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Research Grants Peer Review

ESRC Reference: ES/T008849/1

Document Status: With Council

SDAI open call

Applicant Details

Applicant	Dr Timothy L Mullett	Organisation	University of Warwick
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Title of Research Project

The behavioural economics of domestic abuse

Review Information

Response Due Date	06/12/2019	Reviewer Reference:	134177025
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Research Council Contact Details

ESRC Administration Contact:	Email:	Telephone:
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Application Assessment

Please select a grade to indicate your assessment according to the following criteria. Detailed comments in support of these grades should be provided in the free text overall assessment section. Refer to Help for further guidance.

Originality; potential contribution to knowledge

Outstanding	✓ Excellent	Good	Satisfactory	Fair / Some Weaknesses	Poor	Unable to Assess
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Research design and methods

Outstanding	✓ Excellent	Good	Satisfactory	Fair / Some Weaknesses	Poor	Unable to Assess
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Value for money

✓ Outstanding	Excellent	Good	Satisfactory	Fair / Some Weaknesses	Poor	Unable to Assess
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Outputs, dissemination and impact

Outstanding	✓ Excellent	Good	Satisfactory	Fair / Some Weaknesses	Poor	Unable to Assess
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				Weaknesses		Assess
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Overall Assessment

Feedback for Applicant

Please provide detailed comments in support of the grades you have given and on any other aspects of the proposal that you consider relevant. These comments will be passed on, unattributed, to the applicant(s) and also with notification of the outcome of the application, to other external reviewers if applicable. For further guidance please select Help.

I think this is an exciting and timely application which proposes an interesting and complementary set of feasible empirical analyses, taking advantage of both a major national dataset (CSEW) which has not been fully exploited in this context together with regional police data and a financial services dataset in innovative and well-targeted ways. In most respects I think the proposed modes and techniques of analysis in each part of the research are appropriate, and I think that the likelihood of valuable new findings and insights arising and being reflected in high profile, reputable publications is high.

My main concerns relate to the failure to engage with theory, or to clarify the theoretical positioning, and the apparent lack of engagement with much of the body of more qualitative work which has been done on domestic violence and abuse (DVA), particularly work with victims and with the organisations which work to support them.

I am a bit puzzled by the fact that the title of the proposal highlights 'behavioural economics' but the applicants are all essentially in the psychology discipline, the academic discipline areas highlighted are nearly all in psychology, with none in economics. Furthermore, there is no discussion in the application of how behavioural economics is construed and proposed to be used within the study, or what particular elements and insights from that strand of theory/research are seen as informing this study.

There seems to be no existing comprehensive, detailed literature review on the nature and causes of DVA reflected in the proposal, or provided/costed for in the work programme. Yet I find it hard to believe that there is not a substantial body of work to be drawn in in developing hypotheses about likely direct or circumstantial factors which may be expected to be implicated in generating accounts of causality or risk for episodes of DVA. I am aware from recently referring to it of the study by Rhys et al of the costs of DVA, which is referred to here as well, and can see the point made that some of the wider effects are not covered in that study, although there is an Annex to it which does go into some of the effects via children. But I did not detect any attempt to review or distill from literature based on more qualitative studies in this field, which must surely be extensive.

The lack of a clear theoretical framework, combined with this failure to integrate insights from previous mainly qualitative work, leads to the researchers apparently approaching most elements of the research programme without clear priors, hypotheses or expectations. While it is admirable to pre-register the research plan, this seems to be a crucial missing element. From just a cursory review from my own standpoint, I would be expecting hypotheses around the potential effects of (a) poverty, whether current, recent or in background back to childhood; (b) mental health conditions, in general, or with particular diagnoses; (c) 'Adverse Childhood Experiences' (ACEs, for which there is a strongly growing literature and established scales); (d) substance misuse (this is mentioned quite a bit, I accept, but more specific hypotheses involving it would be of value); (e) economic disruptions, e.g. through loss of jobs, incomes; (f) gambling, which is mentioned, but clarifying the theoretical links here would help; (g) homelessness or housing insecurity; (h) personality types.

With regard to the analytical techniques to be followed, I think most of the proposed methods seem to be appropriate. I would, however, say that I would regard the 'Random Forest' technique as essentially a 'data mining' technique, designed to highlight particular interactions within a given dataset which seem to have some significant effect on the outcome of interest. As such, I think it is inappropriate to rely too heavily on this in the absence of the kind of prior theory and/or

interrogation of the extensive qualitative research, which will give many individual accounts of the combinations of factors which actual victims reported to be significant in their own stories. From my own experiences, getting into more complex non-linear and interactive forms of model without strong theoretical priors or other anchor points, such as qualitative evidence, is generally dubious and produces apparent effects which are difficult to interpret and may well not replicate across different datasets. Although we have used it a bit, in my view Propensity Score Matching is of questionable value in going beyond a well-designed (and theoretically justified) multivariate logistic regression model, and claims that his is somehow uniquely more persuasive of causal influence are in my view overblown.

Overall Grade

Please indicate your overall assessment of the proposal

Outstanding	✓ Excellent	Good	Satisfactory	Fair / Some Weaknesses	Poor
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