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THE IMPACT OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE & COERCIVE CONTROL ON CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE

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1. UNDERSTANDING COERCIVE CONTROL

Victims' lives and freedoms are seriously limited



- Not all bad behaviour in relationships is the same. To understand it, we must look at the **motivations**, the **patterns of behaviour**, and the **impacts**.
- Coercive control is a severe form of domestic abuse, and it is what we will focus on today.
- Coercive control involves situations where somebody subjects another person/s to **persistent controlling behaviour and makes it clear that standing up for themselves will be punished**, i.e. 'do what I say, or else...'
- Punishment may take many forms, it is not always violence, but it will be something the victim dreads, like cruel verbal putdowns, or hurting loved ones (including pets).
- By repeatedly punishing the victim for non-compliance, the perpetrator hopes to **demoralise and terrorise the victim into permanent submission** (Stark, 2007).

Coercive control is mainly perpetrated by men



- Analysis of the Crime Survey for England and Wales by Andy Myhill (2015) found that, out of a group of women and men who had experienced some kind of domestic abuse, **30% of women** and **6% of men** had experienced domestic abuse severe enough to be called 'coercive control'.
- Research by Michael Johnson and colleagues (2014) in the US found **22% of women** had experienced coercive control from ex-husbands, and **5.4% of men** experienced coercive control from ex-wives.

Perpetrators



- **Charming** at the beginning of the relationship to suck the victim in and gain their commitment
- Can use ‘nice’ ‘romantic’ or ‘contrite’ behaviours from time to time to keep the victim locked into the relationship by giving them hope. But the fact that ‘things are good in the relationship at the moment’ does not mean the abuse is over – it is part of the abuse.
- **Clever** at excusing, justifying and denying their behaviour
- Can present to others as a kind, caring, normal person, but this is deceptive
- May be highly qualified and in a respected job. May be your colleague!
- Often **good at recruiting allies** from among their family, friendship groups, workplaces and communities (and often good at turning professionals involved with the family into their allies)
- Often **make counter-accusations**, such as ‘she’s crazy’ or ‘she’s alienating the kids from me’
- Will use whatever tactics work best to gain and keep control

(Bancroft et al, 2012; Bancroft, 2002, Monk, 2017)

Coercive control is caused by the perpetrator



- Perpetrators tend to be extremely self-centred and often have a highly inflated sense of entitlement: they believe their needs come first and that their partner and children should make pleasing them their priority (Bancroft, 2002).
- Coercive control is **not caused by a ‘toxic relationship’**: it **is caused by** the perpetrator’s deeply held **belief systems, attitudes and expectations**, things that they held before the relationship began.
- The perpetrator’s tendency to coercively control doesn’t disappear when the relationship ends – it remains within the perpetrator.
- Put simply – **the problem is in the perpetrator**, not in the relationship (see Monckton Smith, 2020).



2. IMPACTS ON CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE

Perpetrators harm children



- Research evidence from multiple countries highlights that male coercive control/domestic abuse perpetrators are usually harmful fathers or father-figures

(e.g. Thompson-Walsh et al, 2021; Haselschwerdt et al, 2020; Katz et al, 2020; Humphreys et al, 2019; Mohaupt et al, 2019; Smith and Humphreys, 2019; Heward-Belle, 2016; Overlien, 2013; Bancroft et al, 2012; Harne, 2011)

Perpetrators harm children



- ‘Domestically violent men tend to be hostile, coercive, demanding, and entitled fathers who are likely to have rigid and unreasonable rules, little patience, high expectations, and to use harsh forms of discipline. (Thompson-Walsh, 2021, p. 2)
- Perpetrators have elevated risks of physically, psychologically and sexually abusing and neglecting the children in their care (Heward-Belle, 2016; Bancroft et al, 2012; Harne, 2011)
- Perpetrators may also stalk, threaten and terrorise their children as part of their abuse of ex-partners (Katz et al, 2020)

My research on children and coercive control



- Interviewed 15 mothers and 15 of their children (total: 30)
- Children's ages ranged from 10 to 14 (with the exception of one 20 year old)
- Interviewed 9 girls, 6 boys
- Perpetrators were the children's biological father or step-father
- All interviewees were living in the community and had separated from perpetrators

- See my publication: Katz, Emma. (2016). Beyond the Physical Incident Model: How Children Living with Domestic Violence are Harmed by and Resist Regimes of Coercive Control. *Child Abuse Review*, 25(1), 46-59.
Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281633706_Beyond_the_Physical_Incident_Model_How_Children_Living_with_Domestic_Violence_are_Harmed_By_and_Resist_Regimes_of_Coercive_Control



Findings

Control of time and movement



Perpetrators/fathers demanded high levels of attention from mothers at the expense of children and stopped mothers and children spending time together:

- ‘[My daughter] Leah used to want me to sit and brush her hair – that wasn’t allowed because he’d be jealous. He’d say things like: “You’ve spent enough attention on her, what about my attention?”’ (Marie, mother)
- ‘When Mum was giving me attention he’d tell her to go over to him so she’d have to leave me to play by myself.’ (Shannon, age 10)

Control of time and movement



- Perpetrators'/fathers' coercive control limited the amount of maternal attention children could enjoy, and reduced the opportunities for fun and affection in their homes
- Children described feeling sad, annoyed and angry at these situations

Isolation from the outside world



When perpetrators/fathers controlled mothers' movements outside the home, this severely restricted children's social lives. It prevented children from engaging with wider family, peers and extra-curricular activities:

- 'They [the kids] couldn't have any friends round because he'd kick off or something. Kids' parties were another problem because he'd be accusing me of trying to 'get off' [have sexual relations] with one of the dads, so parties were out the question. We couldn't do any after school clubs because [he insisted] I had to be back by a certain time. Me and the kids weren't allowed to go round to see their grandparents.' (Isobel, mother)

Isolation from the outside world



- The multiple benefits that positive experiences with grandparents, friends or in after-school clubs can have on children's social skills, confidence and development were denied to these children by fathers/step-fathers
- Because of perpetrators'/fathers' behaviour, **many children were living in the same isolated, lonely worlds as their mothers.** This was especially the case for younger children, who were more reliant on mothers to facilitate their access to friend's houses, playgrounds, days out, etc.

Deprivation of resources and imprisonment



Extreme tactics for depriving the family of freedom, independence and resources impacted on children as well as mothers:

- Eloise (mother): ‘He’d tell us we couldn’t touch the food in the fridge, that we weren’t allowed to eat, he’d lock us in the house a lot of the time so we couldn’t get out, he’d unplug the phone...’
- John (aged 20): ‘...He’d take out the power because in the hall we’ve got an old electrical box where you can take things out and that’s it – you’ve got no power...’
- Eloise (mother): ‘...He used to take an element out the central heating so we’d have no heating. He’d lock us in the house and go out. He’d take the modem so John couldn’t do his homework and I couldn’t do my banking on the computer. So we were prisoners in a way.’

Deprivation of resources and imprisonment



These tactics highlight how some perpetrators/fathers directly and purposefully extend their coercive controlling abuse over their children as well as their girlfriend/wife

Constrained behaviour



Many children had very limited freedom to say and do normal, age-appropriate things at home. Children had to constrain their own natural behaviour to comply with perpetrators'/fathers' demands:

- 'When he came home from work he'd want to spend time with them and they were always *his* girls. He used to say to Zoe: 'You're my little angel.' But at the same time they couldn't shout, they couldn't make noise, they couldn't be children around him unless it was on his terms. It was alright if he wanted to play with them, but at other times it was like he wanted them to disappear.' (Lauren, mother)

Constrained behaviour



Perpetrators'/fathers' negative moods could dominate homes to such an extent that children and mothers were prevented from laughing and having fun:

- 'Laughing? – We would have just been told to “shut up”. It was just a completely miserable experience. It was just angry and miserable and grumpy all the time. So there was just no fun in the house, no laughter.' (Marie, mother)

Resisting coercive control



- Both children and mothers engaged in acts of resistance to the coercive control they experienced
- Possibilities for resistance depended on the opportunities that children and mothers had under the particular regimes of coercive control that fathers/father figures imposed
- Resistance often took the form of finding ways to maintain elements of ‘normal life’ and close mother-child relationships when possible

Resisting financial control



- ‘Eloise (mother): We did things together. When we went to the pictures or we went shopping we could just ‘let our hair down’ and do what we wanted to do. We were going to the cinema 2-3 times a week to get out of the house.
- John (aged 20): When we would come back with shopping bags, sometimes we had to hide them...
- Eloise: ...because he would go mad that I’d spent money on John. We used to throw the bags over the hedge...
- John: ...into the garden, so he wouldn’t see them.’

Resisting control of time and movement



- ‘Well, some days he would be out, and me and Mum would watch a movie and have some time together [which he wouldn’t let us do when he was at home]. I used to help cook tea with my mum because I enjoy cooking so we’d, like, help each other.’ (Katie, aged 12)
- ‘On those days when we were alone we would snuggle up on the sofa and watch films together, and we always emotionally supported each other then.’ (Ruby, mother)

Positive impacts of mothers' parenting



- Most mothers tend to do what they can to keep their children as safe and okay as possible (Wendt et al, 2015), though their ability to do this can be limited by the perpetrator's/father's determination to abuse in ways that harm the children, and by the negative impacts the father's abuse is having on the mother (Buchanan, 2018)
- Positive parenting from mothers is a major factor in helping children to cope with domestic abuse (Letourneau et al, 2007)
- 'Mothers are cited more frequently by children who have lived with domestic abuse as their most important source of help than anyone else in their lives... Their relationship with their mother is most children's major support in coping' (Mullender et al, 2002, pp. 210-11)



3. IMPACTS ON CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE AFTER PARENTAL SEPARATION

Post separation coercive control



- Coercive control perpetrators don't tend to respect their partner's decision to end the relationship
- They typically continue in their efforts to control and dominate their partner's life and/or punish them for trying to break free (e.g. Monk and Bowen, 2020; Humphreys et al, 2019; Feresin et al, 2019; Sharp-Jeffs et al, 2018; Elizabeth, 2017; Harne, 2011; Beeble et al, 2007)
- This means that most perpetrators of coercive control **continue to harm their children post-separation**

Researching how children are affected by post-separation coercive control



- I teamed up with researchers at the University of Lapland, Finland
- We compared my data on children and coercive control with data they had gathered in Finland through interviews with Finnish children whose coercively controlling fathers had stalked both them and their mothers post-separation
- In total we drew on interview data with 29 children, 15 in the UK and 14 in Finland
- The key question we asked was: ‘How did the children experience their fathers’/father figures’ post-separation coercive control?’

See our publication: Katz, Emma, Anna Nikupeteri and Merja Laitinen (2020) When Coercive Control Continues to Harm Children: Post-Separation Fathering, Stalking, and Domestic Violence. *Child Abuse Review*, vol. 29, no. 4, pp. 310–324.

Available from: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/car.2611>



Findings

Dangerous fathering



- He used to bring some other men and try to break into the house, and me and my brothers feared for our lives because he used to smack on the doors, and I used to hide. (Vince, child, UK)
- My dad's injunction ran out, he kept turning up at the house... Then he wrote something on the back door, he wrote 'dead bitch', and my mum tried to get it removed before we could see it, but I saw it before it got removed. (Roxie, child, UK)

Dangerous fathering



- Perpetrators' dangerous fathering could make children's and mothers' lives frightening and unpredictable
- Perpetrators'/fathers' actions drastically limited the safe space available to children and mothers, often leaving them 'under siege'
- Dangerous fathering undermined children's emotional and physical security and wellbeing

'Admirable' fathering



- Perpetrators/fathers used 'admirable fathering' as part of their ongoing attempts to control ex-partners
- They often chose to present themselves as admirable fathers to school staff and other parents, wider communities (both online and offline), and professionals
- The persona of the 'admirable' father could include playing the roles of being a caring, committed and/or vulnerable victim father – a father deserving of praise and support
- This appeared to be part of perpetrators' strategies to increase their own power, while further marginalising and weakening their ex-partner

'Admirable' fathering



Finnish siblings described how their father had posed as a victim in need of help who had been wronged by his ex. He broadcast on Facebook that their mother had kidnapped them:

- He had written on Facebook... some kind of missing persons report... that whoever finds us or who knows where we are... something like that... he'll pay ten thousand Euros.
(Marko, child, Finland)
- Yeah... he claimed that our mother had kidnapped us and that there will be a reward for the person who finds us. (Minna, child, Finland)

This had the effect of turning every member of the public into a potential agent of the perpetrator, making these children and their mother more fearful, particularly when out in public

'Admirable' fathering



Some perpetrators directed performances of 'admirable' fathering at their children, for example by claiming to be vulnerable victims:

- [During our weekend visits to him] he'd say 'oh your mum makes me cry, your mum makes me do this stuff; I can't see you because of your mum', he'd just paint such a bad picture of her... he blamed her and us for everything... He said he was on antidepressants because I wasn't seeing him often enough... I felt very small and bad... [After our weekend visit with our father, my sister Zoe] would be off school most Mondays because she felt so ill, she was on the sofa being held by mum and crying... He would call [my sister Zoe] and say 'you're the only one who really loves me'... I was just so drained and I felt like crying all the time. (Grace, child, UK)

'Admirable' fathering



- Here, this father was producing 'guilt trips' in his daughters and refusing to take responsibility for his own emotional state
- By presenting himself as a 'vulnerable victim', he was coercing his daughters into maintaining relationships with him that were harmful to their well-being
- By making his children feel as though they were responsible for his welfare, he was disguising the emotional power he was actually wielding over them

Omnipresent fathering



- Many children experienced their father as a constant negative presence in their post-separation lives, whether they saw him frequently or not
- Fathers' coercive control left the children in a continual state of anxiety and worry, and this harmed their ability to live normal lives

Omnipresent fathering



Children often feared that they might encounter their father and be harmed by him, and this could lead to panic attacks, bedwetting and nightmares. Some children described monitoring their surroundings continuously as a protective strategy:

- I have it so that I check that the doors are locked and windows closed. (Lotta, child, Finland)

Children also sought to increase their own and their mother's security by remaining with her:

- [12 year old] Now sometimes I'll sleep in my mum's bed because I feel more comfortable there and I feel more safe sleeping there. (Bob, child, UK)
- It was sometimes even that we weren't able to go to the school... I didn't want to leave my mum alone for the day. (Roosa, child, Finland)

Post separation coercive control: court files



- My Finnish colleagues and I also explored court cases in Finland pertaining to fathers stalking mothers post-separation
- We analysed the court files of these cases
- Findings again highlighted perpetrators'/fathers' frequent use of children in their campaigns of post-separation coercive control

- See our publication: Nikupeteri, Anna, Emma Katz, and Merja Laitinen. (2021). Coercive Control and Technology-Facilitated Parental Stalking in Children and Young People's Lives. *Journal of Gender-Based Violence*, 5(3), 395-412. Available from: [doi: 10.1332/239868021X16285243258834](https://doi.org/10.1332/239868021X16285243258834).

Findings



- The perpetrator threatened the child in his messages to the mother: ‘If you tell the police then I will change the game so that the child is the one that has to be afraid.’ (Investigation notice, 110)
- In the first summer after our separation when the child was at his place he sent me a message ‘book the church for Sunday because I will probably kill the child today.’ (Minute of hearings, 226)
- During the child’s weekends with the father, and at other times, the perpetrator has, via the child’s phone, threatened to come to his ex-wife’s home and abuse her and her new partner. In the presence of the child he threatened to kill the mother by shooting her, and warned that she and her new partner would be attacked by his friends who have criminal records. The child has said many times to the father that s/he does not like his behaviour but he hasn’t stopped. (Investigation notice, 252)

Findings



- Last summer we were with the woman and her children in an amusement park, and she got messages incessantly. The worst of the messages was that he [perpetrator] threatened to kill himself. He also sent the same kind of messages to the children, putting the blame on the mother for how he was about to do something to himself. (Witness, minute of the hearings, 240)
- The child came to ask me on Friday morning ‘Ugh, why am I receiving these kinds of photos of you?’...The child could not connect the messages to him, because s/he didn’t have his phone number. I looked through the messages and noticed that the sender was the ex-partner. He had previously demanded that I take photos [of a sexual nature] of me and send them to him....Now he has sent these photos and videos to my child. (Minute of hearings, 99)



Conclusions

Conclusions



- Coercive control is a severe form of abuse, and perpetrators of coercive control cause high levels of harm
- Coercive control perpetrating fathers tend to parent their children in negative ways, and subject their children to coercive control in ways that profoundly harm the children's day-to-day experiences of life
- The adult victim separating from the perpetrator is unlikely to be enough to make the children safe, as the perpetrator usually continues their coercive control post-separation
- The problem lies within the perpetrator (usually the children's father or father figure) – tackling the problem means **tackling the perpetrator**, holding them **accountable**, **curbing their ability to continue abusing**, and **helping the adult and child victims to be safe** (really safe, not just safe on paper)

Training opportunities



- I am available to provide bespoke training on domestic abuse/coercive control
- Email me at **katze@hope.ac.uk**

Book coming soon



My book will be published in 2022

Emma Katz

Coercive Control in Children's and Mothers' Lives

Oxford University Press

Emma's previous publications



Email Emma at katze@hope.ac.uk if you want copies

Nikupeteri, Anna, Emma Katz, and Merja Laitinen. (2021). Coercive Control and Technology-Facilitated Parental Stalking in Children and Young People's Lives. *Journal of Gender-Based Violence*. Advanced Online Publication.

Katz, E., Nikupeteri, A. and Laitinen, M. (2020) When Coercive Control Continues to Harm Children: Post-Separation Fathering, Stalking, and Domestic Violence. *Child Abuse Review*, vol. 29, no. 4, pp. 310-324.

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