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Gender, Policing and Social Control: Examining Police Officers' Perceptions of and Responses to Young Women Depicted as Violent

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This briefing summarises key findings from a research project of the same title that explored the issue of young female violence from the perspective of police officers in Scotland. Concerns over a growing 'ladette' culture presented as 'the dark side of the female revolution' (MacAskill, 2004) has resulted in both public and political concern that young women are becoming more violent (Burman and Batchelor, 2009). However, there remains to be a lack of evidence to support these contentions and the research findings presented here provide the policing perspective which up to now has been absent from the literature.

Background

In Britain, there have been growing concerns over the increasing female prison population and treatment of girls and women by the criminal justice system (see Batchelor, 2005; Carlen and Worrall, 2004; Hedderman, 2004; Hutson and Myers, 2006; Sharpe, 2009). In particular, there has been a rising female prison population in Scotland which has been associated with greater punitive controls over the behaviour of women (McIvor and Burman, 2011). The British press have depicted a social problem of certain young women becoming more violent and have attributed this to women's liberation, particularly in the night time economy (MacAskill and Goodwin, 2004; Gray, 2006; Evening News, 2008). These

concerns have attracted widespread media and political attention leading to a steady growth in academic research exploring the apparent rise of violent young women (Burman et al., 2003; Burman, 2004; Batchelor, 2005). Despite this, there are relatively few studies that examine responses to young women with an emphasis on violent offences. Furthermore, there is a lack of research that has examined the role police officers have played in the control and depiction of young women's violence.

Aims and methods

The purpose of the research was to uncover police officers' underlying beliefs about young women who are perceived as acting violently and assess whether these beliefs have any bearing on arrest

decisions. Thirty three qualitative interviews were conducted with frontline police officers in Scotland. The interviews explored police officers' experiences of dealing with young women considered violent to gain insight into how they conceptualise and respond to these incidents. The findings were framed within a feminist perspective of social control (see Smart and Smart, 1978; Heidensohn, 1985; Chesney-Lind, 2006).

Findings

The complexity of 'violence'

Evidence from domestic violence literature emphasises that assuming violence to be merely an act causing physical harm can belittle the damage caused by other forms of intimidating behaviour, mainly verbal abuse (DeKeseredy, 2000; Dobash and Dobash, 2004). A broader definition was utilised in this study to include all forms of assault and verbal abuse, but in order to interpret the research findings accurately it was necessary to obtain the police officers' own definition of violence.

There were opposing views from the police officers as to whether 'violence' was solely physical or physical and verbal harm. This discrepancy is important to note given that police officers' decision making is based on their own judgements and discretion and ultimately influences the penalty that they give to people. Verbal abuse was commented on throughout the interviews with reference to young women. This raises the issue as to whether the apparent rise of 'violent' young women is actually being misrepresented whereby verbal abuse is being categorised on the same level as physical harm. Similarly it was noted in the interview data that police officers

commonly referred to women's violence as 'fighting'. The imagery of a 'fight' differs from a violent attack and this is problematic if young women are being imprisoned for 'fighting'.

The police officers described a broad range of behaviours when discussing violent incidents. These ranged from verbal arguments, physical fights and unprovoked attacks. The majority of examples provided by the police officers were what they defined as 'cat fights', whereby young women would scratch, pull hair and verbally abuse each other. This was distinguished from male violence that the police officers associated with punching, kicking and the use of weapons. Recognising the different interpretations of violent behaviours provides a more thorough understanding of what behaviour is being referred to when discussing violence by young women. Furthermore, it highlights the necessity for future research to comprehend what behaviour is actually being referred to rather than taking the term violence for granted.

The prevalence of young women's violence

The media 'myth' that 'liberated' young women are becoming more violent was not supported when examining the official crime statistics in Scotland. Despite slight increases in the number of women with a proven charge for common assault, the number of women with proven charges for violent offences have remained relatively stable since 2001 (McIvor and Burman, 2011; Scottish Government, 2011).

Twenty of the thirty three police officers interviewed believed that there had been an increase in the number of young

women acting violently. Nevertheless, the majority (14) of these officers perceived the increase to be of verbal abuse as opposed to physical violence. It was evident from the police officers' accounts that the majority of violence displayed by young women would be categorised as minor, mainly verbal abuse and minor assaults. Despite some extreme examples of violent incidents being discussed by police officers, these were described as rare and it is uncommon to see young women causing serious assault. Furthermore, the perceived increase in violence was not isolated to young women with the police officers stressing that they believed violence had increased among men and women.

The police officers highlighted that the perceived increase may be due to a growing awareness and better detection as opposed to changes in young women's behaviour. The research found that advances in policing (the new crime recording standard, the introduction of fixed penalty notices for deviance and the increasing use of CCTV) has improved police officers' detection and recording of offences. In addition, there has been a net widening effect of policing with the change in demographics. The police officers discussed their increasing involvement in the night time economy and local communities as well as closed settings such as schools and in the home.

The research showed that improved methods of detection, a relabeling of violent behaviour and a zero tolerance approach to youth crime and domestic abuse could contribute to young women being detected and disciplined by the police. Thus *institutional control* can go some way to explaining the fluctuation in crime statistics with regards to young

women who use violence. The study proposes that changes in police practices have had a net widening impact on the number of young people in general being detected by the police. This supports the argument put forward by Zhan et al. (2008) that increasing methods of formal social control have led to girls and young women being brought to the attention of the police and criminal justice institutions.

Characterising young women's violence

This research found that young women who are deemed as violent were portrayed differently to men by the police officers. When the police officers were asked to describe female violence, it was perceived as more erratic and more spiteful than men's. The findings from this research showed that the police officers perceived the way men use violence to be the norm in comparison to the way young women use violence. The study identified how violence is considered different on the basis of gender constructions, even the most minor forms of violence committed by women were deemed more malicious by police officers as a result of the social construction of violence. Women's violence was not considered anymore *serious* but it was judged as *worse* than men's on the basis that it did not conform to traditional (masculine) typologies of violence. This can be viewed as another way in which women are deemed doubly deviant: violence in itself is a deviant act and the perception that women do not use violence in the 'normal' way makes the violence more unacceptable.

The police officers' perceptions of young women were categorised under three main typologies; liberated, wayward and troubled, which is in accord with existing research findings from magistrates' responses to women who offend (Heidensohn, 1985; Worrall, 1990). The findings from this study demonstrate that the police officers' opinions are based upon traditional sex stereotyping. These perceptions can be understood as a mechanism of *discursive control* whereby traditional gender roles are being reinforced in police officers' opinions, whilst being contradictory in their actual experiences of young women acting violently. This discursive control is presented as an exercising of patriarchy whereby women are perceived as inferior to men in their inability to use violence 'properly'.

Policing young women considered violent

There is insufficient evidence from the interviews to suggest that young women who were regarded as violent were treated any harsher or leniently by police officers on the basis of their (the young women's) gender. The police officers emphasised gender neutrality in their decisions and made it clear that the seriousness of the offence was the most important deciding factor. Despite this, the police officers stressed the difference in the responses they received from young women; in particular they viewed young women as less co-operative than young men. This perception of unmanageable women has two consequences; first of all it reinforces the gender stereotypes that women are more irresponsible than men. Secondly, if young women are more resistant towards police authority then they are at greater

risk of being arrested than young men. Although the police officers may not consciously treat young women differently from young men, the perceived lack of compliance young women apparently display could result in them receiving harsher responses.

The police officers in this study differed on their views on whether male or female officers are able to handle situations involving young women more effectively when the women are uncooperative. The male police officers believed that female police officers are beneficial as young women would be less inclined to *manipulate* female officers. However, the female police officers disagreed and saw their own presence as an aggravating influence on young women's violence. Both the male and female police officers interviewed were in agreement that they prefer to handle situation with men than women, due to the perceived unruly behaviour of women. This suggests that despite apparent gender neutrality in policing, police officers are aware of gender differences when out on patrol. This current study showed how these perceptions mirror the findings of the study conducted with door stewards (O'Brien et al., 2008), proposing that there is a perception among both police officers and door stewards that young women are more difficult to deal with.

Four of the police officers suggested improvements to their training to assist with restraining young women. All of the proposals made were to encourage gender awareness in their training scenarios by including more women as offenders in the role play. Evidence from the interviews suggested that police officers felt that treating young women differently implied that they were 'sexist'.

However, from the examples given by police officers they were not being sexist but instead they were reacting fairly to the young women they were arresting. This highlights the necessity for police officers to recognise the distinction between equity and equality. So, although only four police officers explicitly stated that improvements were required, the interviews implied that more police officers could benefit from gender awareness guidance.

Conclusion

This study provided a valuable insight into police officers' underlying beliefs about young women who are regarded as violent. The findings demonstrate that traditional gender stereotypes are still significant in shaping police officers' views of young women. The masculinisation of violence by the police officers contributes to our understanding of how 'appropriate' behaviour is gendered and the potential negative impacts this has on the lives of young women. The findings of this study support existing literature (Horn and Wincup, 1995; Wilczynski, 1997) which argues women who offend are categorised as 'mad' or 'bad' with little consideration or appreciation for the logical justification of using violence (Batchelor, 2005). To overcome these stereotyped, and old fashioned, views of women is no easy task but it is hoped that awareness of these gendered issues can contribute to improving policies and practices that currently disadvantage young women depicted as violent.

Although the police officers stated their training is gender neutral, it is apparent from the research that in practice gender plays an important role in how they respond to violent incidents. It is

therefore suggested that police training and practice focuses less on being gender impartial and recognises gender differences to develop fair rather than equal policing strategies.

Further information

Further resources on gender, crime and criminal justice, as well as information on a range of other crime and justice topics, can be found at www.sccjr.ac.uk.

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