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## **Naming and defining 'Domestic Violence': lessons from research with violent men**

### **Abstract**

In this paper we draw on data from in depth interviews with men who have used violence and abuse within intimate partner relationships to provide a new lens from which to view the conceptual debates on naming, defining, and understanding 'domestic violence' as well as the policy and practice implications that flow from them. We argue that the reduction of domestic violence to discreet 'incidents' supports and maintains how men themselves talk about their use of violence, and that this in turn overlaps with contentions about the appropriate interventions and responses to domestic violence perpetrators. We revisit Hearn's 1998 work *The Violences of Men*, connecting it to Stark's later concept of coercive control in order to develop and extend understandings of violence through analysis of the words of those that use it. We conclude exploring the implications of these findings for recent legal reform in England and Wales and for policies on how we deal with perpetrators.

### **Key words**

Domestic violence, violent men, definitions, coercive control.

### **Introduction – problematising current understandings of 'domestic violence'**

The question 'what is domestic violence' is one that is strikingly simple to answer on the one hand, yet complicated and contested on the other. It is easy to list various definitions, which

developed organically and were diverse in the 1990s and early 2000s. Now, however, definitions are remarkably similar: in England and Wales<sup>1</sup>, contemporary policy and practice definitions tend to mirror or stay close to the current cross Westminster government policy definition.

Any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive or 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.

The abuse can encompass, but is not limited to: psychological; physical; sexual; financial; emotional.

(HM Government, 2013)

We have written elsewhere about the multiple problems with this text and how it is used, arguing that successive cross-government definitions have disguised, diluted, and distorted the reality of men's violences against women (Kelly & Westmarland, 2014). Of significance here are the words 'incident or pattern' replacing the previous 'any incident', since it continues to fail to address the critique that this wording obscures the reality of intimate partner violence. This was understood and theorised within the refuge movement and early research as an ongoing pattern of behavior – not as one, two, or three isolated 'incidents'. It is precisely the repetition, and the web of various forms of power and control used by perpetrators, which entraps women in abusive relationships (Kirkwood, 1993; Pence & Paymar, 1993). This is not an academic, linguistic quibble – the notion that 'domestic violence' can be broken down into single stand alone 'incidents' has skewed not only knowledge, since any incident counts the same as

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<sup>1</sup> We use England and Wales, rather than the UK, since criminal law and policies on domestic violence are significantly different in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

repetition in prevalence surveys, but also which interventions are deemed appropriate, and who should be prioritised to receive support. The focus for the last decade in England and Wales on 'high risk' cases and short-term risk reduction (Coy & Kelly, 2011; Kelly & Sharp, 2014) sits much more comfortably with an incident based approach than the needs based framing of most specialist domestic violence services.

In this paper we argue that framing domestic violence in terms of incidents – whether in research, policy definitions or practice responses – reflects how violent men describe their behaviour rather than what we know from survivors. What women describe is an ongoing, 'everyday' reality in which much of their behaviour is 'micro-managed' by their abuser: this includes what they wear, where they go and who they see, household management and childcare. None of these are 'incidents', nor would they be considered crimes, and Evan Stark (2007) has argued we should conceptualise intimate partner violence as a pattern of coercive control, a concept that is included in, but is not the overriding framework, of the cross government definition cited above. This problem - the disconnect between the criminal law and the governments' own definition – was been responded to in 2014 with a successful campaign to criminalise coercive control in England and Wales. Our intention here is not to explore this debate, but rather to look at it from a different angle: our question is how does the idea that domestic violence can be understood as discreet 'incidents', especially those which involve physical assault, map onto the way domestic violence perpetrators talk about their behaviours?

We introduce Hearn's theory of 'incidentalism', which was developed through his interviews with violent men in the 1990s and connect it to Stark's later concept of coercive control. After

briefly describing Project Mirabal<sup>2</sup> we present six ways in which the men in our research used the framework of incidentism to excuse, minimise, disavow, and detach themselves from their harmful behaviour. We conclude through showing that one impact of perpetrator programmes is changing how men talk about violence and the implications of our findings.

### **Incident and Prevalence data**

The existing knowledge base on the prevalence of domestic violence in England and Wales comes from the Crime Survey England and Wales (previously the British Crime Survey). The methodology involves asking a large random sample of women and men if they have ever experienced a range of acts ever and within the last 12 months. A positive response to any question means that person has experienced domestic violence according to the government definition presented earlier. This combination of definition and method produces the familiar headline figures that ‘1 in 4 women’ and ‘1 in 6 men’ have experienced domestic violence since the age of 16. These findings are repeated *ad nauseam* – in government documents, in the media, in grant applications, on campaign materials, including those created by voluntary sector women’s organisations. Many are unaware that the numbers refer to ‘any incident’: that a single push, slap, demeaning comment carries the same weight as strangulation and threats to kill. More importantly for our argument, a single incident counts the same in these topline figures as ongoing repeated abuse. How prevalence data is presented and used currently, therefore, conflates forms of violence and abuse, single incidents and repeated patterns, and this conflation leads directly to the contention that women are as violent as men in interpersonal relationships – supporting what is known as the gender symmetry debate

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<sup>2</sup> Project Mirabal is the name of our recent programme of research on domestic violence perpetrator programmes. The project is named after the three Mirabal sisters murdered in Dominican Republic, who became symbols of popular and feminist resistance to violence in South America.

(Johnson, 2006). Previous reports on the survey data (see, for example, Finney, 2006) balanced the topline findings with additional analysis that factored in frequency, injury and fear, revealing much more gender asymmetry in victimisation, reflecting the patterns found in service level data. These analyses are, however, no longer included in the official prevalence figures from the Office for National Statistics (see, for example, ONS 2013).

The consequences of this shift in what we 'know' have been huge, with many arguing now that domestic violence is not gendered, and thus responses to it should not be. In the academic context the debate has been framed in terms of asymmetry/symmetry, with a multitude of publications based almost entirely on prevalence findings, and oversimplifications of feminist analysis (see, for example, the work of Dutton). In terms of policy and practice this de-gendering has had a series of consequences, all of which have marginalised feminist analysis and women's organisations. Harvie and Manzi (2011), for example, undertook longitudinal case studies of local government Crime Reduction Partnerships and their responses to domestic violence. They conclude that the feminist women's empowerment approach had been eclipsed by a crime incident focus, managerialism and what they term a 'perverse equalities' framework, where equality was defined as providing similar levels of support and funding to work with male victims. In the process analysis of domestic violence as a pattern of behaviours involving power and control, based in and reproducing gender inequality, which has underpinned research and interventions for over three decades (see, for example, Kelly, 1987; Pence and Paymar, 1983) is lost. Using an 'any incident' approach with such a broad range of acts could also be seen as 'watering down' how domestic violence is viewed outside of the domestic violence sector, and particularly its seriousness. In a study by Stanley et al (2012) with men in the general population (not specifically domestic violence perpetrators) they were shown the Government definition and many were critical. Of particular relevance here is the

criticism that the definition could be applied to them whenever they had a heated argument with their partner.

Whilst the 1 in 4 figure has been influential in gaining momentum and resources for the domestic violence sector, we nonetheless, need to ask what sits beneath it and whether we need to adapt prevalence research methods and analysis to reflect the conceptual framing of it as a course of conduct, which as the Dobashes, reflecting the practice based knowledge of the women's movement, have consistently pointed out takes behaviour out of context: a context of gender inequality in public and private life (Dobash and Dobash, 1979). Here, gender analysis is not confined to disproportionality in victimisation and offending, but focuses on the gendered context that makes violence possible, and leads to men's behaviour being excused and women made responsible (see also, Jakobsen, 2014).

The failure of the criminal justice system to provide any effective deterrent to domestic violence is now well established, and despite considerable progress in increasing arrests only a minority of cases are prosecuted: Hester (2006) found that attrition rates through the criminal justice system were extremely high. Hester and Westmarland (2006) also argued that the 'pattern' basis of domestic violence did not sit well with the 'incident' approach of the criminal justice system.

Domestic violence involves patterns of violent and abusive behaviour over time rather than individual acts. However, the criminal justice system is primarily concerned with specific incidents and it can therefore be difficult to apply criminal justice approaches in relation to domestic violence (ibid, p35).

### **Listening to men's talk about violence**

The body of feminist research conducted on/with men who use domestic violence is limited, when compared to that which focuses on women survivors. Even less feminist research has considered how men talk about violence. However, the in-depth studies that have been undertaken have found that the criminal law approach of reducing domestic violence to individual 'incidents' – what Hearn (1998) calls 'incidentalism' – reproduces how men talk about their violence: it was a 'one off'; not that 'serious'; not 'really violence'.

In *The Violences of Men* (1998) Jeff Hearn sought to understand 'how men talk about and understand or do not talk about and do not understand their own violence to women' (p. 45). Rather than men's talk about violence simply recounting past events, he suggests that the interviews were both 'much more' and 'much less' than that. Hearn identified four perspectives to understand the way men 'talk violence' (Ibid, p. 60): violence and talk as behaviour; talk as representation of violence as behaviour; talk of violence as text; violence and talk of violence as material/discursive practices. Examples of all of these perspectives were also found in our data.

While the process of listening to women was, and continues to be, a powerful approach, it has increasing limitations, especially given the growing alternative body of work on men and masculinity, which takes men's accounts and lives seriously. However, even within Critical Men's Studies there are anxious voices which suggest that centering men's accounts lets men 'get away with it' (see, for example, Pini and Pease, 2013). Feminist researchers, therefore, face multiple challenges researching men, and specifically researching those men who use violence and are attending perpetrator programmes. There is widespread cynicism, across practice and academia, about these interventions – with men designated perpetrators viewed as inherently untrustworthy persons whose accounts cannot be trusted (Kelly and Westmarland, 2015). We follow Hearn (1998) here, who points out that:



... it is men who dominate the business of violence, and who specialise in violence.

And while women, as the receivers of violence, in some ways know more about the direct effects and experiences of violence than men, men remain the experts in how to do violence and in the doing of violence (ibid. p36).

While earning the label of 'domestic violence perpetrator' carries some layers of stigma, few men are so identified and named. If there is acceptance that domestic violence is widespread, then the men who practice it must also unfortunately be widespread. But most people do not associate going to the supermarket, to the school gates, meeting friends for lunch with the possibility of associating with domestic violence perpetrators.<sup>3</sup> Our communities seem to have many more domestic violence 'victims' than we do 'perpetrators'. Kelly (1987) developed her continuum of sexual violence in a quest to connect the 'horrific' to the 'everyday'. Here we revisit that continuum in relation to domestic violence law, policy and practice. Law and policy and resources are increasingly focused on the extremes – on 'high risk' cases and preventing domestic homicides (Coy and Kelly, 2011; Westmarland, 2011). Yet it is the 'everyday' that sits within the revised definition and recognition of coercive control. This critical concept encompasses the early understandings of domestic violence within the refuge movement and what feminist research has since documented about the myriad forms of controlling behaviour that abusive men deploy. Evan Stark's (2007) *Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life* rekindled analysis of domestic violence as a gendered and gendering process, placing the micro-management of women and children's everyday lives at the centre. Whilst also a critique of incidentalism this book takes the debate further, since it provides an accessible and insightful alternative concept rooted in the experiential reality of survivors.

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<sup>3</sup> There is a parallel process here with family policies and child contact, where in both the violence of fathers is virtually invisible, and where it is acknowledged it is disconnected from their parenting (Hester, 2012).

Understanding how men position themselves within the continuum of violence and coercive control enables us to explore how public policy discourses are, or are not, challenging the routes men use to disavow their behaviour. Hearn (1998) notes that men seek to represent themselves as 'not violent men', their actions as being 'out of character': the violence is presented as 'incidental' to their lives.

The word 'incident' is itself a convenient reduction, fitting neatly into, and perhaps between, several discourses, including those of medicine, law and social work [...] In each case, there is a possible circumspection of the violence' (Ibid, p85).

This allows men to disconnect the 'incident' from the context in took place in; it becomes the exception to the non-violent 'rule'. This strategy of self-representation has also been documented with respect to convicted rapists in the US (Scully, 1990), suggesting this may form a key element in how men talk about their violence towards women.

An important part of learning to rape includes the mastery of a vocabulary that can be used to explain sexual violence against women in socially acceptable terms (Ibid, p 98).

### **Project Mirabal**

This paper is part of a wider programme of research into domestic violence perpetrators in the UK which considers what domestic violence perpetrator programmes add to a coordinated community response (Kelly and Westmarland, 2015). With an ambition to innovate in methodology, we linked a pilot study (see Westmarland, Kelly and Chalder-Mills, 2010 for more detailed discussion) on what counted as success to four groups of stakeholders (women

survivors, men on programmes, programme staff and commissioners) with Stark's contention that coercive control concerns not just women's *safety* but also their *freedom*. This resulted in six measures of success for perpetrator programmes:

- improved relationship based on respect and effective communication;
- expanded 'space for action' for women;
- safety and freedom from violence and abuse;
- safe, positive and shared parenting;
- enhanced awareness of self and others for men;
- safer, healthier childhoods.

In previous perpetrator programme studies it has usually been only the third measure that is addressed. Also in contrast to other studies we gathered both quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative survey was collected five times, the fifth wave being 12 months after men began programmes, and compared a series of indicators for the six measures for a group of women whose partners had been on a perpetrator programme with a group of women whose partners had not. The in depth interviews were conducted with 64 men, 48 women partners and ex partners near the beginning (Time 1) and end (Time 2) of the programme. It is these interviews with men which are drawn on in this paper. In the interviews the measures of success were explored in detail, with respect to a specific example chosen by the interviewee: they were asked to talk about actions and reactions, what was said, thoughts and feelings at the time and later.

The participants were self-selecting, mostly white British, in (or previously been in) heterosexual relationships – reflecting the current profile of men attending programmes. All

were drawn from 11 Respect accredited<sup>4</sup> 'community based' domestic violence perpetrator programmes (DVPPs) in England, Scotland and Wales. These programmes are not linked to the criminal justice system, where work with perpetrators is conducted 'in house' by the probation service (see Phillips, Kelly and Westmarland, 2013 for a Project Mirabal briefing paper on the history of perpetrator work in the UK). At the time of writing the community based programmes receive most referrals from Children's Services, CAFCASS (Child and Family Court Advisory and Support Service) linked to disputed child contact cases, and local authorities. Whilst some referral routes mean that it is mostly working class men who attend, the CAFCASS route is less class based. Ethical approval was granted by the London Metropolitan University Research Ethics Review Board.

The data we draw on here comes specifically from men's responses to questions about the violence and abuse measure. This one question, (plus follow ups) across the two interviews, generated 235 pages of data. Transcripts were uploaded into NVivo and also worked with as printed documents. In NVivo the traditional method of coding for themes was undertaken. Since we were interested in change between Time 1 and Time 2, each man's interviews were read alongside the other to code for change, or lack of it. We also created a code for 'got worse', in order to test the oft cited view that DVPPs merely make men more subtle abusers. It was in the process of working across the two interviews that changes in how men talk about violence became an important theme.

## **Findings**

There were a range of different and often overlapping narratives that the men relied on to develop their own personal 'vocabulary of explanation' (drawing on Mills, 1940). The most

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<sup>4</sup> Respect is the UK membership organisation for work with domestic violence perpetrators, male victims and young people. The 'Respect Standard' sets out the requirements good quality domestic violence perpetrator services need to meet to become accredited.

consistent at Time 1 involved referring to a single incident, indeed many used the terms ‘the incident’ or ‘the episode’, which always had as its referent a specific event that had come to the attention of the police and/or precipitated a separation (sometimes temporary) with their partner. This was in turn linked to an invocation of ‘hitting’ or beating’ as constituting ‘real violence’, which served as a distinction through which they placed themselves outside the category of violent men. One of the most common ways in which men minimised their violence was linguistically - through the repeated use of the word ‘just’, and by dropping in references to what they considered more serious violence, which again reflects the incidentalism within the current cross-government definition. When asked to provide typical examples, especially at Time 1, men often first claimed they ‘couldn’t remember’ (see also, Blacklock, 2001), and/or blamed women, children, or objects for getting in their way. Other strategies included comparisons – their behaviour was not as bad as others and using ‘we’ rather than ‘I’. We expand on each of these strategies below. That our methodological approach asked for detailed descriptions, from a range of vantage points, meant that alongside these strategies were accounts which acknowledged the fear they had created through ‘the look’ (of rage/sanction, embodying the threat of violence), the power of hitting the wall or breaking the door, the pushing past when she was ‘in the way’.

In the next sections we present some of the common ways in which men talked about their violence. We then show how listening to, and analysing how, men talk can help us advance theory and practice: many were aware of their behaviour and its impact, yet still chose to do it, safe in the knowledge that it was only ‘the incident’ – ‘the horrific’ – that there would be interest in. Disconnecting ‘the horrific’ from ‘the everyday’ (Kelly, 1987) – which is what the criminal justice system currently does – allows incidentalism to rule, and for excuses, such as *just* ‘snapping’, ‘losing it’, to go unchallenged.

### ***'The incident' talk***

Men's invocation of 'the incident' was used to suggest this was a one-off, something 'out of character', and thus not part of a pattern of behaviour. Both Aiden<sup>5</sup> and Giles explicitly refer to 'an incident' or 'the incident', a physical assault amidst an otherwise verbally abusive relationship (note also the references to the "I" to 'we" themes which are discussed later).

I think it was more verbal. There was an incident once with a knife (Aidan, Time 1).

Before the incident in the summer there'd never really been... there'd been like name-calling to each other but there'd never been actual like kicking shit out of each other, that never took place (Giles, Time 1).

We present Gregory's narrative about his 'four incidents' in detail because of the extreme levels of violence that are 'dropped in' – referred to in passing as if they are not that significant (for example, a broken rib).

I think there's been in – in all, I think there were four incidents. The first – well in fact actually I would say more on her part, when she disagreed – well, like I said, we used to argue and shout, and she probably slapped me and punched me, did several things. I didn't react. I've had my glasses broken once, but again I didn't react, I didn't take any reaction against that. But I think probably there have been four incidents. The first one where I pushed her against the door, the second one I pushed her onto the ground: we were running on the heath once and again it was – it was something to do with my

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<sup>5</sup> All participants' names have been changed.

daughter, that particular argument. And the third one, quite a physical one, where I did end up having a physical fight with her, dragging her around the room, and I punched her in the back and broke her rib. Which was very unfortunate. It was not intentional to do that, but I did do that. And then the fourth one, very similar to the third one to be honest, a physical fight, ended up in tears, and to be honest I'm very regretful on my part, I've got to say, because I don't feel that's right, and I still look back on that with big regret, and probably one of the biggest regrets of my life, to be honest (Gregory, Time 1).

Gregory's talk here works to present a series of events in which his violence becomes progressively more serious and results in significant injuries, as disconnected incidents: in his account these were fights which were 'unfortunate', in which pushing her to the ground and punching her in the back are presented as unintended. He thus disavows both his actions and their consequences.

Incident talk, as illustrated by these examples, provides a space in which it is possible for men to avoid taking responsibility for the ways they see and treat their partners. There is no recurring pattern, no power and control, and very little impact, beyond the occasional physical injury, which was never intended and always regretted. Defining and speaking about domestic violence in terms of incidents, which the current government definition and many policies do, reproduces and reinforces the discourse of perpetrators and allows men to ask, as Dominic does, whether his anger is 'really domestic abuse' whether it is 'such a big issue'.

I know I've shouted at her in the past, I know I get annoyed at her, I know I lose my temper with her... but I always look at it and just say "is it such a big issue, is it domestic abuse?" (Dominic, Time 1).

### *The work of 'just'*

Men's talk about violence, especially at Time 1, was replete with the word 'just', which served to linguistically minimise and downplay their violence and its impacts (see also Hearn, 1998). In 235 A4 pages of data on the violence and abuse questions the word 'just' was used over a thousand times (n=1101). In the two examples below, the repetition of the word underscores the minimising work it is doing linguistically.

It's more name calling... like calling her a 'stupid bitch' or 'psycho' **just** things like that, **just**... anything I know would get to .... It was **just** frustration... I was **just** letting out for some frustration - punching the wall (Desmond, Time 1).

To be fair I don't think I have ever been violent towards L. In arguments and that I've maybe walked ... tried to get out of a room and she's standing in my way and I've literally ... **just** walked almost through her basically and not let her get in my way, **just** pushed past basically. Not pushing her physically with my hands or anything... **just** squeezing past if you know what I mean? (Emil, Time 1).

In the second excerpt from Emil below, he uses 'just' once, but here it served to distinguish his violence from that of other men, which he regarded as more serious and which should be considered 'real' domestic violence.



Well, heated arguments, I'd call her names, I'd basically **just** be horrible to her. So I mean be – well, like I say, aggressive, I'd swear at her, I'd take the piss out of her to make her feel small, make her feel bad, and that's basically about it (Emil, Time 1).

In Emil's case, what it is 'just... basically about', encapsulates how Stark (2007) understands coercive control: diminishing women, making them feel small by exercising power over them. It is the repetition of this, over and over, that women report as key to decreasing their sense of self and what (Kelly, 2011) has termed 'space for action'.

### ***Refusing to remember***

Hearn (1998) and Blacklock (2001) both note that some men claim not to remember the violence they inflict. In our data, and again most obviously at Time 1, there were frequent references to not being able to remember why arguments had started, or what led up to men's abusive and assaultive behaviour: 'I can't really remember much about it ... I can't even remember what we were arguing about' (Sebastian, Time 1). In the minority of cases where men had very serious alcohol or drugs misuse problems, such claims to memory loss might be authentic. But in many cases it appeared that what men cast out from memory was the detail of what they had they done, the harms they had inflicted. In the example below, Owen had closed the curtains in the bedroom before attempting to kill his partner, note his emphasis on how vague his recollections are of what happened.

She said, 'This is over - the relationship is over'. I can't remember what I said afterwards, she probably could. I said something, erm – 'I'm gonna kill you'. I said that to her, and she thought I was joking or being flippant. And I don't remember myself saying that. I vaguely remember pulling the curtains, and, she was on the bed. I knelt on top of her and she's just looking at me angrily, thinking what am I gonna do now?

And she didn't know, it came out of the blue, I put my hands around her throat and she still thought I was playing a game. I don't remember doing that, I just leant over like that. And I started like doing that, and then squeezing, and then after so many seconds, we can't – she can't remember, I can't remember – I pulled away. And I looked at her, I think it's - she mentioned she was like (*makes choking sounds*), that's when I stopped (Owen, Time 1).

While Owen claims to not to remember, he actually provides an account of deliberate actions, including strangulation to the point of choking his partner. He is able to describe how his partner was responding and the point at which he 'stopped'. This form of men's talk is an explicit disavowal of the seriousness of their behaviour, its meanings and impacts.

### ***Getting in his way***

Some men minimised their violence by blaming people or objects for 'getting in his way', by which they meant that any harm or damage was, at least in part, not their responsibility. In Jasper and Barry's talk below, the fact that their partner had part of their body in the doorway did not limit their actions.

We'd had an argument, and it got fairly heated. She wanted to leave, I wanted to try and sort it out. She tried to go out the kitchen door, and I grabbed her - just to pull her back in, and then the kitchen door closed on her arm, accidentally. And it gave her a bruise because of what I'd done. I didn't sort of slam it on her, but because of what I'd done, it did close on her arm (Jasper, Time 1).

Jasper's partner was not 'getting in his way' to begin with, she was in fact attempting to get away from him. It is his determination to control the interaction, to have the last word, which results in physical harm. 'Grabbing' and 'pushing' are also recurring words in men's accounts, which interestingly also feature in questions in prevalence studies.

There's two incidents, one with the mobile phone and me slamming her in the door. I mean she was following me, I slammed the door behind me. She was in it and she still tried coming, so I tried to just shut the door with her in it (Barry, Time 1).

In Barry's talk, we see a number of the minimisation techniques combined: the idea that his violence was confined to two discreet 'incidents' and he 'just' shut the door with her in it.

### ***I have never hit her***

A number of men sought to distance themselves from the categories of both 'domestic violence' and perpetrator through a claim that there had been minimal use of direct physical violence. Of particular relevance here were other, 'more violent' men: Seth, compares his behaviour to the far worse violence he suffered as a child, with victim status according him authority on what domestic violence 'is'.

I've got a history longer than your arm of domestic violence, but it's all between me and my stepfather. Pretty much he battered the fuck out of me and I hit an age where I wasn't taking it no more [...] yeah, that's pretty most of – the only trouble - I've ever had is me and my stepfather. I've only got one criminal conviction, and that's because of my stepfather. So it's like – domestic violence, I know what domestic violence is, and obviously to me domestic violence is getting beat the shit out of by a 23-stone ex-doorman, it's not shouting at each other and ranting and raving (Seth, Time 1).

For Sebastian, the point of comparison was with his partner's ex-husband who was also violent towards her. This man's violence became part of Sebastian's vocabulary of explanation, since it explains why the woman had been so scared after he had pulled her by her arm and grabbed her hand to prevent her from walking away.

... when I'm like that, she is scared... she's quite often said to some people the way I've been might not be so bad, but because of the violence that she's experienced with her ex husband, her first husband, to her it's like a hundred times worse ... And, I dunno, I suppose sometimes she'd play on that (Sebastian, Time 1).

In Kelly's (1987) terms, Sebastian did the 'everyday', but this could be minimised by comparison to another men's use of the 'horrific'. The social and political context that allows ongoing everyday abuse to be defined as part of everyday life acted as the backdrop to explaining away his violence. He also fails to acknowledge that knowing about her previous experience could/should have acted as a break on how he behaved.

### ***The invocation of 'we'***

It is not our intention to suggest that women never use violence in interpersonal relationships, indeed a number of women in our study reported doing so in their interviews, but that is not the topic of this paper. Rather what is highlighted here is how men diffused responsibility by turning 'I' into 'we', and by focusing more on their partner's use of violence than their own. Hearn talks about this in terms of invoking 'reciprocity'.

When Brendan was asked about the violence and abuse he had used before the programme started, he skimmed over his own use of violence, gave more examples of her violence, used

the term 'we'd' in terms of pushing and shoving and explained all of his other violence as restraint, necessary to protect himself.

The glass was the biggest thing... that was like the biggest thing I'd ever done... we'd had... pushing and shoving, I'd never struck her, ever... a lot of it was restraining for my safety as well a couple of times as well I'd been attacked, one of them I got pierced by a screw driver and cut... and grabbing hold of her and restraining her... most of it was... it was in fact the restraining of it. The glass incident was the, certainly the most violent and the angriest that I'd ever been. Inside I just felt... I'd never felt like that before... but as in terms of... of actual violence it was restraints, it was always restraining (Brendan, Time 1).

The 'restraining of it' here could refer to the woman, or that his actions were in fact limiting violence. Notice how little he actually reveals about 'the glass incident' and his insistence that he had 'never struck her' though he talks of pushing and shoving her in the previous sentence.

Fred also turned the question into being about more than her (probable) use of violence, saying that when he'd restrained his partner that was the only physical violence 'we' had had.

If I kept on and on, and if I didn't used to go home, she used to react then, she'd probably turn round and throw something at me or hit me. Then, of course, I've restrained her then and tell her to calm down. And that's the only physical violence we had really, in our relationship. (Fred, Time 2)

The use of 'of course' here serves to suggest to the listener that the use of restraint was entirely reasonable, and to be expected in such a context.

### **But then again...**

If we had stayed with men's talk, with asking them only about what they had done the story would end here. But there were additional questions, which revealed that something more complex. In response to a question 'how safe do you think she felt' many men admitted that their partners were very fearful, an acknowledgement which sat uneasily with accounts of single or very few incidents. In other places in the interviews, even at Time 1, a number were aware of their own motivations – to control/manipulate/ dominate – and the harms that they were inflicting. So, whilst some men - particularly those where women used violence back or who argued back – had difficulty accepting that their partner felt any fear of them, other men certainly 'knew'. For example, Dexter originally answered the question about an example where he had used violence or abuse before he had started the programme with a dismissal, after a follow up question he admitted he knew the likely impact of his behaviour.

Dexter: No the only abuse I have used is verbal.

Interviewer: We've talked quite a bit about some of the verbal abuse. Would you say you were aggressive as well?

Dexter: Oh yeah, my face is all screwed up and threatening. She's most probably shitting herself (Dexter, Time 1).

It is these facial expressions which we have termed 'the look', a look that communicates menace and threat. Likewise, Bart following a discussion of his 'one time' violence knew that the 'sinister threat of something bad' would sometimes be 'more effective' a strategy.

... as I said, I've never, apart from that one time, I've never been violent to her. I may have snarled at her or intimidated her, with my face and my body language and looks and stuff, but specific instances, no I couldn't give you them. But I know that I have done that quite a lot of times, where there's the threat of violence, or the sinister threat of something bad might happen has been more effective than – than violence itself (Bart, Time 1).

Desmond used the fact that he knew whether he was going to hit his partner or not as a way of keeping her scared when he was angry.

Yes... and she would say things like that she was scared of us when I was like angry and things like that and I'd say to her 'Well that's not the same as us hitting you' and she would say 'Yes but I'm worried if you do'. 'Yes, but I'm not going to' [Laugh] (Desmond, Time 1).

### **Beyond incidentalism**

Drawing on data from men who have used violence we have shown that framing domestic violence in terms of incidents – whether in research, policy definitions or practice responses – is to adopt the talk of abusive men which serves not only to minimise domestic violence, but also explain it in ways that disconnect it from gender, power and control. In the final report for Project Mirabal (Kelly and Westmarland, 2015) we show how the careful work done in Respect accredited DVPPs resulted in a shift in how most men talked about violence. Rather than the hesitant, reluctant engagements that we have documented here, at Time 2 many men understood that their behaviour was not incidents, and that violence was more than physical assaults.

There's so many things in controlling behaviour, I mean there's physical control, there's mental control... I wanted things to be and to suit me (Gregory, Time 2).

When I first spoke to you... I'd say 'It was only a push' but ... I've learnt a push is still violence... it's not just me a lot of the others who go like 'Oh well I only push, I only pushed her. Oh I only pushed her to get out the door' or whatever. But I've learnt on the course a push is still like as bad as a punch or a slap or whatever (Felix, Time 2).

Both Gregory and Felix had learnt to understand their violence differently, to recognise its intentionality and in the process to move away from incidentalism. This is part of the contribution of effective DVPPs, that they work with men to recognise coercive control, the multiple, subtle ways in which they intimidated, demeaned and asserted power over their partners.

### **The implications for policy and practice**

The concept of coercive control (Stark, 2007) emerged out of accounts by women of living with domestic violence, rooted in recognition of it as a course of conduct: it is precisely its everydayness that narrows the victims 'space for action', their freedom to be and think without reference to the potential for abuse. We argue that seeing survivors as someone who is being controlled, rather than abused, may enable practitioners and informal network members to better understand the dynamics of intimate partner violence, to not expect that they 'should just leave'.



Prevalence research requires the creation of a methodology which can make clear distinctions between what is included and excluded within a set of analytic categories, and in crime victimisation surveys this has always been organised around documenting 'incidents'. This has been most strongly developed with respect to domestic violence (European Union, 2010), which is arguably the least amenable to this approach. If domestic violence is quintessentially a course of conduct, measuring it as 'incidents' of crime fails to capture its heart and reality: what is measured counts, and not counting means the everydayness of violence is again hidden, minimised and trivialised. There are profound challenges here for the next generation of survey instruments if they are not to continue to produce 'false equality' statistics. In the meantime the debate about how domestic violence should be defined in law and policy needs to move beyond incidentalism.

The recent decision by the Westminster government to criminalise coercive control was an opportunity to do precisely this, an opportunity that was missed. In an amendment to the Serious Crime Bill, a new offence of coercive and controlling behaviour was introduced. The section of the 2015 Act is:

A person (A) commits an offence if—

- (a) A repeatedly or continuously engages in behaviour towards another person (B) that is controlling or coercive,
- (b) at the time of the behaviour, A and B are personally connected,
- (c) the behaviour has a serious effect on B, and
- (d) A knows or ought to know that the behaviour will have a serious effect on B<sup>6</sup>.

Here again we see the conflation of intimate partner violence and family violence, and a complex formulation which will require three levels of evidence: a pattern of behaviour, that has 'serious effect' and which the person knows will have this effect. The law has not yet been

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2015/9/section/76/enacted>.

implemented and there are widespread concerns that it may not deliver the hoped for shifts in understanding. Had the government chosen to create an offence of intimate partner violence, understood as a course of conduct rooted in coercive control, we would have had the potential to change the perceptions of professionals and the wider public, including perpetrators and victims. Instead the space for continuing to focus on incidents – the very same way that men represent their abuse - remains.

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