

THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair



Shutterstock

Police reporting can undermine domestic violence victims, language analysis shows

Published: November 23, 2021 2.08pm GMT

Patricia Canning

Lecturer/Researcher, Forensic Stylistics, Linguistics, and Rhetoric, Utrecht University

As police officer Wayne Couzens was sentenced for the murder of Sarah Everard, North Yorkshire Police Commissioner Philip Allott said women “need to be streetwise about when they can be arrested and when they can’t be arrested”. Couzens had exploited his authority to falsely arrest Everard, yet Allot appeared to be informing women that it is their responsibility not to get raped and murdered by the police.

Allot’s comments exemplify what Susannah Fish, former chief constable of Nottinghamshire Police, has called a “toxic culture of sexism” in policing. Fish said “victim-blaming” is “endemic” in the force and that women who report crimes face “repeated humiliation”. They are expected, she said, to tell their stories “over and over again” and are made to worry that they won’t be believed.

I believe this is a prevalent problem in cases of domestic abuse. In my work with Nick Lynn, a former UK domestic violence specialist officer, we analysed the language officers used when investigating 18 cases of domestic abuse. These were all reported to Devon and Cornwall police during one month in 2010. Every case was disposed of with a “simple caution”, which means no criminal charges were brought.

We analysed what is known as the MG3 form – a document that summarises a case file. It is composed by the officer in charge of the case after the investigation has been conducted. The MG3 then goes to a colleague known as a gatekeeper. These are usually sergeants or higher ranked officers whose role is to cast a qualitative eye over the case before it is sent to the Crown Prosecution Service for a charging decision.

We found patterns of victim-blaming in the language used by officers and gatekeepers in these documents. The intensity of verbs was downgraded as the process of reporting progressed, for example. And the grammatical constructions deployed could be seen as mitigating the suspect's role in the crime. Victims were, at times, presented as contributing to their own situation.

We believe that linguistic choices have the potential to nudge prosecutors towards a more lenient outcome and, in these cases, could have contributed to the decision to issue cautions rather than more severe sentences.

Telling whose story over and over?

In one of the cases, the victim's account is presented in the investigating officer's original notes as follows:

She had gone into the male's [her husband's] bedroom to see what he was doing and he became aggressive and threw the computer equipment at her ... which struck the female on the top of her leg.

But by the time the officer has written the incident up into an MG3 report, the suspect is no longer presented as "aggressive". Instead, he is described as "perhaps a little agitated as he was tired".



Women protest after Sarah Everard's murder. EPA

There are other differences in the MG3 version of events. The computer the suspect "throws" is presented as having "struck" the female in the original account, yet in the MG3 report, the suspect is reported to have "swung the computer around catching her on the leg".

The change means that in the MG3 account, there is less intention in the action. This is crucial since, for a crime of assault to stand, intentionality is one of the points to prove.

In this particular case, the way the gatekeeper used language in their response further diminishes the suspect's role, even blaming the victim by presenting the precursor to the abuse as an "argument" that merely "develops".

In interview D/P [detained person] admits that he was tired and agitated and was trying to sleep. An argument develops between himself and his wife resulting in him picking up the computer and swinging it towards his wife.

By being party to "an argument", the victim is presented as being at least equally responsible for her husband assaulting her. Note, in particular, the use of the term "resulting in", which strongly implies causation.

The assault itself has been almost written out of the report at this stage. The computer is not "thrown at" her but is instead described as "swinging towards". In other words, the focus of the action is not on its outcome ("struck") but its trajectory ("towards").

Attributing blame

Another case was written up in just seven sentences. Only three of these sentences relate the basic facts of the case. The remaining four are devoted to representing the perpetrator's testimony about the victim rather than vice versa:

He [suspect] states that they both suffer from mental health problems and are both alcoholics. They had both been drinking that evening. He also states that Ms [victim] is not taking her medicine and becoming increasingly paranoid and aggressive. He believes the relationship is over and is prepared to move back to [redacted] to dissolve the relationship.

The repetitive use of the word "both" (which is not linguistically necessary in these sentences) introduces and reinforces shared responsibility. By giving so much space to the perpetrator's views on the victim's state of mind, the victim is recast as the antagonist.

Conversely, the final sentence in the report casts the suspect in an empathetic light by reporting him as making a concession (in being "prepared to move") – essentially suggesting he is rectifying the situation by ending the relationship and therefore potentially implying no further action is needed.

In this particular case, the way the report is written is particularly surprising given that the police had arrived at the scene in time to witness the perpetrator "standing over the victim".

Between March 2019 and March 2020 in England and Wales (excluding Greater Manchester), there were 1,288,018 recorded incidents of domestic violence. Only 79,965 were escalated through to the Crown Prosecution Service.

It's worth considering why all the abusers in the cases we studied benefited from leniency when sentences were decided. Analysing how institutionally-mediated "retellings" can shape the way crimes are reported and interpreted suggests that minimising and sanitising domestic abuse crimes is part of that picture.