

“I am still afraid of her”: Men’s experiences of post-separation abuse

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### Abstract

Research has demonstrated the prevalence of men's victimisation of intimate partner violence (e.g. Archer, 2000; Bates, Graham-Kevan & Archer, 2014), and more recently there has been qualitative work to highlight the severity and impact of their experiences. Little research has explored how the abuse continues or changes once the couple have separated. The aim of this study was to qualitatively explore men's experiences of abuse post-separation and the barriers they experience to help-seeking. Interviews were done with a sample of 13 men and were analysed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Results revealed that their experience of IPV continued post-separation through harassment, false allegations and manipulation of the parental relationship. This abuse often continued, and in some cases escalated, for some time after the relationship broke down. Some men described parental alienation experiences and having had their relationship with their children manipulated or withheld completely. These experiences were impactful and left men with mental health issues, living in fear, or having affected the development of a new relationship. Findings are discussed within the context of currently policy and practice within the United Kingdom.

*Key Words:* intimate partner violence; male victims; post-separation abuse; parental alienation; domestic abuse

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Exploring men’s victimisation is seen as a contentious issue within the wider area of intimate partner violence (IPV) research. The majority of early research within this area had a strong focus on men as perpetrators and women as victims (e.g. Dobash & Dobash, 1979, 2004), and as a model this is associated with feminist analyses and a “gendered” approach to studying and developing interventions around IPV (e.g. DeKeseredy, 2011, see Bates, Graham-Kevan, Bolam & Thornton, 2017 for a review). In direct contrast, there is a competing body of literature that explores IPV within the context of other family violence, and indeed other general aggression (e.g. Felson, 2002), and more generally advocates for a “gender inclusive” approach to IPV. This research has demonstrated that indeed women can be violent (e.g., Bates, Graham-Kevan & Archer, 2014; Archer, 2000), and that bidirectional violence is a common pattern of IPV (e.g., Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Misra, Selwyn & Rohling, 2012).

More gender inclusive approaches to exploring IPV have demonstrated the prevalence, severity and impactful nature of men’s victimisation. For example, we know men experience significant physical aggression and are often injured (e.g., Hines & Douglas, 2010), having experienced violence including hitting, stabbing, kicking, and biting (Drijber, Reijnders & Ceelan, 2013); men further experience significant controlling behavior (also known by emotional abuse and psychological abuse; e.g., Hines, Brown & Dunning, 2007; Carney & Barner, 2012). In an anonymous survey of non-help-seeking men, Author (2018a) found that men had experienced physical aggression and controlling behavior, specifically they reported experiences of gaslighting, manipulation (e.g. through children, use of false allegations, coercion around sex and pregnancy), being isolated from friends and family, and experienced fear.

IPV is a traumatic experience and so there is an increased risk for developing psychological disorders and mental health conditions for male and female victims (Hines & Douglas, 2009). Despite a common perception that women's violence is trivial and not impactful (e.g., Saunders, 1988), men have been found to experience longer term physical and mental health issues (e.g., Coker, Smith, Bethea, King & McKeown, 2000; Coker et al., 2002) including PTSD symptomology (e.g., Hines & Douglas, 2011). Laroche (2005) analysed Canadian General Social Survey (GSS) data and found that there were men in this sample who had experienced unilateral abuse from their female partner and reported being fearful (83%), a detrimental impact on their day to day activities (80%), and that they sought medical help (84%) and counseling (62%). In a further qualitative paper, Author (2018b) found men's experiences had impacted on their physical and mental health, their future relationships and the relationship with their children. They had further described the impact of societal attitudes on their experiences, and how this contributed to the numerous barriers they encountered in help-seeking.

What is currently less understood about men's IPV victimisation is their experiences of continued abuse post-separation. The 1999 Canadian GSS revealed that of those who had identified they had been in a violent relationship, 40% of women and 32% of men reported that some violence occurred after the end of the relationship (see Hotton, 2001). For 24% of those reporting this post-separation experience, the violence had become more serious and for 39% the violence had only begun after the end of the relationship. We know from the literature on women's victimisation that the end of the relationship often does not mean the end of the abuse (Ellis, 1989); for some perpetrators the separation is a trigger for escalating the behavior to attempt to continue to control the partner, and punish them for leaving (Jaffe, Crooks & Poisson, 2003).

Acrimonious divorces and conflict around custody arrangements, particularly where there is a history of IPV (Jaffe et al., 2003), often increase the likelihood of ongoing post-separation abuse. Indeed, the continued abuse of women has been linked to contact arrangements (Morrison, 2015), with many victims often experiencing more significant issues after separation (Anderson & Saunders, 2007). Jaffe et al. (2003) found more than half the women in their sample had experience abuse post-separation that often related to psychological or emotional abuse around the custody negotiations. Whilst research suggests there is a reduction of trauma symptoms for women at 6, 12 and 24 months post-separation, a lack of resources is associated with worsening psychological outcomes (Anderson & Saunders, 2007). This points to a need to understand men's experience to ensure they are offered tailored, appropriate support to safeguard against these adverse outcomes.

This continued abuse and impact often also involves children, and a consequence of high conflict divorce and custody disputes is parental alienation, a term coined by Gardner (e.g., 2002), and a type of family violence that is emerging within the academic literature (Harman, Kruk & Hines, 2018). Parental alienation is a result of a child becoming separated or alienated from the parent; this can be through behaviors such as abuse or abandonment by a parent but can also occur through one parent manipulating the child as a way to control interactions with the other (target) parent. In the less serious cases the child is encouraged to act out and challenge the target parent, whereas in the more severe cases the child engages in manipulating and abusive behavior towards the target parent. Children get caught up in the aggressive communication between separated parents, and indeed some parents can encourage this (Lowenstein, 2013), often on a continuum of severity (e.g., see Darnall, 2010). The target parent is significantly disadvantaged in trying to reduce or counteract this effect of parental alienation and indeed it could result in the child supporting the alienating parent so as to protect their relationship with their only contact parent (Lowenstein, 2013).

The evidence and commentary on parental alienation is mixed; as a type of aggression it is often seen as atypical due to a lack of widespread acceptance of the concept (Harman et al., 2018). Whilst supporters are arguing for parental alienation syndrome to be included in clinical diagnostic tools (e.g., Bernet & Baker, 2013), others are more critical of the term and argue it oversimplifies complex and challenging cases (Kelly & Johnston, 2001), and could in fact obscure dangerous behavior by the target parent (Bruch, 2001). Indeed, those who are opposed to using the term “parental alienation syndrome” agree that it lacks an adequate evidence base (Warshak, 2001) as well as firm criteria that makes it difficult to evidence in court processes (Viljoen & Van Rensburg, 2014). In a review, Harman et al. (2018) highlighted there were significant limitations with the current and existing research that exists on parental alienation (e.g., convenience samples and retrospective reports from adult children), but they highlighted several ways that parental alienation can be seen within IPV behaviors, for example through gaslighting, stalking of ex-partners, and legal and administrative aggression where people in authority are used as a tool to advance this behavior.

These experiences of separation from their children can also be seen as an outcome of wider controlling behavior tactics that use societal systems; the use of false allegations and manipulation of family court systems can leave the father (and the mother in reverse cases) without contact which detrimentally impacts on relationships with his children (e.g., see Author, 2018b). This links strongly to legal and administrative aggression, which involves one partner manipulating legal and other administrative systems in a way to be harmful to a partner (Tilbrook, Allan & Dear, 2010). Whilst a relatively newer and lesser known type of aggression, the presence of it can be seen in the literature through a variety of experiences. For example, Hines et al. (2007) describe men’s accounts of their partners manipulating systems and threatening to remove the children from the home, and indeed a fear of losing

their children is an often-cited reason for men not seeking help or leaving an abusive relationship (Hines & Douglas 2010). It has been further seen through the use of false allegations (e.g., Author, 2018a), Cook (2009) describes abused men's accounts of losing their homes and children through false accusations. The men in his book felt their victimisation could be attributed to their being male and the fact they believed they would not get custody. These perceived gendered stereotypes have been seen to exist in men's reports of their experiences with services; in Migliaccio's (2001) study of 12 male victims, six of the eight men who had called a domestic violence helpline had been made to feel they were lying about the abuse. It is thought these reactions create a barrier for men in help-seeking or reporting their experiences, including for experiences that occur post-separation. Indeed, within the Canadian GSS data almost half as many men as women had reported their post-separation victimisation to the police (30% and 50% respectively).

Stereotypes that exist around perceptions of IPV fall in-line with the male perpetrator female victim model, and this can be impactful on men and their help-seeking behavior. For example, IPV perpetrated against women is seen as more serious (Seelau, Seelau & Poorman, 2003), and male victims are blamed more for their victimization (Taylor & Sorenson, 2005). Men often fear services are not appropriate or available (Tsui, 2014); the public perceptions that exists of IPV shape societal and individual level responses that can perpetuate its occurrence (Gracia, 2014) as well as have adverse outcomes on victims. Shernock and Russell (2012) performed a systematic review of the literature that exists on gender and racial/ethnic differences in how the criminal justice system arrest, prosecute and use protective orders and found that men were treated less fairly than women with these measures. Within their review, scenario-based studies and those using mock jurors felt men were more to blame within IPV situations and the authors conclude that these attitudes are seen within the actual criminal justice responses.

This is important when considering the involvement of legal and administrative systems within post-separation contact, and specifically how these can be manipulated. Men are more likely to be a victim of this type of legal and administrative aggression due to gendered stereotypes that exist in these systems; indeed, men report experiencing it more than perpetrating (Hines, Douglas & Berger, 2016) and it has also been found to be impactful on men's and children's health (Berger, Douglas & Hines, 2015). Specifically when considering parental alienation, some research argues that mothers experience parental alienation to a greater degree (e.g., Balmer, Matthewson & Haines 2018), others argue that it is a behavior more engaged in by mothers against fathers because they are often in a stronger position through having custody (e.g., Lowenstein, 2013). Societal and ingrained gendered stereotypes that exist about the nature of IPV and specifically that see men as aggressors (e.g., see Bates, Kaye, Pennington & Hamlin, in press), have been seen to disadvantage men within legal and court systems (e.g., see review by Shernock & Russell, 2012). Indeed, some abusive women may use these to manipulate the system as it allows her to more easily portray herself as a "victim" of abuse, a claim that will likely be believed due to these perceptions (Harman et al., 2018).

Whilst less is known about men's post-separation experiences, it is likely that the legal and administrative aggression and parental alienation seen in men's account of IPV means the impact is exacerbated. What we understand about the negative impact of IPV on men's health (e.g., Hines & Douglas, 2010), and the post-separation experience of women who have left abusive relationships (e.g., Jaffe et al., 2003), it is critical we explore the IPV experiences of men post-separation to explore similarities, and gender-specific differences. It is also possible that the lack of understanding of men's post-separation experiences also means we understand less about how this impacts on the children of violent women. IPV that occurs between adults (uni-laterally or bidirectionally) impacts children and can be seen in



emotional and behavioral difficulties (Stadelmann, Perren, Groeben, & von Klitzing, 2010), these issues can often be seen in future adult relationships (e.g., Baker, 2005). Despite often being seen as passive witnesses to this abuse, others suggest that the children are just as much a victim of abuse and control (Callaghan, Alexander, Fellin & Sixsmith, 2015). Indeed, witnessing and experiencing IPV in the childhood home is associated with later perpetration and victimisation in adult relationships adulthood (e.g. Whitfield, Anda, Dube & Felitti, 2003; Ehrensaft et al., 2003).

The previous research described above has informed much of what we understand about men's experience of IPV and also the nature of post-separation abuse through parental alienation and legal and administrative aggression. There has not yet been a study that specifically asks men about how their experiences after their relationships ended and to what extent their abuse victimisation continues or changes. The aim of the current study was to qualitatively explore men's experiences of aggression and control post-separation from a female partner, as well as examine the continued impact of this abuse. The current literature has demonstrated the prevalence of men's victimisation, and there is a developing body of research exploring men's experience of IPV (e.g. Author, 2018a), but little has explored the post-separation effects, or indeed any continuation of abuse. It is hoped that this qualitative study will provide a context for understanding the extent of this IPV and how service provision could be informed to reflect any ongoing issues.

## **Method**

### **Participants and Procedure**

The participants in this sample volunteered to take part as a follow up interview to a previous study exploring men's victimisation<sup>1</sup> (see Author, 2018a, 2018b); having completed

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<sup>1</sup> The original sample for both papers was 161 men who completed an anonymous online questionnaire.

the original study, they emailed to request to take part in further interviews. Participants were interviewed either in person, or over Skype/phone call after completing an online consent form. The aim was to largely recruit UK based men to take part, but the previous study was shared quite widely online and so the demographic was wider than originally expected. There was a total of 13 men who offered to take part in follow up interviews; the age range was 29 to 62 years old with a mean of 42 ( $SD = 9.29$ ). The majority of participants identified as White (92.9%) with one participant identifying as Asian African British. The majority identified as British (71.4%) followed by being European (14.3%) or Australian (7.1%). Almost half of the sample identified as being in a current relationship (46%) but the majority had children (92.3%). The average number of years of the relationships was 8.6 ( $SD = 5.02$ ) with a range of between one and 17 years.

### **Interviews and analysis strategy**

This study received full ethical clearance from the University ethics board. The interview schedule was designed to explore several issues: 1) Experiences of aggression from a female partner (e.g. Can you describe what happens when there is conflict in your relationship?); 2) Experience of control within the relationship (e.g. Can you describe your partner's behavior around your levels of independence e.g. job, your activities without them); 3) Experiences of abuse post-separation (e.g. Can you describe if any of the behavior we discussed continued post-break up?) and 4) Impact of these experiences (e.g., can you describe how these experiences impact on your life now?). It was made clear to participants that they were under no obligations to answer all of the questions, and that they could stop the interview at any time if they were to become distressed. After the interview, they were signposted to sources of support that included ManKind Initiative, a charity that works with male victims of domestic violence.

Interviews were between 39 minutes and up to an hour and 50 minutes. Thematic analysis, specifically, a deductive analysis was chosen with a focus on semantic themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As an analytical technique, it can also provide a rich, detailed account of the data in a way that is unrestrained by theory. The transcripts were read several times to become familiar with the content, the data was then coded, and these codes were then transformed into potential themes by finding relevant extracts to evidence.

## **Results and Discussion**

Analysis of the findings revealed several main themes surrounding men's experiences: pre-separation abuse experiences, continued control post-separation, use of children as a weapon, and the impact of their experience. There were a number of subthemes present within each.

### **Main Theme 1: Pre-separation abuse experiences**

#### **Subtheme 1a: Aggression**

The interviews were structured to begin with a discussion of the pre-separation abuse experiences; this often began by describing verbal aggression and berating:

“One night, she just kept me up all night calling me names...she would stand by the bed and berate me while I was trying to sleep” (P4)

“...Phoned me up at work, screamed down the phone at me for half an hour.

Everybody could hear her screaming at me, which was quite a relatively regular experience. It's like erm, people used to joke erm, [participant name] is his own man, and he has his wife's permission to do it” (P2)

For many of the men, they had also experienced significant physical aggression:

“Yeah she actually beat me up on our wedding day... she nearly made us crash because she started hitting me in the car... and then when I stopped she hit me some more... and that’s my main memory of our wedding day.” (P3)

“I mean I suppose that the worst examples of physical abuse are the things like I was driving the car, when the eldest two were quite young and we got into an argument and she just kept punching me in the head. While, I was driving the car. I couldn’t do anything because I had to keep driving the car” (P2)

For some men, the violence, and injuries, were life-threatening:

“erm she just came up behind and stabbed me in my erm in my left arm and that cut all the way through my arm and came out the other side erm and then I had two more further stab wounds on my back...blood was going everywhere you” (P13)

“the last time she hit me was with a phone, a big solid phone that she broke over the back of my head. I had to go to the hospital for that and apparently I almost died...She left me bleeding on the floor that day” (P5)

The descriptions of verbal and physical aggression here fit with a developing body of literature that has demonstrated that men experience significant IPV from female partners.

### **Subtheme 1b: Control**

Coercive control was present through all the men’s narratives; this included through wanting to be in constant contact and also interfering with their other relationships:

“I was bombarded with texts and e-mails: where was I; what was I doing; who was I with; who was I speaking to...” (P11)

“I had sort of found her with my phone...one of the things she had being doing with my phone...changing people numbers by one digit. So, when I tried to call them...” (P3)

This served to manipulate and isolate the men, so they often felt they had lost many of their friendships and relationships with their close family. For some of the men, the use of threats was present in their descriptions; threats that were used to ensure their behavior met their partner's expectations:

“She would just turn around and say ‘fine, I am just going to leave and take the kids’, and then she would storm upstairs quite often at 10,11, 12 o’clock at night and pull this poor 3 or 4 year old out of bed, and say ‘right that’s it we are leaving’...” (P8)

“erm she once injured her hand... she punched me in the face too hard...and then the doctor offered for her to press charges against me, and she made sure that I knew about that when we got in the car. She said that the doctor has gave her his card, and that anytime that she wants all she has to do is call this doctor and the doctor will help her press charges against me for assault, and I said “but you hit me in the face, and broke your hand on my face”, and she said “it doesn’t matter, it’s abuse as far as he is concerned, and he will back me up”. (P5)

The use of coercive control within male victims’ accounts of their experiences is seen within the literature. It is seen to manipulate and control the behavior of men both within and outside the relationship. Whilst we see these experiences in women’s accounts, the men in this study revealed that the gendered nature of the services meant these attempts to control were even more impactful.

The existing literature details the prevalence and severity of women’s aggression (e.g., Hines et al., 2007), the injurious nature of it (e.g., Hines & Douglas, 2010), as well as the impact this can have (e.g., Author, 2018b; Hines & Douglas, 2011). Despite this developing body of evidence, there are still perceptions that women’s typical lesser physical size and strength, compared to men, mean that they cannot cause the same level of impact as men. Previous research has found that women often attack men in their sleep (e.g., Author,

2018a), as well as use weapons as can be seen in the descriptions above. Indeed, Drijber et al. (2013) found that in 54% of cases where there was physical aggression, there was an object used (e.g. knife, vase, chair).

The use of women's coercive control here has a significant impact on the men in this sample; they modified behavior to respond to the threats to remove the children from the home or make false allegations. These threats fit with our understanding of legal and administrative aggression (e.g., see Tilbrook et al., 2010); the men's awareness of the gendered stereotypes that exist within the service system and the threats used will serve to coerce a man into changing his behavior to avoid these consequences.

Whilst the use of physical aggression and violence is impactful on men and women who are victims of IPV, many studies have indicated that it is the psychological or emotional abuse (conceptualised here as coercive control) is often more significant in its impact. In referencing the impact of non-physical abuse, a participant in Jaffe et al.'s (2003) study reported that "The bruises go away after a month but the verbal abuse will stay with me forever" (p.59). This use of this type of abuse has been seen within the women's literature to cause adverse outcomes such as illegal drug use (e.g. Straight, Harper, & Arias 2003) and PTSD symptomology (Street & Arias, 2001), and has seen men reporting living in fear (e.g., Author, 2018a). IPV presents a range of abusive behaviors that can "terrorize" (Shepard & Campbell 1992), and coercive control can create a loss of autonomy and impact on freedom through the need to constantly respond to the partner's behavior (Williamson, 2010).

## **Main Theme 2: Coercive Control continued post-separation**

### **Subtheme 2a: Harassment**

For all the men in this sample, the presence and use of coercive control was something that continued post-separation through methods such as harassment. Much of the

physical violence has stopped for many of these men due to a lack of physical proximity but contact was often maintained through, for example the children:

“Erm, last year...I’d already been told that I wouldn’t see the kids on Father’s day so we decided to go away for the weekend, and that was really as a result of I didn’t really want to be at home when it was Father’s Day knowing I couldn’t see the children...So my partner and I went away and on Father’s Day itself I got a text message through with a picture: Happy Father’s Day, you f-ing sperm donor!” (P11)

For others, the harassment continued despite having entered into a new relationship, the use of social media and email to persist with contact could be seen in several of the men’s narratives:

“I actually ended it, which made her very unhappy. She harassed me for a little over two years, sending me emails. Even once I was in a relationship with somebody else...she took every opportunity to tear me down” (P5)

For others, the harassment and coercion continued through the use of financial control and abuse:

“She’d maxed out my credit cards and this, that and the other and she had used that as a weapon... and then she used that weapon when we did separate... and, and, and that nearly finished me” (P3)

Here, through the use of social media, children and financial connections, these men continued to experience harassment and abusive behavior from their ex-partners. There are perceptions, as with IPV, that harassment and stalking behaviors is something only experienced by women, but the results here contradict this.

**Subtheme 2b: False allegations**

The threat of false allegations is seen within the narratives of these men when they were describing the abuse they had experienced during the relationship. Post-separation these threats became reported allegations that led to involvement with the police:

“And ultimately in 2015...my then wife took the decision to raise a false and malicious allegation against me formally...involving the police which led to my arrest and erm, then, er, I was in custody overnight, released on police bail for 12 weeks.”  
(P12)

This not only involved being arrested and investigated, but for some men there were immediate impacts in their employment as well:

“...every sort of two or three weeks with increasing severity. She obviously she starts off saying “oh no he used to beat me up” and then it got onto I had sexually abused my older kids, so they had to go through a child protection investigation...then she said I was having a relationship with an unspecified child at the school”, I was working at, so I got suspended for three months and a whole big position of trust enquiry” (P3)

The use of false allegations is a form of legal and administrative aggression, and something seen to be used significantly more by women than men due to the gendered stereotypes that exist within service provision. There are many barriers that exist to leaving abusive relationships for men, but the threat of these allegations is one of the most powerful reasons for men to stay.

**Subtheme 2c: Escalation and continuation**

For many of the men, the end of the relationship saw an escalation of the aggressive and controlling behavior:



“...shortly after that we actually separated then things changed really dramatically and if they had been bad over the last few months then it became horrible really...”

(P10)

There are often perceptions that leaving an abusive relationship is the end of the abuse experience, but what is understood from the literature on women’s victimisation is that this is not true, if anything it can be the start of an escalation of abuse in frequency and severity. For some of the men, despite being separated for a number of years they were still experiencing the abuse:

“oh yeah, absolutely it continues to this day. There is like a vengeful vendetta of erm...that how dare I have the audacity to leave...basically anything to try and damage” (P8)

This escalation and continuation could be seen more when there were children involved; having to speak to discuss contact arrangements. For the above participant, this was an opportunity for his ex-partner to try and exert control through the only contact they had:

“Obviously since my departure, she has had no control on my day to day existence other than, on access to the children. She would be as difficult as possible and not be there or be somewhere else” (P8)

Whilst little is known about men’s post-separation experiences, research working with abused women and their children has revealed contact arrangements was a way of their ex-partners continuing their abusive behavior (e.g., Morrison, 2015). The assumption is often that once the abusive relationships ends, the abuse also ends; however, we know for many women the separation could be a signal to the ex-partner to escalate his behavior to attempt to continue to control or punish her for leaving (Jaffe et al., 2003).

One of the ways that ex-partners can continue to attempt to control is through stalking and harassment behavior. The harassment described by some of the men in this sample has

stalking like behavior characteristics. Burgess et al. (1997) describes different stalking activity related to ex-partners, the first group includes attempts to contact the ex-partner and then when this fails, they instead try to discredit them. This behaviors is seen in these men's accounts and was further exacerbated by the use of technology. Technology was used to create a sense of ongoing power, and to isolate and punish; this has been seen in women's post-separation accounts where it was used affect women's feelings of safety, the women never felt free of the contact (Woodlock, 2017).

Less is known about men's stalking experiences although figures suggest one in three victims of stalking are men (Office for National Statistics, 2016). Men's perception of risk in stalking situations is typically lower in comparison to women; for example, men are less likely than women to perceive stalking as dangerous and harmful (Lambert, Smith, Geistman, Cluse-Tolar & Jiang, 2013). Furthermore, societal attitudes suggest that a male perpetrator and female victim is more likely to create concern for the victim well-being and safety (e.g., Finnegan & Fritz, 2012). It is possible there are men who are victims of IPV who post-separation experience stalking and harassment but do not report, or often do not recognise their experience due to the gendered nature of how we construct a narrative around stalking.

The continued control post-separation was seen frequently through the use of children; in the absence of being able to control their ex-partners movements or relationships after the relationship broke down, many women seemed to try and exert their control using the child as one of the only remaining points of contact. This was done here through escalation and harassment and through the use of false allegations. This has been seen in men's account of their IPV in previous studies (e.g., Author, 2018a), for example Cook (2009) describes abused men's accounts of losing their homes and children through such allegations.

### **Main Theme 3: Children as a weapon**

#### **Subtheme 3a: Withholding contact and manipulating parental relationship**

Linked to sub-theme 2c, a strong theme within the men's narratives was around the use of the children as a weapon in ongoing abuse. Specifically, this involved withholding contact and some of the men this has been for a number of years:

"I don't see my eldest child, even though there are court orders saying that I should.

I've not seen her since October 2015, and there is a system there that doesn't give two hoots whether I see her" (P2)

"I haven't seen her for three years, this long I haven't seen her...yes she was very much aware of it" (P9)

For the men who were fathers, this was often the most upsetting part of any of the abuse they had experienced. For others the lack of contact had created problems with the parental relationship; some men discussed the way their ex-partner had not only withheld contact, but also engaged in attempts to ensure the child did not want a relationship with their father:

"...they have sort of said...she has cut you off from the kids, your ten month old daughter when she was taken doesn't know who you are anymore and the older child has been turned against you...she is scared of me because she thinks that I have murdered her pet cat, which is not true...that I am going to kill her, her sister and her mother, and bury them in the backyard. That's what this 6 almost 7-year-old has been told, and she believes it" (P7)

The men's accounts suggest that in some cases their ex-partners had not only been withholding contact, but also manipulating the children to alienate them from their fathers. Parental alienation is a significant and damaging pattern of behavior that can have long lasting impact on the child's relationship with the target parent. Creating an image of the father in the children's mind that leaves them fearful will have aided in the attempts to

withhold contact; ultimately this behavior keeps the ex-partner in control despite the relationship having broken down.

### **Subtheme 3b: Using the child**

For some men, they described the way the children had been used directly in attempts to continue the abuse. For example, Participant six describes the way the child was manipulated into being concerned to leave their mother alone:

“... she was basically saying ‘oh mummy has been going round...just in tears saying oh I don’t know how I am going to cope without you here’” (P6)

For other men, this created situations where they needed to manage the impact of this on the child without causing additional issues:

“Quite often my daughters, both of them were telling me that mum tells lies, which is quite hard to explain to children without being abusive yourself but you know, ‘well mum sees things slightly different to what we do and you must remember that what you’re seeing is your truth and you must, you know, stay true to that, and if you know that your truth the way you saw it is true then you must remember that always’,”  
(P11)

For another man, he had custody of his daughter and yet his ex-partner was still attempting to exert control and influence through social services by attempting to assert he was not looking after his daughter properly:

“...you know I don’t know what she’s trying to get out of it at the end of the day if social services were that worried they’d take her off me and put her in to care which is no good for her or anybody else so...but again it’s like I say there’s something there’s something still there that she’s trying to, you know she’s trying to have an effect over me still definitely but” (P13)

Within each of the narratives that contained this behavior, it was clear the men recognised this was a further attempt to try and exert control by their ex-partners. The prevalence of men's experiences of coercive control is seen in the literature (e.g., Carney & Barner, 2012); for example, Author (2018a) describes men's accounts of manipulation, gaslighting, fear, and isolation. In the current study, this control is seen to extend post-separation through the children in particular.

Threats to obtain custody of the children is an often used tool of control both during and post-separation to enhance power and control (Jaffe et al., 2003). Men in this sample had experienced active parental alienation (Darnall, 2010; Lowenstein, 2013), through either withholding contact, or in some cases manipulating the parental relationship so the children no longer wanted to have contact with their father. In their study with abused women, Jaffe et al. (2003) described the way abusive men used verbal abuse and harassment during exchanges of children, including using false allegations; they further described the way the "children were a conduit for the abuse" (p60), this is something seem strongly within the current study. This type of abuse likely to be experienced by men, and possibly to more severe degree due to the gendered stereotypes that exist within the service and police response systems. Harman et al. (2018) describe false allegations as the "silver bullet" (p.1284) within custody disputes because of the impact it can have in affecting the target parent getting any sort of access to the child.

We know that children who have been exposed to IPV may be at an increased risk of experiencing emotional and behavioral problems (e.g., Holt, Buckley & Whelan, 2008). We also know from the literature exploring women's post-separation experiences that children are often exposed to verbal abuse and denigration of the mother during contact arrangements and handovers, and are clearly distressed when hearing this abuse and when asked to carry further abusive messages back to their mothers (Holt, 2011). Whilst family court systems

regulate the child contact for parents, they do not support and help cope with the consequences of this contact in this context (Morrison, 2015). Holt (2011) describes a range of effects on the children of experiencing this including self-harm, substance misuse and withdrawn behaviors. Whilst the discourse around violent fathers is often missing from decisions made about contact and the arrangements (Featherstone & Peckover, 2007), the discourse around violent mothers undeniably is missing. The impact of these experiences on both the fathers and their children needs further exploration to ensure service provision is appropriate and tailored to their needs.

#### **Main Theme 4: Continued impact of abuse**

For some of the men, they reflected on the impact the abuse had had, whether the abuse was ongoing, or they felt was now over:

“I don’t know how I survived that time because it was just unbelievable” (P3)

“...yeah erm I was diagnosed with PTSD when I was 30. Erm and I have severe agoraphobia with panic disorder now” (P5)

For some this affected them despite knowing their ex-partner was in a new relationship and created ongoing fear:

“... I am still afraid of her she still... she seems to be happy. I think that she is married...but I don’t... I don’t feel like she, would hesitate to her me again...” (P5)

For this particular participant, the trauma of his experience was more frightening than fear for his own life:

“I don’t think being afraid for my life is as scary as being afraid of what she can do to me. I would rather her kill me, then do what she did to me before...I don’t think I could live through it again.” (P5)

For others, they reflected on the fact it meant they feared getting into a new relationship:

“I don’t know if I will ever be able to trust anyone again” (P4)

“I know when you asked me the question do I have a new partner, I try not to laugh when people say “look you know you have to move on, and do something” and I just look at them and say you have no conception of what this does to someone. I mean I could have moved on from what she did to me no problem at all. But having the kids ripped away from me, and knowing that they are in her care, and that both of them are quite obviously suffering...” (P7)

From work with both male and female victims of IPV, we are aware of the significant impact that abuse experiences can have on longer term physical and mental health outcomes. From the women’s literature we know in particular that psychological and emotional abuse can be the most impactful on longer term outcomes (Marshall, 1996; Straight et al., 2003). For example, Leone, Johnson, Cohan and Lloyd (2004) found victims of controlling and violent behavior reported more injuries and more work time lost as a consequence in a sample of low income women. However, other research has demonstrated that there is significant overlap between men’s and women’s physical and mental health outcomes as a consequence; for example, using a longitudinal design, Foshee, Reyes, Gottfredson, Chang and Ennett (2013) explored the effect of psychological and physical victimisation in adolescents. For both boys and girl, psychological victimisation predicted increased alcohol use and internalisation of symptoms. Whilst there is relatively less literature exploring men’s experiences of IPV, we do know that they experience violence that causes injuries (Hines & Douglas, 2010) and that there is a longer-term impact of their abuse (e.g., Coker et al., 2002). For example, Tsui (2014) describes men’s injuries and the mental health outcomes in terms of lowered self-esteem and suicide ideation.

Less is known about the impact of post-separation abuse, but we can draw from the women’s literature on stalking by ex-partners; for example, Logan, Shannon and Cole (2007)

report that women who were stalked after separation reported increased distress and higher levels of fear. Similarly, Mechanic, Uhlmansiek, Weaver and Resick (2000) found battered women who were persistently stalked reported increased rates of depression and PTSD. The complexity of understanding the impact of continued abuse post-separation requires acknowledging that the lack of physical presence or proximity does not render the person no longer impactful. Thiara and Humphreys (2017) call for more recognition of the “absent presence” (p1) of an abusive ex-partner, and specifically call to practitioners to look beyond the immediate context and behavior they will see to acknowledge the ways in which a perpetrator despite being separated remains present through continued abuse (e.g., through child custody arrangements).

The continued impact of this type of abuse needs to be further understood to allow services to best support IPV victims. Whilst there are barriers to help-seeking for all victims, men face significant issues in getting access to help with through a lack of availability, a perceived lack of appropriateness (Tsui, 2014) or the perceptions that services are unhelpful (Machado, Hines & Matos, 2016). The response of the criminal justice system and victim services are key in ensuring all victims are able to recover from their experiences. Humphreys and Thiara (2003) found that for 36% of their female IPV survivors, the abuse continued post separation and beyond 12 months. Inadequate criminal justice and legal responses left these women and children vulnerable to further assaults and harassment. It is critical services are aware of the complex dynamics that exist during, but also after the relationship has broken down and the continued IPV that can be experienced. For men in particular, in a system that appears to have gendered stereotypes about the nature of IPV, it can be particularly challenging to get help and support, and men do indeed feel the impact of these gendered perceptions (Author, 2018b).



**Implications for research and practice**

Much of the research and practice that exists in the area of IPV has historically focused on women's victimisation, typically only seeing men as perpetrators. Whilst we know more now about men's experiences of IPV and the impact it can have, we still know relatively little about their post-separation experiences of abuse and parental alienation. This study aimed to add to this knowledge gap, but there is still more research needed to understand this fully. Further research should seek to explore these experiences on a larger scale and should utilise methods that encourage men to disclose their experiences, so as to ensure a wider and broader range of experience is captured. Men are often more reluctant to seek help or disclose their victimisation, and much of our current understanding comes from help-seeking samples; these have been key in helping us understand men's experiences but often only captures those who have sought help (e.g., Hines et al., 2007), or those who identify as a victim (e.g., Hogan, 2016). Utilising methods similar to Author (2018a, 2018b), the use of online questionnaires would allow men the chance to remain anonymous, something we know is key for some to their help-seeking (e.g., see Brooks, 2018). This research should also seek to address issues with prior research on parental alienation such as convenience samples, a lack of comparison group in cross-sectional designs and relying on retrospective reports of adult children (Harman et al., 2018).

When relationships breakdown there are often still legitimate reasons to still be in contact including negotiating any shared financial assets and also agreeing child custody arrangements. There is a need to fully understand the nature of post-separation abuse and harassment for both men and women, and specifically how it impacts of these processes in services and family court systems. It is critical this research explores men's experiences as well due to the presence of legal and administrative aggression seen within the men's accounts here but also in other literature (e.g., Tilbrook et al., 2010). Current service

provision may not be responsive to the specific issues raised when the IPV evolves due to the change in relationship, and possibly power, dynamics. Many organisations are focused, quite rightly, on helping people escape a dangerous and abusive relationship; but this may mean there are aspects of experience that are not captured in current support. IPV programmes and services need to do more to reach out to men and women and to more fully assess their needs (Anderson & Saunders, 2007).

The manipulation of systems is something seen within men's accounts of their IPV experiences (e.g., Hines et al., 2007), and responses from these services have often not been appropriate with men not being believed (Migliaccio, 2001), or feeling they were treated as if they were the abuser (Author, 2018b). In respect to legal and administrative aggression, there is a need to address the gender biases that exist within service provision. There is evidence that the gendered nature of many of the help-seeking and criminal justice service provisions in fact means women are more likely to use this as a form of aggression (e.g., Hines et al., 2016) and are indeed successfully able to manipulate processes to their advantage. This type of abuse was seen here within men's accounts of false allegations, withholding contact of children and parental alienation. Men reported that police and service responses reinforced and exacerbated this abuse by not recognising the behavior or not fully investigating. Service providers both within and outside the criminal justice system need to recognise both the nature of post-separation abuse but also the way that some partner manipulate and use these systems for their own benefit. This is damaging to women, but primarily men and the children that become used as weapons. This differential treatment can be seen within the literature that explores criminal justice responses, for example in police judgements and responses (Stewart & Maddren, 1997), granting of restraining orders (e.g., Muller, Desmarais & Hamel, 2009) and prosecution (Shernock & Russell, 2012).

For the majority of these men, their experiences of IPV were continuing after their relationship had broken down; the abuse and control continued to influence their lives and often, those of their children too. Control was an overarching theme across the men's accounts; it seemed their partner's control was what prevented the men leaving their abusive relationship (e.g. through fear of losing children), it prevented them from seeking help and support (e.g. through fear of false allegations), and it was still endemic in their communication and experience after separation (e.g. from loss of contact with children). Men's experience of post-separation abuse was clear; this was seen through the manipulation of the court system and family services, through manipulating children and contact, through defamation of character, and in some cases continued verbal and physical aggression.

The finding that a significant amount of the controlling behavior continues post-separation is also important for services, but also for informing policing and court-based practice. In 2015, a new law was introduced in the UK to criminalise the use of emotional abuse, psychological abuse and coercive control in the absence of physical violence (see Section 76 of the Serious Crime Act, 2015; Crown Prosecution Service [CPS], 2017). This legislation aimed to capture some of the more nuanced aspects of abuse within relationships that would not come to the attention of police in the same way as injurious physical aggression. Critics comment that this law has similar "gendered" issues that much of the other IPV legislation has; that is, it is typically seen as a crime of men's violence and control towards female partners. Specifically, here this law only covers behavior that occurs within relationships where there is a "personal connection" which means current intimate relationships, currently living together and are members of the same family, or they were previously in a relationship but still live together. There is also a requirement it causes a substantial impact on the victim's life and day to day activities. The implication here is that the continued experiences of coercive control described by the men above would not be

included (e.g., harassment, false allegations), this is despite the clear impact this had on their life including (from the CPS list) stopping or affecting socialising, and a physical or mental health deterioration. The results of this study would support a recommendation of an amendment of this law to include situations where there has been an intimate relationship and there continues to be contact (or attempts at contact) and alienating behavior around the parental relationship. It is important that policing and legal professionals are aware of the ways in which ex-partners (both men and women) can continue to manipulate systems and cause additional victimisation.

The impact of this abuse on men's relationships with their children was significant. Parental alienation has a profound effect on both the targeted/alienated parent and their child (e.g., Baker, 2009; Baker & Ben-Ami, 2011). It was clear within the accounts above that these men had experienced withholding of contact, but also this manipulation of the parental relationship that meant many of the men had not seen their children for a significant period of time. Parental Alienation is not currently included within the UK definition of IPV and is not covered by the Coercive Control legislation described above. The findings from this study would support a recommendation that it is encompassed within definition and legislation, and this recommendation is indeed in line with both the academic literature (e.g., Harman et al., 2018) and practitioner recommendations (e.g., ManKind Initiative, 2018). This is critical in tackling this behavior and its impact; as a type of abuse, it does not result solely from the actions of the alienating parent, but also the legal policies that recommend sole custody and exclusive care from one parent (Harman et al., 2018) and the lengthy litigation and family court processes that allow time for manipulation and alienation to occur (Viljoen & Van Rensburg, 2014).

### **Final Thoughts and Conclusion**

The aim of the current study was to explore men's post-separation experiences of abuse and control from female partners. The findings revealed men's experiences involved significant verbal, physical, and emotional aggression within their relationships, and that this often continued after the relationship had broken down. Specifically, they reported their ex-partners' escalation of behavior and the continued attempts to exert control through harassment and manipulation. A significant theme that was seen here was the use of the children in this post-separation abuse. Men reported being alienated from their children by their ex-partners, and often a loss of contact that meant they had not seen their children for months or even years. The impact of these experiences was described as significant with some men living in fear, describing mental health issues, and finding it affected the development of new relationships, in addition to the impact on their relationships with their children for those who were parents.

In the UK, despite the gender-neutral terminology, IPV is positioned under the Violence against Women and Girls strategy (Ministry of Justice, 2018), and framed as a gendered crime. That is, "gender-based violence against women shall mean violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately" (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2018). This gendered policy serves to frame IPV in a way affects the perceptions of the general public and service providers, but also men who experience IPV from a male or female partner. It wrongly implies that IPV is a gendered issue, and further exacerbates the social stereotypes that exist that perpetuate the notion women's violence is trivial, and male victims are not in need of services or intervention. This means services are not available or necessarily equipped to be able to support men; this is either in helping them leave an abusive relationship or supporting them cope with post-separation abuse. Furthermore, the stereotypes and biases that exist within the family court

systems further means men face barriers in maintain contact with their children, or obtaining shared custody. Further research is needed to fully understand men's experiences post-separation and this research must also be used to inform practice.

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