

## A 'Helen Archer' moment? The abused, the perpetrator and the fall-out from domestic violence



*The huge interest generated by *The Archers* domestic abuse story line has raised awareness that behind the closed doors of supposedly nice, middle class families, sexual violence may lurk, and it is not only a phenomenon of the disadvantaged and dispossessed. After **putting the storyline into context**, **Professor Jennifer Brown** takes a further look at the profiles of those who abuse and policy implications of dealing with the fall-out for health and criminal justice interventions.*

When an art critic **describes** the mad moment of husband-stabbing in the opera *Lucia di Lammermoor* as 'doing a Helen Archer', does this herald a new dictionary entry? The 'Helen Archer' device was used as shorthand to describe the harassed Lucia's knifing of her new bridegroom and to explain the psychological back story to the happenings in the opera; it represents the tipping point at which the abused turns on the abuser, when there is a reversal of roles in maltreatment and the victim takes the initiative. Thus we might define a Helen Archer moment as the decision point prior to retaking control under conditions of heightened emotional arousal and preceded by a prolonged period of domestic abuse. That action may be to leave, defend oneself and/or initiate a violent response.

In *The Archers*, Helen has suffered nearly two years of psychological abuse from husband Rob, she had possibly been raped and also hit. The storyline has her apparently stabbing him in front of her (and his adopted) son, Henry, possibly to protect him. Rob had become very angry when Helen announced that she was leaving. The psychological issues here are why do men abuse? What is the tipping point trigger and how does all this impact the key players in the drama i.e. Rob, Helen and Henry? The societal issues raised are how do we deal with domestic abuse and what does it all cost?

### The psychology of the perpetrator

Determinants of psychological abuse **have been associated** with historic child-rearing factors such as exposure to violent or controlling behaviour in childhood, male dominance in family life, and acceptance of violent conflict in family relationships. These toxic backgrounds combined with difficulties in bonding with a carer when growing up are some of the antecedents of abusive relationships in adult life. Added into this mix are personality attributes, particularly narcissism.

**The Mayo Clinic** provides a list of the criteria for narcissistic personality disorder such as having an exaggerated sense of self-importance, expecting to be recognized as superior and exaggerating your achievements and talents; being preoccupied with fantasies about having the perfect mate; being unable or unwilling to recognize the needs and feelings of others; believing others envy you. The Clinic suggests such people come across as conceited, boastful or pretentious often monopolizing conversations but also have trouble handling anything that may be perceived as criticism. The final components are situational factors such as economic stress or disparity in achievements of partners.



A **checklist** of resulting behaviours gives a good indication that the recipient is in psychologically abusive relations – does your partner:

- insist on knowing who are with and where you are;
- put you down in a way that makes you feel bad;
- limit your contact with friends or family;
- frighten you;
- prevent you from knowing about/controlling family income;
- prevent you from being employed?

Behaviour may also be characterised by a rigid observance of traditional sex roles. All of this has been present in *The Archers* storyline. Psychological abuse of this type serves to secure continuous and ongoing power over a partner that is a tactic in what has been **called intimate terrorism**. This is a pattern of controlling behaviour which are likely to escalate over time and may result in severe injury or even murder.

Perpetrators can be incredibly plausible, fabricating incidents, and turning patent lies into victim blaming. Indeed, so plausible are the presented behaviours which can be charming and apparently caring, the abuser can fool not only friends and relatives but also professionals.

### **The impact on the abused**

**Paula Nicolson** details how the abused may find difficulty in recognizing what is happening to them. Awareness often only emerges slowly. There often is a period of self-blame and only gradually does the attribution shift to blaming the partner, underpinned by a sense of learned helplessness. This is where there is a disconnect between behaviour and consequences i.e. a severing of control over rewards and punishments that are reaped as a consequence of one's own actions. Nicolson also pinpoints shame as a critical factor in the unwillingness of victims to disclose to others, let alone themselves, that all is not well.

As the abuse escalates the ability to appraise any aspects of the relationship as positive diminishes, contributing to the decision to leave. Psychological abuse can impact a woman's general functioning (e.g. ability to make even small decisions **without** deferring to the abusive partner) catastrophically lower her self-esteem and inhibits a rational analysis of her situation.

Doing 'a Helen Archer' and taking the decision to leave may, and often does, precipitate a crisis. Under conditions of urgency reactions can be a mixture of impulsivity and aggression. **Negative urgency** has been implicated in domestic violence where a person impulsively reacts violently without premeditation or reflecting on the consequences of their response to a stressful trigger. We might call this 'hot' impulsivity. 'Cold' impulsivity is where a person under duress experiences an unusually positive mood and acts rashly.

**Helena Kennedy** describes such a scenario in the cases of Sara Thornton and Kiranjit Ahluwalia both of whom, because of many months of abuse, undertook a more deliberated attack of their respective husbands and were initially found guilty of murder. Both subsequently had their convictions replaced with manslaughter, Thornton on the grounds she was suffering from a severe personality disorder that explained her knife attack on her husband and Ahluwalia, again on grounds of diminished responsibility. This latter case helped to change the law on provocation being replaced by the **concept**

'loss of control' as a partial defence to murder, although this requires a qualifying trigger such as fear of violence to self or another. **Learned opinion** seems to **lean toward** this defence for Helen i.e. hot impulsivity.

## Domestic violence in society at large

**The Crown Prosecution Service reports** an increasing rate of domestic violence referrals to the police in 2013/14 and correspondingly a higher rate of charging. But these figures are still the tip of the iceberg in terms of estimate rates of domestic violence occurring in England and Wales calculated by the **Crime Survey of England and Wales**.

### *Domestic Violence in England and Wales (2013/2014)*

<b>Estimated total of domestic violence experienced (by both sexes)</b>	2,100,000
<b>Recorded by the police</b>	887,253
<b>Referred by the police</b>	103,569
<b>Charged</b>	72,905
<b>Convicted</b>	58,276

Sources: **Crime Survey of England and Wales** & **Crown Prosecution Service**

So whilst the Crown Prosecution Service **reports** an increasing rate of successful conviction, now standing at an impressive 74.6 per cent (interestingly there are 68.7 per cent of guilty pleas so that 92 per cent of all successful prosecutions result as a consequence of defendants pleading guilty), we can all do the maths. Domestic violence remains an under-reported offence for many of the reasons alluded to by *The Archers* script writers: fear, shame, belief that an abusive partner will change, self-blame. Less than half of the estimated number of potential offences are reported and only about one in eight are referred (5 per cent of the estimated number).

Given Rob's survival, it is highly likely their respective accounts of what happened will be amongst the third that are contested. Much will hinge on credibility in the '**he said-she said**' stakes that often characterises rape allegations. Rob is likely to deny the abuse and accuse Helen of initiating the assault because she has been depressed, needing medication and psychiatric help, and has had a history of mental problems (anorexia).

## The conviction process

In reality a 'Helen Archer moment' is also likely to be associated with post-traumatic stress not only as a result of the prolonged psychological abuse but also the knifing incident itself. **Research suggests** a strong link between trauma-related guilt (blaming oneself for the trauma) and likelihood of experiencing symptoms (a sense of horror and helplessness, numbing and avoidance.) It is to be hoped the script writers will include Police National Computer checks on Rob, if not by the police then by an assiduous defence barrister.

**Studies have found** that up to two thirds of male perpetrators had a conviction prior to their involvement in domestic violence. Previous-Archers' aficionados will recall Rob's violent outburst against the hunt saboteur and his reluctance to be CRB checked when trying to adopt Henry. Helen will need the services of an expert in psychological assessment to evidence the results of long-term abuse. In the event of a **standoff**

between two possible accounts of the events in question psychologists can help determine the likely credibility of allegations and counter-allegations particularly through personality testing and the use of criteria based content analysis (often called CBCA).

### Cuts to services

**Sylvia Walby** points out that victims of domestic violence use the services of the police, prosecution, courts, probation and prisons as well as accessing health providers. They may also need time off work. She estimates the financial cost (in 2008) amounted to £15,730,000. In a **later report** Jude Towers and Walby estimated that 31 per cent of the funding to the domestic violence and sexual abuse sector from local authorities had been cut between 2010/11 to 2011/12; a reduction from £7.8 million to £5.4 million. Nine per cent of women (320) seeking refuge were turned away by **Women's Aid** on a typical day in 2011 due to lack of space. Professor Walby goes on to say that Independent Domestic Violence Advisers also experienced funding cuts – of 8 major advice service providers supporting 13,180 clients, two faced funding cuts of 100 per cent, three cuts of 50 per cent, three of 40 per cent and two of 25 per cent.

Given that we need not only to support domestic violence survivors, we also must manage perpetrators and intervene to minimise collateral damage to those such as children who witness violence. Joining up services (health and criminal justice) into multi-agencies responses is critical. Notwithstanding more credence being given to the interconnections between rape, domestic violence and stalking there is a view that **rhetoric falls short of the reality** of service provision. Northumbria Police and Crime Commissioner **Vera Baird** has been foremost in calling for ring-fencing to preserve policing resources to investigate sexual violence. **Crises in prison resourcing** may well put interventions for offenders under pressure whilst the funding crisis in **child mental health services** may also jeopardise programmes to help vulnerable families.

### The next stages

As a final thought, there is no doubt that this storyline has **raised awareness** and presented a powerful characterisation of psychological abuse. The script writers have admirably challenged stereotypes of victims and perpetrators by providing the background to and context within which such abuse originates and escalates, but there is surely an obligation to engender hope. Having endured months of abuse, there is a danger that Helen is punished for her reactive aggression. A police officer in the programme commented about the pregnant Helen 'what a mess, beggars belief you are just about to bring a new life into the world and you go and do something like that' smacks of pre-judgment.

**Research I have been involved in** (with Professor Nicole Westmarland) suggests that specialist units within the police service are best placed to undertake investigations of this kind. It is to be hoped that Dorsetshire Police have such specialists available. Rumour has it that this story line still has a long way to run. No doubt there will be a trial and hopefully Helen will receive not only psychological support, her defence team will deploy all available expert knowledge about the impacts of domestic abuse.

The overriding message to government is that we must commit resources and better integrate services if we want to help those who have suffered from domestic abuse.

### About the Author





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