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“This statement is true to the best of my knowledge and belief”: A provisional assessment of the utility of Police Victim Statements in the qualitative understanding of domestic violence and abuse

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**Abstract**

Understanding the factors that influence the decisions made by victims of domestic violence and abuse has, for some time, been a key area of focus for professionals working within the Criminal Justice System and academic researchers alike. Using female victims' reported decision-making around incidences of domestic violence and abuse as an illustrative case study, this paper analyses N=120 Police Victim Statements, collected by officers in one force in Northwest England. The usefulness of a PVS as a form of qualitative research data to better understand domestic violence and abuse is examined by means of a deductive content analysis. Drawing on the literature addressing decision-making by victims in domestic violence and abuse, a simple coding frame was developed to provide a structure for the initial investigation of the Police Victim Statements to examine the type of data contained in these legal documents. Findings suggest that, whilst they have some limitations, PVSs are a valuable and currently under-utilised form of qualitative data to research and understand victim decision-making in domestic violence and abuse.

**Key messages:**

1. Police Victim Statements provide a useful and rich source of data to further the understanding of domestic violence and abuse victims' decision-making.
2. Police Victim Statements supplement knowledge drawn from more established qualitative methods, such as semi-structured interviews and focus groups.
3. Unlike more traditional forms of qualitative data, Police Victim Statements often capture the circumstances of victims while still in their abusive relationships, and/or very soon after an abusive incident has just occurred.

**Key words/short phrases:**

Domestic Violence and Abuse, Decision-Making, Police Victim Statements, Qualitative Research.

## **Introduction**

To date, it would be uncontroversial to propose, the great majority of qualitative studies addressing domestic violence and abuse (henceforth DVA) have utilised post-hoc methods, most commonly open-ended research interviews with victims, to facilitate a stronger understanding of the nuanced reality of living in abusive relationships. There can be no doubt that this robust approach has cast considerable contemporary light on the global situations of DVA victims that would likely otherwise have remained hidden from wider view (McCarthy, Hunt, and Milne-Skillman, 2017; Spangaro, Koziol-McLain, Rutherford, and Zwi, 2020). As observed in a number of critical accounts, however, this approach is also not without its limitations, both operationally and in terms of the range of analytic inferences that might be confidently drawn (Flin et al., 1992; Randall and Phoenix, 2009). In this paper it is contended, thus, that a wider range of data forms might be examined in terms of their prospectively complementary utility for the broader qualitative DVA research programme. In the service of this argument, data drawn from police victim statements (henceforth PVSs) are specifically investigated. Using female victims' reported decision-making around incidences of DVA as a case study, it is outlined how investigation of PVSs might augment knowledge drawn from more established methods.

## ***Approaches to Qualitative Research in DVA***

Contemporary research into all forms of DVA is broadly dominated by two methods of primary data collection. Quantitatively, the social survey prevails as a means of elucidating broad matters of demographic incidence and correlation (Curtis et al., 2019; Ferrari et al., 2016). This orthodoxy is routinely complemented by statistical analyses of official crime data, with recent investigation of the relationships between DVA, soccer results and alcohol abuse being a pertinent case-in-point (Trendl, Stewart, and Mullett, 2021).

Qualitatively, as noted above, the one-to-one, open-ended research interview is the method of choice for a majority DVA researchers when exploring nuance and specificity in the lived experiences of victims (Arai et al., 2021; Heron and Eisma, 2021; Robinson and Spilsbury, 2008), although focus groups have found some purchase in the domain to date (Rhodes, Cerulli, Dichter, Kothari, and Barg, 2010; Stanley, Miller, and Richardson Foster, 2012). For the sake of brevity, both post-hoc questioning-based approaches will henceforth be termed Primary Qualitative (PQ) except where methodological concerns relating to interviews and focus groups diverge. What is perhaps most striking about the qualitative paradigm in DVA research, particularly when juxtaposed against quantitative work, is a lesser engagement with more ‘official’ forms of data as a useful counterpoint to primary studies. This remains the case despite observations regarding methodological limitations in the dominant PQ research programme. For example, it has been argued that a fuller qualitative account of the intricacies of DVA victim experience remains elusive not least due to a serious participant recruitment problem; only victims with sufficient confidence to share their sensitive experiences of DVA for the purposes of a research interview will typically volunteer (Aldridge, 2013). This problem is, moreover, likely to be amplified when using focus groups. These inherently require any participant to tell their story in a yet more public context than an interview, where corollary embarrassment and concerns about confidentiality can tend to prevail (Sim and Waterfield, 2019).

Although such recruitment difficulties are a ubiquitous problem in qualitative research addressing sensitive topics, it remains troubling that the voices of the DVA victims most profoundly affected by their experiences may remain relatively unheard in the current body of PQ research (Aldridge, 2013; WalterMaurer, Ortega and McNutt, 2003). A more explicitly epistemic concern in this domain, meanwhile, and one also relevant to a great deal of qualitative research in the broader social sciences, is the matter of immediacy. When

victims of DVA do consent to take part in PQ studies, they typically do so some considerable time after the events/experiences they are being asked to recount. This delay, typically exacerbated when sensitive matters such as DVA are at stake, can render emergent studies vulnerable to challenges regarding the clarity of a participant's memory during an interview (Flin et al., 1992). Equally, if not more pertinent in the business of recounting sensitive experiences is the degree to which, for a participant, "...the significance of past events tends to change and grow with time" (Randall and Phoenix, 2009, p.130). The latter, it should be asserted, is not an inherent weakness of method; indeed, in some largely interview-based frameworks such as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (McCarthy, 2019), the correspondence between (re)interpretation of experience and present cognitive states ultimately becomes topic. It is within the more commonly-drawn direct thematic links between 'what is latterly said' and 'what happened' that these epistemic challenges become particularly relevant.

It is essential to reassert at this point that there is no argument advanced in this paper *against* the present PQ orthodoxy in qualitative DVA research. The body of work emergent of this approach has clearly revealed previously undocumented concerns affecting DVA victims in a wide range of circumstances (Arai et al., 2021; Heron and Eisma, 2021; Robinson and Spilsbury, 2008). It is also important to be mindful that a PVS has clear epistemological vulnerabilities. It does not, for example, give direct access to the victim's own words, as PQ methods inevitably will. Similarly, the researcher using a PVS has no capacity to build interpersonal rapport, nor to encourage the victim's extended reflection on specific issues of interest. Although a PVS may indeed represent a long and detailed account given *in situ* by a DVA victim, the decisions regarding which features are of key relevance reside with the police officer rather than the researcher.

In summary, no single methodological approach to social research is entirely unproblematic, however, and the position taken herein is that findings drawn from *post-hoc* primary qualitative methods might be actively and critically augmented by official qualitative data forms, to the same ends (if not in the same way) that survey-based studies interact with crime statistics. Nearly two decades ago, this case was articulated by Canter and Alison (2003) who advanced a set of compelling arguments addressing the merits and demerits of a variety of qualitative law enforcement evidence forms as formal ‘unobtrusive’ research data in investigative psychology. They concluded that:

If the researcher is respectful of the parameters within which information is collected and is aware of what police officers must collect, she or he could highlight those features that are likely to be most useful for research reports. (p.21)

With respect to these concerns regarding critical awareness outlined above, one should be mindful that a PVS is ultimately assembled with reference to its facility in a court of law. In short, the core details preserved in the summary are likely those that the police officer reasons will most robustly support a subsequent prosecution

Taking into account some of the merits and limitations of PQ methods versus PVSs it is important to look more broadly at other forms of police evidence that have been used instructively to inform research: for example, applications for a protection order (Durfee and Messing, 2012) and Victim Impact Statements (Leverick, Chalmers and Duff, 2007). Hayes and Devaney (2004) further argue that case files are a rich resource that have been typically overlooked as data sources. At the time of writing, and after extensive review, however, no such studies were found to have explicitly utilised the PVS (the material of this paper) as a formal qualitative resource in the understanding of DVA victims’ circumstances.

### ***The PVS as Qualitative DVA Data***

In England (the site of this study) and Wales, a PVS is a document compiled by a trained police officer that records and summarises the account provided by a victim in a standardised format. By authorising a PVS, the victim confirms that it is ‘a true account’ of their experience and, further, that it may be used as evidence in court (Crown Prosecution Service, 2017). It should be noted that this authorisation does not automatically end in a criminal prosecution of an abuser, as evidenced in the high number of subsequent retractions made by victims choosing to opt out of the Criminal Justice System (henceforth CJS). Recent official statistics indicate that around 24% of such reports to police are subsequently retracted by the victim (Office for National Statistics, 2017). Rather, a victim’s provision of a PVS in the immediate aftermath of an abusive act simply embodies the decision of that victim to engage with the authorities, thereby entrusting a police officer with their story at that point.

The process of interviewing suspects, witnesses and victims in the UK is guided by the PEACE (preparation, engage and explain, account, closure, evaluation) model, introduced in 1992. Grounded in the cognitive interviewing approach (Fisher and Geiselman, 1992), this standardised framework encourages free recall, with the officer refraining from persistent questioning and taking care not to interrupt (College of Policing, 2021). In these respects, the core techniques involved in data collection are not unlike those of the conventional semi-structured research interview in which, ideally, the interviewer remains as passive as the context permits. A formal summarised account, the PVS itself, is then compiled from notes, with the officer directed to carefully evaluate all available materials and ensure that the statement accurately reflects what was said. Moreover, and for the sake of legal transparency, raw notes must be retained should the veracity of the statement subsequently be contested during a prosecution (College of Policing, 2021).



Given the above, it is perhaps unsurprising that a DVA-related PVS can (and often does) contain much of the descriptive and reflective information typically sought by qualitative DVA researchers including (but not limited to):

- The build-up to and attributed cause(s) of the abuse;
- The dynamics between the abuser and victim before, during and immediately after the incident;
- Any immediately post-abusive events;
- The emotions of the victim towards the abuser and the relationship;
- Reasons for reporting and wanting to leave the relationship;
- The character and history of the abuser (e.g. drugs/alcohol/anger problems), and;
- Previous abusive incidents and attributed causes thereof.

In terms of immediacy, a core critique of interview-based studies (Flin et al., 1992; Randall and Phoenix, 2009), a PVS is typically taken (in England and Wales at least) within 24 hours of an incident occurring and/or the police being called. Moreover, and in terms of accessibility, a relatively large body of qualitative PVS data is comparatively easy to assemble, certainly when compared to research interviews with victims of DVA (Aldridge, 2013). For this study, and as further elucidated below, a data-sharing agreement was established between a police force and the academic institution of the first author. With robust ethical checks, a database consisting of thousands of PVSs collected across the twelve divisions of the participating force was thereby made available to the researchers.

In order to support this examination of the utility of the PVS in the qualitative understanding of DVA, the matter of female victims' decision-making was selected as an

illustrative case study. This selection was grounded in evidence that decision-making permeates a victim's activity at all levels in cases of DVA (see below), and this ubiquity would provide optimal opportunities for comparative investigation. DVA perpetrated by a male against a female, meanwhile, is by some margin the most widely reported and researched order of the phenomenon. Finally, with respect to decision-making, a PVS represents a unique correspondence between form and content for DVA researchers in one very particular sense. This is, the key decision by a victim to report their abuser to the authorities, and/or the point at which they decide they can no longer endure their conditions or feel compelled to report by means of their support networks or professionals assisting them, is *embodied* in the very act of providing the PVS in question. . This is in stark contrast to those studies employing PQ methods where the decision-making arises as a highly persistent latent theme throughout the corpus of work as opposed to having this as their explicit focus thereby highlighting another benefit of using PVSs to further the understanding of PVA.

### ***Case Study: Female victims' decision-making in the reporting of DVA***

A review of currently available qualitative literature indicates that among the difficult and multi-faceted decisions faced by victims of DVA, the initial decision to report the abuser - and therefore involve authorities - can be particularly challenging to make (Anderson and Saunders, 2003; Francis, Loxton and James, 2017; Rhodes et al., 2010; 2, Miller and Richardson Foster, 2012).<sup>1</sup> A consistent observation in this literature is that female victims do, however, routinely make the decision in a deliberate and systematic manner, despite the troubled circumstances surrounding their making. In doing so, they have been shown to take

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balanced account of a variety of pragmatic concerns (Bowles et al., 2009; Davies, Block and Campbell, 2007; Harrell and Langton, 2013; Rhodes et al. 2010).

Key issues that have been qualitatively documented to facilitate a victim's decision to report DVA to the police include the perceived seriousness/significance of the assault(s), whether the abuser has a demonstrable history of violence (i.e., whether it is a 'first or unusual offence'), and whether the abuser is intoxicated at the time of a given assault (Felson et al., 2002; Harrell and Langton, 2013). Research has further indicated that the understood presence of strong informal support networks, typically family and friends, proportionately increases the likelihood of an individual taking formal legal steps to effect a change in their circumstances (Davies, Block and Campbell, 2007).

While it has been argued that embarrassment/shame, and an inference that retaliation is probable, are likely to inhibit - at least for a time - a woman's likelihood of reporting DVA (Bowles et al., 2009), the corollary issue of fear is also widely documented to influence decisions to call the police, although not necessarily in predictable ways. Typically, persistent/chronic fear has similarly been seen as a barrier to seeking help (Felson et al., 2002; Singer, 1988). Greenberg and Beach (2004), however, demonstrate that where high/acute levels of fear are involved, the victim's usual processes of situational evaluation can be suspended and, perhaps counter-intuitively, their likelihood of reporting DVA to the police actually increases. Fear can also be viewed as a motivational, pro-active emotion, capable of producing change behaviour and a form of activism amongst victims (Pain, 2014) which includes decisions to report DVA. Finally, the wellbeing of children has been shown to present a particularly nuanced decision-making dilemma for women around the reporting of DVA. Rhodes et al. (2010), for example, articulate how the mothers participating in their study unequivocally desired to protect their children from exposure to violence, but were also

keenly aware of the instability and anxiety that those children may also experience as a consequence of involving legal authorities, and thereby potentially dividing a family.

With regard to the above, and as evidenced in the 24% retraction rate of DVA-related statements to police in England and Wales (Office for National Statistics, 2017), the act of requesting police assistance need not evidence any definitive will on the part of a victim to terminate the relationship with the abuser. Rather, it is often driven by a situated pragmatic desire to simply halt the abuse itself (Barrett and Pierre, 2011). Indeed, a high proportion of women who report and then take the active step of leaving an abusive relationship do ultimately return to the abuser (Anderson and Saunders, 2003).

## **Methodology**

In line with the exploratory purposes of this paper, a model of largely deductive investigation informed by directed content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005; Wei and Watson, 2019) was employed. It should be stressed that this approach is herein applied illustratively rather than exhaustively. Core categories for investigation were developed from extant theoretical materials drawn from qualitative research into women's decision-making in DVA (reported above), and empirical PVS data then systematically examined in terms of their correspondence with these. Quantification of thematic occurrence within the data corpus, a key component of summative content analysis (Aroustamian, 2020), was not surmised by the authors to be a useful exercise in a paper ultimately designed to explore the value of PVSs as a complementary data form to that drawn from PQ methods. The focus, in these terms, remains ultimately upon qualitative detail.

## ***Ethics***

Precursory to any discussion of process in a paper of this order is the business of elucidating the ethical mechanism for gaining access to key data. It is clear that conventional *a priori* ethical mechanisms around securing informed consent from participants, as typically relevant in qualitative research, cannot be applied when using police data such as the PVS to better understand DVA. Moreover, it is not legal nor ethical to return to individual victims who have provided a PVS and ask for such post-hoc consent. This would require using their personal contact details on police file (an inherent GDPR violation), risk re-traumatising victims who had moved past the circumstances of their original report (Epstein, 2010), and/or put potentially victims at further risk of harm when still in their abusive relationships.

When a PVS is obtained in England and Wales, victims are provided with the police force's Privacy Notice (see Metropolitan Police, 2021). This amounts to a standard Participant Information Sheet, which asserts that any prospective use of data to constructive ends, such as research, will be fully redacted of any and all personal details. The first author guaranteed observation of these terms. Ethical approval was, thus, granted by the academic institution of the first author, and a data-sharing agreement was established with the participating police force.

### ***Materials***

Once access to the participating police force's full database of DVA-related PVSs was granted, exclusion criteria were initially applied in line with the priorities of this case study. These are outlined in Table 1 (below). Given that the participating police force was responsible for a large geographical area with high levels of socio-demographic differentiation, a stratified random sample of  $n=10$  statements from each of 12 divisions was taken from the remaining corpus, totalling  $n=120$  statements and 63 960 words, at a mean of 533 words per PVS.

<b>Exclusion</b>	<b>Rationale</b>
Statements taken prior to 2010	<i>Policy changes and issues such as police resources can vary across decades and create difference in the statement taking process.</i>
Same-sex relationships	<i>The dynamics of abuse within same-sex and heterosexual relationships vary considerably (Donovan et al, 2006).</i>
Male victim, female abuser	<i>The dynamics and patterns of abuse can vary greatly from female male offending compare to male female offending (Houry et al, 2008).</i>
Intra familial abuse	<i>This centres more around familial abuse (i.e. between siblings) and not intimate relationships (Finkelhor et al, 2005).</i>
Forced marriage	<i>The dynamics and abuse patterns are specific and situated in cultural contexts (Idriss, 2017).</i>

Table 1: Exclusion criteria

### **Participants**

Table 2 displays the mean and median ages of the victims and abusers in the N=120 data corpus. In terms of the relationship status of victims and abusers at the time of statement-provision, 53.7% were in a relationship, 32.9% were separated and 13.4% were deemed to be in an ‘on/off’ relationship.

	Mean Age (years)	Median Age (years)	Age Range (years)
Victim (female)	33.50	22.52	18-53
Abuser (male)	34.29	23.24	20-57

Table 2: Victims’ and abusers’ mean and median ages (years), age ranges for both victim and abuser

### **Procedure**

By accessing the participating force’s database of PVSs, raw data were discovered in two formats: (a) a majority were scanned files of handwritten documents, and (b) the

remainder were typed electronic documents. All data were handled in strict accordance with the ethical conditions outlined by the institution of the first author, and in the data-sharing agreement agreed with the Metropolitan Police. Where electronic, the data were redacted of all details relating to names, exact dates, and places. Where scanned, the data were typed and redacted to the same ends.

### *Analysis*

The analysis presented below, to reiterate, is an illustrative exercise; its core function is ultimately methodological rather than substantive, and therefore largely deductive rather than inductive. Using the literature addressing decision-making in DVA discussed above, the simple coding frame illustrated in Table 3 was developed to guide provisional investigation of the PVS data sample selected for this exercise. It should be noted that none of the embedded thematic labels presume a valence of influence upon a victim's decision-making; rather, they simply embody the key concerns as evident in the literature.

<b>Major Theme</b>	<b>Description/Sources</b>
Significant Event	<i>Influence of a perceived change in abusive behaviour (refs)</i>
History of Abuse	<i>Influence of abuser's longitudinal behaviour patterns (refs)</i>
Intoxication	<i>Influence of abuser's alcohol/drug use (refs)</i>
Support Networks	<i>Influence of family/friends (refs)</i>
Fear	<i>Influence of acute or chronic fear (Felson et al., 2002; Greenberg and Beach, 2004; Singer, 1988).</i>
Children	<i>Influence of dependents (Rhodes et al., 2010)</i>

*Table 3: Coding frame for exploration of data, based on key literature addressing women's decisions to report DVA*

The function of this frame was, manifestly, to facilitate points of comparison. The first author initially explored the data corpus in detail. All data thematically corresponding with this frame were coded accordingly, with key quotations selected for best illustrative value, while

any data that indicated prospective novelties were subjected to inductive coding for subsequent integration into the presented findings (Wei and Watson, 2019). This full process was then independently replicated by the second author. Finally, the authors coordinatively appraised and integrated their analyses, and determined the strongest direct data for presentation.

## **Findings**

In line with the key themes outlined in the frame above, the following correspondences were found in the data examined.

### ***Significant Event***

Across the data corpus, a ‘tipping point’ in the abuser’s behaviour (i.e. a key precipitating event) was commonly identified as the key influence on the victim’s decision to report. In very few cases was this event reported to be a first incidence of abuse; rather it was typically described as a sudden escalation of physical violence:

V74: *“I stayed where I was, and I rang the police. I’ve never phoned the police before about him but the fact that he could actually kick me in my head made me feel sick and I knew that I had to do something about it. I have put up with a lot from him, but this is just too much. For him to be able to kick me in the head, not just once, just says that I have to do the right thing and end it before I end up seriously hurt.”*

V72: *“This has left me feeling very nervous and on edge. I am very scared in case [abuser’s name] comes back and manages to get into my flat again. I have always taken him back in the past but this is the final straw. I honestly believe that if I do not do something about him now then he will end up killing me.”*



### ***History of Abuse***

A specific event or point of escalation was not always given as the core reason for a decision to report being made. In some cases, the simple persistence of the abusive behaviour was given as the victim's 'breaking point'. Both women embed an explanation for their prior reluctance to report in their account of why they finally did:

V68: *"I have never provided the police with a statement or made any complaint against him. The main reason is I love him and didn't want to get him into trouble with the police. I have always forgiven him even though he has hit me before. I can't forgive him this time; he has gone too far."*

V23: *"In the past I haven't always cooperated with the police and provided statements. I've felt mixed up- I love him. I'm not sure what to do. I know I've had enough of the violence, it has to stop. I'm not sure what the future holds for me and him. We both need help. I want the matter to go to court to force him to get help around anger and raising his awareness of domestic violence."*

### ***Intoxication***

In the full data corpus, the abuser's use of alcohol and/or drugs was a routine feature of many accounts, though it was not always given as a key reason in itself for reporting. For some victims, it was a background detail provided when describing 'typical' behaviours, but for many others it was the main cause of the argument and subsequent abuse and violence occurring:

V21: *“This assault was completely unprovoked and as a result of him drinking and smoking cannabis. That’s it now I do not want [abuser’s name] back and the relationship is over.*

V115: *“[abuser’s name] scares me so much. I know that when he drinks he is going to be aggressive and violent towards me. [abuser’s name] doesn’t know his limits when it comes to alcohol and he will take his anger out on me when he drinks. I am scared of what he is capable of and that he will really hurt me one day. The incident I have reported stems from an argument after him drinking a lot of alcohol. I always end up having to put up with his abuse towards me.”*

### ***Support Networks***

In the PVSs explored, family and support networks were often addressed. The actual or threatened abuse or harassment of loved ones precipitated some of the reports and for others, family and support networks facilitated the reporting by calling the police:

V82: *“- He was so angry his face changed and I did not want my son to get hurt. [abuser’s name] has run up the stairs and I was stood between xxx and his path to my son, he came towards me angrily and pushed me towards the staircase. [Abuser’s name] was screaming at me I can’t remember what he was saying because I was scared but I just wanted to protect my son. He pushed me backwards with force he placed both hands on my shoulders and pinned me against the staircase. My son shouted he was going to call the police which he did.*

V91: *“I was curled up in a ball and [abuser’s name] knelt over me saying ‘I’m gonna kill you and your family I’ve given up everything and this is how you treat me.’ He then sat down, and I got up and said I was going to the toilet I called the police for help and then went downstairs and saw him lying on the couch. The police eventually came, and he was arrested.*

*I think I called the police before he assaulted me too because I was scared of him and what he would do to my family and I knew things would escalate.”*

## **Fear**

The issue of fear in the data often crosses that of Significant Events (or tipping points):

*V5: I have had enough of this relationship and I want to leave [abuser’s name]. He had no right to assault me or steal and damage my shoes. It is not just what happened that has upset me I am just terrified of him. He has put me in so much fear over the past year I cannot cope anymore and I have to leave the relationship. I don’t want anything else from him. I am so scared.*

*V99: I have explained to the police officer that I have never rung the police before to report such a matter however I am frightened of what he may do next. I want him out of my life.*

## **Children**

Where the wellbeing of children was at stake, fear was a common parallel concern:

*V64: “I am petrified of [abuser’s name] and I’m scared of what he will do to me now that I have contacted the police. I’ve had enough of him and feel that I am putting myself and family at serious risk of harm. I feel if I do not do something about this relationship, he may end up doing something to me which is unbearable to think of. I am scared of [abuser’s name] and have been for a while. I have just been too scared to leave him or contact the police, scared he was to get me again after an incident. I cannot go on like this anymore, it is not fair to me but more importantly my children. They do not need to see this violence from [abuser’s name] anymore. I just want a nice safe environment for my family.”*

V110: [abuser's name] *is lik tre two different people, on the one hand he is an amazing great partner and he is wonderful with the kids and he is great to be around but the other [abuser's name] is nasty scary and intimidating. When he's like this I am scared of him, scared of what he could do. I am scared for the children as well as myself.*

## **Discussion**

The manifest purpose of this paper has been to explore whether PVSs might provide a useful complementary resource in the qualitative understanding of the circumstances of DVA victims. Given this, and using female victims' decision-making during DVA reporting as a case study, the illustrative analysis above consistently demonstrates significant substantive convergence with analyses drawn from PQ methods. These points of convergence are evident throughout, with examples of direct data underscoring them. The observation that an analysis of PVSs can reveal much of the same core topical terrain as more conventional qualitative approaches to DVA is, however, only a point of departure from which more critical methodological arguments can be developed.

Firstly, and as previously noted, the interviewing methods in police interviews and open-ended research interviews are directed by similar imperatives. Ultimately, both are designed to elicit as free a narrative from a DVA victim as possible. The manners in which victims' accounts are captured, however, are rather different. A police interview is recorded via detailed field notes, in some respects more in line with a traditional ethnography, while a research interview is (typically) recorded in an audio/video format and then transcribed in full (Aldridge, 2013). In this respect, the 'raw' data emerging from a police interview are already subject to interpretation and summary by the interviewer, while those emergent of a research interview amount to a more literal representation of the victim's account itself. Furthermore,

a formal PVS is an artefact that has been subject to further interpretation and summary on the part of the attending police officer.

From the point of view of the DVA researcher, therefore, and somewhat inevitably, there will be a substantial discrepancy in terms of sheer detail available *per case* between a PVS and an interview transcript. The mean length of a PVS in the sample explored above was 533 words, while a research interview of around an hour in length will typically yield more than 8000 words of transcript. This is, of course, not a direct equivalence. A PVS ultimately summarises (through several stages) a larger body of qualitative data in the same way that a qualitative researcher will initially move to summarise a transcript via coding process; the labelling of that which is deemed useful (and in what way). The quality and character of a PVS is, however, dependent on the summarising skills of a trained officer using set models, rather than those of the researcher. This separates the researcher from the ostensive participant (the victim of abuse) to a much greater degree than work in which the researcher has direct contact with that victim.

Despite these clear points of epistemic divergence, it would be difficult to argue that the direct PVS evidence above does not echo both the substance and tone of direct evidence drawn from research interviews. In these terms, it is contended here, the analysis of PVSs has manifest promise as a research tool within the specific (decision-making) and broader DVA domains. What is prospectively lost in raw detail, flexibility and participant-researcher proximity is potentially offset by accessibility, range and - above all - immediacy. Not only is the decision to report DVA clearly embodied in the report itself but, in the sample above, 67.1% of participants considered themselves to still be in, to some extent at least, the abusive relationship they were formally reporting. This contrasts strongly with conventional qualitative DVA research, wherein the relationship with the abuser is very often a past event

to be reflected upon. Indeed, and as clarified by Aldridge (2013) and Lerner and Kennedy (2000), the recruitment of research participants who remain in a violent relationship is problematic, both pragmatically and ethically.

Given the above, critical reflection on the purposes of a DVA-related PVS, and its mechanisms of production, are key to making claims regarding its specific usefulness in research (Canter and Alison, 2003). A PVS in the UK is ultimately compiled with reference to its prospective functionality in prosecuting an abuser. One might reasonably expect each PVS explored, therefore, to play more as a ‘highlights reel’ of the abuser’s most legally transgressive behaviours, and their impacts on the victim, than a balanced longitudinal account of the victim’s experience at the point of reporting. A PVS provides a more incident based approach focus whereas PQ methods routinely give access to the subtleties of everyday life, and the incremental change therein (Francis, Loxton and James, 2017; McCarthy, 2019). It is certainly observable in the body of data analysed above that the more ‘mundane’ (though far from trivial) progressive aspects of a victim’s life with an abuser are seldom addressed in any great detail. While such information may well have been (and likely was) embedded in the raw accounts proffered to police officers, there is a much stronger emphasis in the resultant PVSs upon the vivid incidents of psychological and, more particularly, physical abuse that immediately prefigured the act of reporting itself than upon ongoing patterns of behaviour. This may reflect some very practical reasoning on the part of the authors of PVSs themselves regarding the quality of immediacy. As previously noted with respect to interviews, accounts of more chronologically-distant events are more inherently subject to challenges regarding the quality of the teller’s memory (Flin et al., 1992; Randall and Phoenix, 2009). While a largely epistemological issue for researchers, this challenge to credibility is a very real concern with very real consequences during a prosecution. By focusing a PVS upon particularly vivid and particularly recent events, a police officer

ultimately demonstrates not only what they infer are the most legally transgressive of the abuser's actions, but also the most defensible elements of the victim's account. In short, a PVS is at least to some extent designed around the author's specific inferences relating to its prospective legal persuasiveness in terms of content and structure.

These observations provide a further basis for reflection upon another nominal weakness of a PVA as an analytic resource: a lack of access to the participants' own words. While assembled from field notes rather than audio/video recordings, and invariably thus an extended paraphrase rather than a set of direct quotes per se, it is important to remember that any such reported speech (along with the remainder of the PVS) has been authorised by the victim as a 'true' representation of what they said at the time. This might, indeed, be seen as a model of member-checking (Birt et al., 2016). A researcher can, thus, place reasonable confidence in the core correspondence between this (and any part of) a PVS's content and a victim's intended meaning at the time of reporting, while being mindful that at least some of the original account's nuance will have been lost in the summary.

## **Conclusions**

The work above has ideally highlighted that the PVS, as a form of analysable qualitative data, may have much to contribute to the study of DVA. If careful attention is paid to the methodological concerns discussed, and the corollary claims that might therefore be made, PVS-based analyses might well be utilised to complement those drawn from more conventional PQ approaches. The corpus of data explored, while certainly limited in terms of nuanced longitudinal narrative and detail on progressive behavioural patterns, provided a particularly strong sense of the acts and circumstances relevant to a victim's reporting of an

abuser to the police. It also emerged that analysis of the structure and organisation of these PVSs could reveal practical reasoning on the part of police officers relating to what the UK's legal system will find most persuasive in a subsequent prosecution of an abuser. This issue certainly warrants further research in itself, and also renders relevant a further methodological question when considering the pragmatic complementarity of the PVS and the research interview. Further studies could explore the decision-making of police officers in which parts of the victim's narrative they choose to include. It is highly likely that a number of context-specific influences on the character of any given account, not least social desirability bias (Visschers et al, 2017), might manifest rather differently when the account of a DVA is being given (a) to a police officer at the time of the pertinent abusive event and (b) to researcher at a rather later date. While neither can be considered more inherently 'objective' in the general epistemology of contemporary qualitative research, future DVA studies might well investigate how these influences relatively play-out in real cases. It is only when armed with this order of knowledge that we will be able to fully understand how the two forms of data might more robustly interlock.

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