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'Six of One': Conflict vs Control in the Policing of Intimate Partner Violence.

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Abstract

Challenging the historical attitude that intimate partner violence (IPV) is not police business has been identified as key to effective police response. This historical attitude draws on the wider cultural assumption that IPV is situational and based on interpersonal conflict - a belief compounded by media coverage and certain theoretical approaches. The coercive control model counters this view, framing the majority of IPV as a power differential established through a deliberate pattern of threat and control. Coercive and controlling behaviour (CCB) was criminalised in England and Wales in the Serious Crime Act 2015. The offence describes a *pattern* of behaviour - rather than the *discrete incidents*, as they are typically framed by police processes - and subverts deeply ingrained beliefs about the causes of IPV. This qualitative research project draws on in-depth interviews with officers and victim-survivors in a force in the north of England. Critical discourse analysis examines police attitudes and culture as embedded within the wider context. A key finding is that police response officers commonly approach IPV as situational and arising from mutual conflict rather than investigating for evidence of CCB. The lack of nuanced understanding of control mechanisms and their effects often leads to exasperation with repeat callers and failure to 'dig deeper'. However, officers who recognise the subtleties of CCB contribute to an empowering effect on victim-survivors, an outcome not formally recognised by policing processes. To equip officers for effective and supportive response, officer development should address the embedded assumption of conflict and focus on CCB as underlying the majority of IPV rather than existing as a distinct offence.

Keywords: coercive and controlling behaviour; intimate partner violence; critical discourse analysis

Acknowledgements

Introduction

Over recent decades in the UK, police have been given increasing responsibility in relation to intimate partner violence (IPV). Despite significant inertia in police response (HMIC 2014, 2015) and a historical attitude that 'domestic matters' should not take up police time (Hoyle 1998, Bowling *et al*. 2019), IPV has been increasingly prioritised in national and local force policy (HMRCFRS 2017, 2019) with a focus on response officers at operating at street level (Davies and Barlow, 2024). Section 76 of the Serious Crime Act 2015 broadened the police remit regarding IPV in England and Wales by introducing coercive and controlling behaviour (CCB) to the legislative framework. The offence of CCB reflects decades of academic research and practitioner advocacy highlighting IPV as frequently embedded within a pattern of ongoing abuse and imbalance of power, rather than occurring episodically (Stark 2007, 2010). Since the introduction of Section 76, police responses to IPV in this jurisdiction remain inconsistent and frequently inadequate (HMRCFRS 2017, 2019, Brennan *et al*. 2019, Barlow *et al*. 2020, Wydall and Zerk 2020, Davies and Barlow 2024). This paper will argue that this is because police officers as individuals are embedded in a cultural context of 'discursive struggle' (Fairclough 2015), in which historically dominant beliefs about intimate relationships and IPV persist both in the policing environment and in the wider culture, even as they are challenged by victim-survivor accounts of CCB. Thus, despite the provision of police training on IPV/CCB, officers remain inclined to individual variations in perception, assumptions and attitude, dependent on their background (Myhill 2019, Brennan *et al.* 2021).

Current understanding of CCB, broadly defined as a deliberate, systematic and harmful pattern of threat and control within an intimate relationship (Stark 2007, Barlow and Walklate 2021), owes much to the refuge movement in the UK and US. Driven by feminist activists, volunteer-led refuges for victims of domestic violence began to spring up in the early 1970s and their advocacy brought previously unheard experiences of IPV into public discourse, including narratives of IPV as CCB (Dobash and Dobash 1992, Mooney 2000, Stark 2007).

Researchers and advocates at the time identified police as critical to challenging traditional acceptance of IPV (Schechter 1982, Stanko 1985, Dobash and Dobash 1992). This was not only for their function as gatekeepers to criminal justice, but for their power to reproduce or disrupt cultural norms (Schechter 1982, Stanko 1985, Brennan *et al*. 2019). Since the refuge movement began, five decades of continued grassroots activism have led to symbolic changes in UK legislation, thus transforming police policy and practice (Myhill 2019, Davies and Barlow 2024). Latterly, the implementation of Section 76 has presented challenges for response officers (Brennan *et al*. 2019, HMRCFRS 2019, Barlow *et al*. 2020, Davies and Barlow 2024), especially since it challenges police systems which respond to 'incidents' (Barlow *et al*. 2020, Myhill *et al*. 2023), yet it provides the opportunity for life-changing encounters for victim-survivors.

With few exceptions (Myhill 2019, and Barlow and Whittle 2019, for example) recent research on the policing of IPV tends to focus on 'outcomes' data such as arrest rates and convictions (Barlow *et al*. 2020, Brennan and Myhill 2021, Brennan *et al.* 2021). These data offer limited insights into officer interactions and whether they recognise patterns of CCB as distinct from episodic, conflict-based IPV. While there is some analysis of risk assessment (Myhill and Hohl 2019, Black and Lumsden 2020) and police records (Barlow *et al*. 2020), there remains a gap in in-depth analysis of interactions between response officers and the public in their response to IPV/CCB (Davies and Barlow 2024). Thus, the current study aims to explore decision-making and understanding in officer interactions with victim-survivors. This research explores the narratives that shape cultural perception of CCB, and the extent to which these narratives impact on officer interactions with victim-survivors both in terms of access to 'traditional' criminal justice outcomes and the potentially transformative experience of being heard and validated (McGlynn and Westmarland 2019).

To explore these interactions, a critical realist approach - which describes the social world as constructed through social interaction (Harré 1994, Burr 2003) - guides the organisation of the work and connects the findings to existing knowledge (Collins and Stockton 2018). This approach considers the positionality of officers as individual social agents, not only within their occupational context but within the wider cultural environment, interacting with social realities as constructed through discourse[1], (Fairclough 2013, 2015). Critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2013, 2015) is selected for its focus on language as a mechanism of social interaction and social construction, and thus of power. The analysis focuses on two conflicting discursive constructions, the historically dominant discourse of abusive and controlling behaviours as 'normal' relationship dynamics versus the counter CCB discourse of abuse as a calculated pattern of behaviours which establish and sustain a power differential within the relationship (Monckton Smith 2019).

Findings highlight the persistence of historically dominant discourse in officer talk, even though officers are trained in, and aware of, the counter CCB discourse (Brennan *et al*. 2021). This paper presents one salient aspect of this 'discursive struggle' (Fairclough 2015), the historical assumption that IPV arises from conflict versus the challenging CCB narrative of power differential and deliberate control.

The inheritance of the conflict narrative

Police occupational culture is often scrutinised, particularly in relation to gender and police responses to gender-based violences[2] (Loftus 2010, Bowling *et al*. 2019, Casey, 2023).

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[1] 'Discourse' is defined as language operating through social interaction which constitutes our social world and relationships (Fairclough 2015). 'Narrative' refers to the stories created through discourse to make sense of our experience (Livholts and Tamboukou, 2015, Plummer 2019).

[2] It is not suggested that all IPV is perpetrated by males against their female partners, but that this dynamic constitutes the majority of IPV incidents.

However, police culture does not exist in isolation, rather it has always been interconnected with its social context (Hoyle 1998, Waddington 1999, Reiner 2017, Myhill 2019). This has proved to be the case over the last five decades, since the concerted effort of the refuge movement began, with evident interrelation between the police and progress in understanding of IPV (Stanko 1985, Dobash and Dobash 1992, Hoyle 1998, Myhill 2019).

Through the 1970s and 80s, the refuge movement brought increased attention to the policing of IPV in the UK and US. Early studies revealed that police at the time endorsed traditional views of the 'domestic', primarily by deferring to the patriarchal jurisdiction of the household (Schechter 1982, Stanko 1985, Edwards 1986, Dobash and Dobash 1992). Officers rarely arrested men who physically assaulted their female partners (Schechter 1982, Edwards 1986) since marital violence was regarded as part of life, especially in the lower social classes where it is associated with limited resources and lack of conflict resolution skills (Dobash and Dobash 1992, Stark 2007).

Just a year before the Matrimonial Proceedings Act 1976 in the UK reinforced the police power to arrest for IPV, the Association of Chief Police Officers stated that the authority of the marital home should be prioritised, and that police time should not be taken up by dealing with domestic matters (Hoyle 1998). Any action taken focused on conflict resolution or mediation to restore peace (Stark 2007, Bowling *et al*. 2019). This highlights the historically dominant narrative of 'domestic violence' as tension between couples, often as justified violence to control a disobedient female partner (Schechter 1982, Edwards 1986, Dobash and Dobash 1992, Mooney 2000). Male violence against women, especially in the domestic setting, was not considered 'real crime' (Stanko 1985, Bowling *et al*. 2019) precisely because it was viewed as interpersonal conflict.

The narrative of IPV as conflict is prevalent in the UK cultural context, where this research is situated. Media portrayals of 'domestic violence' often frame IPV as conflict-

based (Monckton Smith 2012, Gillespie *et al.* 2013, Easteal *et al.* 2015, Lloyd and Ramon 2017). Academic work such as Straus's Conflict Tactics Scale, which insists that IPV arises from a lack of conflict resolution skills (Straus 2011, 2012), continues to be influential. Straus asserts that the family home is typically a violent space where conflict is often resolved through the use of 'ordinary' violence, including "slapping, shoving and throwing things at a partner" (Straus 2011, p.279). This framing of IPV as conflict resolution does not consider a context of CCB within the relationship, characterised by an imbalance of power (Myhill 2017, Stark 2010), nor does it acknowledge violent resistance to abusive dynamics (Johnson 2008, Stark 2010).

The dominant discourse of IPV as mutual conflict is challenged by the 'coercive control' counter discourse (Stark 2007, Monckton Smith 2019, Barlow and Walklate 2021), which is informed by victim-survivor experiences.

The rise of the coercive control narrative

The refuge movement initiated dramatic improvements in cultural understanding of IPV by amplifying victim-survivor experiences of abuse and countering the traditional acceptance of IPV as provoked and justified violences (Schechter 1982, Dobash and Dobash 1992). Those working closely with victim-survivors and perpetrators describe IPV as most frequently CCB - a pattern of calculated oppression within the intimate relationship rather than spontaneous incidents of violence (Hearn 1998, Bancroft 2002, Stark 2007, Miller 2018). Far from the traditional view of mutual family conflict, or the erosion of a 'romance' due to external factors or stressors (Straus 2011, Monckton Smith 2012), CCB describes a power imbalance, deliberately established through a grooming process in the early stages of a relationship (Stark 2007). CCB is a constellation of strategies including financial, economic, emotional and psychological abuses, stalking and surveillance, criminal damage, threats of violence and

sexual coercion (Stark 2007, Barlow and Walklate 2021). There is some debate over whether physical assault should be included in the legislative description of CCB (Barlow and Walklate 2021), however key practitioners and academics typically describe it as part of the pattern of threat of consequences associated with CCB (Hearne 1999, Stark 2007, Miller, 2019, Wydall and Zerk 2020).

It has been recognised for many decades by advocates that victim-survivors are usually resistant to their partner's abuse (Schechter 1982, Stanko 1985), not weak or submissive as is often assumed (Christie 1986, Stark 2007). Resistance can appear to observers as provocation or as 'giving as good as they get' (Hester 2012, Miller 2018). The effects on the victim of emotional and psychological abuse can likewise be perceived as conflict (O'Leary 2001). Without nuanced understanding of the impact of CCB on victim-survivors, the historical narrative of conflict is sustained.

In England and Wales, section 76 of the Serious Crime Act 2015 highlights CCB as a *pattern* of behaviour rather than the discrete *incidents* of violence, which poses a significant challenge to police systems and procedures (Kelly and Westmarland 2016, Brennan *et al*. 2019, Stark and Hester 2019, Barlow *et al*. 2020, Myhill *et al*. 2023). Section 76, and the later development in the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, gives the police responsibility to respond to more than acts of physical violence and often to subtle forms of abuse (Wiener 2017). Here is where the blurred line between the 'normal' and the 'abusive' intimate relationship exists, leaving room for officer discretion in decision making on CCB (Barlow and Walklate 2020). Officer perceptions of IPV/CCB thus impact on retributive criminal justice response to IPV perpetrators. Moreover, the police hold significant symbolic power in reproducing - or disrupting - social order in their interactions (Ericson 1982, Brennan *et al*. 2019). Therefore, a police presence which is grounded in sophisticated understanding of the dynamics and

strategies of CCB has the power to challenge the violences traditionally accepted in intimate relationships.

Policing coercive control

Dramatic changes have been made in the police response to IPV over recent decades, yet the transition to recognising CCB as a *pattern* of behaviour distinct from *episodes* of 'situational' violence has presented challenges to officers (Barlow *et al*. 2020, Barlow and Walklate 2018, Brennan *et al*. 2019, HMICFRS 2019, Stark and Hester 2019). Often, acts of CCB viewed as individual incidents do not present as harmful or high-risk in the context of police response, especially if they do not involve physical assault (Sharp-Jeffs *et al*. 2018, Stark and Hester 2019). Moreover, they are frequently associated with historically dominant narratives of intimate relationships - such as jealousy (Monckton Smith 2019) - and are thus often 'invisible' to police (Barlow 2022, Brennan *et al*. 2019, Myhill *et al*. 2023). Even following targeted training on CCB, non-physical abuse is often disregarded by officers in the context of restricted time and resources (Brennan *et al*. 2019): police continue to prioritise physical assault over non-physical IPV believing it to be more harmful and higher risk (Barlow and Walklate 2020, Myhill *et al.* 2023).

Distinct from 'situational' violence, the context and cumulative nature of CCB has serious and long-term health impacts (Barlow and Walklate 2021, Sharp-Jeffs *et al*. 2018). Contrary to police perception of risk, victim-survivors often report that physical violence is not the 'worst part' of CCB (Stark 2007, 2010). Stark asserts that victims of discrete incidents of 'situational' violence do not experience the same levels of harm as victims of CCB (Stark 2007, 2010). However, the narrative of IPV as predominantly situational, conflict-based, episodic violence (Johnson 2008) remains dominant. As a result, coercive control is often not recognised and recorded by police (Barlow *et al*. 2020, Brennan *et al*. 2021).

Although officers are undoubtedly called to them, incidents of situational violence are less likely to be reported to police since victims do not generally experience the same levels of risk and fear as those associated with CCB (Johnson 2008, Stark 2007). Detailed examination of police records and risk assessments has found that the majority of 'domestic' incidents are underpinned by a pattern of CCB yet are not recorded as such (Barlow *et al*. 2020, Brennan *et al*. 2021, Myhill and Hohl 2019). Even where it is recognised by those officers with increased awareness, gathering evidence to meet CPS thresholds presents extra challenges and officers thus avoid recording CCB (Barlow 2022, Bishop and Bettinson 2018, Myhill *et al*. 2023).

Despite these challenges, and alongside criticisms of potential harm posed to victim-survivors of the criminal justice and police approach to CCB (Walklate and Fitzgibbon 2021, Wydall and Zerk 2020), the police remain a first attempt at help-seeking for many victim-survivors. However, in a clash with police priorities, many do not seek retributive justice, rather they need to be heard, believed and validated (McGlynn and Westmarland 2019). Thus, individual officers hold power beyond their criminal justice remit, as "agents of social formation" (Fairclough 2013, 2015), with the opportunity to change cultural narrative and empower victim-survivors (Brennan *et al*. 2019).

The current study

This study draws on Fairclough's critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2013, 2015) and takes place at a point of social change: historically dominant and challenging counter narratives are engaged in 'discursive struggle', in which the belief system or ideology previously accepted as truth or common sense is challenged by an alternative narrative (Fairclough 2015). The historically dominant acceptance of IPV as situational, as justified anger or as arising from conflict, is challenged by the CCB discourse of calculated power and

control (Monckton Smith 2019). The police are considered as individuals embedded in their cultural environment rather than operating within a discrete occupational culture (Reiner 2017, Myhill 2019). As such, individual officers are subjected to discourse in the cultural field. This includes their occupational culture, but also social and family background and the wider context of news and media constructions of the social world. The data analysis examines the narratives which officers draw on to inform their interactions with victim-survivors and perpetrators of IPV/CCB, with an emphasis on how these shape identities, experiences and realities.

Methods

Qualitative data were collected as part of a larger study with an average-sized police force in the north of England. The findings presented here draw on 18 in-depth response officer interviews, which were conducted between December 2020 and February 2021, five years on from the introduction of CCB as an offence in Section 76, and just before the Force went through the SafeLives DA Matters training in March 2021.16 in-depth interviews with victim-survivors were conducted between January and May 2022. All the victim-survivors who took part had sought support from the participating force within the nine months following the training. The researcher has background experience of supporting victim-survivors of IPV in the third sector, thus located to explore the phenomenon as 'insider/outsider' (Westmarland and Bows, 2019). Researcher positionality was critical to data-collection and analysis: while familiarity with the object of research served to co-produce rich data with participants (Haraway 1988, Livholts and Tamboukou 2015), clarification of participant meaning during data collection and researcher reflexivity at every stage was essential to creating robust data (Kvale 2007, Gioia *et al*. 2013). The data collection followed the guidelines of the BPS Code of Human Research Ethics (2014).

Ethical approval was sought from the researcher's institution prior to data collection (Ethics Review ID ER25758292).

An abductive approach (Kennedy 2018) was applied to the interview data with officers and victim-survivors. This allowed the researcher to draw on existing theory and literature while leaving space for the data to provide novel insights (Gioia *et al*. 2013). Having established the cultural context of discursive struggle briefly outlined above, the dataset was analysed using critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2013, 2015). Critical discourse analysis focuses on power struggle and social change as it takes place in the discursive field, with an emphasis and how social wrongs might be mitigated (Fairclough 2013, 2015). It draws attention to language as relational and constructive of our social world (Fairclough 2015). Thus, it provides a framework for interrogating the narratives in police and victim-survivor accounts of their interactions, and for considering the impact of these on police response and victim-survivor experience.

Fairclough's analysis of texts aims to expose the use of 'schemata' - mental representations of the world which individuals use to interpret their experiences. Central to Fairclough's approach is ideology: schemata are ideologically dependent and draw on 'members' resources', that is the individual's background and environmental context (Fairclough, 2015). This analysis draws on his concepts of schematic 'frames' - which delineate the entities which populate the world (animate beings, inanimate objects, processes or abstract concepts) - and 'scripts' - which delineate relationships and how subjects behave in their interactions (Fairclough, 2015). This critical discourse analysis focuses on how officers interpret their interactions using the 'frames' of victim, perpetrator and healthy/abusive relationship and the 'scripts' of relationships between intimate partners, and between police and members of the public. The ideological dominant and counter discourses of IPV identified by Monckton Smith (2019) guide the analysis.

Analysis began as the interviews took place, since several narrative patterns emerged during early conversations with the officers, and memos were made, initially by hand, forming a messy, note-booked 'mind map'. Interviews were recorded and transcribed faithfully, and the transcripts were then analysed. Analysis of the dataset involved paying attention to how both vocabulary and grammar were used to frame 'discursive objects' (Fairclough, 2015) such as 'victim', 'perpetrator' and 'IPV'. This was an iterative process: transcripts were initially colour-coded by hand for references to the relevant discursive objects, with attention to the dominant and counter discourses (Monckton Smith, 2019). Each transcript was revisited at least three times to ensure that each interview had been analysed in the light of the emerging results (Kennedy 2018, Livholts and Tamboukou 2015). The colour-coded chunks were then imported to Mindview software, which allowed for the mapping and organisation of frames and associated scripts. It became apparent early in the analysis that officers were drawing on distinct 'member's resources' from their policing environment and from individual backgrounds, and that the discursive struggle between the dominant and counter discourses was salient in officer and victim-survivor talk. This paper focuses on the police narratives, with support from victim-survivor accounts, and highlights one strand of this discursive struggle: the historically dominant framing of IPV as conflict and the counter narrative of CCB as a power differential.

To ensure anonymity, participating officers are referred to as Officer 1, Officer 2 and so on, victim-survivor participants were given pseudonyms during the transcription process.

Findings

The language of conflict in police talk

In discussing their work with IPV, police officers frequently used language which implied or described mutual interpersonal conflict. This reflects the historically dominant narrative of

IPV as arising from lack of conflict resolution skills, the assumption of which potentially overlooks a pattern of CCB. 14 of the 18 response officers interviewed used vocabulary including 'dispute', 'argument', 'stormy relationship' and 'cool/calm down'. The following quote highlights the generalisation and simplification of IPV 'incidents' and echoes the conflict narrative:

> it can be as simple as someone's had a bit too much to drink and they end up
> having, what would be a verbal argument, a physical argument and that may be
> the first time it happens. (Officer 12)

The officer describes the context of their attendance as an 'argument', suggesting mutuality. Use of 'it can be as simple as' and 'a bit too much to drink' minimises the circumstances to suggest that an easy, every-day slip is the catalyst for physical violence. The description of the incident as a 'physical argument' reflects Straus' insistence on physical violences as 'ordinary' conflict tactics in intimate relationships (Straus 2011). The language in this extract exemplifies the displacement of responsibility common across the dataset: the perpetrator is not centralised as the cause of violence - or even mentioned - in this description.

The ease with which violence is perceived to occur within intimate relationships is reiterated in the following extract, where the officer discusses being called out to 'big nice houses':

> well-to-do people … they've got nice jobs kids, they've got everything going for
> them, but then they let themselves down by taking it a step too far … in an
> argument. [3] (Officer 13)

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[3] Ellipses are used for brevity in the extracts where the speaker used hesitation markers such as "erm", fillers such as "you know", or where they used repetition.

The use of 'argument' again assumes a context of mutual conflict and this account illustrates the common misunderstanding that IPV is less likely to occur in households of higher economic status (Dobash and Dobash 1992). The phrase 'everything going for them' betrays an underlying assumption that individuals of higher economic status should have nothing to fall out about, or perhaps that they should have better conflict-resolution skills. The latter is underlined where the officer says they have 'let themselves down', rather than considering an intentional campaign of CCB.

Victim-survivor interviews also describe response officers assuming conflict. One participant described an ongoing pattern of CCB which included emotional manipulation, stalking and harassment, indicators of high-risk abuse (Monckton Smith 2019). After an attempt to destroy her reputation at work she contacted the police and summarised the interaction thus:

> she said because it's a domestic and it's ten of one and two of the other [sic] is how she described it … that it was just tit-for-tat whether or not it would go anywhere … they just said that's a work thing that's up to them to deal with. (Louise)

Louise's interaction with the officer took place after the participating force had undergone specialist CCB training delivered by SafeLives and supported by the College of Policing. The description of the victim-survivor's experiences as 'a domestic', especially since it is followed by the insistence that the matter is not for the police to address, is reminiscent of the early police responses described above. The officer has used the phrase 'tit-for-tat', although the context is possibly confused here. This reduces the victim's report to mutual spatting, with the implication of low-level bickering. The (mistaken) repetition of 'six of one half a dozen of the other' is a clear account of police misunderstanding CCB as conflict.

Reputational damage is often a key and powerful strategy in CCB, with obvious consequences including social isolation, economic hardship and loss of contact with children (Stark 2007, Miller 2018, U.N.H.R.C. 2023). The language used by this officer - as reported by the victim-survivor - shows how the conflict narrative inhibits the understanding of CCB perpetrator strategies, of the impact of these strategies on victim-survivors and of the potential for escalation to fatal violence (Monckton Smith 2019).

Tied in with the historically dominant conflict narrative are assumptions about the causes of IPV which shift responsibility away from the perpetrator, thereby potentially missing opportunities to identify patterns of CCB and for better-targeted police responses.

Perceived causes of conflict

There were two prominent explanations for conflict in intimate relationships in the findings: the natural erosion of harmony within relationships over time and external stressors or triggers such as drugs, alcohol or financial struggles.

The increase of tension and conflict over time was discussed by officers and victim-survivors as a natural or expected timeline for the intimate relationship, reflective of cultural discourse of the 'failed marriage' (Bardsley 2019). This is illustrated by Officer 4 who says, 'I think sometimes it can just happen over time as people get frustrated or, you know fed up with one another for various reasons.' Here the use of 'it can just happen' implies a natural and blameless decline in the relationship, with no responsibility attributed to either party. The lack of detail given in 'for various reasons' suggests that the listener will have pre-existing cultural knowledge of the reasons.

In some officer accounts there is evidence of discursive struggle between the language of CCB, which is evidently salient in the policing environment, and the cultural assumption of decline and conflict in intimate relationships:

I think there's a lot of low-level domestic abuse in- like in the police definition

of domestic abuse- in a lot of relationships have a low-level that- that's in a

normal relationship … you start a relationship and it seems fine and normal and

gradually things happen, but at that point you end up caring for that person. And

arguments are quite normal in relationships … by the time you get into- where

it's violent, or where there's control or any form of abuse it's a bit too late

because you're too drawn in. (Officer 17)

This officer reflects on the difficulty of distinguishing between a 'normal' relationship and a

violent one, with reference to the normality of arguments between partners. In relation to the

'police definition of domestic abuse' - that is to say, legislation and local policy - the officer

sees 'low-level' abuses as difficult to distinguish with a 'normal' relationship dynamic. It

should be noted here that many of the behaviours included in the police and legislative

definitions are communicated verbally, including psychological and emotional abuse, threats

of violence, financial abuse, controlling everyday activities and limiting access to family and

friends. This resonates with victim-survivor Carl's account, in which he describes a range of

controlling behaviours delivered in the disguise of argument, and victim-survivor Louise's

report of police assuming that her partner's reputational damage attempts were part of mutual

conflict. Officer 17's narrative reflects the historical acceptance of verbal violence in

intimate relationships, and thus the difficulty of identifying CCB Most of the officers referred

to non-physical abuses as 'low-level', showing a general misunderstanding of the serious

impact of non-physical abuse. Officer 17 perceives abuse as developing over time, perhaps

the result of relationship decline. This is highlighted where they say, 'by the time… where

there's control or abuse'., This contrasts with the CCB discourse which describes it as

deliberately controlling and abusive from the start (Stark 2007, Crossman and Hardesty

2018).

Officer 17's narrative sits within the expectation of loyalty and longevity, a common theme across all officer interviews. They describe victims as people who are unhappy in their relationships, but who are trapped by the cultural pressure of commitment. This is highlighted by Officer 11:

> It doesn't start like that [abusive], people start off complimentary, nice, loving, offering security, and then once- once they've got them- not trapped, but trapped- once they've got them there, erm that's when it starts just the little things to start with, erm that might make them annoyed- they might not be annoyed just ask them not to do it again and then it just gets worse and worse and worse and it's a spiral into- nobody, I find, starts a relationship with someone who's abusive with them straight away. (Officer 11)

These comments occur within a discussion about the officer's own relationship: many of the officers interviewed referred to personal experiences in drawing distinctions between healthy and abusive relationships. Officer 11 describes the compromises that need to be made in long-term relationships and refers to personal examples to draw a distinction between their own partner asking them not to do something and demands of a CCB perpetrator. They describe a blurred line between compromise and control in relationships but explain that their partner is not controlling because the annoyances are reasonable, and the partner does not get angry or violent about them. In this extract, the officer's hesitations reveal a lack of confidence in defining relationships they encounter as CCB even though they describe the grooming process and the slow introduction of control to the relationship common in victim-survivor accounts (Miller 2018). The underlying assumption of conflict due to relationship decline is revealed by the reference to one partner (the victim) gradually making the other (the perpetrator) more 'annoyed' – the historically accepted justification for violence (Hearn 1998) - and the

accumulation of conflict over time which begins with 'little things', such as those the officer describes in their own relationship. Despite an evident awareness of CCB patterns, the result of many years' experience in response, they avoid attributing deliberate perpetration by wavering over the word 'trapped' and stopping short after 'spiralling into-'. Again, the focus is on the disintegration of the relationship, rather than on the deliberate strategies of the perpetrator.

The coercive control discourse frames this apparent disintegration as deliberate strategies of control (Stark 2007, Crossman and Hardesty 2018, Barlow and Walklate 2021). Survivors of CCB commonly describe a pattern of perpetrator behaviour which begins with careful impression management. In her interview, victim-survivor Maureen talked about the initial 'charm' of the husband she lived with for many years, describing her marriage with hindsight as a 'crap relationship':

> I mean he was nice he used to send me flowers but it was all attention seeking.
> He didn't send them to my home for me he sent them to work, but you don't
> think about that at the time. (Maureen)

Maureen goes on to describe her husband's romantic gestures as strategically performed for maximum effect on her and observers, while he slowly introduced subtle control into the relationship. This is typical of the grooming process across all the victim-survivor accounts in the dataset and in the counter discourse of CCB (Stark, 2007, Miller 2018, Monckton Smith 2019). Not all of them recognised their perpetrator's behaviour as deliberate (for example, victim-survivors Maureen, Graham, Rosie, Carl and Emma), even though the patterns they described echoed many victim-survivor accounts of CCB (Stark 2007, Crossman and Hardesty 2018, Miller 2018). Instead, they accepted it as natural and mutual decline in the relationship. Carl, for example described his relationship as becoming increasingly

argumentative over time, though his account revealed that his partner instigated these 'fights', often in an unpredictable and confusing fashion, a common technique of emotional and psychological manipulation (O'Leary 2001, Wydall and Zerk 2020).

The officers in the study often reflected the same cultural assumption of decline as victim-survivors. Without exception, the officers said that they get most of their understanding or information about CCB from *doing* response work, including their interactions with victim-survivors. As such, they will often accept a victim's account of a relationship which started well but disintegrated over time. This is illustrated in the following extract, where the officer considers how victims find themselves in abusive relationships:

> A lot of people when you're taking statements they say, "we met and everything
> started fine, and it was- you know we had x amount of time where everything
> was good, and then something happened or it started to slowly creep in," you
> know, and then there's a build-up of it so I think- probably for most people they
> enter into a normal relationship, and then things start to come from there. Erm
> yeah, I don't really know [how victims get into abusive relationships].
> (Officer 1)

Here the officer draws on common victim-survivor accounts of the slow introduction of CCB strategies, without recognising it as a deliberate pattern of perpetrator behaviour. This is indicated by the phrase 'most people enter a normal relationship' and by the lack of definition of what it is that 'builds up' or 'creeps in'. The officer explicitly admits that they do not understand how victims become trapped.

Officers who engage with CCB discourse - through lived experience, victim-survivor interaction in their response role or contact with specialist support services - are more likely to frame this disintegration as part of the CCB pattern. The following extract provides a good

example, where the officer talks about something learned from a local domestic abuse support organisation:

> I think it's called something like the 'Boyfriend Model' where they'll start out being the perfect partner, erm gifts luxuries all the rest and it slowly dwindles and the before you know it you're just stuck in that relationship. (Officer 10)

The Boyfriend Model is usually used to describe grooming in child sexual exploitation but can be applied to romantic relationships (Cook 2017). Even though grooming is hinted at here, use of passive language in 'it slowly dwindles' does not accurately describe the carefully controlled delivery of rewards/punishments associated with CCB (Crossman *et al*. 2016). The vocabulary of 'grooming' to describe a deliberate perpetrator strategy of CCB was used explicitly by only three of 18 response officers (one of whom had lived experience and two with many years in service). More often, to outside observers this pattern looks like the fading of romance or the failing of an intimate relationship, and the conflict that ensues as a result (Miller 2018).

Another salient explanation for conflict is the presence of external stressors or triggers. These were discussed across all the officer and victim-survivor interviews. Although Officer 10 has referred to the Boyfriend Model, they go on to summarise the most common circumstances associated with IPV:

> they're unemployed they're on benefits … all they do is stay in the hou- like, they've not got much else to do so ... then you've got alcohol depression drugs things like that in the mix cos you're staying in all day … you're then gonna start butting heads, and then you're gonna start arguing and domestic violence is gonna start … if you asked me, what calls do we normally go to yes it's the council estates it's the people that've not had the good education, or that are

> unemployed at the minute or have maybe had a lot of kids and then there's
>
> issues there … I don't for a second think that it doesn't happen in like middle or
>
> upper class I think it probably is even- it just depends who calls us. (Officer 10)

As Officer 10 reports, police are predominantly called out to households where there are complex issues – referred to by five of the response officers interviewed as a 'chaotic lifestyle' – amongst them IPV. However, the officers and many of the victim-survivors in the dataset reveal that IPV is common across demographics. All the officers describe lower socio-economic status households as most likely to call the police, and those with higher socio-economic status as reluctant because of the stigma attached to having a police car outside the house in 'nice' neighbourhoods. Since officers see this correlation on an almost daily basis they describe it as causation, as in Officer 10's vocabulary 'butting heads' suggesting mutual conflict brought about by these factors.

Even though police are aware of, and deal with, IPV across a range of demographics and circumstances, they draw on the historically dominant narrative of external factors as responsible for intimate violences, especially in lower-socio economic household (Dobash and Dobash 1992, Stark 2007). Six of the response officers made an explicit distinction of IPV in higher socio-economic households as CCB rather than conflict. In the absence of triggers and stresses associated with lower socio-economic households - often blamed for repeat calls - the calculated nature of the CCB pattern was associated with intelligence, education and better resources. Officer 15 exemplifies this contingent approach to the pattern of CCB in different households:

> you can get your regular callers and it's normally from like a poor income family
>
> … they just use the police for their own agenda … [when they're] more middle
>
> class … bit more well-to-do … it feels a bit more sinister … when it's a first

time call out to a job and they've disclosed multiple things to you and you just

think, "I'm gonna risk this as high" (Officer 15)

Officer 15 describes the same ongoing patterns of behaviour in both types of household - either 'regular calls' or disclosing 'multiple things' - yet approaches it differently. Officers discuss the shame of calling the police for families in 'well-to-do-neighbourhoods', compared to families who regularly call for support. It could be argued that in both cases, seeking support is their 'agenda'. IPV in higher-economic families is perceived as 'sinister', or in Officer 13's account, 'sneaky'. The emphasis is on the perpetrator as the cause of IPV, rather than on external triggers, evidence that the CCB discourse is salient in the police environment even though it is not applied consistently across demographics.

Drugs and alcohol are the triggers most discussed in the interviews. Victim-survivors Emma, Jess, Carl, Charlene and Pam all describe alcohol or drugs as responsible for the abuse they experienced. 14 of the 18 response officers interviewed explicitly mention drugs and alcohol as one of the main *causes* of IPV, especially physical violences, often describing this as common in victim accounts. Officer 2 relates victim-survivor explanations for their perpetrator's behaviour, supported by their own observations of circumstances:

> [Victims say] "They flip and, that's when the anger comes." A lot of times it's
> started by drink or drugs, physical abuse, like, "after he'd had a drink that's
> when he'll get annoyed and he'll just lash out, and it's like when morning comes
> he'll be a different person" ... drink and drugs seems to be [a trigger] especially
> the ones that I deal with … when people've had a drink they'll go to't pub, both
> parties'll be intoxicated and that argument which probably would've been a
> verbal argument if they were sober, goes that one step further and becomes
> physical. (Officer 2)

As in Officer 12's account above, alcohol is perceived as precipitating IPV, either by changing the perpetrator's character, or by encouraging 'one step further' in an 'argument'. Whether it is the victims' or the officer's phrasing, use of 'just lash out' minimises the violence to a slip which the perpetrator is barely responsible for. Moreover, it implies anger and loss of control, yet the CCB narrative describes perpetrators who are in total control of their behaviour, delivering calculated rewards and punishments (Stark 2007, Crossman *et al*. 2016, Myhill 2017,). There will undoubtedly be incidents where police are called out to an argument in which one or both parties have *lost* control. However, detailed analysis of police records and risk assessments finds that the majority of 'domestic' incidents are underpinned by a pattern of CCB (Myhill and Hohl 2019, Barlow *et al*. 2020, Brennan *et al*. 2021).

The mention of verbal arguments in the latter extract is representative of 13 of the 18 response officer interviews, which frame verbal *arguments* as conflict-based and 'low-level' and thus less risky or harmful.

Verbal arguments or verbal violences?

All officers interviewed use the language of argument, and several recall being called out to petty arguments over household issues such as tidiness, décor or food. However, as Officer 11 insightfully points out, these should not escalate into abuse, or fights worthy of police attendance. This suggests that there is more to 'arguments' than routine disagreement over household matters.

Most CCB strategies are delivered through verbal communication. This includes, harassment, degradation and humiliation, undermining, social isolation, threats of harm, imposition of rules, emotional and psychological abuses, gaslighting tactics, even financial and economic abuses (Stark 2007, Barlow and Walklate 2021). However, across all the officer and victim-survivor interviews, verbal arguments are frequently referred to as 'low-

level abuse' or low-risk, often minimised with the use of 'just' a verbal argument. Officer 12 illustrates the assumption that verbal arguments are nothing more than disagreement:

> if we go to an incident that's domestic but there's no offences and it's just a
> verbal argument we have to then do a call-back with our sergeant, bearing in
> mind we've got body cam on at all time as well to make sure that there's
> obviously no offences. (Officer 12)

Officer 12 makes several assumptions which are evident in the language they use. First, that the context they are called out to is an argument, this overlooks the likelihood that someone experienced sufficient risk to call the police rather than being engaged in a run-of-the mill disagreement with a partner[4] (Wydall and Zerk 2020). Second, the argument is minimised with 'just', implying little or no risk. Third, the officer explicitly describes an argument as 'no offences' twice in this short extract. They highlight the lack of body-worn camera footage, using 'obviously' to justify their decision-making process, yet many CCB strategies cannot be captured in this way (Barlow 2022). Much of CCB is delivered verbally, including psychological and emotional abuse and control of everyday activities (Stark 2007, Crossman *et al*. 2016). Although police are aware of the range of non-physical CCB behaviours, the assumption of conflict prevents officers from considering the impact of verbal abuses.

The impact of the conflict narrative on officer decision-making is reiterated by Officer 2, who discusses actions taken by officers when attending 'domestic' incidents:

> when we go to non-crime domestics so, when no crimes are disclosed but
> they've had a verbal argument when they've felt like they've had to ring the
> police because a verbal argument's got <u>that</u> bad, then those two parties aren't

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[4] Often third parties, such as neighbours or relatives, report to police if they witness or hear IPV, but it is reasonable to assume that most people would hesitate to call the police unless they had genuine concerns.

staying together, one of them's being removed from that address … in non-crime

domestics that doesn't mean arrest that just means taking them to another

address … just so that situation can cool down, and a lot of times we get there

before an assault can happen and that's, helpful (Officer 2)

The framing of these incidents as 'non-crime domestics' leads officers into a mediation approach, reminiscent of earlier police responses discussed above. The aim of the approach is to prevent physical assault, without considering that there might be other offences happening within the verbal exchange. Use of vocabulary such as 'argument' and 'cool down' suggests a situation which is unreasonable or out of control, especially as it precedes the escalation to assault. Where police fail to recognise verbal CCB as crimes, these will not be recorded accurately (Myhill and Johnson 2014). Perhaps more importantly, victim-survivors in the dataset stressed the impact on their *own* decision-making of being taken seriously and validated in their interactions with police.

Moving forward: conflict or control?

Making the distinction between conflict and a dynamic of control and subordination is essential to appropriate police responses to IPV, particularly CCB. Some of the officers in the dataset discussed 'scratching beneath the surface' (Officer 8) to look for evidence of CCB, rather than assuming that a couple is engaged in mutual conflict.

Officer 6 relates an incident where the couple had previously been perceived as arguing by colleagues, explaining that individual officers make different judgements depending on their own experiences:

[a colleague said] "yeah there's no problem it's just been an argument", and then

I was there and I thought "there's something not quite right" … the husband was

<u>very very</u> overbearing. Too much. Like, "you need to do this and you need to do

that" and it was so weird that my male colleague and us had a completely

different view of it. (Officer 6)

Here the officer is discussing the difference they have observed between perception and

decision-making in male and female officers. It is important to highlight, however, that

within this dataset there were male officers who were very perceptive of IPV/CCB,

dependent on their individual context and engagement with victim-survivor experiences. In

the interviews, male officers regularly demonstrated compassion in their approach to IPV, and

actively sought to better their understanding of female victimisation and male violences.

Likewise, there were female officers who demonstrated less nuanced understanding. This

point is worth highlighting within a context of gendered roles and expectations in policing

(Rabe-Hemp 2009, Loftus 2010, Casey 2023). This is not to suggest that these differences are

insignificant, as Officer 6 observes, but that we may reasonably expect male officers to

approach their work with compassion and should not assume that female officers are better

deployed in this area. In the interests of social change, male officers are instrumental in

challenging the historically dominant narratives.

Officer 6 also asserts in another part of the conversation that officers base judgements on

personal intimate relationship expectations, in which gendered roles may indeed be salient.

They demonstrate that by *not* assuming conflict other patterns become visible, in this case the

domination of one partner over the other. As discussed above, victims will often resist

domination, and this may be perceived by observers as conflict (Hester 2012). In fact, this is

a known perpetrator strategy which deflects attention from their own controlling behaviour

(Stark 2007), highlighting the insight which the counter discourse of CCB brings to police

decision-making.

All the officers in the interview dataset said that their primary source of understanding of IPV came from their response work, however, this understanding varied dependent on their familiarity with the counter CCB discourse. The officers who were most likely to look out for or recognise patterns of CCB were those who talked about attending carefully in their interactions with victims, who made an effort to learn more about IPV/CCB by engaging with victim-survivor experiences in the environmental context (social media, literature etc.) and those with lived experience. The following extract is from an interview with an officer who presented as particularly empathic in this aspect of their work:

> nine times out of ten we deal with spontaneous incidents that are assaults and stuff happens during arguments and we get so, it becomes such a normality that I think sometimes … we might not dig deep enough to actually see if there's underlying issues?[5] So maybe if we could just get a bit more awareness of coercive control it might be happening a lot more often that we actually think (Officer 3).

We can see the tension here between the assumption of conflict which is evident in the police occupational context (and in the wider social context), and the acknowledgement that more understanding is needed to recognise CCB patterns. Use of the phrase 'dig deeper' suggests taking the time to notice and ask questions. They reiterate this later, saying, 'when you get there, and you actually start speaking to them and they explain the situation that they're in, you can soon realise that it's coercive control.' The conditional structure 'if we could' used in the extract implies that this currently does not happen as a rule.

Conclusions, limitations and recommendations

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[5] Question mark denotes rising intonation, as in a question.

There is significant evidence in the analysis that the participating officers are subjected to contrasting cultural narratives in relation to IPV and are drawing on both historically dominant and counter CCB discourse in their interactions with the public.

All the officers who were interviewed used the language of CCB to varying degrees when asked to discuss their work with IPV, especially the vocabulary of 'emotional', 'psychological' and 'financial' abuses, reflecting its current prioritisation in policing (Home Office, 2022). However, as Barlow and Walklate (2018) point out, the top-down imposition of new policy and legislation without adequate support is not enough to effect meaningful change. Thus, the deep-rooted underlying assumption of conflict as the cause of IPV was salient in police and victim-survivor narratives. Officers who demonstrated greater understanding of CCB, through personal experience or engagement with victim-survivor narratives, were more likely to support and engage with victim-survivors, respond appropriately to perpetrators in terms of seeking justice and preventing further abuse and more likely to gain satisfaction (rather than frustration) from their work with IPV. This suggests that more in-depth work to challenge dominant misconceptions and introduce the counter discourse will better equip officers to investigate for CCB rather than assuming IPV is based on conflict.

The symbolism associated with the police situates officers in a powerful position to challenge historically dominant narratives of victimhood and perpetration, and to contribute to improved understanding of IPV. Several officers told stories about how their recognition of CCB led to greater public awareness, consequently better equipping victim-survivors to make decisions about their relationships. As discussed by victim-survivors who had been attended by officers with in-depth knowledge of IPV, these officers interact with victim-survivors with greater understanding of their needs, which are not necessarily traditional criminal justice outcomes (McGlynn and Westmarland 2019).

Current police training describes patterns of CCB and how these can be evidenced to build a case, and includes some attempt to address the structural factors which support and facilitate this power dynamic in intimate relationships. However, it does not challenge common cultural assumptions about IPV as conflict and highlight the prevalence of CCB. Thus, the main recommendation to be drawn from these findings is that training and development for response officers should recognise the impact of historically dominant narratives and, in the spirit of Fairclough's work, to expose, interrogate and challenge ideologies that are perceived as common-sense (Fairclough 2013, 2015). To address deficits and inconsistencies in police responses to IPV/CCB discussed above, historically dominant narratives must be targeted as inhibitors to effective police response. Meanwhile the counter discourse of CCB, as understood through victim-survivor experience, should be centred in regular development, rather than on-off training events.

All the officers interviewed considered themselves experts in IPV, to varying degrees: they are ideally positioned as such, given that dealing with it is their 'bread and butter' (Officer 10). They are often resistant to training as a result, since it may not acknowledge the realities and pressures they face on the street. Training and development could consider alternative pedagogies which challenge top-down hierarchies and use co-productive approaches (Giroux 2020). Regular officer development should use officer experience as a starting point to draw out discussion on the nuances of CCB and examples of good practice to equip officers to better serve victim-survivors. Following Fairclough's methodology, the police occupy a position of power to contribute to social change by reproducing and amplifying the CCB narrative in their interactions with the public (Fairclough 2013, 2015). The potential impact of good practice on victim-survivors, such as listening and validation, should also be embedded in regular training to address officer frustrations with repeat callers.

Due to the limitations of this study, it represents exploratory work which requires further research to confirm findings. A key limitation of this research is that it took place in a single police force and although the interview data is rich in detail it was collected from a small number of participants. Moreover, the chosen methodology and analysis rely on researcher positionality. In the feminist tradition, Haraway (1988) and Livholts and Tamboukou (2015) insist that social research is unavoidably 'embodied' and 'situated'. Nonetheless, with the aim of ensuring this work is balanced and meaningful, researcher positionality is tempered by reflection and reflexivity at every stage. Thus, the researcher strives for a position of "exteriority within" (Livholts and Tamboukou 2015, p.18) to consider other perspectives, letting go of personal expectations and leaving space for other narratives to flow and ensuring these are central to the analysis (Livholts and Tamboukou 2015, Westmarland and Bows 2019).

Salient in the data is the assumption of conflict, which often obscures the pattern of control and coercion where police view incidents as discrete and situational. Training and development should emphasise the need for a baseline assumption that CCB is likely to be present, given that prior research indicates that it frequently is. As the findings in this research demonstrate, even the most dedicated officers do not always recognise many of the behaviours associated with CCB as criminal behaviour. Although progress is clearly being made, the victim-survivor accounts in this data suggest that the historical police narrative that IPV is not worthy of police time often persists where the abuse is non-physical (Barlow and Whittle 2019, Brennan et al. 2019). Victim-survivors benefit from validation from legitimate sources, such as the police (McGlynn and Westmarland 2019). Thus, where officers understand that they are supporting 'genuine' victims (Myhill et al. 2023) rather than partners engaged in mutual conflict, they are more likely to recognise their power to support victim-

survivors, contributing to officer motivation, to victim-survivor empowerment and to cultural change.

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