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Responding to coercive control in criminal justice domestic violence perpetrator programmes in England and Wales: Conceptual, operational, and methodological complexities

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Abstract

Evaluations of domestic violence perpetrator programmes have not produced evidence that they are as effective at reducing male, non-violent, coercively controlling behaviours. This article proposes such limitations are understood by adopting a more complex conceptualisation of coercive control for which the reasons are both gendered and biographically unique. Drawing on document analyses and in-depth interviews with eight programme facilitators and an in-depth case study of one male participant, this article explores the merits and limitations of the cognitive behavioural, skills-based criminal justice programme, Building Better Relationships, in addressing coercively controlling behaviours. The dual (re)conceptualisation of coercive control proposed has implications for both practice and programme evaluation methods.

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Introduction

Coercively controlling behaviour within intimate (and other familial) relationships was criminalised in England and Wales in 2015 and is a core lens through which domestic abuse is now viewed (Barlow and Walklate, 2022). The Serious Crime Act 2015 defines coercive control as a pattern and range of 'acts of assault threats, humiliation' used to 'harm, punish or frighten' the victim and to make them 'subordinate and/ or dependent' upon the perpetrator. Whilst domestic abuse is overwhelmingly perpetrated by men and women the victims, coercive control remains a contested concept regarding the extent to which it is gendered, and many issues have been raised regarding how effective this legislation has been when translated into practice (Barlow and Walklate, 2022). This article is specifically concerned with the conceptual, operational, and methodological complexities in the aetiological explanations of male-perpetrated coercive control, and the development and evaluation of criminal justice domestic violence perpetrator programmes (DVPPs) that seek to address associated behaviours. This is important given DVPPs in general have been less successful at reducing coercively controlling behaviours compared to violent incidents (Kelly and Westmarland, 2015) and (some exceptions aside, Downes et al., 2019) few studies have attempted to obtain men's accounts of coercive control and change. This article will be the first to explore such complexities within the Ministry of Justice approved, cognitive behavioural criminal justice Building Better Relationships (BBR) programme in England and Wales which de-centred its previous gendered underpinnings in favour of more individualised understandings whilst centring emotion management and cognitive skills as key tools for reducing violence and abuse.

In doing so, this paper is divided into three sections. The first section will provide a critical overview of the concept of coercive control, some of its limitations when theorising male perpetration, and translating this into practice within the context of criminal justice DVPPs. This will outline the merits of a gendered power lens (Downes et al., 2019) but make the case for a more complex understanding of coercive control which is reconceptualised as both gendered *and* biographically unique (Gadd and Jefferson, 2007). The second section sets out the methods and rationale for these and the third section examines the proposed psychosocial framework by drawing on empirical research from a probation-based, BBR cohort which includes facilitators' perspectives and an in-depth case study of one male participant, 'Dale'. The article concludes by summarising the practical and methodological implications of this dual reconceptualisation of coercive control. Specifically, this article proposes that the reasons for domestic abuse and coercively controlling behaviours are multiple and complex and that such complexities should be considered within

programme development, the context of delivery, and built into evaluations that seek to determine their effectiveness (Renehan and Henry, 2022).

Theorising coercive control

Coercive control is most associated with the work of Stark (2007) in which he described it as a 'liberty crime' and a process by which some men instrumentally deprive women of their autonomy, micromanaging their everyday lives, and using a range of tactics for the purpose of controlling them. Coercive control can also persist post-separation, for example, through stalking, harassment, or systems abuse (Douglas, 2018, Forbes, 2022). Though physical violence can be used to control, Stark's work emphasises the abuse of gendered power through isolation, threats of violence, and psychological abuse as these have pervasive and long-term psychological effects on women who in turn learn to regulate their own behaviour.

Whilst this work has been influential in legislative terms, coercive control remains a contested concept (Barlow and Walklate, 2022). For example, Stark's gendered focus on coercive control neglects the abuse of power and control outside of heterosexual relationships and the occurrence of (albeit much rarer) heterosexual female perpetration. Of relevance here, however, is that whilst heterosexual coercively controlling men can rely upon unequal gender power relations to engage in and justify such harmful behaviours on an interpersonal level (Downes et al., 2019), a gender and power lens alone does not fully explain why only (relatively) few men invest in excessively rigid and harmful gender norms when there are available alternatives. What is required, then, is an understanding of coercive control in which the desire to do so is framed as both gendered *and* (irreducibly) biographically unique (Gadd and Jefferson, 2007).

Aligned with Stark's (2007) thesis, Johnson (1995) and Kelly and Johnson (2008) distinguished between less serious, non-gendered violence and that which is motivated by gender, power, and control. The former, 'situational violence', they propose can be perpetrated by men and women as a reaction to stressful events and is unlikely to repeat or escalate. The latter, predominantly perpetrated by men, is characterised by a pattern of coercive control; the motivation for which is underpinned by men's investments in harmful gender norms about masculinity and femininity (Downes et al., 2019). Downes et al. (2019) highlighted how men attending a DVPP voluntarily in the UK viewed traditional masculine norms, such as being a provider, a protector and head of the household, as key aspects of being a partner and a father. This was contrasted with gender complementary roles for women who were expected to conform to traditional femininity in which they should be nurturers, homemakers and (unrealistically) undesirable to other men to avert their own jealousies and insecurities. Violence and abuse were legitimated by perceived transgressions to this invested gender order.

Whilst widely accepted gender constructions can indeed explain why men are more likely than women to engage in coercively controlling behaviours, it still does not explain why only *some* men invest in harmful and restrictive gender norms and resort to abusing their partners when they transgress their gender expectations. Enter biographical contingencies.

A psychosocial perspective contends that the observed disparities in the use of male coercively controlling violence can be explained by revealing men's *psychic* investments in particular gendered discourses and practices (Gadd and Jefferson, 2007). From this perspective abusive and controlling behaviours have specific meanings that can be (partly) located in inadequate early care experiences. Painful emotional experiences have consequences for healthy psychosocial development and manifest in gendered ways. For abusive men, 'unresolved anxieties' can play out and are transferred into adult intimate relationships, saddling their female partners with their own vulnerabilities (ibid: 15). Fantasies of *emphasised femininity* (Connell, 1995) are simultaneously invested because discourses about who should do and receive (feminised) care can be rationalised within these unequal gender power relations. In other words, emotional dependencies shape psychic investments in gender-differentiated discourses as one (consciously or not) feeds and justifies the other.

When these unrealistic gender expectations are not forthcoming, it can produce anxiety-provoking feelings and emasculating dependencies that are masked and (psychically and discursively) disowned through the twin processes of 'splitting and projection' (Gadd and Jefferson, 2007: 15). These bad feelings and intolerable truths (jealousies, fears, resentment, and inadequacies) are, however, attributed to (perceived) failed women. So, whilst sexist justifications may be invested in to mitigate violence in its aftermath (Hearn, 1998), such denials can also be more complexly viewed as unconscious defences against troubling recognitions and the stigma associated with being labelled a domestic abuser (Gadd and Jefferson, 2007).

A psychosocial perspective thus builds upon feminist insights whilst arguing for an understanding of coercive control that recognises a more defended and contradictory (rather than uncomplicatedly rational and instrumental) subject that also incorporates more intangible correlates into aetiological explanations of perpetrators' motives. The next section will critically document the development of criminal justice DVPPs in England and Wales and argues that they have failed to engage with such complexities by focusing too narrowly on perpetrator cognitions. Such observations may ultimately explain why DVPPs more generally have been less successful at reducing non-violent coercively controlling tactics (Kelly and Westmarland, 2015).

Criminal justice DVPPs and coercive control: conceptual, operational, and methodological complexities

Criminal justice DVPPs in England and Wales were originally underpinned by gendered power understandings of male violence. In 2003, the Integrated Domestic Abuse Programme (IDAP) and the Community Domestic Violence Programme (CDVP) became the standardised models within probation settings, centred (rather loosely) around the US pro-feminist 'Duluth Model' and its *Power and Control Wheel* (Pence and Paymar, 1993). At the same time, the North American *What Works* movement was dominating the (increasingly managerialist) rehabilitation field in England and Wales, in which it was proposed that cognitive behavioural interventions were most effective in reducing reoffending (Morran, 2016,

Renehan and Henry, 2022). Programme facilitators used the Power and Control Wheel to explore with male participants the range of tactics they intentionally used to control their female partners for reasons that were motivated by male privilege and maintaining sex inequities. Abusive men were thus challenged on their destructive behaviour and encouraged to confront their sexist attitudes which were subsequently targeted for restructuring towards more egalitarian thinking (Bullock and Condry, 2013, Hughes, 2017).

Whilst IDAP and (to a lesser extent) CDVP were aligned with feminist critiques of masculinity, the move to a standardised cognitive behavioural model was criticised for its narrow focus on cognition, reducing widespread sex inequalities to perpetrators' faulty thoughts, and imposing a rigid narrative framework on the emotional complexity of men's lives and experiences (Bullock and Condry, 2013, Gadd, 2004). In other words, the 'emotional truths of men's experiences' were being neglected (Gadd, 2000: 431). Some practitioners and researchers have long argued that the emotional and gendered pains of desisting from domestic abuse are not sufficiently addressed within rigidly structured, cognitive behavioural programmes and can engender the very feelings of shame and defensiveness that are antithetical to psychological change (Gadd, 2004, Gadd and Jefferson, 2007, Garfield, 2007, Hughes, 2017, Morran, 2011, Morran, 2022, Renehan and Henry, 2022).

Fast forward a decade, IDAP and CDVP were phased out. However, the decision for their disbandment in favour of BBR (more on this below) appears to have preceded a post-hoc evaluation which determined, to some small but significant extent, that these programmes had been effective in reducing repeat *incidents* (Bloomfield and Dixon, 2015). The emphasis is placed on 'incidents' because the evaluation included differences in reconvictions associated with physical violence and no measure of coercive control. Nevertheless, evaluations which rely solely on quantifiable outcome measures do require caution as the process of change in respect of coercively controlling behaviours can be 'uneven and contradictory' (Downes et al. 2019: 267). Drawing on qualitative semi-structured, pre- and post-programme interviews with coercively controlling men on voluntary programmes in the UK, Downes and colleagues demonstrated that 'unpicking and letting go' of traditional masculine and harmful gender norms was key to the process of those who demonstrated change, as was the men's ability to reconnect *incidents*, often rationalised as 'situational' (Hearn, 1998), to wider issues of gender, power and control (Kelly and Westmarland, 2016). Doing 'emotional work', such as confronting 'anxiety and jealousy that underpinned' (Downes et al., 2019: 278) the men's use of coercive control was also key to dismantling invested gender constructions. The extent to which such dependencies can be addressed in cognitive behavioural programmes though has been a point of contention (Gadd, 2004, Gadd and Jefferson, 2007).

Nevertheless, BBR shifted from gender to more individualised understandings of abusive men's motivations and, despite evidence to the contrary, purported to adopt a more therapeutic (note – less confrontational) and flexible approach to its predecessor (Hughes, 2017). Whilst there remains some alignment with feminist critiques

of masculinities on an (albeit superficial) social-cognitive level, BBR's individualised approach encouraged male participants to identify what *they* felt had happened in their own lives to motivate their offending, such as parental and peer influences. Premised on the same cognitive behavioural principles of its predecessors, once these unique pro-offending attitudes are identified, they are targeted for cognitive restructuring. Emotion management (not understanding) and conflict resolution techniques are also taught. In sum, 'uncontaminated by cognitive deficit or emotion' (Knight et al., 2016), it is assumed that male participants will be able to draw on these psychological resources to avoid violence and abuse.

As it stands, BBR has not yet been evaluated and we still do not know to what extent BBR's individualised, and skills-based approach is effective in reducing violence or coercive control. This article makes an original contribution in respect of the latter. It does so by exploring conceptual, operational and methodological complexities (rather than outcome effectiveness) in working with domestically violent men, the process by which they may or may not change, and the highly contingent nature of that process for individual men when considering their inner emotional worlds and social worlds, and lives outside of the programme. In doing so, it raises the question whether BBR (and skills focussed programmes more broadly) might be better at dealing with so called situationally violent incidents given their focus on emotion management and cognitive skills.

Research overview: producing and analysing data with defended psychosocial subjects

The research reported on below was part of a wider PhD study which involved several in-depth interviews and ethnographic-based observations of 11 BBR programme practitioners (facilitators, women's safety workers and practice manager) and 10 male participants, the latter of whom could be broadly described as coercively controlling and emotionally dependent (Renehan, 2021a). The observations were complemented by analysis of pre-sentence reports and men's post-programme reviews that were compiled by designated facilitators. Ethical clearance was granted by the University of Manchester and agreed at a local level with the participating Community Rehabilitation Company, where BBR programmes were delivered prior to the unification of the Probation Service in June 2021 where they are now delivered in-house. The men were recruited by telling them about the study and aims during a pre-group session, were versed on the limits of confidentiality, and advised that their participation would be anonymous. As such, interviews were anonymised at the point of transcription and pseudonyms were used throughout.

The current article draws specifically upon the ambiguous accounts of eight BBR programme facilitators (seven females and one male), each of whom participated in two in-depth interviews, to explore the merits and limitations of skills-based programmes in addressing coercively controlling behaviours. All were white British. Most had an undergraduate degree in the broad areas of criminology, sociology,

health, and social work and one also held a certificate in counselling. All were employed full-time as probation service officers, meaning they did not hold qualified probation officer status. All had completed Core Skills training in which they learn to deliver programme sessions using a motivational and therapeutic approach. In addition, facilitators must undergo 5 days BBR training. The article also presents an in-depth case study of a male participant, 'Dale', to demonstrate the implications of working within the confines of what was still a narrow cognitive framework. Dale participated in four individual interviews: during programme inception, following the first six-week foundation module, close to programme end, and during a six-month follow-up. Dale's interviews alone produced 174 pages of transcript. The analysis also draws on informal discussions with Dale and his post-programme review. Whilst most of the other men in the wider study presented as coercively controlling and with contradictory narratives of change, Dale was selected as a case study because he overtly expressed, and was conflicted about, being controlling in his relationships. Further, Dale was the only participant to participate in a six-month follow-up after programme completion, therefore any self-perceived changes and life changes could be captured and reflected upon many months after attending the programme.

Interviews were undertaken using the Free Association Narrative Interview Method (FANIM) (Hollway and Jefferson, 2013) which was chosen because it can elicit rich accounts about specific events whilst acknowledging that people are not always willing or able to 'tell it like it is'. FANIM is premised on the notion of a defended subject, assuming that people are motivated to tell stories in ways that psychically 'protect vulnerable aspects of the self' (ibid:24) and simultaneously invested (consciously or not) in empowering discourses which position them in a better light. 'Why' questions are avoided at all costs as they trigger 'speculative theorising', whilst free association follows an emotional rather than cognitive logic as this offers a fuller picture and deeper insights into a 'person's unique meanings' (ibid:141). This was both useful for eliciting detailed practitioners' facilitation stories and to aid interpretations of accounts of violence and control, narratives of change, and the psychosocial contingencies upon which these are fragilely hinged. Narrative appreciative questions (Lavis et al., 2017) were also asked to elicit stories about best practice and how the men reinterpreted prior incidents in view of any newly acquired knowledge and skills.

A psychosocial analysis was deployed (Gadd and Jefferson, 2007, Hollway and Jefferson, 2013). Instead of fragmenting data and ironing out the complexity of emotional experiences through coding, interviews were read in their entirety, paying attention to repetition, avoidances, and contradictions. Analysis was aided through the twin psychoanalytic concepts of defensive 'splitting' and 'projection' (a kind of black and white, all or nothing thinking). Specifically, attention was paid to where Dale separated things (people and life events) into good and bad, where bad feelings were dislodged and attributed to someone or something else, and where more empowering (gendered) discourses and subject positions within these were drawn upon to make sense of, or disown, his troubling feelings. Interpreting omissions and avoidances in such a way adds a psychic dimension to male perpetrators' gendered accounts which is necessary because:

> By articulating the many emotional truths of men's 'experience' we expose the disparity between what men feel, say and do, the interface of men's *psychic investment* in *social discourses* and *practices*' (Gadd, 2000:431 emphasis in original).

These emotional truths are decontextualised within experimental evaluation designs, often left unelicited through semi-structured interviews, or ironed out during thematic analysis. By adding a psychic dimension, this article seeks to explain why it is that some men and not others resort to abusing their partners and to highlight why DVPPs need to be more responsive to the emotional vulnerabilities that feed into investments in rigid and restrictive, harmful gender norms. This reconceptualisation, then, offers a vantage point through which programmes that assume a light view of abusive men can be examined.

Facilitators' accounts on the merits and limitations of a skills-based approach to addressing coercively controlling violence

In a significant move away from its gendered predecessors, BBR adopted more individualised understandings of intimate partner abuse and has three overarching aims – to teach men emotion management, cognitive restructuring, and conflict resolution skills. Emotion management requires men to develop awareness of physiological cues and emotion management techniques such as 'time out'. Once calm, psychological resources such as 'self-talk' and developing an awareness of sexist and/or other pro-violent attitudes can be drawn upon to reduce potential for conflict. There were, however, concerns amongst facilitators that some of the BBR's content was not 'DV relevant' and the extent to which this material adequately addressed concerning coercively controlling behaviours:

> Sometimes exercises don't, sometimes you could forget it was about domestic abuse… but things like you've got other issues, like revenge porn, stalking, harassment, those kinds of things are not really – the programme doesn't necessarily seem strong enough sometimes to address some of those issues. I know with harassment, when we've had people who've been on the groups particularly, they're very slippery. (Tracy, facilitator)

Given what is known about the gendered underpinnings of abusive men's coercive behaviours (Downes et al., 2019) and the increased risk to women when sexist beliefs are invested in to justify abuse post-separation (Monckton Smith, 2020), facilitators' concerns expressed here and elsewhere regarding the gendered nature of this work (Renehan, 2021b, see also Hughes, 2019) suggest that the content and/or approach of the programme may require further review. Nevertheless, it is also crucial not to overlook the relationship between 'masculinity, violence, and personal crisis' in the prevention of domestic abuse (Gadd, 2012: 496). Understood psychosocially within the context of DVPPs, this means having time and space to work with male participants responsively, taking care to explore where emotional vulnerabilities are implicated in these gendered investments.

In cognitive behavioural programmes, however, such an array of complex emotions and structural inequalities are translated into 'risk factors' on the assumption that they can be controlled and that thinking deficits can be restructured and managed, such as is reflected in the facilitators' account below:

> We're not so much power and control any more… now it's more about emotional management, isn't it? We do get some people that are really instrumental and it's about manipulation, but we do get some that just, in that moment, blow up…and don't know how to calm themselves down…in terms of the emotional management side of things and lads that have got no – no real skills, it's about getting them to understand the skills and getting them to – to learn a different way, that's very much sort of the focus of BBR. The - the instrumental lads, it's – it is about manipulation and it is about control, that side of it, for me that's more about getting them to see consequence. (Grace, facilitator)

It was unclear whether such divergences in motivation were revealed by perpetrators' admissions or facilitators' interpretations of them. What was apparent was that despite individualised understandings in what motivated men's violence, the solution remained the same: the men who attended the programme were expected to acquire the skills necessary to control their emotions and manage their cognitive distortions and reactions to conflicts.

The skills-based approach based on Grace's account raised doubt as to how far BBR's purported innovation in individualised understandings departs from the rational and responsibilising cognitive tools of its predecessors (Gadd, 2004). To elaborate, whilst BBR elicits differences in how men think and feel, these are still unproblematically translated into cognitive distortions. Whether such attitudes are presumed to be acquired by perceived male entitlement or from pro-criminal family and peers, BBR still assumes the view that once faulty thoughts have been replaced with 'pro-social' ones, the rational subject is free to choose non-violent alternatives. In sum, male participants who are *out of control* and those who use *control instrumentally*, in effect are all 'treated' the same within a one size fits all psychological discourse of cognitive behaviourism.

Though facilitators broadly agreed that addressing thinking deficits was important and emotion management was a useful skill to learn, reducing the complexity of men's lives, experiences and motivations to manageable incidents was practically problematic (such as will also be demonstrated in Dale's case study). Despite BBR's renewed focus on *emotion management*, facilitators' accounts revealed that it was not so focussed on attending to *emotion understanding*. Whilst BBR had been 'sold' as a 'goal (as opposed to a deficit) focussed programme' (Anna), this did not translate easily into practice. This was because the session 'learning points' and the 'rigid' and 'repetitive' (400-page) manual within which these were embedded, were prioritised over the relational aspects of desistance focussed practice (see similar concerns in Hughes, 2017). Facilitators were troubled that they were unable to be responsive to the emotional difficulties some men expressed, claiming (and sometimes were observed to be (Renehan, 2021b)), 'running' around like 'headless

chickens' (Grace) and 'into sessions' ill-prepared (Tracy, facilitator). As such, delivering programmes was compared to working on a 'conveyor belt':

> Erm, they do [men in BBR] start opening up and disclosing but then you don't see them so you never, you never find out what they've been doing. So to me, it's you've done your piece and then you're on, you're moving on. It's like a conveyor belt. (Helen, facilitator)

> Um, I think sometimes it can just feel very much like conveyor belt, just doing what we have to do. And that isn't what it's [BBR] designed to do. You know, it is designed to be effective. That's what it was written for. (Sarah, facilitator)

This sat uncomfortably with facilitators after encouraging male participants to open up, or when trying to be 'responsive' to those who presented with histories of abuse, self-harm and sometimes even suicidal thoughts (Ellie). They were also concerned that this might be the first time some men had received any kind of support in their lives only for that to end abruptly without any follow-on support from the programme:

> There's a lot of vulnerabilities and I think, like I said, a lot of them do form this relationship, erm and this trust, and then we just cut that off. (Anna, facilitator)

> I think that would be a really good idea [after care] cos it seems that, that they, they get nothing, or whatever, up to a certain point until they land in this room…and then three to four months later we sling them out. (Dave, facilitator)

Facilitators also imagined (and wanted) relevant training and time to work in more responsive ways:

> I suppose it'd be just that we, we would have the time to be able to be properly responsive. Um (pause) and I suppose for us as well, that we'd have proper training in knowing and being able to support people with, with specific needs. (Tracy, facilitator)

As will be demonstrated, such practices ruptured an important therapeutic alliance (see Garfield, 2007) Dale had built with his designated facilitator and contributed to him feeling rejected and resorting to defensive splitting when admissions about his coercively controlling behaviour became too difficult to face alone.

Dale's case study will illustrate the limitations of skills-based programmes that dilute gendered content, reduce gendered inequities to abusive men's attitudes, and uncomplicatedly translate emotions into risk factors that are assumed to be simply rationally controlled. The case study begins by locating Dale's desire for control within the psychosocial framework proposed and, following Kelly and Westmarland (2016) how he defensively *disconnects* his coercively controlling violence from, and gradually begins to *reconnect* it to, understandings of gender and power. However, by exploring Dale's invested narratives of change, it demonstrates how and why these are fragilely contingent upon working through the emotional

antecedents of his coercively controlling violence and how BBR was not designed to address this. Ultimately, the superficial skills upon which he had been taught to rely failed, which invoked a renewed defensiveness in Dale and resulted in him *re*-disconnecting his motivations from gender and power as a defence against 'troubling recognitions' (Bollas, 1993) that were too painful to face up to alone. The methodological issues in capturing such complexities are discussed.

Dale: a case study

Locating the desire for control: defensiveness and disconnecting violence from gender and power

Dale was in his late 40s and had a history of domestic abuse and convictions against former partners. Dale was from a working-class family and was proud to have been in his profession for two decades but had recently lost his job after assaulting his girlfriend, Lucy, with whom he had worked. Dale had been serving a suspended sentence at the time for assaulting his previous partner, Sarah. Recalling the events of the incident with Lucy during our initial interview, Dale explained that he had only been trying to protect her:

> We'd been out and had a couple of drinks when she *told me* – and we'd had a, a silly, a silly row, er, argument, er, and she, er, basically just tried to get out, out the door, just in her, her, er, her knickers and t-shirt to drive somewhere. Er, so I just basically stopped her from going because she was gonna go in the car and we'd had three or four drinks. Um, she started screaming, er, and one of the neighbours rung police…I was arrested. I were interviewed… I told 'em I put me hands on her to push her back. So on that basis, er, on that basis I were, I were arrested.

What Lucy actually 'told' Dale I shall return to later. But despite Lucy sustaining a 'cut lip' (and feeling the sudden need to flee the house in just her underwear) Dale did not think what he 'did that night justified' being sent to jail and attributed his harsh punishment to his previous conviction against his ex-partner, Sarah. Dale described his relationship with Sarah as violent and 'toxic' on 'both sides' and said that it was only her 'offering me out' when they were in the pub one day that led to his suspended sentence:

> It started getting a, a bit heated then and, er, and then I, *I said sommat like, about* – Cos her voice'd just go up and up and up, so people were, were looking and ear-wigging. And I'm a bit proud that I'm – You know, like if stuff needs saying, well, you know what I mean? Not in front of everybody to – Er, and then she just said, "Get outside." So I've gone outside and she just turned and I, and I've hit her. I've punched in her stom', her stomach and then punched her in her face, um (pause) and I've just walked, walked out.

Minimising his own actions, Dale said that Lucy's screaming that night had been an overreaction to her having been 'proper beat' up by a 'couple of bad uns' in the past and, what had started as a 'silly' argument, culminated in Lucy 'losing her shit',

whilst Dale 'were still cool', claiming he would not have done 'anything' because he 'idolised her'.

Dale attempted to 'disconnect' these apparently isolated incidents from gender, power and control (Kelly and Westmarland, 2016) by rationalising them as situationally unique, in 'mutual combat' (Johnson, 1995) or different from the behaviour of other abusive men. However, Dale did acknowledge that he could be 'confrontational' and 'controlling', particularly if his partners had 'done summit' he did not like, though attributed his own sexual indiscretions to them for giving him 'too much rope'. Dale said he would also 'sulk' and 'make' his partners feel 'match box size' before going out and described incidents in which he physically resorted to stopping them from leaving when his coercive tactics failed. Whilst Dale clearly expressed a perceived male entitlement in his motivations, he was also confused as to why he behaved this way in relationships and said that he had raised this with his designated programme facilitator just before our second interview:

> I just, I just said, erm, to the lady before I come in here, why is it? – cos this is what I do in my relationships. I'm greatest person in world, I, I am, do you know what I mean, I laugh, joke. Get wi' 'em. And then as soon as I get wi' 'em I change. Do you know what I mean? I do control, you know, all the name calling and, you know. It's like if they're doing summit I don't like that's when, you know.

By eliciting and exploring Dale's psychic investments in gender-differentiated discourses during subsequent interviews, it became clearer why Dale might behave in ways that he knew to be destructive whilst revealing a complex and troubling past.

Biographical contingencies in the desire for coercive control

Despite Dale claiming his childhood 'weren't violent or owt', he did admit to getting a 'few good hidings' off his dad. Such 'hidings' may in fact have invited the attention of Children's Services by contemporary standards. When asked to elaborate, Dale recalled being given such a 'crack' once that he fell through the coal house doors and another time being dragged from his bed and hit with his dad's 'fist' after which he 'cried meself to sleep'. Significantly, Dale remembered that only he was subject to his father's violence despite being one of three siblings. This would explain Dale's comparable lack of emotional resilience, difficult emotions which he had been encouraged to speak about in some depth with Anna, his designated facilitator, during one to one sessions:

> Dale highlighted that his main influence was his mum…[but]…reflected that he felt he couldn't approach her with problems – he stated that she didn't openly show affection. Whilst she used to spend time with them, she wouldn't openly cuddle them, he recalls not being able to leave her side when he was younger – unlike his brother and sister who would confidently go and play. [Dale] stated that he has never been brought up with closeness so therefore this is how he is in his relationships – especially with his own children. He highlighted he is not comfortable with hugging to this day and describes himself as "unloving" and unable to express his emotions effectively in a

> relationship…When reflecting on his relationship with his father, he stated…that he feels his father is "nout but a f**king bully with my mum". (Anna, facilitator: Programme Review)

Unlike his brother and sister then, being singled out for violence had created emotional dependencies in a young Dale who craved reassurances from his mother (a victim of domestic abuse herself) that unfortunately never came. This was clearly still a source of unresolved pain for Dale during our interviews, as was what he saw as his mother's failure to intervene in the abuse he experienced. These unresolved anxieties and dependencies resurfaced within his intimate relationships (Gadd and Jefferson, 2007), masked within defensive denials and rationalised in more masculine ways that positioned him [much like his father] as reasonable in his coercively controlling violence. Dale's accounts revealed that he expected his partners to tolerate his 'boozing' and 'cheating' – something he did a 'lotta times' back when he 'were decent looking' and had 'a bit of summit about' him. However, Dale was now faced with the realisation that he was not 'summit' back then, and certainly was not now, and was 'scared' that his partners would recognise this, cheat on him or leave. Dale hoped BBR could help him to have a 'normal relationship'.

Changing Dale? Reconnecting incidents to gender, power, and control

Dale was visibly distressed during his second interview for reasons that were not disclosed until our final conversations, though I was concerned enough to report his presentation to the programmes team. Despite BBR's purported therapeutic approach, Dale said he felt unable to disclose difficult feelings in a 'classroom full of blokes' and said that 'check -ins' which should have offered collective reflective spaces should be done 'away with' as none of the men revealed the 'truth' about how they really felt. Dale did, however, value his one-to-one sessions with his designated facilitator (Anna) and had today admitted 'for the first time' about how 'shit' he had been feeling and talked how he could 'go about putting things right'. Dale explained that being able to discuss difficult feelings always left him feeling 'a bit … taller in me shoulders'.

Dale also began to talk about how difficult feelings were entangled with his coercively controlling behaviour and reflected on what he had learned so far by attending BBR. Drawing on cognitive restructuring techniques and concepts, Dale had begun the process of 'reconnecting' (what he had previously described as situational and mutually) violent incidents to gender, power and control (Kelly and Westmarland, 2016). Dale now admitted to assaulting Sarah (his previous partner who 'absolutely idolised him') as a reaction to her telling him that she was going out with friends, a point at which he had cut his sentence off in his initial interview:

> Unbeknown to me she'd arranged to meet a friend, [and had said] "I'm going out for summit to eat". Erm, so I – that day I [said], "Well, you're not going." Do, do you know what I mean, "you'll be up to no good". Now… [if] I'd a picked holes in what she were

> doing and just said all right…Because…You never give me any reason to, to think she's cheating.

Dale's admission appeared to be evidence of the emasculating dependencies and gendered investments he had previously defensively masked, and he reflected that we would not be 'having this conversation now' if he had just had this knowledge before. Moreover, Dale claimed that this knowledge coupled with learning the emotion management skill 'time out' sooner might have prevented him from going to 'jail'. When revisiting the incident with Lucy in which he prevented her from leaving in her underwear, Dale was able to express how fears about Lucy leaving him were tied up with sexist justifications for physically preventing her from doing so:

> She were gonna go to her mate's, er, her mate (pause) isn't a nice person, she takes drugs, and I know Lucy doesn't – didn't – doesn't – but she'd had a couple a partners, *do you know what I mean*…So I didn't want her going there, so that's what it were… And I should a let her go. Now if I'd have had that, if I'd have had that knowledge that I have now.

It was evident that what Lucy had actually 'told' Dale, a point at which he cut off and avoided during our initial interview, was that she was going to her friends, something Dale clearly did not want to hear. Such avoidances raise the question whether BBR *had* facilitated a renewed understanding of his actions – incidental ('silly') to controlling (gendered power) – as he already knew this to be wrong. This shift in violence and change talk (Hearn, 1998) might more accurately reflect a defensiveness in the interview context which, after building trust, meant Dale felt far more comfortable to disclose. Or it may be that some things only become thinkable when shared between two minds (Bollas, 2013) and by 'allowing interviewees to follow the threads of their emotional experience as they transform it into freshly discovered meanings' (Hollway and Jefferson, 2013: 151).

Dale's admissions also raise questions about how narratives of coercive control and change are elicited and, as discussed below, the psychosocial contingencies upon which these invested 'tales of reform' (Gadd and Farrall, 2004: 148) are fragilely hinged. Such insights have important implications for the development of DVPPs in that they reveal the need for programmes to be more responsive to the emotional difficulties men bring to the room and to work through the defensive projections in which they are masked. The consequences of failing to do so are now revealed.

(Re)Disconnecting coercively controlling violence from gender, power and control

During our third interview, Dale admitted that his previous low mood had been due to Lucy ending their relationship (again) because of Dale's 'controlling' behaviour, 'pecking her head' and questioning her movements. However, Dale now felt 'in a good place' and claimed that BBR had 'really, really helped' him. This favourable outlook had, however, coincided with a recent reconciliation with Lucy who had

commented upon his progress during an argument that might have usually resulted in an aggressive outburst. This had given Dale 'a massive boost' and said that he was determined to use self-talk skills in the future to challenge himself on perceived (and unfounded) infidelities.

Whilst not doubting the sincerity of Dale's claims, my reservations about how useful these conceptual tools might be to him beyond intellectualising and in the long-term, without attending to the emotional vulnerabilities entangled in his coercively controlling violence, were confirmed during subsequent informal discussions. During a 'three-day-bender', Dale had been unhappy about an upcoming trip Lucy had planned with her friend. Dale had checked her phone, called her a 'fat cow' and accused her of 'hiding something' and told her to 'go fuck herself'. When presented with difficult situations in which old fears arose, Dale had resorted to belittling tactics, projecting his own vulnerabilities onto Lucy who, on this occasion, was unwilling (or unable) to provide the reassurances Dale craved, reigniting self-loathing feelings by calling him 'vile' and 'cruel'. These intolerable anxieties were exacerbated by the coincidental ending of the BBR programme which Dale now claimed was not working and from which he had now 'switched' off. Dale also said he felt 'let down' by the programme after being given 'all these tools' but subsequently 'boot[ed] out the door' and now felt 'in world on me own' and feared he would reoffend.

During a six-month follow-up interview, Dale said it had been a 'long, hard twelve, thirteen month' which was 'still on-going' having been turned down for two jobs in his profession after criminal record checks. Dale said he had a 'right good life' before the 'summit or nothing' incident with Lucy – who was 'cuckooed' anyway – that had now 'wrecked' his life. A once 'popular' character in the area, Dale continued to be 'pulled' on the street and felt constantly 'judged'. Reflecting on the incident with Lucy, Dale said all that had happened:

> That night I'd – she was trying to get outta door to drive her car, she'd had a few drinks, she were in her bra and knickers cos we'd been pissed – a random argument that, you know, ninety percent country probably has, you know what I mean. But because I were pushing her back and saying, "You're not going, you're not…" she was screaming. Yeah. I should a just let her go and get done for drink driving.

Dale had begun to *re-disconnect* his violence from gender, power and control by trivialising arguments as 'silly' like most of the 'country probably has', returning to less threatening discourses that positioned him as an equal victim or heroically saving women. Suffering 'knockbacks' from potential employers and feeling increasingly 'judged' had left him feeling deeply ashamed – the perfect ingredients to trigger self-loathing and projection, and the antithesis of change. But such defensiveness was the only 'tool' left in Dale's bag, as the pains that come with transformation were clearly not worth the bother and/or too difficult to face alone. This highlights the consequences of the *pains of desistance* (Nugent and Schinkel, 2016) when the benefits of relational desistance and social capital are overlooked in the pursuit of personal and correctional rehabilitation (Renehan and Henry, 2022).

In the long-term, Dale's experiences (similar to many of the men interviewed for this study) pose the question that cognitive behavioural, skills-based programmes that work with emotions on a largely superficial level and teach men techniques to manage their reactions to conflicts are unlikely to address the root of the many emotional antecedents and gendered investments that underpin coercive control (Gadd and Jefferson, 2007) and the complex relational and structural contexts in which these operate and resurface.

Concluding thoughts: conceptual, operational, and methodological implications

This article has explored how and why some men engage in coercively controlling behaviours and what this means for the development and efficacy of DVPPs. The *how*, that is the process of coercive control, has perhaps now gained wide consensus and has been key to understanding *women's experiences* of domestic abuse and the support they will need before, through and beyond reporting this (Forbes, 2022). The *why*, that is what motivates someone to behave in such destructive ways when there are available alternatives, however, remains contested and becomes a more complex nuanced question when explored at the individual level. The why has important implications for how to *respond to men* who use coercive tactics. DVPPs offer a crucial juncture at which abusive men can be supported in understanding and letting go of their desire to control.

This article proposes that to reduce such psychologically harmful behaviours as observed in the most troubling and troubled of men, the desire for control needs to be conceptualised within a framework that acknowledges the gendered nature and impacts of coercive control *and* the emotional vulnerabilities which shape some men's *psychic investments* in excessively harmful gendered discourses and practices (Gadd and Jefferson, 2007). The word investment, rather than choice, encourages a more complex understanding of coercive control and thus how to respond to this within the context of DVPPs. Understanding specific meanings in investments for coercively controlling violence opens up possibilities for working with men in more meaningful ways and in full knowledge that journeys of change are painful, threatening, cannot be undertaken alone or simply in one's mind, and must therefore be worth the bother.

Rich and ambiguous accounts such as those elicited here offer new insights into how, for whom, and under what circumstances DVPPs may or may not work. In this case, it shines a light on the limits of programmes which are orientated towards teaching harmed and harming men skills to superficially manage their emotions, without fully engaging them in understanding the complexities of such feelings and how these are implicated in their harmful gendered investments. This does not mean that learning emotion management skills and developing the psychological resources to challenge problematic thinking are not useful. Indeed, Dale attempted and was able to apply these in certain circumstances. Unfortunately, they were short-lived when intolerable feelings and fears that were not dealt with

inevitably resurfaced. Dale's accounts also raise ethical questions about DVPPs that elicit painful stories for the sole purposes of translating them into cognitive distortions, whilst depriving facilitators of the time, therapeutic knowledge, and skills of working through these difficult but unaddressed feelings (Renehan, 2021b). Finally, they raise questions about the reliability of abusive men's narratives of change when these are extracted from the messy, contradictory, and complex (emotional and social) worlds in which they live and the fragility upon which these invested narratives are hinged. Programmes must be able to support men during and beyond the programme to address such emotional difficulties and evaluations must be methodologically capable of capturing such complexities (Renehan and Henry, 2022) and acknowledge that such interventions are unlikely to be sufficient in the lives of such troubled and troubling men without engaging with gender relations and masculinities more generally.

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