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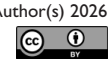

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‘It feels a bit more sinister’: Police perception of intimate partner violence in the context of socio-economic status

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Abstract

After half a century of grass-roots advocacy and academic research, coercive or controlling behaviour (CCB) is still not widely understood or recognised as the most pervasive form of intimate partner violence (IPV). Since the criminalisation of CCB, the police have been a key agency in victim support in the UK, yet effective response remains a work in progress. This qualitative study focuses on the cultural narratives which influence individual officers in their interactions with victim-survivors of CCB. Critical discourse analysis of in-depth interviews with officers reveals that socio-economic status is a significant factor in perception of IPV: in lower socio-economic households IPV is more likely to be interpreted as situational and episodic, while in higher socio-economic households it is more likely to be interpreted as a deliberate pattern of CCB. This finding suggests that cultural narratives and assumptions should be unpacked as part of officer education and development on CCB.

Keywords

Coercive control, discourse analysis, domestic abuse, intimate partner violence, policing, socio-economic status

Introduction

A decade ago, Section 76 of the Serious Crime Act 2015 outlined the new criminal offence of coercive or controlling behaviour (CCB) in England and Wales. With the introduction of this offence, the police were expected to swiftly adapt to a new way of

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thinking about intimate partner violence (IPV) with little training to support the shift (Barlow et al., 2020; Brennan et al., 2019; Stark and Hester, 2019). Section 76 defines CCB as a complex pattern of abusive behaviours aimed at restricting the freedoms of the victim. It was the result of decades of victim-survivor advocacy and research which highlight lived experiences of IPV (Dobash and Dobash, 1992; Mooney, 2000; Myhill and Kelly, 2021; Schechter, 1982; Stanko, 1985; Stark, 2007). Crucially, seminal work in the field asserted that the majority of IPV is not isolated incidents of violence, but a considered pattern of threat and disempowerment (Stark, 2007). Yet in the years since Section 76 was introduced, inertia in the reframing of IPV as a *pattern* of CCB, rather than *episodic* violence, has been a common finding in literature on the operationalisation of the offence (Barlow et al., 2020; Brennan et al., 2019; Kelly and Westmarland, 2016; Myhill et al., 2023a; Stark and Hester, 2019; Vera-Gray et al., 2025; Wiener et al., 2025). There are many barriers to an effective shift, not least the restrictions presented by existing criminal justice processes (Vera-Gray et al., 2025). However, this study focuses on officers as individuals engaged in social interaction and explores the background knowledge that informs their decision making. Critical discourse theorist Norman Fairclough uses 'members' resources' to describe personal, occupational and cultural 'knowledge' and emphasises it as ideological (Fairclough, 2013). This paper highlights competing cultural discourses[1] on IPV: the historically dominant discourse of IPV as episodic, spontaneous violence, and the CCB counter discourse of IPV as a deliberate pattern of domination and control (Monckton Smith, 2019). As part of a larger study on the policing of CCB, in-depth interviews with response officers revealed that, with the introduction of the CCB discourse to the policing environment, officers are more inclined to interpret IPV in higher economic status households as CCB but still perceive IPV in lower economic status household as episodic 'domestic abuse'.

The slow shift from situational IPV to coercive control

Historically dominant narratives of IPV typically frame it as situational, blaming external factors such as economic instability and infidelity, or caused by health issues such as mental ill health or addiction (Buss and Duntley, 2011; Hearn, 1998; Kelly and Westmarland, 2016; Stark, 2007). Usually concentrating on male physical violence, the dominant discourse tends to view IPV as perpetrated with legitimate cause, triggered by factors external to the perpetrator (Dobash and Dobash, 1998; Hearn, 1998; Kelly and Westmarland, 2016; Schechter, 1982). Triggers are typically related to the microcosm of the family: normalised expectations of gender roles have not been fulfilled, or the stress of maintaining an economically viable household has created strain (Dobash and Dobash, 1998; Hearn, 1998). External triggers for violence might include economic strain (Ahmadabadi et al., 2020; Ali and Naylor, 2013; Hearn, 1998), drugs and alcohol (Bancroft, 2002; Hearn, 1998), jealousy (Monckton Smith, 2012, 2019) or the victim themselves (Dobash and Dobash, 1998; Kelly and Westmarland, 2016; Meyer, 2016). Historically, reactions to these triggers were viewed as episodic and contingent, rather than as a deliberate and calculated pattern (Stark, 2007). The perpetrator was deemed to behave violently when they were *out* of control, with an assertion that the violence was

'out of character' (Hearn, 1998). However, research with perpetrators suggests that these 'triggers' are most frequently excuses which fall away during therapeutic sessions, in which violent men discuss the best techniques for controlling a partner (Bancroft, 2002; Hearn, 1998).

The dominant discourse of IPV as situational is supported by influential work such as that of Straus (1979, 2011) and Buss (2018). They both emphasise external factors as triggers for violence with strong implications for economic status. Buss's hypothetical stance focuses on male violence as an evolutionary response to uncertainty of paternity and rests on the notion of resource scarcity in the ancestral environment (Buss, 2018; Buss and Duntley, 2011; Buss et al., 1992). This argument fails to address female perpetration and abuse in non-heteronormative, child-free or post-reproductive relationships, and is contradicted by victim-survivor and perpetrator perspectives. Straus's conflict model (Straus, 1979, 2011) remains influential, despite heavy critique (Mooney, 2000). Straus describes 'slapping, shoving and throwing things at a partner' as 'ordinary violence' (Straus, 2011: 279), which occurs due to a deficit of conflict resolution skills, especially in families with lower-socio economic class and lower levels of education (Straus, 1979, 2011). These narratives are ingrained in the social perception of IPV, thus 'domestic violence' has long and erroneously been associated with families of lower socio-economic status (Dobash and Dobash, 1992), where there are higher levels of economic strain and ostensibly less refined conflict resolution strategies. Situational IPV undoubtedly affects some intimate relationships where stress and inability to resolve conflict are triggers for episodic violence (Johnson, 2008). However, in resistance to the dominant discourse, victim-survivor accounts – regardless of socio-economic status – commonly describe IPV as a pattern of targeted strategies (Barlow and Walklate, 2022; Johnson, 2008; Stark, 2007).

The reframing of IPV as patterned and deliberate CCB represents the counter discourse, challenging the historically dominant ideology in what Fairclough (2015) calls the 'discursive struggle'. Research with victim-survivors and perpetrators asserts that the majority of IPV is a pattern of deliberate CCB – a constellation of strategies to disempower victims with credible threats (Barlow and Walklate, 2022; Barlow et al., 2020; Brennan et al., 2021; Butterworth and Westmarland, 2016; Hearn, 1998; Miller, 2018; Myhill and Hohl, 2019; Schechter, 1982; Stark, 2007). The counter discourse describes physical violence as often used to enforce compliance, alongside a range of other strategies – sexual violence, financial and economic oppression, and verbal, psychological and emotional degradation (Barlow and Walklate, 2022; Stark, 2007). While acknowledging CCB in sexual minority relationships and female perpetration in heterosexual relationships (Bosco et al., 2022; Brooks et al., 2020; Donovan and Hester, 2010; Renzetti, 1992), the counter discourse emphasises the overwhelming prevalence of male violence against female partners, and highlights deeply embedded cultural expectations of marriage and gendered roles as legitimising a dynamic of male domination and female subordination (Barlow and Walklate, 2022; Monckton Smith, 2019; Stark, 2007). Crucially, in victim-survivor narratives of CCB, IPV is about control, not about the loss of it. This contradicts the dominant discourse of external triggers and thus the association between IPV and socio-economic status.

Police response to IPV and coercive control

Advocates have long called for victims of IPV and CCB to be better recognised and supported by police (e.g. Dobash and Dobash, 1992; Stanko, 1985) and 'domestic abuse' is identified as at the forefront of contemporary response demand (NPCC, 2024). Aside from delivering criminal justice focused 'positive outcomes' (College of Policing, 2015), police play a significant symbolic role in driving social change (Brennan et al., 2019) and in validating victim-survivor experience (McGlynn and Westmarland, 2019). The criminalisation of CCB in the UK centralises police in both justice and community responses, and while progress is evidently being made in effective support there are continued calls for further development (Barlow and Walklate, 2025; Wiener et al., 2025). A repeated finding in research with police is the difficult transition to recognising and acknowledging a pattern of CCB, rather than discrete incidents of IPV (Barlow et al., 2020; Brennan et al., 2019; Wiener, 2017; Wiener et al., 2025).

Police response officers are usually the first point of contact for victims who seek a criminal justice response. The interaction between victim and response officer is thus critical in establishing trust in and engagement with the criminal justice process, but also in validating the victim experience. Analysis of risk assessment data suggests that the majority of IPV incidents response officers attend are part of a pattern CCB (Barlow et al., 2020; Brennan et al., 2021; Myhill and Hohl, 2019). However, they are not recorded as CCB; response officers are more likely to record and gather evidence for a charge of discrete incidents such as sexual violence, stalking, assault or malicious communications, since police perceive these as easier to evidence to meet CPS thresholds for a charge (Barlow, 2022; Bishop and Bettinson, 2018; Wiener et al., 2025). Moreover, the police continue to focus on physical violence – typically as incidents – and regard this as the most harmful form of abuse (Barlow and Walklate, 2025; McPhee et al., 2022; Myhill et al., 2023b; Robinson et al., 2018; Vera-Gray et al., 2025). Response officers are often familiar and frustrated with repeat callers whose experiences of abuse, taken as individual incidents, do not meet the threshold for a criminal justice response but amount to serious long-term CCB (Stark, 2012; Stark and Hester, 2019).

As Barlow and Walklate (2025) have emphasised, change takes time. Using Fairclough's notion of members' resources, this change involves the reframing of ideologies and understanding of the social world. Fairclough describes ideologies as 'assumptions and expectations [which] are implicit, backgrounded, taken for granted, not things that people are consciously aware of, rarely explicitly formulated or examined or questioned' (Fairclough, 2015: 101). The policing environment does not exist in isolation, rather it is heavily influenced by – indeed it constantly interacts with – the socio-cultural environment in which it is embedded (Loftus, 2010; Reiner, 2017). The perception of verbal or physical IPV as repeated episodic conflict in lower socio-economic households was identified by early seminal authors in the field (Dobash and Dobash, 1992) and violence in low-income households viewed as 'normal behaviour' by police (Stark, 2007: 36). These assumptions continue to be evident in academic work, as described above, and are reflected in cultural and media narratives (Easteal et al., 2015; Galician, 2004; Gillespie et al., 2013; Lloyd and Ramon, 2017). This study seeks to explore the members' resources (Fairclough, 2013)–that is, the background cultural knowledge – that response officers draw on to inform their interactions with victims of IPV and CCB.

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 in this paper draw on 18 in-depth response officer interviews. As a researcher with background experience of supporting victim-survivors of IPV, I was located to explore the phenomenon as 'insider/outsider' (Westmarland and Bows, 2019). My familiarity with the dynamics of CCB and service responses to IPV served to co-produce rich data with participants (Haraway, 1988; Livholts and Tamboukou, 2015). Due to this positionality, meticulous clarification of participant meaning during the interviews and reflexivity at every stage was essential to producing robust findings (Gioia et al., 2013; Kvale, 2007). 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).

In-depth interviews with 18 response officers from across the Force area were conducted with the researcher. Interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed faithfully. The extracts presented in this paper have been edited for ease of reading with commas and full stops to represent pauses, and ellipses [. . .] to show were repetition or hesitations have been removed. Where a word is followed by colons this represents a drawn-out utterance. Emphasis is represented with underlining.

Fairclough's toolkit for critical discourse analysis (CDA) focuses on the 'discursive struggle' between dominant and counter discourses, with an emphasis on power and on how realities and identities are shaped through ideological discourse (Fairclough, 2013, 2015) In this study, CDA reveals the cultural discourses present as 'members' resources' in officer talk. Fairclough's (2015) concepts of 'scripts' and 'frames' are central to the data analysis. 'Frames' delineate the entities which populate our social world – animate beings, inanimate objects or abstract concepts – for example, the IPV perpetrator, coercive control, the response officer. 'Scripts' delineate relationships and how subjects behave in their interactions, for example the intimate relationship, the police/public interaction (Fairclough, 2015). An abductive approach (Kennedy, 2018) drew on existing theory and literature while leaving space for the data to provide novel insights (Gioia et al., 2013). The finding presented in this paper – that response officers make a distinction between 'DA' and CCB and their perception is dependent socio-economic status – was an unexpected insight which emerged across the data set through the analytical process.

Findings and discussion

Across the officer interviews, an explicit distinction was made between a pattern of CCB, as defined in s76 of the Serious Crime Act and the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, and what the police continue to call 'DA' (domestic abuse). The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 defines domestic abuse as 'any *incident or pattern* of incidents of controlling, coercive, threatening behaviour, violence or abuse' between individuals who are over 16 and 'personally connected'. Yet in police conversation in the context of IPV, 'DA' refers to the historically dominant framing of episodic physical violence, described by Michael Johnson as 'situational couple violence' (Johnson, 2008). This distinction underpins the

finding that police interpret IPV differently dependent on socio-economic status. The findings are presented in 3 thematic sections, which each represent historically dominant scripts for IPV. The first is 'triggers': extrinsic factors were mentioned frequently in the response officer conversations, aligning with conflict and strain narratives of IPV. The second is 'chaotic lifestyle': this was a term used by response officers to describe disordered family life, a common trope in cultural narratives of IPV. The third is 'intelligence': the assumption that CCB tends to be perpetrated by individuals with higher levels of education was articulated across the response officer conversations, as opposed to 'DA' caused by deficit in education and skillset.

'Triggers': Causes and motivations

11 of 18 the response officers interviewed referred to 'triggers' when discussing IPV, particularly physical violence. This locates the cause of IPV outside the perpetrator, reflecting the historically dominant discourse of IPV described above. These triggers are explicitly associated with lower socio-economic households, even though some of them – such as mental ill health, drugs and alcohol – are undoubtedly present in higher status households.

One of the interview questions asked response officers about the motivations for IPV or CCB. This line of conversation aimed to explore their beliefs about the circumstances, situations and personalities involved in abusive relationships. The resulting discussions revealed a pervasive theme across the interviews: in line with the dominant discourse of IPV, the officers discussed situational factors which they linked with lower socio-economic households as 'triggers' for violence. Experienced Officer 5 explained, there are 'more domestic incidents on the poorer side of [the city], just no arguing against it'. This response officer, visibly puzzled by the 'motivations' question, offered an answer which was echoed across the interviews.

> I see reasons and motivations being two separate things [. . .] reasons are, I think jealousy, drugs and alcohol abuse, certainly jealousy being a big one [. . .] but I don't think that's a motivation [. . .] I see motivation as [. . .] like you're motivated to run a marathon or you're motivated to get a promotion and you wake up every day thinking 'how am I gonna achieve that' [. . .] I've never thought about perpetrators' motivation to commit domestic abuse (Officer 5)

By challenging the use of 'motivation' in the question, Officer 5 draws a distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic factors, associating intrinsic 'motivation' with a deliberate goal. This implies that IPV/CCB is *not* deliberate or considered, which contradicts evidence from both perpetrator and victim-survivor accounts of deliberate strategies of control, often including physical violences (Hearn, 1998; Kelly and Westmarland, 2016; Stark, 2007). The 'reasons' Officer 5 gives as examples are extrinsic to the perpetrator and represent common excuses for IPV (Bancroft, 2002; Hearn, 1998). Officer 5 goes on to consider the question in more depth, confessing that this is the first time they have done so:

> I think the domestic violence part of it, is drugs and alcohol [. . .] anger issues [. . .] maybe it's cos it's more of a [. . .] like- almost like a physical and changing- whereas I see coercive control as [. . .] fuelled by more jealousy which is more of a mental emotional, side of it. If you don't trust your partner and you're constantly checking or, tracking their phone or, not letting them see their friends or family, I think that's more of a long term, insecurity and jealousy, whereas the violence part of it is usually like a flare up, something happened then and there whilst you're drunk (Officer 5)

Officer 5, on reflection, suggests that CCB is prompted by an emotional state, rather than situational factors. Previous in-depth work with perpetrators, however, reveals such prompts as *justifications* for controlling behaviour rather than *reasons* (Bancroft, 2002; Hearn, 1998). The use of jealousy here relies on the historically dominant (and heavily gendered) assumption of ownership or possession of the partner, and the normalisation of jealousy as a prompt for 'passion' (aggression) (Monckton Smith, 2012, 2019) Historically, IPV is a justified response to relationship transgressions, framing 'jealousy' as out of the perpetrator's control and deflecting responsibility onto the victim for their perceived transgression (Buss, 2018; Buss and Duntley, 2011). The counter discourse rejects jealousy as legitimate rationale for IPV, instead identifying it as a control mechanism normalised within the ideological 'intimate relationship' (Dobash and Dobash, 1992; Monckton Smith, 2012, 2019). The framing of physical violence as 'a flare up' also contradicts CCB discourse, which describes physical violence as used with careful consideration (Crossman et al., 2016). The officer chooses the word 'fuelled' again suggesting provocation.

Officer 17 likewise stresses 'reasons' in response to the question about motivations. Underlining represents emphasis in Officer 17's speech:

> There probably are different, <u>reasons</u> [. . .] a lot of the common triggers [. . .] to do with, anger management issues and mental health or:: [. . .] drugs and alcohol [. . .] and then jealousy [. . .] a lot of the coercive control or some of the, stalking offences are about control [. . .] being quite jealous and, insecure yourself, about the relationship with that person so [. . .] the power and dominance is to try and, control that isn't it [. . .] from an offender point of view- perpetrator there's [. . .] I don't know, mental health insecurities, some element of, <u>their</u>, personality almost that makes that come out and then, if that's got additional, stresses with drink drugs it's gonna [. . .] make it all worse (Officer 17)

Again, the perpetrator is characterised as without intention, prompted by extrinsic factors. Even where this response officer mentions 'control', 'power' and 'dominance' in relation to CCB (of which stalking is a key aspect), this is attributed to jealousy – a 'passion' historically normalised, legitimising aggression and out of the perpetrator's control (Monckton Smith, 2012).

In all the response officers' narratives, a clear distinction was made between the traditional framing of 'DA' as episodic and spontaneous, and to CCB as the pattern of behaviour outlined in s76. Officer 12's comments on the coverage of IPV in the media demonstrates this distinction.

> it's only really the major incidents that get shared on there [police social media and news] it's not your low level things so I think it's underrepresented in the media, the coercive control side of it, and I think people see that as like a lesser offence, than DA, because like I said it's not physical it's not a stabbing (.) it's not someone's been punched and got a broken nose it's the harder side to prove maybe, the less sexy stuff maybe (Officer 12)

The distinction is reiterated by Officer 2, who has just mentioned a difference between CCB as 'underlying' and spontaneous violence as anger triggered by something. When asked for more detail on what they describe as 'DA', they explain,

> Drink and drugs seems to be- especially the ones that I deal with, like we go to probably most domestic incidents [. . .] 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 [. . .] or, when partners damage each other's things that's [. . .] when they've had a drink or if they're under the influence of drugs and things like that, for a lot of people there's definitely a trigger [. . .] I don't think CCB's a trigger thing I think it's something that's ongoing throughout the relationship whereas violence can be, like that split second they just feel that and then, that's when the perpetrator attacks somebody (Officer 2)

Across the data set, discussions on the aetiology of DA and CCB are where the disparity emerges between lower and higher socio-economic households. Officer 3 gives a clear account of this:

> I don't think domestic abuse is like stereotyped to one walk of life. Yes it does, I'd probably say it does happen a lot more in more deprived lower-income families so to speak, maybe it happens more because they phone us more [. . .] lower income more deprived areas is usually where your alcohol's involved your drugs are involved, and that's where the spontaneous arguments that lead to assaults lead to criminal damage, lead to incidents that we deal with on a daily basis [. . .] with coercive control, premeditated [. . .] usually a bit more, well-to-do a bit more smart, know what they're doing they plan- they choose, the victim [. . .] take them in, make out they're this wonderful person, and then obviously over a period of time slowly change (Officer 3)

Here, the dominant and counter discourse are both evident. Dominant discourse is used to explain the IPV that police most commonly attend – 'on a daily basis' – in lower socio-economic households, which is framed as 'domestic abuse'. Response officers generally interpret the incidents they attend in these households through using the dominant discourse script of IPV as triggered, situational violence. As described by this response officer, IPV in lower socio-economic household is assumed to be episodic and 'spontaneous'. No deliberate strategy or pattern is recognised, despite the repetitive nature of calls to these households. However, in 'nice' houses where familiar 'triggers' are not evident, alternative explanations are sought. Officer 3 thus perceives the pattern of CCB in 'well-to-do' households in the absence of a more familiar script. 3 of the response officers disclosed lived experience of IPV. It was only these officers who connected 'DA' and CCB, asserting that episodic violence was generally underpinned by a pattern of CCB.

The distinction between 'DA' and CCB and the 'triggers' associated with the former, lead us into the next theme: the 'chaotic lifestyle'.

'Chaotic lifestyle': 'ordered' and 'disordered' families

All 18 of the response officers interviewed explained how most of their 'DA' response involved families facing a combination of challenges which were presented as a disordered environment. Sometimes referred to as a 'chaotic lifestyle', this might include poverty, unemployment, drugs and alcohol, health issues, lack of engagement in formal education and family history of abuse.

Most frequently mentioned – in 15 of 18 interviews – were alcohol and substance misuse, which officers associated with lower-income households, although it is widely-known that they are prevalent across all income brackets. This context for abuse is expressed by Officer 13:

> we do tend to go to a lot of domestic incidents where they're on, low income, they've got an addiction to something [. . .] we've got a homeless project in town and we tend to go there a lot, but again I associate that with, if they've got a dependency on alcohol or drugs I just think, is the alcohol and drugs doing the talking (Officer 13)

The choice of language in 'alcohol and drugs doing the talking' reiterates the emphasis on extrinsic 'causes' of abusive behaviour. In Officer 13's conversation, this is explicitly framed as an issue in lower socio-economic households. Officer 12 offers these factors as reasons why victims are 'less likely to leave' abusive relationships, yet other officers described a more desirable lifestyle as likewise difficult for victims to leave:

> my experience of the coercive control jobs that I've known [. . .] it's the higher wealthier more well-to-do people [. . .] and some will accept a bit of the controlling behaviour to be able to still lead the life that they're living (Officer 14)

Officer 14 not only minimises the widely-documented harms of CCB (Stark, 2007) by using 'a bit of the.'.. but does not demonstrate an understanding of how CCB ties the victim into a relationship through fear of punishment if they leave (Barlow and Walklate, 2022; Dutton and Goodman, 2005; Johnson, 2008; Stark, 2007). Instead, they present a victim who makes a considered bargain for the 'well-to-do' lifestyle in exchange for a life of abuse. In either scenario – DA or CCB – the lifestyle is offered as a reason why victims stay. While economic pressure undoubtedly creates dependency in CCB, threat of harm is not acknowledged here in relation to victim-survivor experience of leaving.

The demand for police intervention from higher income families is notably lower, as described by all the response officers in their interviews. This is demonstrated by Officer 2's account of responding to a call from a wealthier area.

> there is times when you go and you just think 'wow I'd never expect this to be a house that I'd walk into' [. . .] when it's that perfect family dynamic that you walk in, there's pictures of the kids the house is really nice which is awful I feel awful saying it [. . .] nice area and you'll walk in there'll be- like they'll both have really nice jobs, they'll both have nice cars on the drive and you'll just think 'this is different' (Officer 2)

Officer 2 openly describes surprise at being called to attend a higher-income household, highlighting its relative rarity. They explicitly contrast this setting with the 'chaotic

lifestyle', using vocabulary of 'perfect family' and the repeated use of 'nice' in relation to the representations of order: house, area, jobs and car.

6 of the response officers described how, in contrast with the volume of calls from low-income families, the low number from higher-income households is associated with embarrassment of seeking police support. This reflects an assumption that 'DA' is *part of* the disordered or chaotic lifestyle, which higher income households are not expected to experience. They suggest that people with higher economic status are less likely to call the police due to the shame and stigma of having a police car outside the house. The following extracts illustrate this common officer experience:

> I think people who're mainly in roles of responsibility [. . .] social workers who are going through it, doctors nurses, but they don't want to report it because of how it might loo::k or they're embarrassed [. . .] it's very rare, that I deal with people like that (Officer 10)

> we turn up, if you're well-to-do with a nice big house nice job and the neighbours see the police car outside, they're not gonna really want us there (Officer 3)

Meanwhile, repeated calls from well-known households, and the higher demand from those described as lower-income and more disordered, frequently elicit exasperation and frustration from officers. Officer 15 suggests that repeat callers in disordered household are taken less seriously:

> you can get your regular callers and it's normally from like a poor income family, I don't mean to stereotype but that is generally the way, you know the drug addicts, alcoholics [. . .] you know the children are tearaways and they're struggling at school getting expelled, it just generally, don't wanna say council living family but, it's- [. . .] you know the smoking twenty a day and regularly give each other as good as they get but, it's got to a the point where she just thinks 'oh I'm sick of you now I'm gonna call the police and get you gone', and they just use the police to just for their own, agenda, rather than being a genuine victim of a domestic environment [. . .] it's almost like the boy who cried wolf one too many times (Officer 15)

Officer 15 not only highlights a disordered lifestyle as underlying 'DA', but by using 'regularly give each other as good as they get' implies a level of conflict is part of this family environment. Moreover, this is not perceived as 'genuine' abuse, though without context we cannot know whether this is sound judgement. The officer describes it as a typical scenario– 'you get your regular callers'–which invites an assumption that the abuse is not high-risk, despite it being reoccurring, and that the victim is not deserving of support. Research on CCB victimisation commonly describes resistant rather than passive victims (Donovan and Hester, 2010; Miller, 2018; Stanko, 1990; Stark, 2007) and in the context of the disordered family this could easily be misconstrued as conflict (Myhill et al., 2023a; Myhill et al., 2023b; Tatton, 2025).

Repeated help-seeking could indicate a pattern of CCB (Stark and Hester, 2019), yet response officers tend to treat repeat calls from lower income families as a string of situational *episodes*. Moreover, it appears that reports of IPV in higher income settings are more believable because they are *not* repeat callers. Officer 15 goes on to contrast the description above with their perception of higher-income and more ordered households:

> then you can go from the complete opposite to someone [who's] worried that she's wasting our time, and then she's disclosed years' worth of offences [. . .] she's never called the police before and then all this comes out and that's a genuine job [. . .] more middle class, bit more well-to-do, it feels a bit more sinister [. . .] and you just think, 'I'm gonna risk this as high' (Officer 15)

Where the victim describes 'years' worth' of abuse in the first call to the police, this is evidently perceived differently to a victim who likewise experiences ongoing abuse but calls the police more regularly. Use of the word 'sinister' points to Officer 15's inclination to view this as a dangerous pattern of CCB, rather than as situational 'DA'. In the context of higher social class, the IPV/CCB is taken more seriously, as demonstrated by the risk assessment in Officer 15's account.

These examples of police response and perception demonstrate that IPV is viewed differently through the lens of order and disorder, respectively associated with higher or lower income. The way that response officers approach these different households impacts on their levels of compassion or frustration, and thus on their readiness to offer support. Their narratives often imply an assumption that people with 'chaotic' lifestyles need police *intervention* to establish order, whereas those in higher socio-economic status are more worthy of police *support*. The following section explores this distinction further by considering the relationship between economic status and level of education.

'Intelligence': Education and status

Across the response officer interviews, different forms of abuse–'DA', referring to episodic physical violence, and CCB, referring to a pattern of non-physical abuse – are explicitly attributed to different levels of intelligence. Following on from Officer 3's extract presented above, they contrast 'domestic abuse' perpetration with 'coercive control', obviously uncomfortable about making the distinction:

> with coercive, it takes some time to come to light, and it might be, a more, not- not- [officer sighs] more intellectual individual carrying out coercive control, obviously manipulative person [. . .] I don't like saying that they're more intelligent but, yeah probably (Officer 3)

The hesitations show that this officer was reluctant to describe a more 'intelligent' person as the most likely to carry out CCB, but they clearly articulate this view.

This is distinction is made in 11 of the interviews, with further connection made between low-socio economic status and perceived levels of intelligence. Officers 5 gives an example of this:

> I think maybe::, a more well-off family might, more likely to be coercively control element rather than the violent element because, they're usually quite well-educated and they know they, aren't gonna get away with, violence but they might get-, if they know they're coercively controlling they know they're probably more likely to get away with that, they might not know they're coercively controlling their partner but, usually they're more savvy to what they can get away with (Officer 5)

An interesting observation is revealed in Officer 5's distinction here. CCB is clearly perceived as non-physical violence, in contrast with 'DA', but in describing the tactics of

a 'smart' perpetrator, they allude to the use of physical violence as a more visible strategy of control. This somewhat contradicts Officer 5's earlier description of 'reasons' rather than 'motivations'. Even within this extract, while the officer refers to the 'savvy' perpetrator who *thinks* about what they can 'get away with', they still suggest that they 'might not know' what they are doing. In contrast with this, Officer 7 describes higher economic status perpetrators as too well-educated or intelligent to be ignorant of the choices they make and are thus credited with more agency.

> you could argue, the perpetrator of coercive control's a bit more, what's the wor- succes- not successful, but that- that like caree- bit more driven, rather than, you see a lot of people that you think right okay they're, lower end of the socio-economic scale, and you see that quite a lot, and then you see people who're a bit more, manipulative [. . .] you can see parts of their personality like, at work so, more than likely it's them because they're a bit more clever how they do it (Officer 7)

This response officer chooses words hesitantly, wary of making a statement about the intelligence of individuals of higher and lower socio-economic status. In describing perpetrators as 'successful', 'driven', 'manipulative' and 'clever', they show an awareness of the forethought and intention described by the CCB counter discourse. However, they suggest that this is only present in CCB perpetrated by higher status individuals. This view is echoed by Officer 13:

> The abuser who is being controlling and coercive [sighs] for me is- has a certain level of intelligence, cos they know what they're doing, erm:: and they're subtle in the way that they're doing it, like just this morning, I've been to one [. . .] you know nice car and everything like that, he's- he's got from what appears to be a really good job [. . .] it is- it is difficult I'm not saying that you can-, if you've got a lower intelligence that you can't control or coerce someone, you just-, I tend to find that it's more [sighs] the person that we're dealing with comes across well, erm comes across as personable, likeable [. . .] and I think that's how they, get around to, you know, doing this behaviour to the victim (Officer 13)

Again, the hesitations show how the officer seems uncomfortable talking about intelligence and suggesting that some perpetrators do not have the intellect, status or educational background to perpetrate a complex pattern of CCB. This includes the grooming process, which is acknowledged here by Officer 13 where they describe how a 'likeable, personable' person establishes the trust required as the basis of CCB (Miller, 2018; Monckton Smith, 2019). Drawing on their own lived experience of CCB and on the academic research they have explored to inform their work, Officer 13 goes on to describe the CCB perpetrator as motivated by self-obsession and personal gain, using the word 'sneaky' to describe the contrast between the public and private persona: they say that during police interviews, they 'come across really well but then I've seen evidence that they really are being quite nasty to the victim'. It has been well-known for several decades that 'charm' is an essential component in the early stages of the abusive intimate relationship, and that this is not associated with intelligence (Horley, 1991; Miller, 2018). This characteristic is often unacknowledged by the officers who are heavily influenced by the dominant narratives of 'DA' discussed above.

The assumption that sophisticated intelligence is required to plan a campaign of CCB is clearly articulated by Officer 14:

> I think you're talking, your middle to upper class probably more coercive control [. . .] whether it be:: right or wrong, coercive control I think takes more::, more common sense, more brains, more planning [. . .] which, a lot of the people that we see for DA haven't got- haven't probably got that common sense or knowledge [. . .] to do that certainly when, technology, social media, technology [. . .] financial ways, so I seem to think coercive control- this is just my opinion, is probably more middle to upper class than erm, than DA (Officer 14)

Officer 14 reiterates the distinction between DA as situational violence and CCB as a considered pattern of control. The implication here is that people with a lower-economic status have less intelligence and fewer resources – such as social media and technology – to control a partner. Even within the data set this is contradicted, unsurprisingly given that most people in contemporary UK have access to these resources – most phones and many apps have tracking facilities. Aside from this, there are many strategies which can be employed without financial or intellectual resources to control the victim's daily life, including physical violence. Recent research finds that police risk assessments often reveal a pattern of CCB even where it has not been recorded as such (Barlow et al., 2020; Brennan et al., 2021; Myhill and Hohl, 2019), and it does not have to be sophisticated. Officer 10, for example, recounts experience with a pattern of the CCB in a lower-socio-economic household where the perpetrator uses resources at his disposal to control his female partner:

> the low level, 'are you cheating on me [. . .] you must be cheating on me you've just been to the shop who've you been with?' [. . .] I've had like people who::ve like, awful awful coercive control where they've come back from the shop and they've told them to take their knickers off so they can smell their knickers to see whether they've been with anybody else. (Officer 10)

Even though Officer 10 describes this CCB as 'awful', it is framed as 'low level' abuse. Yet it undoubtedly restricts the victim's freedom and places tremendous psychological strain on her everyday activities. The pattern of CCB described by Officer 10 is context specific, drawing on the strategic options available to this individual. This would be entirely different in another household, depending on what the victim will respond to and the resources available to the perpetrator (Hearn, 1998; Stark, 2007).

With all these references to perpetrators considered, there is a general distinction made by officers between perpetrators of 'DA', who are characterised within historically dominant frames as out of control, and of CCB, who are assumed to be more intelligent. These findings suggest that where lifestyle and background do not fit the stereotype provided by dominant discourse, officers are more inclined to consider the presence of CCB and to credit the perpetrator with the resources and capabilities to accomplish it.

Conclusions and recommendations

This study was limited to one police force, and it is possible that the perception of 'DA' and CCB are specific to this force culture. However, since the distinction aligns with

wider and long-standing cultural narratives, it is likely that comparable findings would emerge from similar study in other regions. Since the study is qualitative and in-depth, the number of interview participants is small. However, saturation occurred within this data set in relation to this finding. Further exploration would be required to generalise these findings.

This study aimed to explore the background cultural and ideological knowledge–'members' resources' (Fairclough, 2013)–which response officers draw on in their interactions with victims and perpetrators ofIPV/CCB. Critical discourse analysis of interviews showed that response officers generally drew on historically dominant discourse associating 'DA' with lower socio-economic status households. Families with higher socio-economic status, who are only recently more inclined to seek support from the police, are viewed through the more recent criminal justice framing of CCB. Three distinct themes emerged from the analysis which reflected narratives from dominant and counter discourses of IPV: that physical violence is 'triggered' by external factors; that triggers are typically associated with a 'disordered' lifestyle; and that CCB requires intelligence associated with higher socio-economic status. Across these themes, a key issue in response officer understanding of CCB is the distinction made between 'DA' as spontaneous physical violence and the pattern of CCB described in the Serious Crime Act 2015. This distinction fails to acknowledge the prevalence of CCB as underlying the majority of IPV, and of physical violence as part of the CCB pattern (Stark, 2007). Thus, where officers discuss repeat calls from lower socio-economic households and express frustration with these families, it is likely that CCB is an underlying pattern unrecognised due to interference from dominant discourse.

Since previous studies have found that CCB is frequently present but not recorded by the police (Barlow et al., 2020; Brennan et al., 2021; Myhill and Hohl, 2019), these findings represent a strong case for unpacking and challenging cultural narratives of IPV in police development, in order for officers to acknowledge and support victim-survivors more effectively.

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Note

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).

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