dominance was found to reduce concern for human victims (McFarland, 2005), it was hypothesised that its high scorers would be less punitive than low scorers. The other predictor factors (i.e., *Gender*, *Religiosity*, *Right-wing Authoritarianism*, and *Belief in a Just World*) were kept. Four models were run, the four outcome variables being *Support for Harsher Punishments for Men/Women*

Emotionally/Physically Abusing (their partner) Women/Men (1- none; 7 complete). Similarly to *Study 1*, an online questionnaire was used by 100 participants (72 Females; 27 Males) of various backgrounds aged 18+ ($M=28.2$; $SD=11.06$).

Results

Male emotionally abusing female

The total variance explained by the model as whole was 14%, $F(6,93)=2.52$, $p=.05$, $R^2=.14$ and the factor making the strongest unique contribution to explaining the dependent variable was *Social Dominance* ($\beta= -.226$, $p=.05$).

Male physically abusing female

The total variance explained by the model as a whole was 14.3%, $F(6,93)= 2.59$, $p=.05$, $R^2=.143$ and the factor making the strongest unique contribution to explaining the dependent variable was *Gender* (i.e., being male; $\beta= -.250$, $p=.05$). The factor making the second strongest unique contribution was *Social Dominance* ($\beta= -.235$, $p=.05$).

Female emotionally abusing male

The total variance explained by the model was 6%, $F(6,93)= 2.87$, $p=.013$, $R^2=.060$ and the factor making the strongest unique contribution to explaining the dependent variable was *Social Dominance* ($\beta= -.228$, $p=.027$).

Female physically abusing male

The prediction model was not statistically significant, $F(6,93)= 0.98$, $p=.06$.

Discussion

The emergent data picture from *Study 1* was not as clear and conclusive as first anticipated, implying the need for a follow-up study, taking into account more variables and a more diverse population sample. Although significant relationships were found between; *Gender* and *Punitive Attitudes* towards *Paedophilia*, *Age* and *Punitive Attitudes* towards *Rape*, and *Belief in a Just World* and *Punitive Attitudes* towards *Rape and Bestiality*, results found

that *Right Wing Authoritarianism*, *Mortality Salience* and *Religiosity* were not significant predictors.

The results of *Study 1* compliment the findings of Applegate *et al* (2002) who found women to be far less punitive (but more rehabilitative) in their attitudes as opposed to men, which is likely due to men demonstrating punitive behaviour than women (Holbrook, White & Hutt, 1995). The results are also in line with existing research showing that older members of the public are more punitive in their responses to criminals, in particular sex offenders (Wood & Tendayi Viki, 2004). They also tie in with much earlier findings (Rubin & Peplau, 1975; Tyler & Boeckmann, 1997) suggesting a strong link between *Belief in a Just World* and support of harsher punitive policies. Attitudes of the public towards sex offenders have a number of potentially important consequences for sex offenders and the communities that they are re-enter (Church, Wakeman, Miller, Clements, & Sun 2007; Pickett, Mancini & Mears, 2013). Research suggests that punitiveness is linked to inaccurate perceptions of crime (Roberts & Indermaur, 2007), and as a result sex offender policies have been influenced more by public outcry based on misinformation than on empirical evidence (Griffin & West, 2006).

In *Study 2*, the variable *Social Dominance* produced a consistently negative regression coefficient for males emotionally abusing females, and females emotionally abusing males, meaning there was a negative relationship between *Social Dominance* and these variables. These findings contrast with the existing research such as that by Sidanius *et al* (2006) who found high levels of *Social Dominance* positively correlated with harsh criminal punishment. However, they are in line with research showing that those scoring high on Social Dominance have been found to display less empathy (Pratto *et al*, 1994), less concern (McFarland, 2005) and to show coldness towards others (Ekehammar *et al*, 2004). In other words, it is possible that the high Social Dominance scorers had little empathy towards the domestic victims, thus

giving low support of harsher punishments. Gender also proved to be a significant predictor of harsher punishments in response to males physically abusing females, challenging feminist theories of domestic abuse. By being more punitive to other men physically abusing females, it is possible that male participants could demonstrate their chivalry and sensitivity. As stated by Nicholls (2005), men may not view a female violence towards them as an equally serious crime, which might clarify the lower preference of punishment for females physically abusing males.

Despite the relatively narrow range of examined factors, this exploratory research represents a tentative, qualified and small-scale, but original extension of relevant research in the field, inviting other more focused studies. Recent news articles stress the importance placed behind changes in public opinion (Hobley, 2012). It is important to understand the factors that have an effect on punitive attitudes to understand the increasingly relevant punitive phenomenon and the public satisfaction with the justice system (Roberts & Indermaur, 2007). However, research focused on individual factors related to punitive attitudes to specific sexual and domestic offences has, to date, been quite limited (Gelb, 2011). As there is a gap between the public and judges in terms of appropriate sentences, the laws put in place do not seem to reflect public views on crime (Mirrlees-Black, 2001; McNaughton et al., 2012). In support of this claim, others (Gelb, 2009; Hough & Roberts, 1999) found that when the public is more fully informed about sentences that are actually given for different offences, its members tend to be less punitive.

In recent years, the public has become more punitive in their attitudes and many countries across the world have put stricter laws in place as it has become harder for legislators to introduce any other approaches to offenders, other than the increasingly punitive responses (Gelb, 2007). The findings from this research indicate the need for

informing public on criminal justice processes and evidence-based treatment effectiveness, as well as ensuring that legislators are more aware of what factors shape public attitudes.

As crime and treatment are both sensitive topics, we argue that it is the role of public leaders to inform the public about the utility of certain sanctions and the disutility of others.

Due to public attitudes playing such an important part in the effectiveness of offender treatment (Shackley et al., 2014), there is a clear need for the exploration of other individual and socio-economic factors that might lie behind punitive attitudes to specific rather than general offences. Such further exploration might also address some of the limitations of this research, like the relatively narrow range of explored individual predictor factors and outcome variables, as well as the correlational rather than an experimental design that would link the punitive attitudes to actual behaviours.

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