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“I’ve never felt such absolute devastating loss”: A photo elicitation exploration of men’s  
post-separation experiences of coping after intimate partner violence

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### Abstract

Current research and statistics support that there are a significant number of male victims of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), yet less is known about how men cope with, and indeed move on from, these experiences post-separation. The aim of the current study is to discuss the findings from a photo elicitation study exploring men's post-separation experiences of coping after IPV experiences; photo-elicitation as a method of interviewing is simply the use of photos within an interview setting (Harper, 2002), they are used as a stimulus to elicit richer accounts of the topic under study (Frith & Harcourt, 2007). We interviewed 16 men who brought photos that represented their experience for discussion. Interviews were analysed thematically, and several overarching themes were identified: a) Power, b) Post-separation Support, c) Systemic Injustice and Separation, d) Impact and Change. Men described the ways in which they engaged in mechanisms to help their "recovery" and help them to cope, but these efforts were often hampered by ongoing issues of power with their ex-partners, gender stereotyped treatment, a lack of support from systems they approached for help, and separation from their children. Findings are discussed in relation to current legislation and practice, with recommendations made around the need for tailored support and intervention to support men and their children.

*Key Words:* intimate partner violence; male victims; post-separation abuse; recovery; domestic abuse

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) is a significant social and societal problem; where there has been a historical focus on exploring men's perpetration and women's victimisation experiences (e.g., see Dobash & Dobash, 1979, 2004), the most recent figures suggest there are significant numbers of male victims. For example, the latest United Kingdom (UK) crime survey statistics suggest one in three victims of IPV are male (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2019) which equates to nearly 700 000 men.

Large scale quantitative research and meta-analyses has revealed both the similarities and differences that exist for men and women in terms of their perpetration and victimisation of IPV (e.g., Archer, 2000). This research has been key in highlighting the prevalence of women's violence and men's victimisation. More in-depth work that has explored the experiences of male victims has yielded evidence of significant physical violence, for example Drjiber, Reijnders and Ceelan (2013) found men reported being hit, stabbed with an object, kicked and bitten. Hines et al. (2007) found the most common types of physical violence used were being kicked, punched and choked. Bates' (2019c) study further found evidence of men being assaulted with objects, but also found that men were often attacked when they were vulnerable such as asleep or in the shower. Male victims of IPV are less likely than women to be injured (e.g. see Archer, 2000), but there are still reports of significant injuries particularly in research studies exploring men's experiences in detail. For example, Hines and Douglas (2010) reported that 80% of their sample of male victims described being injured, 35% of which reported a serious injury such as a broken bone. Other research has demonstrated men's experiences of psychological/emotional abuse and coercive control (e.g., Bates, 2019c). For example, Dixon et al. (2020) found evidence that men in their sample were primarily victims of unidirectional aggression, and there was evidence of women's exertion of power and control, often via the use of their children. The authors also

describe the ways in which the slow escalation from psychological abuse and control (that was tolerated by the men) to physical violence had “served to normalize a context of abuse and control” (p. 13). This body of research working with men to understand their experiences has highlighted both the severity and the range of abuse experienced.

Much of this research has focused on exploring experiences of abuse in the relationship, or experiences and barriers to escaping the abuse. However, the end of the relationship does not always mean the end of the abuse, research has demonstrated the prevalence of post-separation abuse in large scale national surveys as well as in more in-depth studies. For example, the Canadian General Social Survey revealed that of those who had identified they had experienced IPV in their relationship, 40% of women and 32% of men reported that some violence occurred after the end of the relationship (see Hotton, 2001); for 24% of those reporting this had escalated post-separation. Within the women's victimization literature, we see evidence of continued abuse and harassment, often linked with psychological or emotional abuse around children and custody arrangements (e.g., Jaffe, Crooks & Poisson, 2003). This points to the need to understand the ways in which abuse continues or changes after the end of a relationship. There has been very little exploration of men's experiences after the end of the relationship. Although, we see evidence of the ways in which the abuse may continue through the stalking literature base, for example a review by Wigman (2009) revealed that a significant number of those victims who are stalked by a former partner are men.

In one of the only studies with this focus on post-separation IPV, Bates (2019a) explored men's experiences through qualitative interviews with 13 men. These men described ongoing and continued harassment, having false allegations made against them, and the use of children as a weapon by their ex-partner, either through withholding or manipulating contact. Legal and administrative systems are often reported by participants to facilitate this

ongoing abuse, to the extent that Tilbrook et al. (2010) coined the phrase legal and administrative aggression. This term represents the way in which one partner or ex-partner can use these systems as another form of power and control; Tilbrook et al. posit this is something that is experienced disproportionately by men due to the gendered systems and stereotypes that exist in the IPV sector. There is evidence of these experiences in men's accounts from the literature (e.g., see Cook, 2009; Migliaccio, 2001; Hines et al., 2007), including reference to false allegations affecting loss of financial stability and homes, and threats to lose their children. False allegations have also been described as the "silver bullet" within custody disputes because of the impact it can have in affecting an alienated parent getting access and contact (Harman, Kruk & Hines, 2018; p. 1284). These are factors that continue post-separation and were indeed seen in Bates (2019a), who further reported the impact on mental health, fear, relationships with children and a lack of trust for new relationships.

Understanding pre- and post-separation experiences of abuse has helped us understand the prevalence, severity, and range of behaviours that have been experienced; understanding the impact of these experiences is also key in helping us inform service provision. IPV victimization has been found to be associated with mental health problems for men and women (Kaura & Lohman, 2007; Afifi et al., 2009). For example, Próspero (2007) used cluster analysis to categorise "high" and "low" levels of IPV victimization with higher levels of victimization associated with worse mental health outcomes. There were no significant gender differences in reported experiences of anxiety, depression, hostility or somatization amongst those reporting "high" levels of victimization. When exploring specifically men's experiences, victimisation has been seen to be associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Hines & Douglas, 2011), suicidal thoughts (Bates, 2019b; Tsui, 2014), feelings of loneliness and helplessness, (Tilbrook, Allan & Dear, 2010),

depression (Hines & Douglas, 2015), and alcohol and drug abuse (Hines & Douglas, 2012). IPV presents a wide range of abusive behaviors that can “terrorize” (Shepard & Campbell 1992), suggesting that whilst the physical impact can be significant and long-lasting, the impact on a person’s sense of self, and self-esteem, can also significantly impact on health (Marshall, 1996).

Exploring experiences of how victims of IPV cope with experiences of victimisation is key to developing an understanding of how service providers can best help and support victims of IPV; for example, an insight into coping strategies can help service providers support the development of effective coping (Zink et al., 2006). Again, what we understand so far about how people recover and move on from IPV has largely come from work with female victims; indeed, there is still a dearth of literature exploring men’s post-separation experiences of coping. For example, studies have shown the importance of, responsive help sources (e.g., Waldrop & Resick, 2004), social support (e.g., Anderson, Renner & Danis, 2012), positive social reactions (Sylaska & Edwards, 2014) and reclaiming a sense of self and identity (e.g., Allen & Wozniak, 2011) in the reduction of negative outcomes associated with being a victim of IPV. It is likely that there will be some overlap here in terms of men’s experiences, but also that there will be some gender-specific differences. Research has emphasised where there is a lot of similar experiences for victims, they are still a heterogenous group with research highlighting similarities but also between group differences (e.g., Rizo & Macy, 2011; Bauer, Rodriguez, Quiroga & Flores-Ortiz, 2012). This emphasises the need to work with all victim groups and understand any overlap as well as group specific differences that can inform support and service provision

Where the above review demonstrates we understand much more now about men’s experiences, there are still gaps in our knowledge about how they cope with these experiences post-separation. Developing this knowledge is important to understand how we



can best support men in this time, but also could help us better understand the longer lasting impact of these experiences. Previous research has explored the impact of men's experiences of IPV through surveys (e.g., Machado, Hines & Matos, 2016) and through qualitative interviews (e.g., Hogan, 2016), which has contributed to our understanding and has informed how we work with victims; however, the agenda and content of these data collection techniques has relied on the researchers' frame of reference of the topic. The aim of the current study is to explore the experiences of men who have been in an abusive relationship with a female partner and how they cope post-separation using a qualitative method that allows the structure of the interview be controlled by the participant. Photo elicitation (PE) involves the use of visual stimulants in an interview setting; the use of images has been found within previous research to strengthen memories to events being described through promoting stronger emotional connections (Harper, 2002). It can be used in a researcher driven or participant driven way depending on who brings the images (Holloway & Wheeler, 2013; Bates, McCann, Kaye & Taylor, 2017); using participant driven PE allows the participants to bring photos that represent their experience and so take control of the content of the interview (Oliffe & Bottorff, 2007; Capstick, 2012).

PE has been used as a method in a number of different subjects and disciplines including being effectively used with female victims of IPV (Frohmann, 2005) and children who had experienced domestic violence (Wagstaff, 2009). The current study represents the first time this method has been used with male victims and it is hoped it will provide an insight into how men cope and live with their experiences post-separation with a goal of informing services that support men. In a sector that has been established to support and help women as victims and men as perpetrators, it is important that there is evidence informed practice that is responsive to gender specific needs.

## **Method**

### **Participants and Procedure**

This study received full ethical clearance from the University ethics board. The study was advertised as being for men who had been in an abusive relationship with a female partner, and was advertised through organisations that support male victims in the UK and also through social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter). The language for the advert was chosen carefully to account the fact some men do not always identify as victims of IPV due to the continuing gendered stereotypes, we specifically said “We hope to explore the experiences of men who have been in an intimate relationship where there has been violence and control. Specifically, we hope to understand their experiences after the relationship has ended in terms of how they move on, and cope with their experience going forward.” Once participants had responded to the advert, they were sent more information on the study and the brief for the collection of photos. Specifically, after an interview date was arranged, participants were asked to collect between five and ten photos that represented their experiences since their relationship ended. There was a focus on post-separation to understand how men coped after the end of the abusive relationship, although some participants did bring photos from before separation but linked them to their current ongoing coping mechanisms. Participants were given a minimum of two weeks to consider and collect the photos. At the beginning of each interview, the discussion began with a general question about the nature of the relationship with their ex-partner (“Can we start by me asking you about how your relationship was like?”), and then followed on by discussing each photo in the order desired and guided by the participant. The photos replaced the use of a traditional semi-structured interview schedule and allowed the participant to fully guide the direction of the discussion.

Sixteen men were interviewed, and each interview lasted between 38 and 85 minutes. These men identified as majority White British (87.5%), with one identifying as White American (6.25%) and one identifying as White South African (6.25%). Their ages ranged between 33 and 61 years, with an average of 48.75 (SD = 8.43). They further reported relationships lengths of 7 months to 33 years, with an average of 10.57 years. Nine men had children within the sample.

### **Interviews and analysis strategy**

The interview agenda consisted of a rapport building question to allow participants to begin discussing their thoughts and experience. The interviews focused around the participant photos, using these as prompts for discussion; the session concluded by asking participants if there were any photos they would have liked to have brought but were not able to, or if there was anything else they would have liked to add about their experience. Interviews were recorded and fully transcribed.

A thematic analysis was applied to the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006); specifically, a hybrid of inductive and deductive analysis was chosen (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Whilst a hybrid, the analysis was data driven (inductive) and this reflects the lack of existing literature and theoretical frameworks around post separation and the ethos of the data collection technique. However, there are semantically relevant constructs that have influenced the researchers coding processes, for example, legal and administrative aggression. As explained by Braun and Clarke (2012) it is rare for a thematic analysis to be either inductive or deductive, it is more usual for it to involve both top down and bottom up processes. The analytic process involved the two principal researchers independently coding the data following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six step method. The process that followed involved clarifying and revisiting the data until the codes were agreed. A thematic map was

produced to ensure that the codes (extracted data) and the entire data set were represented by the themes and sub-themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Maguire, & Delahunt, 2017). The main objective of this final step was to ensure that the final themes represented the lived experiences of the men in the sample and were contextually meaningful (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2012).

## **Results**

A range of photographs were brought to the interviews that captured both similar and different experiences for each participant. Some photos that were of concrete or tangible things (e.g., a scar from an injury, pets, their home), whereas others were more symbolic and were representative of something that had been impactful (e.g., a park representing starting running, a sculpture representing the pain of the experience). The interview data was analysed thematically (see Braun & Clarke, 2006) and four overarching themes were chosen, each with associated sub themes. These overarching themes were Power, Post-separation Support, Systemic Injustice, Separation, Impact and Change.

### **Overarching theme 1: Power**

This overarching theme reflected men's accounts of ongoing power imbalances that they experienced since the breakdown of their relationship. These were separated and discussed in the following sub-themes: Children, Finances, Social Status, and Personal Agency.

**Sub-themes 1a: Children.** The men within this sample who were fathers described the ways in which their children were used in ongoing, post-separation power dynamics. Where men had described their experience of control within the relationship around the children, this was extended post-separation through alienating behaviours and manipulating

of the parental relationship. For one man, this involved the breakdown of what had seemed to be successful contact arrangements:

*"We separated for the second time and then I used to see my two boys every, twice a week...About 5 or 6 months after that process... she wouldn't let me walk to the door, so the children had to walk from the car to the front door on their own...and she wouldn't let me in the house, she wouldn't speak to me. You know and I tried to keep that out of their line...erm but then one day she just stopped and then...she wouldn't respond, and she wouldn't let me see the children at all...I resulted to filing for a divorce and then...after that she made false allegations about me and then...and my children suddenly had this...story that they believed."* (P12)

For another man, this behaviour occurred through further manipulation of his other support networks too:

*"I talk to my [family member] a lot. This is my coping mechanism. But... see she's attacked my coping thing...She got my...daughter to say that my [family member] had hit her, and I had to call my .. daughter a liar...she .. said, 'mum told me to'. And again, nobody at that point thought that this was a problem...You know I, if I get an accusation, I've got police all over me. I just do not understand it!"* (P6)

For these fathers, the use of the children was described as a purposeful choice to continue to exert control by their ex-partners.

**Sub-theme 1b: Finances.** For many of the men within the sample, they described the ways in which their ex-partners tried to continue to exert power and control through their shared finances:

*...yeah, still frightened of my ex-partner...again I didn't feel like I was heard in mediation. You have got a person who sits there and says well, what are you going to*

*do? You have got a family home here... I'd paid off pretty much all the mortgage, and I wanted 50/50. I thought this is fair, you know I have paid everything. But you have contributed, we had done our thing family has grown up...But that wasn't going to happen. I was offered [money] there and then. In the first mediation, and I was just in tears. And, I just said I can't do it. I can't do it. (P15)*

For some men, this left them with very little resources. For example, for one participant, he lost his house and car which had left him struggling:

*yeah, yeah, yeah. So, she took the car with her as well. Erm so I was and again I spent all my money doing this house...So, I was car less as well. (P1)*

For another man, he described the way in which the control exerted through the ongoing court disputes had meant he lost his job which obviously impacted on his finances:

*I mean, I have lost two jobs because of this because of I need to go to court rather than go to work. (P3)*

**Sub-theme 1c: Personal agency.** For some of the men, they described the ways in which they felt they had lost part of their identity through ongoing power and manipulation, and for one man, he described how he felt he had lost his agency:

*So, I feel like I have no agency, you know, no personal agency in order to affect what's going on with my, with my circumstances, you know, this is just happening to me and the best I can do is try and salvage something. I don't know what, you know, my dignity?...I'm not sure what that is but it's just a, it's a steam roll, you know, this is just coming, coming at me and I can't stop it, you know, so. (P4)*

This participant describes the impact of this loss of control. In the aftermath of experiencing abuse, especially where there has been coercive control and psychological or emotional abuse, victims describe the ways in which it has impacted on their sense of self and their self-worth as the quote below illustrate:

*I dunno, I just, obviously I had no self-worth whatsoever, I didn't think anything of myself, but at the same time I didn't want to inflict that on anybody else [laughs]. Erm and I certainly didn't want to inflict that on my daughter, you know what I mean, I didn't want to, what I thought go home and ruin her life by trying to be there. (P 8)*

What was clear within this Overarching theme of Power, was the way in which the participants' ex-partners were able to continue to exert their power despite the fact the relationship had ended. The legislation that governs the use of coercive control post-separation is the Stalking and Harassment legislation and whilst this covers some elements of behaviour (e.g., harassment, following), it does not cover the ways in which these participants described having their finances, children, and agency questioned and manipulated.

### **Overarching Theme 2: Post-separation support.**

This overarching theme reflected men's accounts of how they engaged with support post-separation. These were separated and discussed in the following sub-themes: Formal Support, Informal Support, Self-Care, and Medical.

**Sub-theme 2a: Formal Support.** Some men had chosen not to engage with formal support, but for others they had sought help from male victim charities. For one man, the support he received impacted on him so much he chooses to try and support the charity where he can:

*"[victims support organisation] helped...every now and then I'll donate some money. When it's Christmas or whatever I just put a donation on their page. Ten, twenty pound, whatever I can afford at the time, erm, to help somebody else. I've directed lots of other people there as well, erm, if I see things that are familiar." (P2)*

Another man described how he had engaged with seeing a therapist as a way to try and cope with the experience he had been through:

*I went into that place absolutely broken from what that girl did and I came out of the other side and I was like well do you know what? There is nothing wrong with me at all (P1)*

Some men face barriers to engaging with formal levels of support due to fear of disclosing their experiences. For those who had engaged with this type of support in the current sample, the majority (though not all) had reported positive experiences with these types of support.

**Sub-theme 2b: Informal support.** Men had also utilised more informal sources of support such as friends and family.

*my family and friends are supportive...they've been very supportive um so, that that's made a real difference. (P4)*

Being able to engage with this source of support has been found previously to be key in recovering from traumatic experiences such as IPV. One man reflected on the way that it was about being able to talk about it:

*The more I talk about it the more it helps. And I think that's why I'm encouraging other people to do, the more you talk about it, the more it doesn't matter. (P5)*

Men face many barriers in seeking help and support both during the abuse and post-separation, especially when that abuse continues.

**Sub-theme 2c: Self-care.** Where many of the sample had engaged with both formal and informal sources of help, other men described ways in which they engaged in what we would call "self-care". This included exercise such as running:



*I went for a nice, a nice run this morning, a ten-kilometre run. I run through a local university um, it's good meditation. I've always enjoyed exercise, um it, it lets my mind go um, so I think that's um, that's a key lifeboat for me right now (P4)*

For some this also included the benefits of the exercise, but for others it seemed to be coupled also with being outdoors and in nature. One participant reflected on the power of nature in comparison to more formal methods of therapy:

*Erm and I would say that having been through psychotherapy and having been through CBT [cognitive behavioural therapy], that actually erm you know, what's now recognised as green therapy was the most effect therapy for me. Just spending time outdoors (P14)*

This sub-theme represented men's attempts to engage in mechanisms to improve their sense of wellbeing. Indeed:

*I was trying to upgrade my health and find out what else I could do to improve the quality of my life (P12)*

**Sub-theme 2d: Medical.** The final sub-theme here represented where men had sought more substance or medical based ways to try and cope with the aftereffects of the abuse. One man had had trouble sleeping and sought medication:

*So I'm having trouble sleeping since the, even towards the end of the relationship and now, you know as you're trying to move forward from this, I have trouble sleeping. So, um those are sleeping pills I take every night in order to, in order to sleep so I can be rested in order to um show up and do my job and keep my job (P4)*

This mechanism of coping was described as the only way in which he could cope with the other commitments in his daily life. Another man described the way in which he used alcohol as a way of coping:

*I was also drinking excessively... I wanted to anaesthetise myself a little bit through drinking (P14)*

### **Overarching Theme 3: Systemic Injustice**

This overarching theme reflected men's accounts of how they had experienced systemic injustice through several mechanisms during their recovery. These were disaggregated and discussed in the following sub-themes: Gender stereotypes, formal help-seeking, media and external representations.

**Sub-theme 3a: Gender role stereotypes.** One of the key ways some of the participants described injustice they had experienced seemed to be rooted in societal gender stereotypes.

*When my doctor's incredibly supportive and I say to him 'there's nothing out there for me', and he'll repeat this thing, 'oh, that's because 90 whatever per cent of it happens to women, not men', and he's not, he's not in... that's how infected everything is, as far as I'm concerned. (P6)*

For this man, his attempts to seek help and support had met with a lack of resources; the response from the practitioner in this case represented the common assumption that IPV is a problem of men's violence towards women, despite recent ONS statistics suggesting one in every three victims of IPV are male. Similarly:

*I just feel sometimes that what is difficult for men is that men are normally the abusers... how can a man allow that to happen and all those sorts of things. Particularly, somebody who is a police officer. ...it feels weak that I allowed that to happen. That's just genuinely how I feel, and perhaps that's why men don't talk about these things greatly. (P9)*

These perceptions had affected how this participant, who was formerly a police officer, had understood and labelled his experience, as well as seemingly taking the blame for it. His perception was that it would greatly impact on men's ability to talk about the issues, and indeed this is shown within the previous literature.

Another participant described a vicarious experience that had affected him greatly:

*one of my friends was quite badly assaulted by his, by his partner, his ex-partner. And, through like the most ridiculous of circumstances. He ended up being prosecuted for it. ... following this tale from the girl...and, regardless of this lack of evidence this poor lad was put through the mill, will he lose his job, will he go to prison and this went on for a very very long time. And, one of the things erm she said to me on the night that we broke up was erm was "right, well I will give myself as black eye and we all know who the police will believe" and that one, that one just completely broke me. (P1)*

Watching his friend go through this experience impacted him and his ability to discuss and disclose. He reflected on the ways in which it mirrored his own experience and the recognition that a system that still treats IPV as a gendered phenomenon would mean the veracity of disclosure may be questioned.

**Sub-theme 3b: Formal help-seeking.** Some of the men described the ways in which they had felt they had been treated differently through formal help-seeking because of their gender. One man described the way in which the police had investigated his wife's allegation but without speaking to him:

*Erm during that time my ex-wife erm...made statements to the police saying that erm I'd physically, been physically abusive towards her and erm, that err, erm I'd also been very controlling and, and not let her have any money of her own or anything like*

*that. And err, the police err believed it and errr they took statements off her and erm, never asked me about anything at all erm...and erm, yeah they, they believed everything that she said and err....(P10)*

The impact of the abuse experienced seems exacerbated by the fact they were treated differently as a man.

**Sub-theme 3c: Media and external representations.** Many of the men described the way in which media representations of IPV had impacted on their experience through creating stereotypes and influencing public attitudes. One man describes how it impacted on his ability to discuss what had happened to him:

*It's probably why I don't talk about it a lot, is that people often think that there is no smoke without fire and there is two sides to a story and all the rest of it. I am here telling you how bad she was and she is not here to defend herself, and no doubt if you spoke to her she would have a completely different story to tell you. (P9)*

The way in which he felt he had to justify his experience or defend himself in this way, was perceived to be unfair. Another participant commented on the way in which this meant support for men was either not as visible, or indeed underfunded:

*that stereotype will always be there. I think it will always be there and I think it's just a case of overcoming that. I think a big problem is like [victim's support organisation]. I wouldn't have known about it if my mate hadn't have been what he had been through. Cos, they are a charity, but they still kind of rely on public donations don't they. (P1)*

#### **Overarching Theme 4: Separation, Impact and Loss**

This overarching theme reflected men's accounts of how they had experienced the impact of the abuse, the separation and loss that also ensued. These were separated and

discussed in the following sub-themes: Failure and guilt, the “why question”, and loneliness and loss.

**Sub-Theme 4a: Failure and guilt.** Men in this sample discussed the ways in which they felt they had taken responsibility for their experience, despite being victims of abuse:

*When I look back, sort of fall apart really, and I thought this is it. You have made your bed; this is how it is. This is life. Erm...and grin and bear it. You know, be rejected, suffer. (P15)*

This participant described how he felt he deserved the abuse he had experienced through becoming involved with his partner. For other men, there were feelings of guilt and failure through becoming alienated from their children, for one man, he felt the shame and failure of having left the abusive situation because he had not been able to take his son with him:

*But I have abandoned him, haven't I? I have left him in that situation (P9)*

**Sub-Theme 4b: The “why” question.** Part of their attempts to overcome their experience for some men involved trying to understand why it had happened:

*It's never gonna stop, never gonna stop. It's just hard work, erm, I think she's, I mean I've, I've done my research and, and tried to understand what's wrong with her (P3)*

For some participants, it was reflecting on why their partners had behaved in the way they had, but for others it was more reflecting on why they themselves had been victims:

*the one word that runs through everything that helps me recover is 'why'. That how did I get into that situation, why, why did she do it? (P7)*

**Sub-Theme 4c: Loneliness and loss.** Many men described the loneliness they had felt at the end of their relationship.

*and that was my biggest thing, when we broke up was I hated silence. I hated not having somebody to talk to and erm...so basically it got me out of the house and was a massive reason for coming out of whatever it was that I was in. (P1)*

For this participant, he had lost other social networks through the abuse he experienced, which left him even more isolated once his relationship ended. For another participant, this was associated with an uncertainty about what the future entailed:

*I realised that you know, my days are going to be different than the way I thought they were going to be and that is stressful and that um, keeps me awake, keeps, keeps me from being interested in eating and um, so, it's the stress of how it was and the stress of the uncertainty moving forward, and the unhappiness of what I wanted isn't going to be (P4)*

This was especially the case when there were children involved and the men had lost some (or all) contact as this participant describes:

*I felt that there was this absolute vacuum...Now that absence, that absence was very painful. (P12)*

This loss and loneliness had a significant impact on the physical and mental health of these men:

*I've never felt such absolute devastating loss, and I couldn't, I couldn't work that out. I just knew that it was highly likely that that I...that I might give up. (P13)*

One man describes the way in which he felt it impacted on his identity and his concept of who he was:

*You lose your identity, you lose who you are, your, your, your hobbies, you know, people you care about...your identity's sort of eroded, erm... (P2)*

For one man, this was related to his physical appearance after being scarred through the abuse he was victim to:

*I look up in the mirror and I see my face [long pause]. I see my face, what it looked like before I met her [pause], and I remember being [upset, sighs], going really cold. So I pulled the plug out and I put my hands under the tap, I threw the cold water on my face to, to get the foam off and I looked back up, and I looked in the mirror, and I saw my face, what it was like on the day I, the day I left; completely changed. And I couldn't work out why would that happen (P7)*

Two men reflected on how this loss had also impacted on the extended family:

*but he now doesn't have a relationship. He's [age] nearly my dad, and he doesn't have a relationship with his grandson. (P9)*

*My boys...my mother used to look after the boys all the time and then she was cut out. (P12)*

## **Discussion**

The aim of this study was to explore men's post-separation experiences of coping after IPV victimisation. Previous literature provides us with evidence of the physical and mental health outcomes associated with men's victimisation (e.g., see Próspero, 2007; Rhodes et al. 2009), but this is the first study to explore the process men go through post-separation in order to cope and "recover" from their abusive experience. Photo elicitation was utilised to enable participants to share their narrative in a participatory way, without being guided or influenced unduly by our experiences.

Four overarching themes were chosen from the analysis: Power, Post-Separation Support, Systemic Injustice and Separation and Loss. Men described the ways in which they still experienced ongoing issues around power. Specifically, they referred to their ex-partners exerting power through manipulating the parental relationship, and the finances. Ultimately this resulted in some of the men describing a lack of personal agency and control over their

current situation. This study contributes to our understanding of men's post separation experiences which is still a significantly understudied area. Despite this, we know from the limited literature there is that the current study supports previous studies (see Bates, 2019a) in the themes around children, finances, and ongoing issues of coercive control. It also supports literature that has explored the post-separation experiences of women where we have seen for example further abuse and harassment (e.g., Humphreys & Thiara, 2003), ongoing disputes around custody arrangements (e.g., Jaffe et al., 2003), and child contact (Morrison, 2015). The goal of many victims in abusive relationship is to leave and escape the exertion of power and control, but for the men in this study their post-separation experiences were characterised by ongoing power imbalances. This was particularly impactful for those who were fathers where there was evidence that contact had been withheld, children had been manipulated, and for some men they had become estranged through this behaviour. Mothers may exert direct control over paternal behaviour known as "maternal gatekeeping" (Allen & Hawkins, 1999; McBride et al., 2005) through links to maternal identity or a reluctance to relinquish control.

The term "parental alienation" is controversial within the academic literature, and there is no consensus from researchers or practitioners about its definition or recognition (Harman et al., 2018). Regardless of the term used to name these experiences, the men who were fathers within this study typically described their relationship with their children as having been negatively impacted. The most reported effects were the withholding of contact or contact / relationship manipulation. For some, the parental relationship had been irrevocably damaged. The narrative around this issue in research has been affected by the lack of quality research which means practitioners received mixed messages about what this behaviour is characterised by, who can experience it, and how to best tackle it within a family court and practice setting. Future larger scale research is needed to explore this in more



detail, including with more extensive exploration around interventions (Harman, Bernet & Harman, 2019).

Linked to this, men have previously reported that the fear of losing their children has been an important reason in staying in an abusive relationship (e.g., Hines et al., 2007, Bates, 2019c). The traditional family structure has not always facilitated or encouraged father involvement (McBride et al., 2005); this perception may have informed a stereotype that fathers feel less invested or experience less involvement in the parental role. Research has demonstrated that the importance of the father identity to individual men has predicted future levels of fathers' involvement (Goldberg, 2015), but where this identity is central to men, this may create an opportunity to be manipulated. The impact of then becoming separated, and possibly estranged, from their children is significant; where research has explored the experiences of non-resident fathers in divorce or separation it has suggested no difference in paternal role investment, but that non-resident fathers reported feeling less competent and satisfied in the role despite the role being more salient (Minton & Pasley, 1996). Non-resident male parents have described the loss of their partner and their access to their children as leaving them at a loss and feeling unsure in their identity (Corcoran, 2005). Furthermore, research has shown that estrangement reduces levels of psychological well-being and increases experiences of loss and perceptions of stigma (Blake, 2017). Indeed, targeted parents described the emotional and financial costs associated with engaging with legal and child protection systems (Poustie, Matthewson & Balmer, 2018). For men within Corcoran's (2005) study, they described their "invisible pain" (p.148), where they discussed an inability to recognise and address the pain they were feeling.

Men described engaging with different forms of help to support their health and well-being through these post-separation difficulties. For example, they described using informal sources of help such as talking to friends and family; indeed, previous literature (e.g.,

Machado, Hines & Matos, 2016) has suggested that male victims use informal sources of support the most often. Similarly, men engaged with activities we have labelled as self-care such as exercise, therapy, and being outdoors in nature. The research around health and wellbeing has supported the importance of exercise and green space in improving mental health (e.g., Maier & Jette, 2016) and these were indeed seen to be effective here for those who engaged with it. Men also described engagement with formal help-seeking services that in some cases were perceived to be helpful, but in others they felt these were impacted by discrimination based on stereotypes that exist around IPV.

Men described being treated differently because of their gender, and this treatment seemed to exacerbate the impact of the abuse through secondary victimisation (Campbell & Raja, 2005). We have seen in the previous literature that men have reported experiencing gender stereotyped treatment (Machado, Santos, Graham-Kevan & Matos, 2017). Our perceptions of gender roles and their associations with violent behaviour have been demonstrated as persistent (e.g., Bates, Kaye, Pennington & Hamlin, 2019). Indeed, this has arguably influenced social perceptions of IPV, with men's violence towards women being considered the most serious (e.g., Seelau & Seelau, 2005). Furthermore, assumptions appear to be made around women's perpetration for example, that women's violence must have been "provoked" (Scarduzio, Carlyle, Harris & Savage, 2017), leading to male victims becoming the subject of blame.

### **Implications and conclusions**

Whilst this study represents a small-scale exploration of post-separation experiences of male victims of IPV, we feel it yields some important implications for research and practice in the area. Firstly, the results fit within some of the wider literature that demonstrates women's post-separation abuse (e.g., Jaffe et al., 2003), the impact of IPV

victimisation (e.g., Próspero, 2007), and the long-lasting impact of these experiences (e.g., Coker et al., 2000). It also supports the minimal literature so far that has explored men's specific experiences (see Bates, 2019a). The current study had also generated new understandings of men's ongoing post-separation experiences, their coping strategies, and the systemic injustice that exacerbates these experiences and is likely to cause secondary victimisation (Campbell & Raja, 2005). By using this participatory method, we have seen the ongoing impact of abuse on men as they go through the process of healing and regaining their identity. The narratives around ongoing power imbalances were particularly strong in this sample, especially for the men who were fathers. Their experiences contribute to a growing body of literature around men's experiences of estrangement and parental alienation, yet this area remains contentious, and more research is needed to ensure interventions are informed by evidence (Harman et al., 2019). Current interventions that involve court-ordered separation from the preferred parent are not only ineffective but also potentially harmful (Mercer, 2019).

The current study further supports other literature that has demonstrated that men experienced stereotyped treatment with services (e.g., see Machado et al., 2017) and that this stereotyped treatment was impacting and exacerbating men's experiences (Bates, 2019b). This treatment and the stereotypes that still exists in services enables the use of legal and administrative aggression (Tilbrook et al., 2010). The men in the current study described the ways in which their ex-partners manipulated services to continue to exert control. There is a need for more research to explore this, and specifically the ways in which criminal justice and support services work with this behaviour. Service providers need to recognise both the nature of post-separation abuse but also the way that some partners manipulate and use these systems for their own benefit.

We had initially chosen the word “recovery” as a way to capture the process of healing or moving on after the end of the relationship. What became clear from the narratives of our participants, was that there was no “recovery”. Many men were still experiencing the abuse and the significant ramifications of it; this included ongoing issues with power, harassment, and manipulation of the parental relationship. Even for the men who had experienced abuse and were no longer directly experiencing these behaviours, they still lived with the aftereffects of in terms of the impact on their identity, their relationships with their children, their willingness to get into new relationships. This is important for two reasons, firstly service providers and specifically anyone working with men and their mental health during or after the end of an abusive relationship need to recognise and accommodate this. Knowledge of the continued abuse some of these men were experiencing should be part of any therapeutic interventions, including recognition of the importance of their identity as fathers. The breakdown of a relationship and the challenges that ensue with being a non-resident parent are challenging and unsettling for their father role (Concoran, 2005), and this could be part of this process. Secondly, the discussion around terminology yields an important point about the language used in this area. We already know that many men struggle to identify as victim of IPV, and indeed that the word “victim” is seen as synonymous with weakness which does not fit with the male gender role. Within help-seeking services, we would recommend people are mindful of the language used to enable these services to be seen as available and approachable for men. A number of the barriers men experience to help-seeking or reporting their experience are concerned with social responses and resource availability (e.g., see Taylor, Bates, Colosi & Creer, 2020 for full discussion), and these are often reflected within language choice that can significantly impact on a man’s agency and ability to reach out.

This study is not without limitations. We recognise that with a small-scale sample, these findings represent a pilot study; however, the use of this participatory method has given new insights into men's experiences that could inform future research. We also recognise that we have a self-selecting sample and are working with men who were in a position to talk to us about their experience. Utilising alternative methods that facilitate disclosure (e.g., an anonymous online survey) are important steps for allowing a wider range of men's experiences to be understood. For example, Bates (2019c) reported that 25% of the men who had completed her anonymous survey had never disclosed to anyone else about their experiences. We would recommend engaging with participatory methods, but future research could look to do this alongside a level of anonymity that might facilitate a broader sample of men's voices to be heard. Despite these limitations, this study represents a unique exploration of the post-separation experiences of men who have experienced IPV; the understanding we have gained can be used to facilitate future research and practice, and ensure that this victim group receives tailored and evidence informed support and interventions.

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