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Article

Fathers' Experiences of Relationship Breakdown Including Post-Separation Abuse and Parental Alienating Behaviours

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Abstract: Background: Family breakdown, separation, and divorce (FBSD) are often traumatic events, particularly for fathers who face unique challenges. These include emotional, psychological, and financial struggles, often exacerbated by abusive behaviours from ex-partners. This study explores fathers' experiences of FBSD, focusing on both the breakdown event itself and any abuse, including coercive control and parental alienation, before and after the separation. Methods: A mixed-methods approach was employed, including a survey of 141 men and follow-up interviews with 30 participants. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis to identify key themes related to FBSD and associated abuse. Results: Fathers reported significant emotional, psychological, and financial distress, with many experiencing ongoing abuse and coercive control after separation. Abuse often continued through legal processes and manipulation of child access. Parental alienation emerged as a prominent form of post-separation abuse, with fathers describing attempts by ex-partners to undermine their relationships with their children. Conclusions: The findings highlight the need for gender-inclusive services that address the specific challenges fathers face during and after FBSD, particularly in relation to post-separation abuse. Targeted interventions are necessary to support fathers' well-being and ensure their continued involvement in their children's lives.



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1. Introduction

Family breakdown, separation and divorce (FBSD) are all situations in which the relationships between family members are either strained or come to an end and are centred around the end of a central romantic relationship, sometimes between parents. As such, FBSD is often a traumatic process that occurs over a long period, with accompanying long-term responses. This is reflected in Amato's (2000) divorce-stress adjustment perspective, which proposes the end of marriage as a lasting process during which the signs of dissolution occur over an extended period starting from before the official end of the relationship itself. Conversely, Kluwer et al. (2021) conceptualise the post-divorce journey as recovering from a trauma, which entails managing the crisis of the breakup, then processing and understanding the contextual factors of the separation, and ultimately finding closure (Bonach 2009). Regardless, it is evident that the FBSD event itself may involve some level of trauma for those involved and is a difficult life event for all family members.

There is compelling evidence for the profoundly negative impact that FBSD can have on the physical and mental health of the parents (Auersperg et al. 2019; Bierman et al.

2006; Sbarra et al. 2015; Wood and Liossis 2007) and children involved (D'Onofrio and Emery 2019), with studies showing that children start to experience a negative impact before the official ending of their parents' relationship (Strohschein 2005) and that FBSD is rightfully listed as an adverse childhood experience (ACE) (Crouch et al. 2019). Moreover, divorced individuals are more than twice as likely to die by suicide than married individuals (Kposowa 2000; Stack and Scourfield 2015). However, it is important to note here that divorced men are shown to be particularly vulnerable, with a suicide rate almost ten times that of divorced women (Evans et al. 2016; Kposowa 2003; Scourfield and Evans 2014), and that is reflective of their overall higher suicide rate in the UK (16.4 vs. 5.4 per 100,000, Office for National Statistics 2023). This is possibly explained by the consistent finding that men are considerably more reluctant than women to seek professional support for their mental health (Addis and Mahalik 2003; Oliver et al. 2005) in fear of appearing weak and unmasculine (Seidler et al. 2016; Yousaf et al. 2015). Other studies highlight that the outcomes for men and women vary by domain and proximity to the event, with men experiencing a graver short-term impact on well-being (Leopold 2018).

Furthermore, many divorced fathers (more than 80%) experience the unique challenges associated with being a non-resident parent (NRP) (Department for Work & Pensions 2020), including increased distress over limited contact with their children (Kielty 2006). There is also evidence to suggest substantial gender bias against men in law enforcement and legal systems (Andreasson and Johansson 2019; Dim and Lysova 2022; Lehr and MacMillan 2001; Natalier 2012; Steinbach 2019), for example in the family court system, where three-quarters of non-resident fathers believe that the legal system is biased against them (Braver and Griffin 2000). Moreover, fathers are also more at risk than mothers to experience custody challenges related to having a serious mental health condition (Kaplan et al. 2019; Salzer et al. 2021), which significantly increases the risk of loss/change in parenting custody (Salzer et al. 2021). There are also significant financial implications for fathers, relating to custody and stereotypes around masculinity and being a financial provider (Dudley 2021).

If FBSD is the result of abusive behaviour, fathers leaving these relationships must also navigate negative stereotypes which undermine the visibility of their experiences of intimate partner violence (IPV, Bates 2019; Bates et al. 2022; Hine 2019). This is supported by evidence demonstrating that up to 83% of male victims do not report their victimisation (Schmid et al. 2024). In this manuscript, we utilise the definition of domestic violence and abuse as provided by the UK government, which describes it as any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive, threatening behaviour, violence, or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are, or have been, intimate partners or family members, regardless of gender or sexuality. This encompasses but is not limited to, psychological, physical, sexual, financial, and emotional abuse.

It is now widely accepted that if a relationship has included abusive behaviour, the ending of a relationship does not equate to the end of abuse inflicted by that partner (and it may also constitute the beginning). This is the case for both men and women (Spearman et al. 2022, 2024), however, in research examining the prevalence of IPV inflicted on men, Hotton (2001) and Hine et al. (2021) found approximately a third of their samples of male victims of IPV experienced abuse from an ex-partner after the end of their relationship (32% and 29.7%, respectively). Moreover, of the men who reported post-separation abuse, 24% reported that the violence had escalated following the breakup, while 39% reported the violence as having begun only after the relationship had ended (Hotton 2001). The end of the relationship can also be a trigger point for abuse perpetrators who wish to continue to control the partner and/or punish the victim for terminating the relationship (Jaffe et al. 2003), and this can be achieved when the couple continue to share responsibility over children and/or finances as these necessitate continued contact (Bates and Hine 2023).

Additionally, children are often used by abusive ex-partners as a vehicle for continuing to inflict aggression post-separation (Toews and Bermea 2017). In Clements et al.'s (2022) qualitative study of victims of IPV, the authors found that most participants' abusers had used their children as a method of inflicting abuse within the previous six months. It was reported that abusers used the children for several abusive purposes, including to intimidate (72%), monitor (69%), harass (71%) and frighten (69%) the abused ex-partner, and even to persuade them to agree to resume the relationship (45%). This is supported in research with both mothers (Hay et al. 2023; Katz et al. 2020; Monk and Bowen 2021; Tutty et al. 2024) and fathers separately (Bates 2019, 2020a; Bates and Hine 2023). Participants in Clements et al.'s (2022) study also cited that their abusers made attempts to turn their children against them (62%), a form of post-separation abuse known as parental alienation.

Parental alienation (PA) is defined as "one type of contact refusal, when a child—typically whose parents are engaged in a high-conflict separation or divorce—allies strongly with one parent and resists and rejects contact and/or a relationship (i.e., contact refusal) with the other parent without legitimate justification" (Bernet et al. 2022, p. 5). PA typically refers to the actions and attitudes manifested by the child in refusing contact with the parent and is brought about by the alienating behaviours of the parent with whom the child is aligned. These parental alienating behaviours (PABs) are further described as "the activities of the alienating parent, which contribute to the child's unjustified contact refusal of the other parent such as denigrating the other parent; limiting the child's contact with the other parent; allowing the child to choose between their parents; creating the impression the other parent is dangerous and unloving; etc". (Bernet et al. 2022, p. 5).

Several recent reviews have outlined not only the nature and prevalence of PABs (Harman et al. 2022; Hine 2024) but also their profound impact on parents and children (Lee-Maturana et al. 2022; Miralles et al. 2023). For parents specifically, significant and wide-ranging negative impacts are listed, including anxiety, depression, stress, physical symptoms, feelings of powerlessness, hopelessness, being socially isolated, disenfranchised grief, ambiguous loss, and suicide ideation (Harman et al. 2022). Some scholars have recently chosen to focus on the experiences of fathers due to their potentially elevated vulnerability to alienating behaviours as the parents most likely to live outside of the home following separation (i.e., the non-resident parent, NRP). Indeed, recent work by Bates and Hine has highlighted the gendered vulnerabilities of men to PA due to (a) the high likelihood of being the NRP, (b) prejudicial stereotypes relating to fatherhood, and (c) lack of visibility associated with additional IPV victimisation (Bates and Hine 2023; Hine and Bates 2024). Importantly, the work on men's experiences of PA above has highlighted a greatly elevated risk of suicidal ideation and completion, a finding supported by other theoretical work on this specific relationship (Sher 2015a, 2017) and men's elevated risk of suicide following family breakdown more broadly (i.e., 11× more likely than women; Evans et al. 2016; Scourfield and Evans 2014; Sher 2015b).

Taken together, the above evidence suggests that, whilst FBSD events are traumatic for all family members, there is sufficient justification for examining the specific experiences of fathers. However, few studies have examined the experiences of separated fathers in detail and in a way which tracks their experiences from an intact relationship, through the FBSD event, to their experiences post-separation whilst also centring and exploring their experiences of abusive behaviour. The present study thus examines men's experiences of FBSD, focusing both on the FBSD event and experiences of abusive behaviour before FBSD and thereafter.

2. Materials and Methods

A total of 141 men, recruited via social media, took part in a qualitative study employing both survey ($N = 141$) and interview ($N = 30$) methods to understand father's experiences of family breakdown, separation, and divorce (FBSD) within the last five years. This manuscript will explore fathers' experiences of the breakdown event itself and associated abuse (including parental alienation).

2.1. Participants—Qualitative Survey

A total of 141 men participated in the survey, with ages ranging from 29 to 75 years ($M = 45.54$, $SD = 9.22$). The majority were White (89.3%, $n = 125$), and most participants identified as heterosexual (97.9%, $n = 137$) (see Table 1). On average, participants who had been married were so for 9.95 years ($SD = 6.38$), while those unmarried had relationships averaging 7.70 years ($SD = 5.08$). In terms of current relationship status, 40% were divorced, and nearly all participants were no longer living with their ex-partner (97.1%, $n = 136$). 57.1% ($n = 80$) had entered into a new serious relationship, with 86.2% ($n = 69$) of those men still with their new partner. Of these, 43.4% ($n = 30$) were in a relationship but not cohabiting, 40.5% ($n = 28$) were cohabiting, and 15.9% ($n = 11$) were remarried. Regarding domestic violence, 72.9% ($n = 102$) reported experiencing abuse during their relationship, and 73.6% ($n = 103$) reported post-separation abuse, including manipulation or coercive control. All survey participants came from the United Kingdom.

Table 1. Numbers and percentage of total sample values for participant demographic characteristics.

	Survey Sample		Interview Sample	
	N	% Total Sample	N	% Total Sample
Ethnicity				
White	125	89.3	28	93.4
Asian	8	5.7	1	3.3
Black	5	3.5	1	3.3
Mixed	1	0.7	0	0.0
Other	2	1.4	0	0.0
Sexual Orientation				
Heterosexual	137	97.2	29	96.7
Homosexual	0	0.0	0	0.0
Bisexual	2	1.4	1	3.3
Bicurious	1	0.7	0	0.0
Prefer Not to Say	1	0.7	0	0.0
Current Relationship				
Divorced	56	40.0	13	43.3
Separated and previously married	35	25.0	8	26.7
Separated but not previously married	49	35.0	9	30.0
In a New Relationship				
Yes	80	57.1	16	53.3
No	61	42.9	14	46.7
Experienced Domestic Violence During Relationship				
Yes	102	72.9		
No	39	37.1		
Experienced Domestic Violence After Relationship				
Yes	103	73.6		
No	38	35.4		

2.2. Participants—Interviews

Thirty men participated in the interviews, with ages ranging from 20 to 68 years ($M = 43.97$, $SD = 9.76$). Most participants were White (93.4%, $n = 28$) and the majority identified as heterosexual (96.7%, $n = 29$) (see Table 1). For those who had been married, the average marriage duration was 8.04 years ($SD = 5.57$). Regarding relationship status, 43.3% ($n = 13$) were divorced, and over half of the participants (53.3%, $n = 16$) had entered into a new serious relationship since the breakdown, with 64.2% ($n = 9$) of those in a relationship but not cohabiting, and 28.6% ($n = 4$) cohabiting (with one participant remarried, 7.1%). Geographically, most resided in England (53.3%, $n = 16$), with others in Scotland (30%, $n = 9$), Northern Ireland (13.3%, $n = 4$), and the Republic of Ireland (3.3%, $n = 1$).

With the demographic and contextual composition of the samples in mind, we encourage readers to interpret the results presented below with caution in relation to generalizability (see also limitations).

2.3. Materials and Procedure—Qualitative Survey

A detailed online survey, developed from prior research (e.g., [Bates and Hine 2023](#)), was conducted using Qualtrics. Participants first provided demographic and family structure information to contextualise their responses. They were then asked open-ended questions about their experiences during the breakup, including any abuse, its impact on their mental health and relationships, and their experiences with support services. Example questions included: “Please describe the events that took place during the end of the relationship,” and “Did you ever experience any behaviour you would describe as abusive during the relationship?”

Participants were recruited via social media (e.g., Twitter/X) and through organisations supporting fathers. The survey began with an information sheet outlining the study, and consent was obtained through a tick-box form. Participants created anonymous pseudonyms for data withdrawal if necessary and could complete the survey at their own pace. Demographic questions followed, as did the experiential questions, with up to 150 words allowed per response.

Given the sensitive nature of the study, participants were provided a debrief sheet with details on data withdrawal and support services. They could also enter a prize draw for a GBP 25 Amazon voucher by submitting an email separately from their responses. Additionally, participants could volunteer for follow-up interviews, with 39 men expressing interest, leading to 30 interviews being conducted.

2.4. Materials and Procedure—Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted using a pre-prepared script, with follow-up questions for clarification or elaboration. The script was developed after a limited review of survey responses, ensuring a bottom-up approach to data analysis. The interviews aimed to explore issues raised in the survey, with questions reflecting the format of the survey and prior research (e.g., [Bates and Hine 2023](#)). These included questions about the relationship (Can you describe what your relationship was like with your ex-partner while you were in a relationship with/married to them?), the family breakdown event (Can you describe the events that took place during the end of your relationship with your ex-partner?), family violence and abuse (Can you describe whether you experienced any behaviour from your ex-partner during or after your relationship that you would describe as abusive (if any)?), parental responsibility (Can you describe your experiences negotiating parental responsibility arrangements for your children?), impact (When thinking about all of the experiences we have discussed so far, can you describe how you think these have impacted

you?), and coping (Can you describe the habits or behaviours you engaged in (healthy or unhealthy) to help you cope with the impact of family breakdown?).

Participants were emailed an information sheet detailing the research and their rights. Those who agreed to participate signed a digital consent form and scheduled a virtual interview via Microsoft Teams (Version. 24335.204.3298.2649), lasting 60–90 min. Before the interview, participants completed a demographic questionnaire. At the start of each interview, consent to participate and record was confirmed.

During the interview, participants were asked open-ended questions with follow-up prompts. Measures to protect their well-being included breaks, reminders of their right to withdraw, and the option to skip any questions. After the interview, participants received a verbal and written debrief, including support resources.

A GBP 25 Amazon voucher was emailed to all participants as thanks for their time. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the school-level ethics board at a UK university.

2.5. Analytic Plan

Survey responses and interview transcripts were analysed together as a singular data set utilising [Braun and Clarke's \(2019\)](#) reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) technique. Survey responses were already assigned pseudonyms, and we anonymised the interviews, transcribed by the company Trint, using the original participant-chosen pseudonyms and removing identifiable information. RTA is appropriate as a modern iteration of thematic analysis, a well-established qualitative technique for highlighting important and common experiences among a population ([Braun and Clarke 2019](#)). RTA also emphasises the importance of disclosing the analyst's relationship with the topic as it inevitably shapes their interpretation of the data.

The six stages outlined by [Braun and Clarke \(2019\)](#) were followed. Firstly, each participant's survey or transcript was read repeatedly to gain in-depth familiarity with the data. Following this, excerpts from the transcripts were highlighted and annotated with coding labels according to their relevance to the research topic. Once all of the transcripts had been coded, codes were organised into themes representing common patterns across participants' accounts. The names of the themes identified and the codes they contain were refined through an iterative process of shifting attention between the themes and the raw transcripts to ensure the final list of themes comprehensively captured the depth and breadth of participants' experiences. This analysis was facilitated using NVivo 12.

Due to the volume of information generated, this manuscript focuses only on themes and subthemes related to fathers' experiences of the family breakdown event itself and associated abuse. Other themes will be detailed in subsequent manuscripts, but a full list is included here:

Manuscript 1: The FBSD Event, Domestic Violence and Abuse.

Manuscript 2: Negotiating Co-Parenting Arrangements, Experiences with systems (including family court).

Manuscript 3: The Impact on Fathers, The Impact on Children, Coping.

3. Results

During analysis, two themes relating to FBSD and associated abuse were developed, each with several subthemes. These were 'The FBSD Event' and 'Domestic Violence and Abuse (DVA)'.

3.1. Theme 1: The FBSD Event

The FBSD event itself often occurred as the culmination of general relationship deterioration and resulted in a large array of negative emotions. Crucially, however, narratives

were diverse and underscored the idea that relationships end for a variety of reasons. What was similar was fathers' descriptions of their subsequent emotions.

3.1.1. Subtheme 1: Stressors During the Relationship

Although some fathers described previously having a good relationship with their ex-partners while together, others recall a rocky relationship that was antagonistic and conflictual. Fathers frequently commented that their relationships with their ex-partners were positive early on, for example, in the early years, but that tensions started to mount because of stressful life events or their partner's growingly abusive and/or controlling behaviour:

"And for the first six months to a year, everything was going really well, and as the last year kind of moved on, there was kind of changes in the dynamic of the relationship and maybe some of the behaviours that my ex was kind of displaying in terms of controlling behaviours". (P18)

Many fathers cited various life challenges as having created tensions in the relationship, including pregnancy, the birth of each child, post-natal depression, raising the children, a big family move, property development and maintaining a property, money issues, financial insecurity due to the COVID-19 and lockdowns, and generally stressful working lives:

"And then dealing with a small baby was a big source of additional conflicts relative to [...] how to take care of them, what strategy to adopt, what activities, when, how all that. That was all a source of conflict". (P2)

"And then because we were in lockdown and then with the uncertainties of finances and lack of work and not knowing the future, big factors that were affecting the dynamic of the relationship". (P17)

Some reflected that the relationship was fast-moving, creating high-pressure and intense relationships, having "got pregnant fairly quickly" (P3):

"I think it was quite quick, like from getting together to getting married to having children and things like that seem to progress fairly quickly". (P27)

3.1.2. Subtheme 2: FBSD Onset

Among fathers who mentioned which person initiated the end of the relationship, roughly the same number reported that they ended the relationship as those who reported their partner ended things. The ends of the relationships were typically triggered by affairs, constant arguments, one big conflict, or the unsustainable culmination of abuse:

"But the official kind of divorce [...] came when she attacked me with a knife in the house". (P8)

Fathers reported that they, more than mothers, had to move out and leave the family home, although this difference was not drastic (in that several mothers had left the family home also, but less than the number of fathers). Nevertheless, in almost all cases, the father lost the resident parent status either by the children staying "in my ex's care" (P29), in the family home, or the mother having "left the family home with the children" (P14). For several fathers, this was caused by the mother deciding that she would take the children, followed by a prolonged period of the father not seeing their children¹:

"She took the children away from me [...] and she took them up to her parents and I did not get to see my children for two solid months". (P13)

"She'd moved out to her parents, which was about an hour away. And from that point on, I didn't see my daughter for about nine months, ten months". (P25)

The period that followed, whether in contact with their children or not, was described by several fathers as a disorienting, elongated rollercoaster of “being pulled in every direction” (P13) while “your whole life’s [. . .] completely turned upside down” (P7):

“It’s always a moving thing. [. . .] You’re always kinda waiting for the calm before the storm. [. . .] It’s a constant, you’re always on edge, [. . .] Yeah, it’s a rollercoaster. It doesn’t seem to have a stop or a start. You’re always on the rollercoaster and can’t get off”. (P5)

“That’s one of the big problems is just there’s so much uncertainty. You don’t know what’s going to happen. And you don’t know if you’re going to stay at your house. You don’t know if you’re going to see your child anymore. You know, you don’t know if you’re gonna be robbed blind by your ex and lose all your life savings. So there’s just so much uncertainty”. (P30)

3.1.3. Subtheme 3: Negative Emotions

The family breakdown event was described as “emotionally charged because it was really tough” (P24):

“I mean, you go through a real rollercoaster of emotions”. (P18)

As a result, some fathers recognised they had difficulties regulating their emotions and that this was important when engaging with necessary post-separation processes and communication with their ex-partner:

“I get very emotional. I find my emotions are very, very hard to keep under wraps sometimes”. (P16)

Overall, the fathers cited predominantly negative emotions following the family breakdown, particularly associated with reduced or eradicated contact with their children. These included anxiety and fear:

“So, there were times when I was in a constant state of anxiety [. . .] there’s always something round the corner but you kind of got to be prepared for it, so it made me become more vigilant”. (P17)

Some described confusion, frustration and anger, guilt, pain and hurt, sadness, shock, and stress:

“I can’t believe that other someone that you love could be so instantaneously evil towards you and not care one bit in the slightest. So that, that’s hard to get your head around”. (P7)

“I was completely out of control dealing with my ex. . . I think that was the main cause of the frustration and anger and anxiety”. (P22)

“The guilt I felt for leaving those two little creatures unprotected or me away from [. . .] being under the same roof”. (P15)

“I feel like I have been totally, I feel like I’ve been put in a sack and kicked by about 20 burly men. My insides are painful as hell because of what’s happened and what she’s done to me”. (P21)

“There’s been loads of weeks where I’ve dropped them off and come home and just broken down. Because like under the situation, I knew that I wasn’t going to see them for another ten days”. (P24)

“That’s when she started the whole divorce proceedings and stuff like that, which came as a shock because I just thought, you know, we’re just going through a bit of rough patch”. (P19)

“And it’s only now that I’m really starting to process just how difficult that year was. It was extremely stressful. It was very painful”. (P16)

3.2. Theme 2: Domestic Violence and Abuse (DVA)

Many of the fathers in the sample reported experiencing abusive behaviour both during their relationships and after they had split from their partner. Many men spoke of how their relationship with their children was specifically targeted, with many giving examples of parental alienating behaviours (PABs) that resulted in disruption or rejection of contact (parental alienation).

3.2.1. Subtheme 1: During the Relationship

Well over half of the fathers reported experiencing abuse within their relationship, including emotional and psychological abuse from their ex-partners, often in the form of belittling, name-calling, and humiliation. They described being constantly criticised, sometimes even in front of family and friends, which created a volatile atmosphere. Several of these fathers expressed feeling like they were walking on eggshells in fear of their partner’s unpredictable behaviour:

“What happened is that when she got quite abusive, at some point things would flip and she would be out of control. . . It was ultimately the worst part. . . I was really, really afraid. I was unable to sleep”. (P3)

Other fathers also reported gaslighting, as their partners downplayed their behaviour or tried to manipulate the narrative, leaving them confused and unable to recognise the abuse:

“There was a lot of undermining what I was thinking was happening. And ‘No, I didn’t say that’. ‘That never happened’. ‘Oh, I didn’t hit you’. ‘Oh well I hit you, but it was your fault. And it’s because you provoked me’”. (P3)

Verbal abuse, such as shouting, provocation, and swearing, often co-occurred with emotional and psychological abuse. A minority of these fathers also experienced physical abuse, including being hit, punched, or beaten with objects, and in extreme cases, threatened with weapons:

“I woke up and found that she’d handcuffed me to the bedframe. And she then proceeded to torture me for about [. . .] 40 min. [. . .] in the most appalling way. I still have scars. She poured hot oil and candle wax on my chest. . . And when she finally let me go [. . .] I went downstairs and the first thing she said to me was, ‘What’s for dinner?’”. (P10)

Some fathers also reported financial abuse, with partners misusing family resources for personal gain, often leading to severe financial difficulties, as well as false allegations, typically made to health visitors or social services while still in the relationship:

“She was diverting money away from the family [. . .] I don’t know who would do that. But, you know, she was stealing money from us. And we had some times where financially it was really difficult. We could have lost the house”. (P11)

“My wife falsely accused me of having tried to commit suicide in front of the children”. (P12)

Coercion and manipulation were commonly reported among these fathers, with many fathers feeling that they had no control over the relationship and were forced to comply with their partner’s demands. Moreover, many fathers felt they lacked any voice or influence in their relationship due to the dominance of their ex-partner, and some reported feeling

isolated from family and friends, with some reporting their ex-partners exerted control over their social life, finances, and parenting:

“She’d assert ways that should be done. Things like you must have 2 showers a day. There was no choice in that. . . It’s my way or the highway”. (P4)

“I had no impact. I had no voice. I had if I dared speak out or speak up about anything, if it didn’t align wholly with what her expectations were in her head, I would have absolute hell”. (P13)

“I had no access to any funds. I was actually buying clothes and items from charity shops because I didn’t have access to my funds. You know, all the credit cards and everything else. She’d taken hold of that”. (P8)

“My social life when I was with my ex-partner was curbed under her control”. (P7)

3.2.2. Subtheme 2: Post-Separation Abuse, Coercive Control, and Parental Alienation

Over half of the fathers also reported experiencing some form of abuse or coercive control from their ex-partners after their separation or divorce. For some, this behaviour was a continuation or escalation of the abuse during the relationship, while for others, it only began after the separation:

“Nothing that I can foresee during the relationship. It was when I asked for the divorce and then we separated and then everything else. That’s when the side of her I didn’t know or didn’t think about actually emerged.” (P20)

The types of abuse fathers experienced post-separation closely resembled those during the relationship, including emotional, psychological, verbal, physical, and financial abuse. However, the methods changed, with much of the abuse occurring through necessary post-separation contact, such as interactions with their children or through legal processes. Many fathers reported that their children were used as “pawns” or “weapons” by their ex-partners to control or hurt them, often by limiting access to the children (and this is discussed further below in subtheme 3):

“It’s the only thing now that she has left to keep beating me over the head with, that she can withdraw access to children at the drop of a hat with the flimsiest of reasons”. (P13)

Several fathers described how this manipulation of access to their children caused deep emotional and psychological harm. In some cases, this was carried out as retaliation or to gain leverage in the divorce proceedings. Financial motives also played a role, with a handful of fathers noting that restricting access increased child support payments:

“It is all for financial gain, all of it. So, she claimed that I cannot have them overnight, which then makes the child maintenance support payments go up through the roof for her”. (P21)

The legal and administrative processes surrounding the family breakdown were often used by ex-partners to continue or initiate abuse. The most commonly reported form of post-separation abuse was false allegations, which were frequently made to reduce the father’s contact with his children:

“I’m mature enough and sensible enough to know that if I’d abused my children and abused my wife, I’d deserve this... But I haven’t. I don’t deserve this. It’s completely and utterly unjust”. (P21)

To protect themselves, some fathers began meticulously documenting their interactions, keeping detailed records and using audio recordings to guard against future allegations:

“I keep a diary now of events, and any little thing, I write it down”. (P17)

Court orders were also commonly used to restrict fathers’ access to their children or to threaten them with further legal action. A small group of fathers reported that their ex-partners, often with the help of solicitors, intentionally prolonged legal proceedings, which resulted in emotional and financial strain for the fathers while their ex-partners had access to legal aid:

“Maybe it’s just my ex’s solicitor. But they’re very, very good at stretching things out, that end up costing me a lot of money and I’m like, well, I just want to get these things sorted”. (P24)

A minority of fathers also continued to experience direct or indirect physical violence during interactions related to childcare, such as handovers or when they were called to help with the children:

“When I was over collecting the children, [...] she went in and got a kitchen, big kitchen knife, brought it out and stabbed three of the tyres of the car with the kitchen knife and said, ‘You’ll not be able to go anywhere in it now’”. (P23)

3.2.3. Subtheme 3: Parental Alienating Behaviours (PABs)

Approximately a third of participants alluded to some degree of attempt at parental alienation from their ex-partner through the use of parental alienating behaviours (PABs):

“She’s trying to sabotage the image that they have of me, and the role that I can play”. (P2)

“But the reality is that for as long as my children, or me, or my ex-partner are alive, she’s going to do her damndest to make life a living hell and to diminish, minimise, and destroy whatever relationship and contact I have with my children. I can’t do anything about that”. (P13)

Some examples were given by fathers with alienating behaviours representing coercive control after the relationship had ended. This was achieved via various methods, including isolation from social networks (typically through defamation), threats and, most worryingly, using the children:

“I think she went into the whole divorce thing with this enormous sense of entitlement. Everything had to go her way or there would be hell to pay. That’s just her character”. (P13)

“Friends and family were turned against me”. (P3)

In some cases, the children were used as a vehicle of control, for example, using contact as leverage or using them as informants on the father’s activity:

“She also said, ‘If you don’t like it, you can see me in court and I’ll keep the kids until we’ve settled this’. Despite knowing the fact that the court case would take at least a year. So basically, it was it was a gun to my head to say, ‘Accept this or you won’t see your children’”. (P24)

Many examples of other parental alienating behaviours (PABs) were provided, for example, badmouthing and fed negativity:

“The atrocities that their mother has been saying while they are in her care. And then the children, sometimes they were even telling us some of the comments that she was making to them”. (P15)

“And my son would come up to me, and he would actually, because he’s the older one, several times, ‘Dad, mum said something, that you did something that

doesn't sound like you. Did you really do that?' And I would have to say, "No, no, no, I didn't". So that was tricky. And there is parental alienation". (P3)

"Her language towards me in front of the kids was using insults [...] and then the children were starting to repeat it as they heard it from the other parent. [...] When I was trying to tell my youngest not to do something, [...] she was even entering the nursery and she, in front of other parents, she said, "Shut up, you stupid". And that is exactly the way the sentence would be heard at home. You cannot be angry at the child. But when you go home and you say with embarrassment to the other parent, you say what happened, and she actually laughs [...] that was a wake-up call". (P15)

As well as instilling fear of the father, having a secret phone, withholding medical information about the children, creating dependency on the mother, and commanding the children not to interact with the father:

"Her mother had told her that I killed our dog. And if little one told me about mum's new boyfriend, I'd come round and kill their dog. [...] It was all complete and utter rubbish designed to make her scared". (P10)

"She makes it very clear to my son. She tells him that it's not safe for him to be with me". (P4)

"Some of the things that she would do is just trying to have continual communication between her and our daughter. So, one of the things she did was bought a cheap phone, gave it to her so that they could text all the time. And, you know, she put in our son's number, her number, one of our daughter's friend's phone number, and that was it". (P11)

"The only information that will be passed to me is information she wants to tell me, which is usually virtually nothing. If I ask any questions, for example, medical things [...] I've subsequently found out that my eldest has been put on to a Ritalin derivative medicine with no consultation, with no discussion. I find out this about three months after taking place second hand". (P13)

"There were times where [daughter] was awake at 2:00 in the morning, you know, because she was really worried about her mum, because her mum was always crying, her mom was always upset. And [daughter] didn't know how to cope with that. [...] I felt quite alienated from [daughter] because [daughter] loved being with me, but she was so worried about her mom, she couldn't relax. Her mom would constantly send over little keepsakes and not in a way to help soothe [daughter], but in a way to constantly remind her of where loyalty should lay". (P16)

"If there's any sports or any things like that, I go there to support him, and you can see he can only give me a little quick wave or something unless she tells him to come over to me. Otherwise, he's, you can see he's not allowed to. And I don't want to push it because there's going to be repercussions for him". (P6)

4. Discussion

This study is one of the first to examine father's experiences of family breakdown from their intact relationship history through to their post-separation experiences, whilst centring their experiences of abusive behaviour. Findings are clear in highlighting not only the variety of circumstances surrounding men's FBSD experiences but also how frequently their intact and post-separation timelines feature abusive behaviour.

The first theme elucidated fathers' complex relationships and supported previous work which situates FBSD events as challenging and traumatic (Kaleta and Mróz 2023).

Specifically, fathers reported the wide variety of negative emotions found in previous research (Kaleta and Mróz 2023) and spoke of the confusion and disarray they felt at this time. Interestingly, many fathers spoke about a lack of support both pre- and postnatally and how this contributed to the FBSD event. This provides support for previous work focusing on the importance of fathers' postnatal mental health (McNab et al. 2022) and the need to better support both mothers and fathers at this time (Mayers et al. 2020).

The second theme illuminated not only the breadth of abusive experiences for fathers within intact relationships but also the complex avenues through which this begins or continues post-separation. This supports previous work on men's experiences of IPV (Scott-Storey et al. 2022) and post-separation abuse towards both women and men (Bates et al. 2022; Spearman et al. 2022, 2024) that argue relationship breakdown is a fertile ground for abusive behaviour. Critically, it is clear that the men in this study felt that their position as fathers specifically left them open and vulnerable to this abuse (Bates and Hine 2023), including through systems such as family courts (Dim and Lysova 2022), and via false allegations (Bates 2020b).

Specific findings for fathers relating to coercive control support a growing literature examining the experiences of men and provide additional context on avenues for this abuse, specifically children (Powney and Graham-Kevan 2022). Findings on financial abuse are novel and demonstrate that the conceptualisation of this form of violence in relation to female victims (Eriksson and Ulmestig 2021) may not be appropriate for men or may need gender-sensitive interpretations. For example, whilst some testimonies spoke of financial control (well documented by female survivors), other men spoke about coercive pressure associated with the provider role and partners running up debts with their income, which may constitute more 'male' forms of this type of abuse.

Results also support a growing body of evidence on men's experiences of parental alienating behaviours (PABs). The men in this study outlined numerous ways in which their relationship with their children was attacked by their ex-partner, including several specific and well-known PABs (Hine 2024). This supports previous work examining not only men's experiences with PABs and their impact (Hine and Bates 2024) but also their specific vulnerability to these behaviours as fathers, especially when facilitated by systems they perceive to be biased against them (i.e., family court; Bates and Hine 2023).

The main implications of this work centre around increased awareness of fathers' experiences and the appropriate provision of support. It is clear that fathers experience a wide variety of negative emotions, and given their increased risk of suicide at this time; there is a desperate need for upscaled and gender-inclusive mental health support for these fathers. Moreover, considering the prevalence of DVA in this sample, the provision of gender-inclusive services for male survivors of IPV is also desperately needed (Bates and Douglas 2020). For any service, it is clear that these should be constructed in ways that both acknowledge and are fundamentally shaped by survivors' experiences as men specifically (Hine et al. 2020). As we know, fathers' involvement has important implications for their children's healthy development, which is irreplicable and different from maternal involvement (e.g., Lamb and Lewis 2012). Therefore, having appropriate policies and support services tailored for men to support their continuous involvement as fathers while keeping them safe and free from abuse is fundamental to their children's wellbeing.

There are several important limitations to recognise when interpreting the results of this study. First, the sample is somewhat self-selecting, as participants were recruited through both organisations that support men experiencing FBSD and through social media. This may have attracted men who have had a particularly poor experience of FBSD or who are particularly aggrieved or traumatised, thus skewing this sample. However, it is worth noting that men and fathers, especially those who identify as survivors of abuse,

typically (and somewhat problematically) identified as ‘hard to reach’ or ‘seldom heard’ and that the research team, therefore, had to accept those who were willing to share their experiences. Nonetheless, future research may wish to try to explore the experiences of a more heterogeneous sample.

Second, the participants invited for the interview were drawn from those who had taken part in the survey, and so, whilst there was then more detail gained around these experiences, some of the experiences may have been ‘doubled reported’. Steps were taken, however, to pair interview testimony with survey testimony through the use of a unique identifier across both accounts. Results should, therefore, accurately reflect the experiences of the sample as a whole.

5. Conclusions

This study highlights the profound impact of family breakdown, separation, and divorce (FBSD) on fathers, particularly when coupled with abuse, coercive control, and parental alienation. Fathers reported a wide range of emotional, psychological, and financial struggles, exacerbated by legal systems they perceive as biased. The findings underscore the urgent need for gender-inclusive services that support male victims of abuse while also addressing the unique challenges fathers face in maintaining relationships with their children post-separation. This research calls for targeted interventions to better protect fathers’ well-being and ensure their continued involvement in their children’s lives.

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Note

- ¹ These quotes should be caveated by the fact that there is just one narrative presented here (from participant fathers), and that these mothers may have had justified, or believed they had justified reasons for removing children from fathers.

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