

**“Men are the alphas. Men can't be hurt.
Men can't be victims” - Narrative, identity,
and male victims of female perpetrated
intimate partner abuse.**

PhD Thesis

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Abstract

This thesis details the process and analysis of the 'Hard to Tell' study, a qualitative, narrative study examining how male victims of female perpetrated intimate partner abuse (IPA) tell their story, and what it might mean for their identity. The study consisted of life-story interviews with 18 self-identifying male victims. Between them they described the full range of abuse, including physical, sexual, emotional, psychological, financial, controlling, coercive, and legal and administrative. The differing nature of these forms of abuse meant that some were easier to describe in narrative form, which carried significant implications for their ability to make sense of their experiences and explain it to others.

Analysis was informed by a complex and dynamic understanding of identity, including key concepts from Narrative Identity Theory (McAdams, 2018; Bamberg, 2011) and Positioning Theory (Korobov, 2010; 2015). In telling their story, these male survivors were driven to defend against powerful cultural narratives of masculinity and male perpetration that contrasted with their experience as a man and as a victim. In doing so they drew upon other cultural narratives such as mental ill-health and childhood trauma to attain a valid identity position. Cultural narratives such as those of coercive controlling abuse and narcissism, enabled them to identify their abuse and sidestep gendered assumptions of perpetration.

This thesis proposes a model of identity work within autobiographical narration that incorporates key components of the individual, audience, context, and culture. A prominent feature of these men's stories was the role played by third parties, who enabled them to reframe their experience as an abuse narrative and begin a process of escape and recovery. This places professionals at the heart of this model, as audience and co-producer within a critical process of narrative sense making and identity validation.

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Part 1 - Introduction

Chapter 1 – Introduction

“Tell the world Johnny, tell them Johnny Depp, I, Johnny Depp, a man, I’m a victim too of domestic violence. And I, you know, it’s a fair fight, and see how many people believe or side with you.”

Amber Heard

1.1 Introducing this study

The topic of gender and domestic abuse has seldom been as prominent as it has over the last two years, due to the court room battles of Johnny Depp vs Amber Heard. Amid much media furore, two libel trials, and at great financial expense, the story of Heard and Depp’s marriage has been scrutinised in court and media. The central issue of these trials was one of domestic abuse, with both parties seeking to present a narrative that positioned themselves as the victim, and the other as the perpetrator. I do not intend to speak on the veracity of either’s story, but what is pertinent to this study is that, within the accompanying media debate, there has been discussion on male victimhood and its lack of acceptance within our culture (e.g. Odone, 2022). The opening quote to this introduction is taken from a recorded phone conversation between Heard and Depp that was played to the court. In this statement Heard emphasises just one qualifying characteristic of Depp: the fact that he is a man. In doing so, she heavily implies that because of this he will not be taken seriously as a victim of abuse.

Depp’s subsequent efforts to tell the world he is a victim of domestic abuse have been controversial and culturally divisive. As Heard alluded to, the dissonance between being a man and being a victim runs deep and stands as a hurdle to any male victim seeking to tell their story. For this reason, male victims can struggle to find an open audience. The consequences of this are significant. There is a growing body of research that indicates the opportunity to tell our stories, to narrate our experiences, may be key to making sense of them. Furthermore, that being able to make a narrative sense of experiences may be important to the formation and maintenance of our individual identity and sense of self (McAdams, 2018). The implication of this is that male victims of intimate partner abuse may be denied the

opportunity to tell their story, and thus denied opportunities to make sense of their experiences, which, in turn, may hamper identity processes.

This thesis documents the collection and analysis of 18 narrative interviews with male victims of female-perpetrated intimate partner abuse. This research was carried out to increase our understanding of how male victims/survivors can tell their stories, and how they make sense of their experience of abuse in relation to their identity and sense of self. As a social work study, it aims to better inform our individual and collective approach to supporting victims of domestic abuse.

1.2 Key terms

Many of the key terms used are explained and discussed in depth within these pages, but for clarity I will define the use of some here:

Intimate Partner Abuse (IPA) – Domestic abuse that occurs between current or former intimate adult partners. This includes different forms of abuse, such as sexual, emotional, financial, and psychological abuse, as well as physical violence.

Victims and Survivors – these terms will be used interchangeably to refer to individuals who have been subject to domestic abuse. There has been some discussion within public discourse on the use of these terms, due to their differing connotations. Whereas the term ‘victim’ might be seen as underscoring aspects of vulnerability, oppression, and lack of agency, ‘survivor’ evokes strength, resilience, and empowerment (Setia & An, 2022). Although use of the latter speaks to a valid effort to support and promote the resilience of victim/survivors, as will be discussed within these pages, the cultural expectation that men cannot be victims has historically been a hurdle to recognition of their abuse. It is therefore important that we recognise the term victim as appropriate for these men.

Narrative and Narration – A telling of events that attends to key aspects of what happened, including dimensions of time, space, and meaning. i.e., when it happened, what happened, and what it might mean.

Identity – an understanding of oneself that is understood at an individual level; formed, performed, and validated at the relational level; shaped and directed by the culture in which one lives and narrates.

Narrative Identity – an understanding of oneself that is rooted in the stories one can tell of one's life experience.

1.3 Rationale for this study

Underpinning this study are some key understandings regarding identity, narrative, gender and human experience that have heavily shaped the design, implementation, and analysis of this research. These have been touched upon previously and will be explained and explored in greater depth within the literature and methodology chapters, but in simple terms they are as follows.

- We understand and communicate our experience of the world through stories. This applies to how we understand ourselves, and thus our identity is shaped by how we can tell our story.
- Victimhood is antithetical to dominant understandings of masculinity; Being 'a man' is by common understanding not being a victim, and by the same measure, being a victim equates to not being 'a man'. There is, therefore, a perceived tension inherent within the term 'male victim'. This tension potentially causes a dilemma in managing a masculine identity position, whilst narrating experiences of victimhood.

Given these two tenets, the research question follows:

How do male victims of female-perpetrated intimate partner abuse incorporate their experiences of abuse within their narrative identity?

How victims make sense of a traumatic experience appears key to recovery (Park, 2010), and the sense made will direct how abuse is recognised and communicated to others. Logically, abuse that remains unrecognised has a greater potential for remaining undisclosed. Supporting victims and survivors to recognise, make sense of, and communicate their experiences of abuse is critical to assisting escape and recovery. Educating professionals how to recognise abuse narratives, as well as the pressures and behaviours that might prevent them from being told, increases capacity for identifying abuse as well as supporting survivors in the process of narration and its inherent identity work.

Discourse on domestic and intimate partner abuse over the last half-century has focused on female victimhood and male perpetration. This has been supported by data that shows there are more female than male victims of IPA. In the year ending March 2021, there were 845,734 recorded domestic abuse crimes in England and Wales, with 73% involving a female victim (ONS, 2022). With an estimated 80% of domestic abuse incidents going unreported (ibid), it is evident that DA is widespread within our society. Mainstream awareness of this has been growing over the last 50 years, but it is only recently, with the Domestic Abuse Act (DA 2021), that domestic abuse entered statute as a crime in-and-of-itself. As the police, local authorities, and courts work to implement the new powers and duties that it brings, now is a critical time in the development of professional understanding and skillsets for identifying and responding to domestic abuse. As it stands, we are in a better position to do so for some victim populations than we are with others. For, arguably, the focus on female victims that has characterised domestic abuse discourse has meant that less is known about male victim experience. Cases such as that of Alex Skeel (BBC, 2018) are beginning to raise public awareness of the existence of male victims, but there remains comparatively little research on the male victim perspective. This study attends to this gap in knowledge.

1.4 The Hard to Tell pilot

The methodological design of this study was piloted within the Hard to Tell study. This small piece of research interviewed four self-identifying male victims of female perpetrated IPA. The pilot demonstrated the capacity of the narrative interview method to elicit rich and detailed narrative responses from male victims. It also highlighted potential difficulties in recruiting male survivors/victims and directed a wider recruitment strategy for the full study.

Key findings of the pilot corresponded with those in the full study. These included the importance of stereotypes of masculinity and male perpetration of domestic abuse to the experience and sensemaking process of these men; the significance of children to the duration and nature of the abuse; and that the perceived response of professional services, such as the police or social services, could affect how these men sought and engaged with support.

1.5 **Why recognising, understanding, and preventing intimate partner abuse is important to social work.**

What we understand of patterns and prevalence of IPA is discussed in depth within Chapter 4, alongside what is currently known about the male victim experience. But it is the harm of domestic abuse, both near and far reaching, that places it high on the agenda across all areas of social work practice. The spectre of domestic abuse can be found in all communities and walks of life. Working with children and families, mental health, adult care, or any other field of practice, the widespread nature of abuse means social workers will be called upon to support individuals suffering from it - be that managing risk within an abusive relationship, or living with the trauma of previous experience. Fundamentally, IPA is the violation of core social work values and principles (BASW, 2021) such as human dignity, human rights, and the principle of self-determination. IPA is the antithesis of empowerment, it is oppression of a particularly insidious and personal nature, and as such must be a core focus of social work research and practice.

When considering the harms of intimate partner abuse, most apparent are the physical, emotional, and psychological harm inflicted upon the victim themselves. These are most starkly recognised in physical injuries and homicides, but the emotional and psychological harm can be just as fatal and endure long after the end of the intimate relationship. However, the harms of IPA are not confined just to the victim party of that intimate relationship. The significant harm caused to children who experience violence and abuse between their parents or carers is well evidenced. NICE states that “domestic violence and abuse between parents is the most frequently reported form of trauma for children” (NICE, 2014; Meltzer et al., 2009). Such exposure, and awareness of its potential impact, has also led to its identification as an example of ‘emotional abuse’, one of the four categories of ‘significant harm’ within UK statutory guidance for safeguarding children (DfE, 2018). ‘Child affected by parental relationships distress’ is also a classification within the DSM-5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders), acknowledging the detrimental impact on psychological functioning of such exposure (Bernet, Wamboldt, & Narrow, 2016).

In their comprehensive literature review, Artz et al (2014) found evidence of a detrimental impact to children from exposure to IPA across neurology; physical health; mental health; conduct and behaviour; delinquency, crime, and victimization; as well as academic and employment outcomes. Importantly, Artz et

al. found a dynamic relationship between these categories of impact. For example, exposure to IPA correlates with insecure attachment models (Gustafsson, Brown, Mills-Koonce, & Cox, 2017), behavioural difficulties (Bedi & Goddard, 2007), and 'delinquency and crime' (Artz et al. 2014; Ellonen, Piispa, Peltonen, & Orenan, 2013). However, where secure attachments have prevailed, studies have shown them to act as a protective factor in mitigating against behavioural difficulties, despite childhood exposure to IPA (Johnson & Lieberman, 2007).

There is also correlation between an individual's childhood exposure to IPA and an increased risk of entering violent and abusive relationships in adulthood (Kimber, Adham, Gill, McTavish, & Macillan, 2018, Roustit et al 2009). This is a phenomenon that has become known as the intergenerational transmission of violence (Stith et al. 2000; Johnson, 2005). Our understanding of this has been historically driven by the concepts of Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, Ross, & Ross 1960; Stith et al, 2000), which posit that in witnessing acts of violence and abuse within the family, individuals learn such behaviours and use them in adulthood to obtain certain outcomes, illicit certain behaviours from others, or as an accepted, even expected, manner of behaviour in certain situations. This theoretical understanding fits well with findings such as those of Murrell, Kristoff, and Henning's (2007) study of 1,099 adult males arrested for perpetrating IPA between 1998-2002. Within this sample, Murrell et al found an increased risk of IPA perpetration for those who had witnessed IPA as a child. They also found that the greater the childhood exposure to IPA, the greater the risk of adult perpetration of non-intimate violence, evidencing the wider social impact of violence within the home.

Other insights into possible processes of intergenerational transmission of violence have come from Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1982). In this, violence within the home environment can bring a level of threat and inconsistency to the infant/caregiver relationship, disrupting the formation of secure attachments in infancy, potentially leading to dysfunctional/maladaptive relational behaviours in adult life. This approach to understanding also ties in with the previously mentioned nature of secure attachment as a protective factor against behavioural difficulties (Johnson & Lieberman, 2007). Further insight into the relationship between IPA, attachment, and child outcomes might also be found within another well documented consequence of IPA: mental ill-health.

Research shows a positive correlation between IPA, victimhood, and mental ill-health (Spencer et al. 2017). Trevillion, Oram, Feder, and Howard's (2012) systematic review of the literature found strong enough evidence that both men and women, across a wide variety of mental health disorders, were at high risk of experiencing domestic abuse. Further to this, studies have indicated that the perinatal mental health of mothers, particularly with comorbid presentation of psychological conditions, can disrupt the formation of a secure attachment between the infant and caregiver (Smith-Nielsen et al, 2016). In this growing understanding of a possibly bi-directional relationship between domestic violence and parental mental ill-health, we see two of three persistent factors of risk evident within Serious Case Reviews (Brandon et al. 2012). The third of these is drug and alcohol misuse, which is also shown to correlate as an outcome for individuals who have experienced exposure to IPA in their childhood (Artz et al, 2014). Overall, this places IPA at the heart of a comorbid and interrelated pattern of trauma, alongside mental ill-health, drug and alcohol abuse, child death and injury, and wider social and socioeconomic phenomena such as academic achievement, employment, and crime. As Artz et al. summarise

exposure to intimate partner violence is in no way merely an intimate experience. It is a toxic, harm-producing experience that cascades into all aspects of our shared social world.

(Artz et al, 2014, p555)

1.6 Why study male victims?

Historically, social work engagement with families has centred around the role of the mother, responsabilising her for all that takes place within the home and largely ignoring the existence of the father (Ferguson, 2011). Such practice, perhaps, has its roots in the prescribed ideals of a post war society that held women as home makers and men as 'breadwinners' and 'heroes' (Christie, 2001). In such a scenario, men were not expected to be home when the social worker called, and were generally seen as being too busy winning bread and being heroic to take on childcare duties. However, this perception has shifted over time to a contemporary consideration of men that is characterised by an emphasis on risk. This is never more prominent than in discussion of domestic abuse, where the characterisation

of men as the abuser has meant that the phrase 'working with men' is simply taken to mean 'working with perpetrators' (e.g. Day, 2009).

"The discourses of risk with which the welfare state and more specifically the social work profession are most associated include: risk to children and women (mainly form [sic] men's physical and sexual violence); risk to society (person's and property also largely associated with men's deviance); risk to community cohesion (often associated with female lone parent families and men's absence from the family and the community)."

(Christie, 2001, p21)

In this excerpt we see a paradoxical position for men in which both their presence and absence is viewed as grounds for concern. Although in recent years the recognition of the benefits of paternal care and involvement has driven a policy agenda for greater male inclusion (Featherstone, 2003), in practice the status of men within social work has remained characterised by absence and disregard, causing some authors to refer to them as "ghost fathers" (Brown et al, 2009; Critchley, 2022), or 'the unheard gender' (Baum, 2016). The similarly titled report from the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel (CSPRP) 'The Myth of Invisible Men' (2021) highlights the serious problem with this in the tragedies of child death and injury, predominantly caused by the violent actions of men who are frequently overlooked and poorly engaged by services. This alone warrants a greater emphasis on engaging with men in social work, but there is another risk inherent to the men's absence from services, and that is the failure to recognise those instances where they are the victim.

The collision of two competing discourses of men, one of risk, and one of resource, has led to the polarisation of individual men as either all bad or all good (Maxwell et al., 2012). Most recently, in response to this dichotomy, a growing voice has called for a more nuanced understanding, one where men must be considered as both risk and resource (Philip, Clifton, & Brandon, 2019). In their study of fathers in recurrent care proceedings, Philip et al (2021) identified characteristics of trauma and vulnerability within these men's lives that revealed how at risk these men are themselves. In considering how we can acknowledge this vulnerability in practice, Philip et al. warn against the current discourse that still perceives men as additional to the family, a commodity that can be either added or subtracted to find an acceptable risk/resource balance. In such a discourse there is little consideration of the possibility that at times men may be the victims, that sometimes they might

be the valid focus of care, support, and intervention. Any nuanced and holistic understanding of men within social work practice must have consideration for this.

1.7 Why a narrative study?

There are several reasons for applying a narrative lens to this field of study. Methodologically, the use of narrative interviews is well suited to gathering information regarding abuse (Hyden, 2013). Given the often-untold nature of experiences, and the individualised and nuanced ways that abuse can manifest, the narrative method enables individuals to convey their own personal experience, insights, and understandings, to literally tell their own story.

This study is informed by a constructivist position in which the world, or at least all we can know of it, is understood to be a construct of human perception. In this, the world appears the way it does because that is the way we make sense of it. Although there are key areas of social work where it is necessary to get as close as possible to agreeing upon the 'facts' of a situation, much of social reality is the interpretation and reinterpretation of action, response, and meaning. How individuals act and respond, adapt and change is directed by the personal sense they have made of their experience. If individual sense-making is substantially a narrative process (Singer, 2004), then a key focus for social work is the narrative process of those we seek to support. Put simply, if the world is only how we make sense of it, and if we make sense of it through stories, then understanding those stories must be a focal point for any social work that seeks change on a therapeutic or radical scale. In this light, an understanding of narrative and narration is key to support work and intervention.

1.8 Structure of this thesis

This thesis is set out in 4 parts: introduction, literature review, methodology, and analysis & discussion. The literature review presents four areas of research key to this study: Identity, Narrative, Intimate Partner Abuse, and Masculinity. The second section, comprised wholly of Chapter 6, attends to the theory, planning, and process of this study, setting out the design rationale, the reality of carrying out the interviews, and the analysis process. The third and final section presents the findings and analysis of the 18 interviews. The sequence of analysis chapters was

chosen for the purposes of clarity and can be understood to mirror a process of narrative sense making: first seeking to establish what happened; then how participants made sense of what happened; and finally, what that means in terms of how male victims can tell of their experiences and its implications for our understanding of identity. Through this process, the analysis evolves over the course of four chapters, moving from a more descriptive presentation of the abuse described by participants, to a deeper analysis of how they made sense of their experience and the processes of identity work at the heart of their narration. Analysis culminates in Chapter 10 with the proposal of a diagrammatic model of identity work within autobiographical narration. The final discussion, Chapter 11, explores the implications of these findings for our understanding of identity and narration in general, as well as for social work practice. Importantly, it highlights the role of professionals as key figures in a process of narrative co-production.

Part 2 - Literature Review

Chapter 2 - Identity and narrative

*"Who are we but the stories we tell ourselves,
about ourselves, and believe?"*

Scott Turow

2.1 Introduction

Before examining the significance of narrative identity to the context of male victims of Intimate Partner Abuse (IPA), it is important to understand the conceptual underpinnings of this study's approach to identity. This chapter sets out a role for narration across a systemic understanding of identity, that includes individual, relational, and collective/cultural components. This is a predominantly conceptual task and the specific details of research into how individuals narrate their experiences and the implications for functioning and wellbeing are subsequently examined in Chapter 3.

2.2 What is identity?

The concept of 'identity' has been much studied, with many complex and potentially contradictory concepts considered under the umbrella terms of 'identity' and 'self'. At the level of the individual, identity can be considered as the self's understanding of itself. "...the process by which a social actor recognises itself and constructs meaning" (Castells, 1997, p22). On a social level, it becomes more complicated in the consideration of other individuals, groups, institutions, and even nations, all of which pertain to some quality of identity.

Historically, there have been persistent drives to frame concepts of identity in terms of dichotomous relationships and dilemmas. Breakwell (1986) traces these back to James (1950) with the Subjective self vs the Objective self, the 'I' vs the 'Me'. This objective self (the 'Me') is, in most part, considered to be a person's identity. It is also often referred to as the 'self-concept' and can be understood as the sum of three cognitive achievements: to be able to think, to be cognisant of thinking, and

to consider the thinking self as an object of thought (Oyserman, Elmore, & Smith, 2012).

From birth, a person's identity is an evolution through subjective realisation towards objective thought. Firstly, the subjective self comes into existence with the child's recognition of being able to affect change in the world - the baby cries, its carer responds. Then, gradually, a more objective sense of self develops to include complex features of an identity such as taste, relationship, and gender (Lewis, 1991). As an individual's cognitive capacity grows, so does their ability to objectively consider themselves, taking significant steps through adolescence with the increased capacity for abstract thought (Piaget's, 1977; Erikson, 1968, 1987; Marcia, 1966; Kegan 1982).

Mead (1934) asserted that the capacity of the 'I' to contemplate the 'Me', for the self to be held as object unto itself, is unique to human thought and makes our social reality possible. According to Mead it is the 'I' which acts in the world; informed and directed by its understanding of the 'Me'. The actions of the 'I' become part of the 'Me' only in retrospect; past actions become biographical and come to inform the future actions of the 'I'. In other words, how I behave is directed by who I think I am. Who I think I am is informed by my past experience of being me.

The analogy of a mirror may help in understanding this concept. When I look in the mirror, I see 'me', and I gain an objective understanding of what I am like. The reflection can be considered as one's identity, the objective-self; It is 'me' as I and others perceive me. But a mirror's reflection only represents a physical appearance, and our identities are more complex than that. To understand anything beyond its immediate physical properties, requires being able to locate it within the dimensions of time, space, and meaning. By space I mean physical reality, and by meaning I refer to all the layers of symbolic understanding that exist within the human world, such as value, purpose, or intent. Importantly, these three dimensions are the foundation elements of a narrative: once upon a time... something happened... and it was meaningful.

For Kegan (1982), the essential task of identity across the lifespan is to find a balance between the subjective and objective selves. A balance between being subject to the circumstance of life, doing what you do moment to moment, and being able to objectively reflect on who you are in relation to others and the world

around you. It follows that for this balance to be achieved, for an individual to move beyond anything other than the subjective self, they must begin to consider themselves in respect of those three dimensions, time, space, and meaning, and in doing so they begin to narrate. This narration enables the conception of an objective self. As Ricoeur describes:

The answer to the question “who?”... is to tell the story of a life. The story told tells about the actions of the “who”. And the identity of this “who” therefore itself must be a narrative identity.

(Ricoeur, 1988, p246)

2.3 Individual vs social approaches

In a wider ontological and epistemological sense, the field of identity research has at times been presented as split between those who focus their study on individual identity, and those who focus on the social and discursive aspects of identity (Mead 1934; Schwartz, Luyckx, & Vignoles 2011). Traditionally, this has been delineated by different fields of study, with cognitive and developmental psychology holding the individualistic domain, and sociology, anthropology, and discourse psychology attending to the social aspects. It is not necessarily that these separate endeavours deny the importance of the other’s field, but that they hold their own respective domains as being the priority in the construction of identity.

The more individualistic approaches conceive of identity as an internal construct that, once formed, remains relatively constant. On the other hand, the more social and discursive approaches conceive of identity as fluid and evolving; formed and reformed by ever changing contextual and relational factors. This latter, more socially focused approach, can be further divided into the ‘relational’ and the ‘collective’ (Schwartz et al, 2011). A relational focus is one that focuses on the interpersonal interactions, such as discourse psychology (Edwards & Potter, 1992) and conversational analysis (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998). A collective focus takes a broader sociological or cultural perspective (Foucault, 2002).

Across all three of these domains - the individual, the relational, and the collective - narratives play an important role. I have already described how, at the individual level, the concept of narrative can be fundamental to the very concept of the objective self. Further to this have been attempts to model the cognitive processes

involved. Singer, Blagov, Berry, & Oost (2012) and Dunlop (2017) have proposed hierarchical models of autobiographical memory storage and how it might contribute to the construction of identity. Both models propose that at the top of the hierarchy sits a narrative concept of self - a life story. At this level, individuals will have different narrative identities for different roles, such as my identity as a researcher, my identity as a parent, or my identity as a social worker. Dunlop calls these 'contextualised self-aspects', and further proposes that atop of these sits a 'generalised self', a summarised narrative identity that encompasses the salient aspects of one's whole life story.

Both these models seek to understand the process by which the self draws upon memories to narrate an identity, but neither professes to be a complete and finished model. It is important to bear in mind that "narrative identity is not about memory; it is the story told about memory" (McAdams, 2018, p368). This assertion draws attention away from the cognitive processes of memory storage towards the aspect of 'telling' - the practice of narration as a social and discursive phenomenon. The inference being that we will not fully understand narrative identity unless we examine the social aspects of identity and discourse.

Because attempts to understand identity through the study of cognition are limited by the difficulties faced in seeing inside the mind, the study of identity in discourse has the advantage that one can observe and record the discursive act. However, such observation can be muddied by various factors inherent to the nature of discourse. As Edwards & Potter (1992) explain, all discourse is 'occasioned' and 'orientated'. It is occasioned by being performed at a time and place and for a reason, such as an article in a newspaper, a conversation with a friend, or a research interview. Because of this it therefore has purpose, or purposes, towards which it is 'orientated'. A classic illustration of this would be the discourse found in a criminal court room. Occasioned for the pursuance of justice, the discourse of the two parties will be orientated towards each's desired outcomes - conviction or acquittal. This example also illustrates a third observation that Edwards and Potter make, that all discourse is an act of persuasion, and is therefore rhetorical. In everyday discourse, it may not be as stark and clearly defined as the establishment of innocence or guilt, but can be more nuanced, such as the establishment of authority, affirmation of a relationship, or the refutation of this or that characterisation.

In analysing autobiographical narrative as a discourse, it must be considered that the narrator has chosen such memories with regard to the occasion they find themselves in. Such occasion will orientate them to certain objectives, towards which they will employ rhetorical tools. In this, a narrative is a rhetorical tool.

Narrative offers a useful discursive opportunity for the fusing of memory and attribution, or of event description and causal explanation, in that the events are generally recounted in ways that attend to their casual, intentional, and plausible sequential connections.

(Edwards and Potter, 1992, p162)

The narrative enables the teller to portray an event, or series of events, in a manner that will manage the narrator's own credibility, counter potential alternatives, and achieve the tasks relevant to the occasion. As Ricoeur (1988) points out, this means the narrative is never unbiased, and is itself a strategy for imposing upon the audience a "vision of the world that is never ethically neutral" (p249).

A way of considering how this is done is in the concept of 'positioning' (Harre, Moghaddam, Cairnie, Rothbart, & Sabat, 2009; Korobov 2010, 2015; Korobov and Bamberg, 2004). Positioning refers to the rhetorical and discursive process that individuals embark upon in interacting with one another, working to occupy a position not just in relation to other people's positions, but also to potential alternative or opposing positions. It describes a complex and nuanced practice where roles and identities are not just assumed but crafted, rhetorically fought for, evidenced, and defended against. This is continually attended to through all the discursive tools available to the individual, including the act of narration – of telling stories about ourselves. Bamberg, Defina, & Schiffrin (2011) argue positioning is a discursive endeavour which results in "acts of identity" (p182). This can be understood with reference to Mead's (1934) assertion that the acts of the subjective self, become components of the objective self once they have been carried out. The position taken in discourse informs a person's identity. Further to this, the very nature of autobiographical narration requires the inclusion of oneself as a character within the narrative and in doing so brings to the occasion further tasks of identity.

2.4 Key tasks of identity work

According to Bamberg (2011), the self must navigate three core identity dilemmas in managing a pivotal task of self-validation which he frames as orientation towards the 'human good'. This need for validation is a common theme across several authors' works and is what Goffman (1997) describes as the need to be perceived "in a steady moral light... a socialised character" (p23). It is perhaps important to consider that, as will be discussed further in Chapter 5 regarding Hegemonic Masculinity, such a position is not necessarily the 'norm' (as in present in the majority) but normative as an ideal to which people are driven to orientate themselves.

Bamberg terms the first of these dilemmas as the 'diachronic' identity; the resolution of stability vs change over time. Fundamentally, this dilemma speaks to a dissonance at the heart of identity: the physical reality of change that belies our concept of a constant self. This phenomenon is illustrated by Grand (2000) in asking his readers to think of a childhood memory:

"...something you remember clearly, something you can see, feel, maybe even smell, as if you were really there. After all, you were really there at the time, weren't you? How else would you remember it? But here is the bombshell: you *weren't* there. Not a single atom that was in your body today was there when that event took place. Every bit of you has been replaced many times over."

(Grand, 2000, p30)

Thus, in maintaining a sense of a constant self, that I am today who I was yesterday and will still be tomorrow, I am creating a reality separate from the physical reality of the universe. I am attending to my need, and the need of anyone who relies upon me, for stability against the unmistakable reality of change. This is the diachronic dilemma (see also Adler & Mcadams, 2007; Habermas and Bluck 2000). For male survivors of IPA this may be a difficult task, balancing the need to no longer be a victim, against the need for identity stability.

The second of Bamberg's dilemmas is individuality vs sameness to others. Encapsulating a fundamental duality, identity refers both to the uniqueness of the individual, and their membership of various social groups. The dilemma is that I am both different and similar to others; the healthy balance, perhaps, being not too individual and not too consumed by my social identity. For male survivors of IPA, the lack of public discussion or widely known stories of male victimhood and female

perpetration may increase a perception that their story sets them apart from other men, to an isolating extent.

Bamberg's third dilemma is the balancing of a sense of agency. Bamberg describes this in terms of a "person-to-world sense of fit" (Bamberg, 2011, p6) but it can also be understood in terms of autonomy vs heteronomy, or an internal vs external locus of control. 'Agency' is the power to affect change in the world, and in this respect it is framed within a dichotomy of internal vs external; do I have the power to control or shape my circumstances (internal/autonomy), or do others have it (external/heteronomy)? The importance of a sense of personal agency to individual wellbeing has been demonstrated by numerous authors (Dienstbier, 1989; Werner, 1993; Tew, 2011; Adler, 2012, Adler et al. 2015) with an individual's perceptions of an external locus of control correlating with poor mental health and psychosis (Harrow, Hansford, & Astrachan-Fletcher, 2009). For male survivors, establishing a narrative that evidences their individual agency, without portraying themselves as part responsible for their own abuse, could be a difficult task. The importance of agency to outcomes of wellbeing and functioning has been repeatedly identified within the arenas of resilience research and mental health, including at the physiological level, with previous experience of personal agency affecting the hormonal stress responses in subsequent adverse conditions (Dienstbier, 1989). A sense of personal efficacy has also been identified as a protective factor in longitudinal studies of personal resilience (e.g., Werner 1993).

Bamberg's dilemmas are not new to concepts of identity and are also framed by Breakwell (1986; 2014) within her Identity Process Theory; "continuity, distinctiveness, and self-esteem" (1986, p47), to which she later added "efficacy" (Rusi & Breakwell, 2014). Breakwell posits that when there is conflict between these three processes, individuals are faced with a threat to their identity. Coming from an individualistic stance, Breakwell conceives of an almost mechanistic understanding of how individuals either assimilate or reject new elements of their identity. In contrast, Bamberg (2011) posits that the self manages these dilemmas through the process of 'narration', continually managing and moderating, working and reworking personal narratives through social interaction.

This chapter has so far discussed the role that narrative and narration plays in the individual's objective understanding of itself, the very concept of identity, as well as in the process and enactment of relational tasks of identity through interpersonal

discourse. As mentioned previously, there is a third, collective tier of identity found within the spheres of culture and social structure.

The connections between the relational and the collective elements of social existence have been much debated within sociology and social psychology (Blumer, 1969; Dewey, 1930; Stryker, 1980, 2008, Mead, 1934; Zimmerman, 2014). From the most reductive position, there are those who argue that the complex patterns of social structure are merely the result of individuals successfully carrying out their interpersonal interactions, directing their own behaviour in accordance with what they perceive the attitudes of others to be (Mead 1934). However, as Stryker (2008) points out, this leaves no serious consideration for the evident influence of social structures in directing the behaviour and identity of individuals and their interactions. At the other pole, there are the 'top down' approaches (Kurz & Donaghue, 2013) that perceive wider social discourse and structure as being the predominant shaper of interpersonal interaction and individual identity (Foucault, 2002). This, however, also has its logical shortcomings, for social structures cannot have come prior to interpersonal interaction. The solution perhaps lies within attempts to model ways in which interpersonal interaction feeds into wider social and cultural frameworks, which in turn feedback to mould interpersonal interactions.

Zimmerman (2014) proposes that identity plays a crucial role in this dynamic. Through the assumption of 'discourse-identities' within social contexts, individuals enable interpersonal interactions to function, which in turn facilitate the wider social structures. He refers to these respectively as 'proximal' and 'distal' contexts. An illustration of this could be the assumption of identities that take place within social work tutoring. Within a seminar, the tutor will assume their role as a seminar leader, signalling this by their position within the room and the way in which they manage proceedings. Students will fulfil their identity roles as seminar participants, engaging with proceedings and responding to their fellow students and the seminar lead accordingly. This co-ordination of assumed identities enables wider contexts of higher education to function, whilst also feeding into the profession of social work, and supporting the ideals of evidence/research-based practice, all of which in turn feedback to inform how we perform our identities within the seminar context. In this way, Zimmerman's discourse identities provide participants with "a continuously evolving framework within which their actions, vocal or otherwise,

assume a particular meaning, import, and interactional quality” (Zimmerman, 2014, p352).

Applying our understanding of narration to this dynamic is simply recognising that to assume these roles we must have an understanding of the role requirements and how we can fulfil them. To assume the identity of a social work tutor, one needs a valid narrative, including chapters of previous academic study and social work practice, in order that others can accept such an identity. Their acceptance is informed by an understanding of the existing narratives of what it is to be a social work tutor. In other words, one needs to have an objective self that fits enough of the requirements to assume a discourse identity and engage on a relational level. This is achieved through a process of narration - through the discursive maintenance of a narrative identity.

2.5 Identity as a system

Over the last 30 years, there has been a great deal of research examining how individuals manage their narrative identity and its implications for wellbeing and functioning. This is discussed further in Chapter 3. However, before doing so, I wish to return to the previously mentioned presentation of identity research as either individualistically or socially focused. As Schwartz et al (2011) describe, this delineation has been a practical reality of research into identity, with researchers on different sides being unaware of each other’s work and insight. This, they say, has led to the position where even if individual specialists were to meet, they may struggle to communicate, having developed different conceptual languages within their separate disciplines. However, Schwartz et al. assert that such division is ultimately unhelpful and that these different approaches are better understood as differing merely in ‘levels’ of content, irrespective of which:

“...any given aspect of identity can be viewed as defined by individual, relational, and collective processes: as the subjective understanding or experience of individuals, as an interpersonal construction, and as a sociocultural product”

(Schwartz et al., 2011, p9)

Kaplan and Garner (2017) build upon the writing of Schwartz et al (2011), to propose a ‘complex dynamic systems’ approach to understanding identity. Moving

away from dichotomous concepts and attempts to resolve them on one side or another, they propose that we consider identity as a system, within which there are many different components, including individual, relational, and collective elements.

The concept of a systemic approach to identity has been influential in this study. As outlined in this chapter, narration is important across the levels of individual and social conceptions of identity, and a complex dynamic systems approach can enable us to bridge that divide. This approach developed out of General Systems Theory (Von Bertalanffy, 1968), which addressed a failure within science to adequately understand organised complexity (Checkland, 1999). As Rapoport (1986) explains, traditional analytical scientific methods are good at understanding simple systems (organised simplicity) and, through tools of statistical probability, good at understanding 'chaotic complexity', but not so good at understanding organised complexity. Systems science attempts to understand humankind and their environment as complex, yet organised, interacting systems (Skyttnar, 2001). It does so by refocusing from the nature of the elements to the network of relations (Rapoport, 1986; Williams & Hummelbrunner, 2011). As outlined in this chapter, this could be seen to fit with understanding identity as relations between the 'I' and the 'Me', relations between individuals, and the collective relationships of individuals within society.

Fundamentally, the concept of a system fits well with that of identity, in that 'preservation of identity' is considered one of the defining characteristics of a system (Rapoport, 1986). If a component changes, the identity of the system is not lost, there is constancy amid change, or as Bamberg (2011) terms it, the 'diachronic identity'.

Furthermore, the application of a systemic model to identity enables us to understand the importance and influence of goal-directed behaviour. In traditional scientific modelling, the end state cannot be considered within the calculation, for the effect cannot be included as a causal factor. Put another way, the dependent and independent variables are not interchangeable. But within a systemic model that includes consideration of human agency, the goal of self-validation or the 'human good' (Bamberg, 2011) can be understood as an influential factor on the behaviour of the system. In Complex Dynamic Systems, this is referred to as an 'attractor state' (Kaplan & Garner 2017). On a simple interpersonal level, this can be illustrated by individuals attempting to 'save face'. In these situations, as

described by Goffman (2014), both parties have a mutual goal of 'saving face', i.e., maintaining or achieving a position of social validation, and so will both work to save each other's 'face' and in doing so save their own. Originally published in 1967, Goffman's sociological work predated the formulation of positioning theory (Harre et al 2009), but we can now arguably frame his descriptions of 'face work' within the complex discursive process of positioning, within which narratives can play such an important part.

The systemic approach to relationships is also non-linear, and not always obviously proportional (Gustello, Koopmans, & Pincus, 2009). Causes can be effects, which can in turn be causes, bringing into consideration the influence of feedback loops and the magnification of small effects and diminishment of large ones, commonly known as the 'butterfly effect'. In applying this to narrative identity, we might see how the individual constructs a narrative understanding of themselves and uses that narrative to assume positions on a relational level. The assuming of such a position feeds back into their narrative of themselves, as well as feeding into the narratives of other participants. In terms of the butterfly effect, many people will be able to provide anecdotal evidence of how the smallest of social experiences can have a significant, even catastrophic, effect upon an individual's sense of self and personal narrative. Or at the opposite end of the scale, how one person's personal narrative can have society-wide impact.

The use of a systems approach, both through systemic thinking and ecological theory, is not new to social work and is seen as core theory within the field (for example Becket & Horner, 2015; Devaney et al, 2021; Munro 2011; Teater, 2014;). Applying systems to an understanding of identity within social work could bring insight to how the narration that takes place within the social work context can play a part in the formation and maintenance of identity across individual, relational, and cultural levels. In doing so it attends to both therapeutic (individual) and radical (structural change) social work, and thus supports a model of anti-discriminatory practice (Thompson, 2012). It means understanding how the discourses in play within a social worker's engagement with anyone will direct the positioning of individuals within their own narratives and in turn shape the identities of all participants going forward. For this, a deeper understanding is needed of how individuals narrate and how narration relates to the context of male victims of intimate partner abuse.

2.6 **Summary**

This chapter summarised the role of narrative in enabling individuals to understand themselves in terms of time, space, and meaning. Furthermore, these narratives are, in turn, a discursive tool in the continual task of positioning within the relational and collective arenas. They enable the individual to navigate the complex dilemmas of maintaining a diachronic self; establishing an appropriate sense of agency; and both differentiating from, and associating with, others. Approaching the concept of identity as a complex and dynamic system, within which the individual is merely one component alongside interpersonal interactions and wider constructs of social and cultural identity, can enable us to better understand the complexity, fluidity, and critical importance of narrative processes for the relationships that exist within and between us. These are universal concepts, and I have so far not applied them to the specific reality of this study's focus, male victims of intimate partner abuse. To do this, I will outline what we know from research about how people narrate and the content of their narrative identities. The research within this field has come to be known as Narrative Identity Theory and confirms the status of narrative and the act of narration as integral to the processes and content of identity.

Chapter 3 – Narrative and narration

“It’s like everyone tells a story about themselves inside their own head. Always. All the time. That story makes you what you are. We build ourselves out of that story.”

Patrick Rothfuss, The Name of the Wind (p657)

3.1 Introduction

Chapter 2 set out a conceptual model of how narrative can play a key role in a complex and dynamic system of identity which spans the three levels of individual, relational, and cultural human existence. In this chapter, I outline a multifaceted understanding of what narrative is, how and why people narrate, and what it can mean to the individual. In doing so, I will discuss some important epistemological difficulties that lie at the heart of narrative identity research, whilst taking a broad and inclusive view of the contributions different approaches have made.

This is, by necessity, short of providing a full and comprehensive account of the field. As Tamboukou, Andrews, and Squire (2013) point out, the multi-levelled, interdisciplinary nature of narrative research means that any attempt to reduce its complexity would not do it justice. For this reason, I focus specifically on the nature of human narration with regard to identity and associated issues. All of which inform our understanding of the central premise that autobiographical stories are critically important to how individuals understand themselves.

Starting broadly, this chapter begins by looking at the nature of narrative and the role it plays within human thought, before outlining some of the fundamental difficulties faced by researchers who study it. Following this is an examination of quantitative approaches to narrative identity, and their contributions to our understanding of the relationship between narration and wellbeing. The middle sections of the chapter will address two interrelated concepts at the heart of narrative identity, *coherence* and *meaning-making*. Both have a rich body of literature from more qualitative approaches. Where appropriate, discussion will be further informed with illustrations from the Hard to Tell pilot study. The final sections of this chapter will look at the importance of narration on a relational and cultural

level, and how our stories can evolve in relation to changes in context and the progress of time. First, however, it is important to establish what it is we mean when we refer to narrative.

3.2 What is narrative?

Fundamental to the study of narrative identity is the idea that a narrative is identifiably distinct from a series of statements or list of events. Despite this premise, what exactly qualifies as a narrative is not universally agreed (Fivush, Booker, & Graci, 2017; Adler, 2012). However, a helpful starting point can be found in Murray's definition as:

An organised interpretation of a sequence of events. This involves attributing Agency to the characters in the narrative and inferring causal links between events. In the classic formulation, a narrative is an account with three components: a beginning, a middle, and an end.

(Murray, 2015, p87)

Understanding that such a way of organising knowledge could be foundational to the way humans make sense of their experiences, i.e., the concept of 'narrative schema' (Singer 2004), has developed over the last forty years to take a prominent position within psycho-social research and theory. It has been instrumental in the move away from mechanistic epistemologies, such as those of behaviourism, towards a more contextualised perspective of human understanding and identity (Sarbin, 1986; McAdams, 2018). Perhaps the previously mentioned difficulty in defining the concept of narrative has been part of its success, giving it a capacity for flexibility that researchers have drawn upon across diverse areas of research and theory. This has meant that many disciplines have contributed to enriching our understanding of narration, including psychology, sociology, literature, linguistics, and philosophy, and it remains unbound to any individual theoretical analysis or agreed upon theory (Singer, 2004; McAdams, 2018).

Although the use of narrative interviews as a valid form of data collection can be traced back close to 100 years (Brannen, 2013), it was the writings of narratologists, predominantly from within the field of literary theory, that really began to inform psycho-social thinking and led to the conception of 'Narrative Psychology' (Sarbin, 1986). Initially Sarbin proposed that narrative be used as a root metaphor for understanding psychology. However, this was superseded by an

understanding of narrative as literally being a building block of human thought and self-understanding. In his seminal paper 'The Narrative Construction of Reality', Bruner (1991) explicitly drew from narratology to apply narrative concepts to a psychosocial understanding of human meaning-making and a constructivist understanding of the world.

Bruner argued that the Piagetian approach to how humans make sense of the world as 'little scientists' had created a paradigm that fixated upon the concepts of accurate truth finding and inner representations of an external, verifiable world. Although this may be appropriate for how we understand the natural world, the human world is comprised of subjective meaning and social constructs. Drawing on the developmental theories of Vygotsky, Bruner argued that Narrative is a cultural tool that, like language itself, both expresses and shapes thought. Much like language, as the individual develops, the two become inextricable, narrative becomes fundamental to thinking.

Human cognition carves the flow of lived experience into meaningful temporal units with beginnings, middles, and ends, stories that provide a narrative structure to human understanding.

(Fivush, Habermas, & Reese, 2019, p156)

The role of such narrative thinking within an individual's understanding of themselves has informed a growing field within psychology known as Narrative Identity Theory (NIT). NIT posits that an adult individual understands him/herself as a narrative. Each person has an "internalised and evolving life story, integrating the reconstructed past and imagined future to provide life with some degree of unity and purpose" (McAdams & Mclean, 2013, p233). This has driven many studies that have sought to scientifically analyse autobiographical life stories and provide an empirical model of their composition and effect, as well as their developmental nature.

As a psychosocial theory, NIT is rooted within Eriksonian developmental concepts, considering human development as series of consecutive stages, each with its own tasks that shape and direct individual identity. NIT proposes that personal narratives are shaped and reworked to address the identity tasks of the different life stages (Josselson, 2009). Within this model, the development of the fully fledged objective identity, the 'Me' as outlined within Chapter 2, is achieved with the adolescent convergence of both the developmental capacity for objective and abstract thought, (Kegan, 1986; Marcia, 1966), and the social and biological

demands of independent social engagement and intimate relationships. In observing the necessity for objective thought in narration, Habermas and Bluck (2000) argued that the capacity for certain elements of narration necessary for a coherent life story, what they termed *thematic* and *causal coherence*, would develop only in adolescence, meaning that the concept of a true narrative identity cannot be realised before this. At the time of their writing, this was a well-informed but largely theoretical proposal. Subsequently, there have been several studies confirming their model and further supporting the premise of NIT that Narrative and Narration can play an integral part to the formation of identity (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010; Bohn & Bernstien, 2008; Chen, et al. 2012).

The empirically grounded approach of NIT research has generated many insights into how life stories can be composed and, importantly, possible correlations with mental health and wellbeing. Adler's (2012) study of participants undergoing a 12-week course of psychotherapy ($n= 47$, *narratives = 600*) found themes of agency within participants' accounts of daily life increased over the course of therapy and consistently preceded self-reported increases in wellbeing. This corresponds with Bamberg's (2011) assertion that one of the key dilemmas of identity work is in maintaining a healthy sense of agency. It also compliments a wider body of research that links agency with positive wellbeing and conversely correlates a self-perceived lack of agency, or external locus of control, with mental ill-health (Tew, 2011).

In line with the understanding that narrative enables individuals to make sense of their experiences, factors of 'coherence' and 'meaning-making' have also featured strongly within NIT research. However, in considering the contributions of this element of Narrative Identity literature, it is important to understand the epistemological and ontological differences within the field, and their implications for research.

3.3 Fundamental differences in approach

As asserted by Bruner (1991), inherent within the concept of narrative identity is the view that reality, or at least all that we can understand of it, is a construct of human perception. In focusing on narrative within psychological empirical study, one is forced to straddle the two paradigms of scientific empiricism and subjective 'truth', maintaining an objective scientific approach whilst embracing the "fundamental subjectivity of stories" (Adler, 2012b, p327). Subsequently, one of

the significant complications this brings to the field is a diverse interpretation of concepts.

Before measuring a subjective phenomenon, one must first define what it is one wishes to measure. The difficulty being that a universal definition is almost antithetical to the nature of subjectivity. Efforts to do so within narrative research have led to a diverse number of different codes used by different researchers, examining potentially overlapping constructs with nuanced differences in emphasis. This creates a problem for any reviewer of the literature. For example, in looking at the evidence for correlates of agency and wellbeing within narration, one might also wish, as Adler et al (2016) did, to consider studies that have coded for 'power' (King & Noelle, 2005), 'autonomy' (Phillipe et al., 2011), or 'growth goals' (Baur & McAdams, 2010).

A second complication that stems from these ontological differences is that of reductionism. The need to define in order to measure can lead to the reduction of broad and complex constructs to specific and numerable aspects of narration. This is particularly evident in attempts to quantify and measure 'meaning-making'. As Park (2010) explains, it is widely agreed that the concept of 'meaning-making' is an important step to recovery, a psychological process that enables individuals to make sense of traumatic experience. However, the ways in which this can be modelled and interpreted are so varied that the resulting field of study has become too extensive and diverse to be reviewed in entirety and is composed of a great many studies that measure merely one or another component or feature. As Park states:

...empirical work has not matched the richness or complexity of theories regarding meaning and meaning-making, perhaps partly because the abstract and complex nature of the theoretical models renders them more amenable to hypothesis generation than to hypothesis testing.

(Park, 2010, p262)

The difficulties of both varied interpretation and reductionist tendencies are a significant challenge to concerted efforts to apply quantitative analysis to narrative identity. Nonetheless, such endeavours have made hugely significant contributions to our understanding of autobiographical narration, narrative identity, and wellbeing.

3.4 **Quantitative contributions to understanding narrative identity, the structure of narration, and its relationship with wellbeing.**

Many studies have examined the nature and structure of autobiographical narration and its correlation with constructs of health and wellbeing. This section focuses on two large-scale and rigorous studies that sought to consolidate much of the existing research: Adler et al. (2016) and McLean et al. (2019). Both studies sought to identify fundamental aspects of narration that linked to wellbeing outcomes, but before exploring their findings it is important to understand some of the conceptual problems that make such research so difficult.

Within NIT research, an accepted method of measuring meaning-making has been through the coding of specific instances where the narrator “steps back from the episodic action of the experience and reflects upon the meaning of the episode with regard to the self or world” (Cox & McAdams, 2014, p67), i.e., when the narrator makes a specific statement about what they have learned from the described experience. Such statements can in turn be sub-categorised as different types of meaning-making such as ‘lessons learned’ or ‘insights gained’ (Thorne, McLean, & Lawrence, 2004). Others have sought to categorise overt meaning-making statements in terms of valence, through positive or negative meaning-making (Cox, 2015).

Despite variations in coding, these approaches have demonstrated correlations between such meaning-making and wellbeing. Again, there is further complexity to be considered here because how ‘wellbeing’ is defined and operationalised differs between studies. For example, a common differentiation is made between the concepts of ‘hedonic’ and ‘eudaemonic’ wellbeing. The former is grounded in the understanding of happiness being the minimisation of pain and maximisation of pleasure. The latter, eudaemonic concept, regards “human flourishing and living up to one’s full potential (i.e., self-actualization)” (Disabato et al, 2016). This is also often considered in terms of ‘life satisfaction’. However, although the philosophical differences behind such concepts have been explored at length (Sirgy, 2012), the difference between operationalised measures is not clear. Studies showing high levels of correlation between measures have led some to argue that scales of hedonic and eudaemonic wellbeing are in fact measuring of the same wellbeing construct (Disabato et al, 2016). I highlight this here because it illustrates how the concepts under analysis are subjective and hard to define, and how, consequently, they continue to allude definitive measure.

Adler et al (2016) reviewed 30 empirical studies looking at the relationship between various aspects of autobiographical narration and incremental wellbeing. These inevitably included several different measures, and the authors are clear in pointing this out and considering it in their analysis. Adler et al drew on the expertise of seven leading NIT researchers to propose that the diverse array of different codes and constructs could be grouped together into four domains: *Motivational themes*, *Affective themes*, *Themes of integrative meaning*, and *Structural elements*.

3.5.1 *'Motivational themes'*

These capture all the individual differences in narratives that indicate what the individual seeks, either at the time of interview or at the time of the narrated experience. Two of the most documented of these are those of agency and of communion, which represent two of the defining concerns of human existence: the self and others.

Whereas agency is concerned with the individuals' motivation to achieve and exert some influence over their circumstances, communion is concerned with the individual's motivation for attachment, affiliation, love, friendship, and nurturance.

(Adler et al 2012, p3)

Of the four domains, Motivational themes had the most significant correlation with measures of incremental wellbeing.

3.5.2 *'Themes of integrative meaning'*

These identified instances where the narrator makes a reflection or interpretive evaluation of their narrated experience and include the previously discussed codes for meaning-making. This domain included what has come to be known as 'self-event connections' (Holm & Thomsen, 2018; Pasupathi, Mansour, & Wainryb, 2007 – cited Grysman & Manfield, 2017; Singer et al 2013), where the narrator makes a link between what they have experienced and who they are as a person, what they have learned, and why they behave in a certain way. Like *Motivational themes*, *themes of integrative meaning* also showed a consistent correlation with measures of incremental wellbeing.

3.5.3 *'Affective Themes'*

Coding for *'affective themes'* focused primarily on either the positive or negative valence of a narrative, or changes of valence during narration. Within this domain,

the concepts of 'contamination' and 'redemption' featured heavily amongst the studies selected. The concept of a redemptive narrative in its original conception (McAdams et al, 2001) is one where the narrator had a good situation, experiences adversity or loss, but manages to overcome this to achieve a good situation once more. Since its initial conception, it has, within subsequent studies, become shortened to code for stories that merely move from an adverse position to one of success (e.g., McCoy & Dunlop 2017). In contrast, a narrative of contamination is one where the narrator started in a good position, but this was lost and never won back. The work of McAdams and colleagues (McAdams, 2013) has consistently indicated that narratives of redemption and contamination, respectively, correlate with positive and negative wellbeing outcomes, although there may be variation within different demographic groups (McCoy & Dunlop, 2017). Looking across the studies, Adler et al (2016) found that although there appeared to be a relationship between wellbeing and *affective themes*, it was not straightforward. Correlations only appeared with measures of hedonic wellbeing, and, corresponding with the work of McAdams and colleagues, the correlation appeared to be dictated by the direction of travel between negative and positive affect, i.e., it was the ending valence that appeared to matter. Moving from negative to positive affect within stories correlated with positive wellbeing, and progression from positive to negative affect, correlated with negative wellbeing.

3.5.4 'Structural elements'

The fourth domain outlined by Adler et al (2016), that of '*structural elements*', refers to the how the story was told, such as the sequencing, level of detail, and complexity. Importantly, these themes predominantly contribute to notions of coherence, which I will discuss in greater depth later in this chapter. Adler et al. (2016) were unable to find any evidence within their chosen studies of '*structural themes*' correlating with incremental wellbeing. Despite, as they point out, the prevalence of theoretical literature that posits structural concepts such as coherence to be fundamental to narrative identity (Linde, 1993; Habermas & Bluck, 2000), this is relatively underexplored in empirical research. This may relate, as discussed previously, to the difficulty of applying nebulous theoretical concepts such as 'coherence' to the narrow specifics of statistical analysis.

Adler et al. (2016) are careful to state that although they believe these domains to be helpful in directing further research, the placement of individual themes within particular domains for the purposes of their study does not preclude the possibility of themes having aspects of relevance to the other domains. For example, the

concepts of *contamination* and *redemption*, although captured within the domain of affective themes, could also be understood to have structural elements.

Building upon Adler et al's insights, McLean et al (2019) conducted a large study of three existing narrative data sets (combined $n = 855$, narratives = 2,565). They coded for these narratives for 15 themes which they identified as broadly representing the myriad found in current literature, and through an exploratory factor analysis, identified three latent factors (underlying factors that are present, but have yet to be fully identified). They labelled these three factors as '*Structure*', '*Autobiographical Reasoning*', and '*Motivational and Affective Themes*'. Although Adler et al (2016) considered *motivational* and *affective themes* as two separate groups, Mclean et al's (2019) analysis indicated they were both measures of one underlying factor.

Importantly, within the full analysis, the allocation of individual codes was not clear-cut, as some measured for more than one latent factor. For example, 'thematic coherence' appeared to measure for both *structure* and *autobiographical reasoning*. Mclean et al. argue that such 'cross-loading' can inform what they term a '*landscape model*' of narrative structure. This is an ecological, and thus essentially systemic, model that acknowledges a richer understanding of the narrative process by considering the bi-relational and interdependent nature of its composite factors.

Mclean et al (2019) also provide a simpler *functional model*, outlining more straightforward covariant relationships by removing codes that cross-loaded (including 'redemption' and 'thematic coherence') to provide a reduced model of the same three latent factors and their uniquely covariant codes. However, in recognising the benefit of a dynamic systemic model, Mclean et al warn against 'embracement' of the functional model, arguing that the overlapping nature of some features of narrative may indicate their increased potency rather than their redundancy.

In short, across all their data, including thousands of analysed narratives, both Adler et al (2016) and Mclean et al (2019) point to the existence of key thematic domains within the composition of autobiographical narration, and demonstrate a correlative and predictive relationship between narrative identity and wellbeing. This is informed by, and supports, theoretical assertions that cast narrative identity as a distinct aspect of human personality, playing a key role in life outcomes such as wellbeing (McAdams & Pals, 2006). It is important to note, however, that the

evidence does not establish a straightforward causal relationship one way or the other. Framing wellbeing as an 'outcome', as is characteristic within the literature, infers a causal relationship, with wellbeing as the dependent variable. In reality, these studies are not controlled, and truly only claim correlation. The longitudinal studies required to start establishing more nuanced relationships are few. Adler's (2012a) examination of narratives and wellbeing within psychotherapy patients, did show that the narrative theme of agency preceded self-reported improvement in wellbeing. Bauer & McAdams (2010) showed that individual narratives concerning growth goals were predictive of eudemonic wellbeing three years later. But, with so many other variables unmeasured, these relationships cannot be outlined simply as those of cause and effect, though there is enough evidence to understand narration as a nuanced predictor of some measures of wellbeing. It might be tempting to consider that the right narratives lead to positive wellbeing, or, conversely, that attaining a state of positive wellbeing enables a certain type of narration, but this would be overly simplistic. A systemic understanding of these relationships would hold that both can be true, and that wellbeing and narration both play significant roles within a complex and dynamic system.

McLean et al's (2019) study attempts to bring to NIT research the statistical analytical rigour that established the 'big five' personality traits (McRae & Costa, 2008). The authors stress that their efforts are merely the first steps towards this goal and that their identified latent factors should not be taken as fully comprehensive. This study considered 15 codes that the authors thought broadly representative of the literature. However, they make clear that the possibility of factors that remain unidentified must be kept in mind. This highlights a potentially problematic aspect of quantitative research and analysis: the answers achieved are limited precisely to the questions that are asked (Brannen, 2013). If the codes considered are reduced aspects of a broader, more complex phenomenon, then arguably so will be the resulting analysis.

The recognition of the possible limitations of applying quantitative approaches to the subjective and qualitative construct of narrative identity, should not take away from understanding the considerable contribution such endeavours have made and will continue to make to our understanding of narration and narrative identity. The work of NIT researchers has firmly established correlations between mental health and wellbeing, and elements of the way we make sense of our experiences through narration. However, to purely focus on the aspects of narrative identity that

have been distilled through quantitative means would be to miss the deeper complexity of the narrative drive for coherence and meaning-making.

3.6 Coherence and meaning-making

The concepts of coherence and meaning-making are bound together in the understanding of narrative as a way of making sense of ourselves and our relationship with the world around us. Measurements such as those previously described not only have potential to assume false negatives, i.e., assuming an absence of meaning-making just because the individual has not explicitly stated it, but also disregard the possibility that all of narration is an attempt to make meaning through the construction of a coherent account of one's life experiences.

As Taylor (1983) explains, the process of meaning-making is an attempt to make sense of an experience or experiences, resulting in efforts to understand what happened, and subsequently what it means moving forward. This includes, but is not restricted to, attributing cause and/or intent, and attempts to figure out implications for now and the future. For such work to take place, there must be a level of coherence. An incoherent narrative does not make sense.

In his proposition for human narrative thought, Bruner (1991) suggested several features of narration that served the human meaning-making process, some of which we have touched upon in Chapter 2 (stability, intention, and attribution), but Bruner also highlighted narrative's hermeneutical nature. As outlined in Chapter 2, our world is not only defined by dimensions of space, but also of time and of meaning. In coming to understand anything as more than just its physical properties, one begins to narrate; to understand its place in time and locate it within human dimensions of meaning. However, in the search for the meaning of an act there is, arguably, always more context to consider, and more context can inform further interpretation of the act, which in turn can reveal more about the context in which it took place. The pursuit of interpretive meaning in this fashion is known as 'Hermeneutics' and this cyclical process of analysis is known as the 'hermeneutic circle' (Schmidt, 2006). This cycle, as outlined, is potentially never ending, which poses a problem for individuals. As children often demonstrate, any explanation can always be met with a further '*why?*'. The narrative, however, attempts to counter this, to resolve such an endless cycle (Ricoeur, 1988). The coherent narrative contains all the information the narrator perceives as necessary to understand events, including their context and meaning (Flick, 2015). It delivers a

hermeneutic package that closes the circle and curtails the endless application of 'why?'.

Habermas and Bluck (2000), in their influential paper 'Getting a Life...', consider the concept of coherence of utmost importance to the process of narration, and argue that it can be understood as having several different forms. Firstly, they differentiate between 'local' and 'global' coherence. In local coherence they refer to the formulation of small clauses and individual descriptions of specific incidents. Local coherence is important in telling the story of a particular event, and research indicates that this capacity is usually attained by the age of 8 years (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010). But to place such an event within an overarching narrative composed of several events, i.e., to compose a life story, 'global coherence' is required.

3.6.1 *Global Narrative Coherence*

Habermas and Bluck (2000) identify four types of, arguably interrelated, global coherence: *temporal*, *thematic*, *causal*, and what they term a '*cultural concept of biography*'.

Temporal

Temporal coherence is simply the ability to place events in a chronological sequence, literally within the logic of time. A narrative that does not make sequential sense is easily dismissed as illogical and incoherent, and therefore more likely to be judged erroneous or untrue. Such temporal sequencing has been a core tenet of narrative studies within the social sciences, with chronological sequencing being considered one, if not the, defining feature of a narrative. However, this has been contested. Mishler (2006), one of the most authoritative voices within qualitative narrative research, argues that of equal if not greater importance to narrative composition is the narrator's perception, what Riceour (1980) refers to as 'Narrative Time'. In this, narrative coherence is achieved through the arrangement of events, and it is in fact the 'sense of an ending' (Riceour, 1980) that brings coherence to the story, for without such a coda there is no recognisable story. Like an argument, the conclusion is necessary to draw the points together (Mishler 2006). This is particularly relevant to life stories, and Mishler gives examples of life events causing a reappraisal of previous life experiences. Classically, this can happen in becoming parents, when the behaviour of one's own parents is viewed from a new perspective, driving a reinterpretation of our own experiences of being parented. For male victims of IPV,

this may come in the eventual realisation that what they have experienced is abuse; what one pilot study participant referred to as a 'light bulb moment'.

Mishler refers to this as the "double arrow of time", where the most recent event can recast the telling and understanding of the past. Within stories of IPA the sequencing of events can be critical to whether an action is deemed to be abuse or self-defence and so temporal coherence is very important to victim narratives. But, in taking into account the iterative process of narration and the 'double arrow of time', we must also understand that such sequencing, and the selection of what is and isn't necessary to include in a story, may change with hindsight as the narrators understanding of what happened evolves. Therefore, accounts provided by victims before and after the 'light bulb moment' may differ accordingly.

Causal Coherence

Temporal coherence plays an important role in the establishment of causal coherence, for, as touched upon in Chapter 2, the relationship between cause and effect is widely understood as a sequential one. However, causal coherence within life stories has a significance beyond just establishing a sequential plausibility. Habermas and Bluck assert that without causal or 'explanatory' coherence, narrators cannot depict themselves as having lived 'a reasonable life'. In this assertion, we again see the perceived need for validation, as discussed in Chapter 2, as well as a need for purpose or design.

"When causal links are lacking... life appears to have been determined by chance and therefore to be meaningless" (Habermas & Bluck, 2000, p751)

Within the context of IPA, causal coherence has profound implications in terms of moral and legal culpability. For example, in the case of Sally Challen (BBC, 2019), the quashing of her murder conviction required a narrative of coercive controlling abuse leading to mental ill-health, which in turn needed to be considered as a causal factor in the killing of her husband. Within the Hard to Tell pilot study the establishment of temporal and causal coherence was evident in how participants sought to detail not only the sequence of events, ie who did what first, but also why they had done what they had done.

Thematic Coherence

In thematic coherence, Habermas and Bluck describe an ability to establish 'thematic similarities' across the events of a life, achieved either implicitly, through the narration of similar stories, or explicitly, through the drawing of comparisons

between events or even through the naming of themes ('my life has been a series of...'). Although such themes may not have the explanatory power of a causal sequence, they perhaps play a role in establishing relationships between events and thus provide some form of pattern to a life that helps to produce a coherent package and resolve the hermeneutic circle. Within the Hard to Tell pilot study, this was evident in participants setting out themes of abuse within their relationships, as well as across a wider life trajectory.

Cultural Concept of Biography

Habermas and Bluck's fourth type of global coherence they termed the *Cultural Concept of Biography*. This, they argue, is the pattern of events and experiences that a given culture expects to find within a biography, such as childhood, marriage, having children, retirement, etc., what Saraiva et al (2021) refer to as a cultural life script. In this, there are elements of all three of the other types of coherence identified by Habermas and Bluck (2000). At certain times of life, certain themes may be expected (e.g., adolescence and exploration) and knowledge of what is expected of a life can assist in providing temporal coherence, i.e., things that happen in childhood necessarily precede adult events such as marriage. Life stages can also contribute to causal coherence in experiences that are associated with expected life events (e.g., getting married and having children in early to middle adulthood). Further to these elements, however, there is an explicit acknowledgement of the role of culture in shaping the autobiographical narrative process.

3.7 Culture, narration, and cultural narratives

Although we have mostly focused on narrative construction at the level of the individual, there are, as set out in Chapter 2, conceptually two other levels of identity: the relational and the collective. Bound up within the meaning of 'coherence' is the implication of intelligibility. At the relational level, a coherent narrative is one that makes sense to the audience. The need for the narrator to be understood and accepted, as well as the need of their audience to make sense and understand, means that attaining coherence is a "co-operative achievement" (Linde, 1993, p12), even one that is socially demanded.

"The process of creating coherence is not a light matter; it is in fact a social obligation for the participants to appear as competent members of their

culture... ..If (in the estimation of a given addressee) this obligation is not met the speaker is liable to be criticised or corrected by the addressee”

(Linde 1993, p16)

Because of this, the telling of one’s story, from anticipation to delivery, to a private diary or to another person, is shaped by a demand for coherence (Wainryb & Recchia 2014; Dunlop 2017; Bamberg 2011). This is impacted by how the audience reacts and engages with the narration process. For example, positive response to a narrative appears more likely to be associated with the gaining of insights, and negative responses associated with the learning of lessons (Thorne et al. 2004). Pasupathi (2001) refers to this as the co-construction of stories, and it is also supported by findings that show rehearsal (where individuals had previously talked about a memory) as a predictor of meaning-making (Alea, 2018). Beyond the interpersonal, we exist in a ‘storied world’ (Murray, 2015), meaning each narrator has a world of existing cultural narratives to draw upon. This provides material with which to build a narrative, norms to guide its shape and delivery, as well as prescriptive and proscriptive codes to encourage or caution against telling (Wang, Song, and Koh, 2017).

It would seem that different cultures offer different menus of images, themes, and plots for the construction of narrative identity, and individuals within these cultures appropriate, sustain, and modify these narrative forms as they tell their own stories.

(McAdams & Mclean, 2013, p237)

As McAdams and Mclean outline, the nature of different narratives is tied to the culture they form a part of, and within different cultures, due to numerous factors of history and politics, certain narratives will be more dominant than in others (Hammack 2008).

The concept of dominant cultural discourses is not new. Historically, they could have been understood within the concept of Hegemony (Kiesling, 2006), or Foucauldian conceptions of discourse (Hook, 2001), as both address dominant ideas with regard to which individuals must position themselves. More recently, they have been considered in terms of ‘Master’ narratives (Arnett, 2016; Hammack, 2008; Mclean et al. 2017; Mclean, Shucard, & Syed, 2017).

McLean, Shucard, and Syed (2017) conceive of master narratives as “culturally shared stories that provide guidance for how to belong to, and be a good member

of, a given culture; they are useful frameworks that guide personal story construction” (p.94). In this process, master narratives, such as how to be a good husband or a successful man, direct positions within discourse and potentially become internalised.

McLean, Shucard, and Syed (2017) identify four principles that such narratives share: *Ubiquity* (known by the majority within a culture); *Utility* (serving a normative and legitimating purpose); *Invisibility* (being accepted unconsciously and without recognition by the population); and *Rigidity* (being difficult to change, linked to structural power, and compulsory in nature). This understanding of individual psychology being shaped and directed by wider social constructs has become known as ‘structural psychology’ (Syed & McLean, 2022), within which the application of the master narrative framework has directed recent interest in the normative concept of a ‘good life’ narrative.

Narrative identity is highly personal, but contingent upon cultural narratives, which provide value laden directions about what constitutes a good life.

(Westberg, 2022, p1)

The perception of the normative life as being the ‘good’ way to live ties in with the identity drive for validation, as discussed in Chapter 2. Within the master narrative framework, this directs individuals to narrate their experiences in ways that conform to a cultural conception of what ‘the good life’ is. How successful an individual is in meeting these cultural expectations is an assessment of “how well they are faring in life” (Westberg, 2022, p2). This poses a potential problem for those whose life story does not fit normative expectations, as they may be denied a sense of belonging within mainstream culture, and risk isolation (Bauer, 2021; Syed & McLean 2022). In such positions, individuals may be driven to embrace ‘alternative’ or ‘deviation’ narratives, perhaps overcoming isolation through communion with others with similar stories (Westberg, 2022; Syed & McLean, 2022).

Whether adopting a master narrative or not, individuals position themselves in relation to it, for alternative narratives are defined as such by their relationship to the master. Thus, whatever narrative position is occupied, these dominant narratives are internalised, defining an individual’s identity and influencing their standing within their social environment. As will be discussed in subsequent chapters, there may be master narratives around gender and intimate partner abuse that have significant bearing on how male victims narrate their experiences.

In a mixed method study employing narrative, discourse, and identity status analysis, Mclean, Shucard and Syed (2017) looked at the use of master and alternative narratives in correlation with measures of identity status in college undergraduate students ($n=245$). Identity status theory (Marcia 1996) maps the development of identity in adolescence through the four stages of *Diffusion*, *Foreclosure*, *Moratorium*, and *Achievement*.

Within their collected narratives, the researchers identified a Master Narrative of traditional gender roles:

defined by the view that men and women have separate, and traditional, roles, reflecting a clear power differential. For example, for men, these roles include being breadwinners, more powerful, and stronger; and for women, these roles include being submissive, nurturing, and weaker.

(Mclean, Shucard and Syed, 2017 p96-97).

However, they found that the majority of participants positioned themselves around alternative narratives which they identified as “equality”, or “should be equal” narratives, and this also correlated significantly with measures of identity status.

Positioning around the master narrative correlated with high identity commitment, associated with identity foreclosure (Marcia, 1966), and alternative gender narratives of *equality* and *should-be-equal*, correlated with lower identity commitment associated with a status of identity exploration (moratorium). Although statistically significant in each instance, the effect size was low for both ($\eta^2 = .03$ & $.05$ respectively).

McLean, Shucard, and Syed then took a subsample of 12 participants, grouped them in pairs, and recorded their conversations around gender. Subsequently, each participant listened to and discussed their recordings with the researchers in one-to-one interviews. In these encounters, they were observed to align themselves more with traditional master narratives whilst in conversation with their peers, despite these not necessarily being the positions they took in one-to-one discussion with the researchers. This led them to conclude that:

It is not only that people align themselves with one and other in conversation, but also that they align themselves with where they think the other person is positioned regardless of whether this is true.

(Mclean, Shucard and Syed, 2017 p101)

With this research, Mclean, Shucard, and Syed are seeking to reveal both the process and content of identity across an ecological model explained in greater detail by Galliher, Mclean, and Syed (2017). This framework attempts to map the transmission and negotiation of identity from distal master narratives, through the process of discursive positioning, to the individual cognitive processes of identity formation, i.e., across the three levels of collective (cultural), relational, and individual identity outlined in Chapter 2.

The production and use of such cultural narratives has also been a rich area of enquiry for more qualitative research into narrative and identity. This has tended to focus on the content of narration, looking not only at the structure and types of stories told, but also how these can evolve through telling and retelling,

A significant body of this work has come from research into the narratives of ill health. As Murray (2000) points out, the reality of experiencing ill health, particularly what Frank (1998) refers to as 'deep illness', has many components of what in Eriksonian terms would be deemed an 'identity crisis'. "A crucial moment when development must move one way or another, marshalling resources of growth, recovery, and further differentiation" (Erikson, 1968, p16). Those experiencing such ill health, and their family and friends (Whiffin et al, 2019), can use narratives to reassess their position in life and relationships in the light of their change in circumstances (Frank 1995, cited Murray, 2000).

Focusing on the type of story told by individuals reckoning with such changes, Frank (1998) identified three types of story he had come to recognise in 'deep illness': the '*restitution story*', the '*chaos story*', and the '*quest story*'. The *restitution story* resonates with McAdams' (2013) redemptive narrative, and in this the patient follows, or predicts the following, of a narrative arc from illness, through diagnosis and treatment to restoration of health. The '*chaos story*' is more resonant with that of the 'contaminated narrative' (ibid), where illness is followed by a poor prognosis, nothing is ever the same again, and the patient cannot envisage a restoration of health. The '*quest story*' incorporates what other researchers might consider the most 'meaning-making' and self-event connections, where the narrator credits their experiences of illness with a newfound perspective and understanding of life, or their relationships with the world around them.

The approach of identifying through qualitative analysis the types of story told, and how they can be affected by different cultural and interpersonal factors, has been highly influential, both in the identification of different story types, but also, once

identified, in gaining insight to the narratives of others (for example Thomas-McLean, 2004).

Regarding Male Victims of IPA, Corbally (2015), through interviews with male survivors, identified three types of story: '*the fatherhood narrative*', '*the good husband narrative*', and '*the abuse narrative*'. Corbally referred to these as strategies and concluded that the *fatherhood* and *good husband* narratives played a discursive role in positioning the narrator in relation to the *abuse* narrative, i.e., they weren't victims, they were good parents or husbands.

A further rich vein of such qualitative narrative and identity research can be found in the studies of the 'coming out story' as a significant cultural and personal narrative within the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer-identifying (LGBTQ) community (Bacon 1998). The coming-out story is the recounting of the narrator's experience of telling their family or friends of their LGBTQ status for the first time. The focus of research and literature on this genre of story has provided rich insight into how stories are both produced and assumed by individuals, and how they can play such a critically important role across all levels of identity (e.g., Gray, 2009; Roseborough, 2006). Didamenico's (2015) study of people collaboratively rehearsing and refining their coming-out stories for a panel presentation provides fascinating insight into how such identity defining stories can be at once uniquely personal, interpersonally negotiated, and communally and culturally owned (see also Cohler & Hammack, 2006). Although much of narrative identity research focuses upon individual stories collected within a one-to-one interview setting, human interaction is not always so binary. Real world scenarios can feature multiple parties, 'small stories' (Bamberg, 2011; Freeman, 2010), and a process of communal storytelling (e.g., Cook, 2019) that make up day-to-day relational identity work. Further insights to the nature of narration at a relational level consider how stories evolve and change across time and between contexts.

3.8 The evolving story - time and context.

The telling and retelling of stories over time is significant in shaping how those stories are told and what they mean to the individual. Evidence for this was touched upon previously with Alea's (2018) study, showing that rehearsal of a narrative correlated with wellbeing outcomes. This alludes to a process of working through a story and the importance of having the chance to narratively process to better understand and make sense of an experience. The fact that memory and our

capacity for recall changes over time, as well as in relation to our developmental life stage, has been well documented (Bauer, Hattenschwiler, & Larkina, 2016; Josselson 2009; Thompsen et al, 2012). Fivush, Booker, & Graci (2017) thus point out that consequently our ability to make meaning from our narratives must also change over time. They argue that this is heavily directed by the cognitive capacity and psychosocial needs of different life stages. However, the context of narration also appears to be of great importance.

In line with Edwards and Potter's (1992) assertions discussed in Chapter 2 that all discourse is occasioned and orientated, the influence of context upon the telling of biographical stories has been well documented. This can be understood and examined in many ways, for example Trester's (2013) study of one individual telling and retelling the same story reveals clear differences in how the same narrator was able to position themselves in the first telling as a participant, reliving the story, and in the second as a more removed author, reflecting on the events and the meaning they had made of it. Arguably a researcher hearing just one or other of those accounts may draw different conclusions regarding the narrator's capacity for meaning-making or other such constructs.

Lambrou's (2014) study of the retelling of a survivor's story of the 7/7 London bombings, on the day of the event and two and a half years later, revealed an increase in context setting and elaboration, with detail included in the second telling that could not have been known by the narrator at the time of the first. On an individual level, this speaks to subsequent knowledge informing the narrative of previous events. But on a relational/interpersonal level, we must also consider that they were very differently occasioned. Lambrou's participant first told of his experience to a news reporter at the scene of the incident. The second telling took place in an interview between him and Lambrou (although it is hard to imagine these were the only times he told his story): different context, different audience, resulting in a different narration. Studies have shown that the audience engagement can have a significant effect on the content of narration without the narrator realising, with distracted audiences eliciting less elaboration and detail (Pasupathi & Hoyt, 2009). This, it seems, is a dynamic process, for studies also indicate that how a story is told can have significant effect on how audiences feel towards the narrator (Cole and Beike, 2019). This, combined with the previously discussed need for validation, frames an understanding of how stories can change according to the relational needs and dynamics of different occasions (Stanley & Billig, 2004).

3.9 Cultural context, time, and IPA survivor stories

An understanding of master narratives, alongside a recognition of the importance of interpersonal and cultural context to narration, reveals a stigmatising potential for survivors of IPA, and a potentially life-long journey of reauthoring to attain a culturally validated life story (Brosi & Rolling, 2010). Speaking from an American context, Delker, Salton, and McLean explain:

The reality of interpersonal violence, which involves physical, sexual, or psychological harm committed intentionally within a relationship, threatens common assumptions of a safe, just world. In the wake of an act of violence, a “just world” emphasis shifts the collective conversation from perpetrator actions and accountability to the question of what victim characteristics might have justified the attack. Likewise, deeply rooted American cultural values around individualism, stoicism, personal “grit,” and “pulling yourself up by your bootstraps” can convey that victimization and emotional vulnerability are personal weaknesses, which should be overcome promptly by force of personal will.

(Delker, Salton, & McLean, 2020, p243)

Thus, through the cultivation of “self-blame, shame, and anticipatory stigma” (Kennedy and Prock, 2018, p520), such a cultural context acts as an impediment to victims telling their story. However, Delker, Salton, and Mclean (2020) assert that some are able achieve a ‘survivor identity’ though attaining a redemptive narrative of growth and resolution following trauma, and in telling their story, take on the identity of ‘advocate’. Such an achievement arguably meets both the identity needs of agency and communion, whilst also attaining a generative aspect in advocating for others. Such a status is evidently harder to reach for those who cannot claim such a redemptive journey.

That is, if one does not experience growth and resolution in the wake of a traumatic experience, that story will be hard to tell and will be harder to be heard, because it does not fit with cultural narrative expectations.

(Delker, Salton, & McLean, 2020, p247)

This brings many factors into consideration regarding male victims and their stories within this study. These include the length of time since their experiences of abuse, how many times they have been able to tell of their experiences, in what context

and to whom. Within the pilot study, it was noted that the participant with the least coherent narrative concerning their abuse was also the one for whom the least amount of time had passed since such experiences, and who had had the least opportunity to retell their story. The insights into how important relational context is to narration is also worth considering with regard to the interview itself. The narrator's perception of the interviewer will also shape the content of the narrative in terms of detail provided, knowledge assumed, and the agenda of the audience (De Fina 2011). My role as a male interviewer, and the participants' understanding of my agenda, will inevitably shape their narration.

3.10 Summary

As this chapter has described, the field of narrative identity is a broad church, including authors and researchers from a wide range of backgrounds and expertise, all coalescing around the basic premise that how individuals understand themselves and engage with the world is fundamentally shaped by the stories they are able to tell. Although such a diverse range of approaches brings inevitable difficulties in terms of ontological and epistemological grounding, these are arguably outweighed by the benefits. The concept of a narrative identity is now well supported by both empirical statistical examinations, as well as through qualitatively rich analysis, placing narrative and narration at the heart of adult identity. We know that the narratives told and the way they are narrated changes in relation to the passing of time, psycho-social development, and the audience and context of each telling. Of great importance to professions such as social work, we know that the content, structure, and rehearsal of personal narratives correlates with mental health and wellbeing outcomes. Furthermore, we are beginning to understand how the wider culture in which we live provides content, shape, and guidelines for individuals in the forging of their personal narratives. These cultural narratives can have powerful influence on the telling of one's story and, in turn, the formation of an individual's narrative identity. Having explored an understanding of what narration is, and how it fits within a systemic multi-levelled model of identity, Chapters 3 and 4 focus on two pervading and powerful cultural narratives of relevance to male victims, Masculinity, and the existing discourse of IPA.

Chapter 4 – Intimate partner abuse and male victims

*“Some people have never seen their fathers beat their mothers,
only because their mothers are the ones who did
or do the beating.”*

Mokokoma Mokhonoana

4.1 Introduction

This chapter examines what we know of Intimate Partner Abuse (IPA) and how it is experienced by male victims/survivors. I begin by setting out a definition of what constitutes Domestic Violence and Abuse, and IPA. Although our contemporary definition is relatively comprehensive, we still have hurdles to overcome to effectively map its prevalence. This chapter will evaluate the key sources of data with particular regard to gender patterns in perpetration, before moving on to what we understand of the male victim/survivor's experience. Where relevant, discussion and literature will also be linked to the findings of the Hard to Tell Pilot study.

Contention within the field regarding gender patterns of perpetration is a theme repeatedly returned to throughout this chapter. Researchers take differing positions, with some arguing that IPA is predominantly perpetrated by men and others arguing greater parity between the sexes. This is known as the 'symmetry debate' and, as will be explained over the coming pages, this remains unresolved, arguably because we lack the tools to accurately measure true prevalence.

In the previous two chapters I have used the three layers of human experience (individual, relational, and collective) to examine how the phenomena of identity and narration can be understood at each level. This chapter will do the same for IPA, although not as explicitly. Such an approach resonates with what Macy et al. (2021) consider an ecological perspective of domestic abuse, not just focusing on the individual's context, but also those of the interpersonal and relational, community, and societal elements.

IPA can be examined at the relational level in several ways. Firstly, and fundamentally, it is relational in the very act of perpetration of abuse by one person upon another. However, it also manifests at this level in how individuals engage with both formal and informal support, and its impact on other members of the household. As outlined within the introduction, exposure of children to violence and abuse between parents and wider family can have significant detrimental effect across all areas of a child's development (Artz et al, 2014). In addressing the relational level, this chapter will draw on several authors (Ali, Dhingra, & McGarry, 2016; Johnson, 2008) to outline a typology of IPA, from physical violence to controlling and coercive abuse, the continued psychological violence of legal administrative abuse, and the contested concept of parental alienation.

Understanding the impact of these different forms of abuse entails an examination of what IPA means at the individual level, where it appears that some elements of the victim experience are gendered and qualitatively different for male and female victims. This chapter, therefore, examines the impact IPA has upon male victims in terms of physical and psychological harm, outlining what we know so far, as well as some key areas around which there remains conflicting data and unresolved questions.

The final sections of this chapter will consider collective aspects of IPA in considering how the cultural narrative of male perpetration and female victimhood has come to dominate mainstream discourse, and what this can mean to those, such as male victims, whose personal narratives do not fit collective expectations.

4.2 Defining domestic violence & abuse

The Domestic Abuse Act (DAA, 2021) provided, for the first time in England and Wales, a statutory framework that outlawed domestic abuse and defined it as follows:

- (2) Behaviour of a person ("A") towards another person ("B") is "domestic abuse" if—
 - (a) A and B are each aged 16 or over and are personally connected to each other, and
 - (b) the behaviour is abusive.
- (3) Behaviour is "abusive" if it consists of any of the following—

- (a) physical or sexual abuse;
- (b) violent or threatening behaviour;
- (c) controlling or coercive behaviour;
- (d) economic abuse (see subsection (4));
- (e) psychological, emotional or other abuse;

and it does not matter whether the behaviour consists of a single incident or a course of conduct.

- (4) “Economic abuse” means any behaviour that has a substantial adverse effect on B’s ability to—
 - (a) acquire, use or maintain money or other property, or
 - (b) obtain goods or services.
- (5) For the purposes of this Act A’s behaviour may be behaviour “towards” B despite the fact that it consists of conduct directed at another person (for example, B’s child).

(DAA, 2021, s2-5)

There are several important aspects of this definition. Firstly, it applies predominantly to individuals over the age of 16. Abuse perpetrated against someone under 16 would be considered child abuse and addressed within the Children Act (1989). However, children (anyone under the age of 18) are considered victims within the act if they see, hear, or experience the effects of the abuse, and are related to either of the two adults involved. Furthermore, as set out in s5, behaviour towards a child can be considered abusive to their parent. Secondly, the definition is gender neutral and names a variety of forms that abuse can take. This reflects a contemporary understanding of abuse that is not limited to physical violence. Whereas once some considered domestic violence as solely ‘battered wives’ and/or ‘child abuse’ (Martin, 1978), we now have a litany of terms regarding different types of abuse that occur within the domestic arena and a growing recognition that it is not solely perpetrated by men upon women. Thirdly, the definition includes not only single incidents, but also a ‘course of conduct’. This recognises how abuse can be perpetrated through the accumulative effect of many different acts, some of which may not appear overtly abusive when considered in isolation. Such behaviour has become known as ‘coercive and controlling abuse’ and was outlawed in England and Wales by the Serious Crime Act (2015). It defined the two constituent elements as follows:

Coercive behaviour is an act or a pattern of acts of assault, threats, humiliation and intimidation or other abuse that is used to harm, punish, or frighten their victim

Controlling behaviour is a range of acts designed to make a person subordinate and/or dependent by isolating them from sources of support, exploiting their resources and capacities for personal gain, depriving them of the means needed for independence, resistance and escape and regulating their everyday behaviour

(H.O., 2015, online)

Some argue this is the most destructive manifestation of DA (Myhill, 2015; Johnson & Leone, 2005) and often, although not always, includes components of physical violence, or the threat thereof.

As well as the different forms of abuse identified above, domestic abuse can also be considered in terms of the relationships within which it takes place, e.g., parent abuse, sibling abuse, or elder abuse. The focus of this study is abuse between intimate partners. In recent literature, this is often referred to as Intimate Partner Violence, but to remove any ambiguity regarding the inclusion of non-physical violence, I will use the term Intimate Partner Abuse (IPA). Such abuse has also appeared within literature as marital violence, marital abuse, spousal abuse, partner violence, conjugal violence, partner abuse, or intimate partner aggression.

I highlight the existence of such a variety of terms, as it is important to how we understand existing research and data. When talking about IPA not all researchers are talking about the same thing. Having such a range of specific terms can be helpful for examining the complexity of abuse in all its different forms and the differing needs of those who experience it. However, it makes cross study comparison particularly difficult. Meta-analysis and literature reviews invariably cite the same problem: different researchers focus on different populations, study different behaviours, and use different concepts and definitions for the same terms. (Artz et al, 2014; Hamberger, Larsen, & Lehrner, 2015; 2017; Kimber et al, 2018; Spencer et al, 2017; Trevillion et al, 2012).

4.3 The nature and prevalence of perpetration

Any assessment of the scale of domestic abuse is heavily directed by the nature of the data available. The data regarding IPA comes from 3 key sources: *administrative data* such as crime reports and hospital admissions; *large, representative population surveys*, such as the Crime Survey for England and Wales; and (usually smaller scale) *non-probability samples*. One of the difficulties facing current understanding of IPA is that these different sources can return different results regarding prevalence and perpetration. This, in part, has prevented the resolution of a key debate around gendered patterns in perpetration. *Large population studies* tend to indicate greater prevalence of female perpetration and male victimhood than both *non-probability studies* and *administrative data* sources. A complicating factor within this is that each data source has its own strengths and limitations.

4.3.1 Administrative data

refers to data collected through the administration of services. These include recorded crime figures, health records, use of advice services, use of refuges, legal proceedings, etc. Crime figures can be particularly useful as they are collected nationwide and can be used to show regional variations in policing and, over time, changes in the effectiveness of policing strategies and judicial process. But, as a measure of domestic abuse prevalence they have significant shortcomings.

Although the crime of 'domestic abuse' has only existed within England and Wales since 2021, the UK Home Office has been collecting data on domestic-abuse-related offences since 2015. In the year ending March 2022, police in England and Wales recorded 910,980 domestic abuse-related crimes (ONS, 2022). This is the number of incidents where the police recorded that a crime took place (not necessarily leading to a conviction) and considered it domestic abuse due to the existing relationship between victim and perpetrator. This is an increase of 7.7% from the previous year, and continues an increasing trend, that the ONS attributes to an increasing willingness to report such crimes. The crimes themselves include homicide, assault and battery, criminal damage, coercive & controlling behaviour, and stalking and harassment. However, these figures do not represent the prevalence of domestic abuse within the wider population as they do not include crimes that went unreported. They only show the reported incidence of DA that qualifies as a crime under UK law, and they do not provide a breakdown of who

did what to whom. Thus, we cannot know how many of these crimes were between intimate partners.

It is important to bear in mind how dependent such crime figures are on the processes of identification and recording by police. Illustrating the effect of such factors on the final figures, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) attributes a significant increase of 111,500 domestic abuse crimes between 2017 and 2018, to better identification and recording by police, and a greater willingness for victims to come forward and report the crimes. This latter point touches on one of the biggest problems with crime statistics and domestic abuse. The hidden and deeply personal nature of IPA means that it is seldom reported to the police. Drawing data from their large population study, the 'Crime Survey of England and Wales', the ONS estimates that less than one in five victims report their abuse to the police; an estimated 83% of domestic abuse crimes go unreported. Further to this, once a crime is reported, we are reliant upon the police recognising and recording it appropriately. As the ONS acknowledges, "it is possible that some offences may not be correctly identified" (ONS, 2021). An illustration of this regards Controlling and Coercive Abuse (CCA). Made illegal in 2015, it continues to elude satisfactory measurement. In their report to the N8 Police Research Partnership, Barlow et al (2018) found that CCA was not being fully recognised by police officers due to a misinterpretation of the law and of the circumstances presented to them in the course of their duties. Barlow et al concluded that the comparatively low frequency of police officers using the law around coercive and controlling behaviour indicated a lack of understanding and missed opportunities for detection when responding to other related crimes, such as assault and actual bodily harm. This was reflected in the types of evidence gathered and enquiries made, e.g., collecting limited witness statements and not considering phone records.

Another source of administrative data are records of death and injury. In the year ending March 2018, there were 726 homicides in England and Wales. 499 (69%) were female victims, and 227 (31%) were male. Of these female homicides, 63 (33%) were killed by current or former partners, compared to only 7 (1%) of male homicides. Although it is one of the least contested data sources, there is still room for the context of such incidents to be debated, and some argue that counts of domestic homicide where the male is the victim will include incidents of self-defence on the part of the female killer (Larance, Goodmark, Miller & Dasgupta, 2019). The defence of 'battered women syndrome', although not a legal defence

in and of itself, has been used in cases within the UK to establish a defence of diminished responsibility (e.g., *R v Ahluwalia* (1992) 4 AER 889; *R v Thornton (No 2)* (1996) 2 AER 1023) to demonstrate that for some, the cumulative effect of ongoing abuse will result in the use of fatal violence by the victim against their perpetrator. In contrast, the concept of battered husband syndrome, originally proposed by Stienmetz (1978), has been fiercely contested (Pagelow, 1983; Straton, 1994).

Studies of injury and hospital admission data have found women are more likely to suffer injury and even more likely to require hospital treatment (Desmaris et al, 2012; Archer, 2000). Physical gender differences of size and strength make it logical to assume that when the two parties resort to physical violence, whether in aggression or defence, the female is more likely to suffer injury. However, it is important to bear in mind that such figures reflect only incidents of physical violence that result in injury. They do not capture the myriad of different abusive behaviours that may not require physical dominance.

Taken as a whole, sources of administrative data can be informative as indicators of how administrative systems are encountering and responding to IPA at any given point, as well as changes over time. A high frequency of some IPA related measures (e.g., police call outs) may indicate a high prevalence within the wider population, but an absence from records would not necessarily mean it is not occurring, merely that it is not manifesting in such a way as to be recorded by an administrative body. Changes over time within administrative data cannot necessarily be taken as a straightforward reflection of changes in prevalence, as changes in law, policy, and procedure, as well as public awareness and custom, will affect recording.

4.3.2 *Population surveys*

Population surveys seek to sample a large number of individuals that can be considered demographically representative of the population, e.g., the Crime Survey for England and Wales (ONS, 2018). Given the number of participants involved, and the enumerate requirements of statistical analysis, such studies tend to rely on counting the frequency of pre-identified violent incidents. With questions such as:

Since you were 16 has a partner or ex-partner ever used force on you? For example, they may have pushed you, slapped you, hit, punched, or kicked you, choked you or used a weapon against you.

1. Yes
2. No
3. Don't know/can't remember
4. Don't wish to answer

(Campbell-Hall, Clegg, Guzman, & Bolling, 2010)

The Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS and CTS2) (see Hamby, 2017) are both examples of this, as is the scale used by World Health Organisation (WHO) (Garcia-Moreno et al 2002) and the previously mentioned Crime Survey of England and Wales (CSEW). These instruments have been criticised for not adequately gathering contextual information, such as motivation, effect, or frequency. As will be discussed, the context of an action is arguably what defines it as abusive, and this shortcoming has led some to question the validity of these instruments as measures of domestic abuse (Dobash, Dobash, Wilson, & Daly, 1992; Walby et al., 2017).

There are also difficulties with sampling. Many such studies come from the US and are frequently drawn from student populations (e.g., Chan et al, 2008; Forke, Myers, Catalozzi, & Schwartz, 2008; Milletich, Kelley, Doane, & Pearson, 2010; Nabors, 2010). Although the intent of such studies is to use more diverse samples that contain both those who have and those who haven't experienced domestic abuse, the often convenience-driven practice of drawing such samples from a student population narrows their findings to specifically focus on 'dating violence' and potentially limits application of the resulting analysis to non-student populations.

The Crime Survey of England and Wales (CSEW) is a large-scale survey that asks a representative sample of the English and Welsh population of their, or their household's, experience of crime over the preceding 12 months. It claims to capture a more accurate assessment of crime prevalence as it also asks about unreported crimes. Data collection for the most recent CSEW (2022) was hampered by the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, and because of the status 'National Statistics' has been suspended due to concern about the quality of the data. However, their estimate that 2.4 million adults experienced domestic abuse

with the preceding year, with an approximate 2:1 gender split (1.7million female victims, and 699,000 male), similar to the previous full CSEW (2018).

4.3.3 *Non-probability samples*

Non-probability Samples are drawn from identified cohorts who are chosen for their situation, experience, knowledge, or background. Within the field of IPA, numerous studies have drawn their sample from users of women's refuge services, or from programmes working with known perpetrators of DV&A (Browning and Dutton, 1986; Alsaker et al. 2012). Although these can provide rich information regarding the experiences of those groups, they represent certain gender groups by the nature of their situation (Women in refuges, and men on perpetrator programmes). These studies can provide rich and detailed information regarding the experiences and understandings of these groups, but their value for gauging the experiences of domestic abuse in the wider population is questionable. Furthermore, they represent those who have experienced IPA to the extent that they have sought refuge, or incidents that have brought them to the attention of services and authorities. Thus, they present a 'skewed sample' and resulting quantitative data tends to inflate the effect size for male perpetration (Archer, 2000). In other words, surveys of perpetration rates that only survey female victims and male perpetrators tend to produce data that, in statistical analysis, shows gender to have greater power in relation to perpetration than would be found in randomly sampled populations.

4.4 **The gender debate**

As highlighted previously, the variety of terms and concepts used within the field of IPA research has been a hurdle to wider understanding and meta-analysis. This situation is made more complex by these different approaches to data collection producing different findings. The large population surveys tend to indicate a greater prevalence of female perpetration and male victimhood, compared to both administrative data and non-probability samples. This has led to a polarised debate within the field of IPA regarding gendered patterns of perpetration.

On the one hand, there are those who argue greater symmetry of perpetration, referred to as theorists of Family Violence (e.g., Pagelow, 1984). They propose that large population studies reveal IPA is perpetrated in roughly equal measure

by men and women. The studies they cite predominantly use an itemised measure such as the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) or Revised Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS2). (Strauss, 1979; Strauss, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996). On the other hand, proponents of asymmetrical gender perpetration argue quantitative methods, such as the CTS, do not consider the context and consequence of the individual acts they count (Dobash & Dobash 2004; Dobash et al, 1992; DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1998). As Dobash et al (1992) point out, contextual factors such as intent and outcome are what define an act as abusive, as opposed to defensive, or even playful. Therefore, an accurate understanding of IPA cannot be achieved through methods that do not consider contextual features such as repetition, consequence, and intent. Furthermore, there is an almost ontological element to the debate, with the two sides taking a perspective that is heavily directed by their understanding of the way the world is. Dobash et al. believe the perception of symmetrical perpetration is not compatible with a feminist understanding of gender relations, arguing that “the alleged similarity of women and men in their use of violence within intimate relationships stands in stark contrast to men’s virtual monopoly of violence in other social contexts” (Dobash et al, 1992, p72). As Oakley (1998) points out, there are some who have gone as far as to assert that quantitative methods are patriarchal in character and essentially oppressive. “The urge to predict and control as the underlying drive of the quantitative method is ideologically linked with men’s desire to dominate, to exert power over people as well as nature” (p711).

These statements represent a particular feminist perspective that perceives patriarchal violence as systemic and structural to our society and understands IPA to be a manifestation of such a system within the home (Bjørnholt, 2021). When viewed in this way, IPA is therefore fundamentally about power and control. Some feel such a position has been used to ‘caricature’ modern feminist approaches to IPA (Johnson, 2011), but it is true to say that such a radical position has been highly influential in mainstream understanding and the provision of support for victims of IPA. This is evident within the ‘Duluth model’, an educational model for working with both victims and perpetrators of IPA, the prominence of which will be discussed further in the closing sections of this chapter.

Family violence theorists claim that the prominence of feminism within the field of IPA has misdirected our understanding, leading Straus (2007) to accuse the research community of a ‘concealment’ and ‘distortion’ of data, driven by a feminist

doctrine. These assertions have been echoed and built upon by other researchers (Dutton 2012, McNeely & Robinson-Simpson, 1987; Bates 2019a), who have all argued that male victims are considerably underrepresented in crime statistics and support services. This, they argue, is due largely to a combination of men's aversion to talking about their experiences of being abused, and the lack of support services that cater for men. Theorists of Family Violence argue that a feminist perspective continues to promote a gendered narrative, based on studies which focus on female victims and male perpetrators to the exclusion of studies that present a more symmetrical picture. Importantly, the term 'family violence theorists' covers a diverse number of researchers with differing approaches to understanding domestic abuse, such as conflict theory, symbolic interactionism, communication theory, the General Aggression Model, or a Violent Events Perspective (Anderson and Bushman, 2002; Cahn, 2009; Chester & DeWall, 2018; Lysova, 2016; Witt, 1987). Such perspectives argue that to say gender is wholly, or even mostly, responsible for IPA is erroneous and misleading (Dutton, 2012). As well as citing studies that show greater gender parity in perpetration, they also point to data showing other correlating factors. For example, there is a significant body of research correlating perpetrator mental ill-health, such as anxiety, depression, and personality disorders, with perpetration of IPA (Dutton & Bodnerchuck 2005; Sesar, Dodai, & Simic, 2018). Domestic abuse has also been shown to correlate with poverty and social marginalisation (Evans, 2005), drug and alcohol use of both perpetrator and victim (Stuart et al., 2008), and even the availability of alcohol for sale within a local area (Livingstone, 2011).

The importance of our understanding to issues of safeguarding and victim support has meant this debate has been argued passionately, and at times heatedly, with some describing it as a paradigmatic schism within the field (Winstok, 2011), and with both sides accusing the other of misrepresentation of the data (Dutton, 2012; Johnson, 2011). A significant attempt to bridge this divide has been to consider if these different methodological approaches are perhaps measuring different types of intimate partner abuse.

4.5 Different studies for different types of abuse

A suggested explanation for the discrepancy in gender perpetration data, is that different studies are in fact measuring different forms of abuse. This typological

approach to IPA has driven a much more complex understanding that has arguably led to the inclusive statutory definition detailed at the start of this chapter.

Several typological approaches exist for trying to understand IPA (Ali et al, 2016), but one of the most developed examples has been that of Johnson (1995, 2005a&b, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2017, Kelly & Johnson, 2008; Johnson & Leone, 2005; Johnson, Leone, & Xu., 2014), who has proposed that IPA can be understood in two essentially different forms - situational couple violence (SCV) and coercing controlling violence (CCA), although he initially termed these 'Common Couple Violence' and 'Patriarchal or Intimate Terrorism' (Johnson, 1995). Over the years, Johnson developed this typological approach, proposing that the types of violence result from the coming together of different 'types' of people, who are either controlling, violent, or both. Taking a dyadic approach (instead of just focusing on the behaviours of one party), he has argued that true coercive controlling violence results when one of the couple is both controlling and violent, whilst the other is non-controlling and non-violent. Situational Couple Violence results from when neither of the couple are controlling, but one, or both, of them is violent. This model also logically points towards a third and fourth category; one where both parties are violent, but only one of them is controlling, resulting in what Johnson termed 'violent resistance'; and a fourth pattern of abuse he termed Mutual Violent Control, where both parties are violent and controlling.

Johnson believes the proponents of Symmetry derive their understanding from studies that measure incidence of situational couple violence, where he claims there is roughly symmetrical occurrence. On the other hand, he argues that those who are claiming Asymmetry do so from data sets such as those gathered from victim support services, and they are measuring controlling coercive abuse, which he argues is almost entirely perpetrated by males. However, whilst his research evidences the need to understand IPA in more complex terms (considering patterns of coercion and control rather than just individual incidents of violence), his studies predominantly focus on data sets composed of female respondents. For example, his analysis draws from Frieze's (1983) data set of 274 married and formerly-married women (Johnson, 2006); or Johnson and Leone's (2005) analysis of the US National Violence Against Women Survey (n=4,967 women). The unrepresentative nature of these samples raises questions about his conclusions relating to gender symmetry. This issue of sample validity is something that has plagued research in this field. For example, in attempting to consider a British

population with a more diverse gender makeup, Graham-Kevan & Archer (2003) used both the CTS and a Controlling Behaviours Scale to test Johnson's gender predictions across 4 sample groups. Their findings supported Johnson's theory with CCA being predominantly male perpetrated, and situational couple violence being mutually/symmetrically perpetrated. However, their sample groups were as follows: Female Shelter Sample ($n=43$); Mixed sex student sample ($n=104$); male DA perpetrator programme attendees ($n=4$); and male prisoners ($n=97$). Although sampling a greater number of males, these sample groups are arguably still not representative of the wider adult population.

Using a much larger data set, Myhill (2015) applied Johnson's typology to UK CSEW data for 2008/2009. Focusing on respondents who had experienced just one abusive relationship since the age of 16 ($n=3,544$), Myhill identified those within the sample who had endured coercive and controlling abuse as those who had answered yes to both of the following statements, that their partner had "*Repeatedly belittled you to the extent that you felt worthless*" and "*frightened you, by threatening to hurt you or someone close to you*". Myhill's study repeated the findings of Johnson and Leone (2005) in demonstrating the pernicious and destructive nature of CCA, evidencing that respondents who had experienced controlling coercive abuse ($n=843$) suffered more frequently and more severely than those who had experienced situational couple violence. In addition, their abuse was more likely to result in physical and emotional injury, less likely to desist, and more likely to have an impact on victims' working lives. They were also more likely to have sought help from supportive agencies. Further to this, Myhill was able to demonstrate that 30% of female respondents who had experienced IPA ($n=791$) had experienced controlling coercive abuse, compared to just 6% of male respondents ($n=52$). This reflects Johnson's assertions regarding gender patterns of perpetration, whilst also highlighting that the vast majority of incidents of IPA are not of the controlling coercive type, provided Myhill's measure of coercive controlling abuse (just two questions that necessitated the threat of physical violence) can be considered a true measure of CCA.

These three studies each use a typological understanding of IPA to gain insight to the nature and patterns of IPA, but each is significantly hampered by limitations of study design and the data available. They do, however, provide insight into a complex picture of IPA perpetration. One in which mutual couple violence, where individuals are at times both victim and perpetrator of IPA, is not uncommon, and

where the majority of IPA is perpetrated by both men and women and could be classed as situational violence, rather than controlling coercive abuse.

The difficulty in measuring controlling coercive abuse is one we have yet to overcome. The criminalisation of controlling and coercive behaviour in 2015 was a significant step forward in legislating against such abuse. However, its implementation has raised questions about our ability to police and enforce such laws (Barlow et al, 2018) as well as how we identify patterns of potentially abusive behaviour that do not feature overt incidents of violence. The previously discussed defining context of abuse is particularly relevant to CCA, and thus makes it difficult to measure through quantitative survey.

The largest relevant population study within the UK is that of the Crime Survey of England and Wales (CSEW). Attempts within the CSEW to measure perpetration of Controlling Coercive Abuse have had limited success so far. The CSEW survey of 2017, ran as a split sample study, with one half provided with DV&A questions used in previous years, and the other half given new questions regarding controlling coercive abuse. The discrepancy in results between the two samples was such that the new measure was not considered robust enough, the data was excluded from the statistical release, and further methodological research has been called for. One of the specific areas of discrepancy was that of victim prevalence between men and women (ONS, 2019, online). The full analysis of more recent endeavours to develop better survey methods are expected in the spring of 2023 (ONS, 2022).

The debate regarding gender patterns in the data has been a point of contention within IPA research since its inception in the 1970s. Explanations centring on the identification of different types of abuse provide some insight into this phenomenon. The understanding that *coercive controlling abuse* is not as widespread as *situational couple violence* is supported by some studies (Myhill, 2015; Graham-Kevan & Archer, 2003), but has not been greeted with enthusiasm by either side of the symmetry debate. As Johnson (2017) most recently explains, he and other feminist proponents feel a significant unease that such an explanation could provide a framework for perpetrators of controlling coercive abuse to disguise their abuse as incidents of situational couple violence. Whilst at the same time, some proponents of symmetry feel that the portrayal of the numbers of male victims of controlling coercive abuse as negligible, not only denies the reality of

those individuals, but perpetuates a cultural narrative that contributes to their abuse through the denial of their existence (Lysova, 2016).

Although our understanding has come a long way since the 1970s, we have yet to identify instruments capable of satisfactorily measuring the extent of IPA with the wider population. The most destructive forms of domestic abuse, those that amount to controlling and coercive behaviour, remain the hardest to measure. There are some that argue it is this aspect of abuse in which we find the most asymmetrical pattern of gendered perpetration, with men typifying the perpetrator, and women the victim. But this has yet to be truly confirmed. As Walby et al (2017) point out, we have yet to reach a quality threshold that enables us to consistently measure gendered patterns of domestic abuse:

“most surveys do not meet the necessary quality standards. They use a definition of violence that is inappropriate (centred on acts and omitting harms and intentions), sample sizes that are too small, sampling frames that are too skewed, and methods of approaching respondents that are too diverse to produce reliable and robust results”

(p142)

4.6 **What we know of heterosexual male victims**

Historically, the contested nature of gendered patterns of perpetration has contributed to a lack of research into the experience of male victims. However, the work of family violence theorists (e.g., Bates, 2019a; Hines & Douglas, 2015; 2018; Hines, Brown, & Dunning, 2007, Dutton, 2012) has raised awareness of their existence and cultivated a small but growing body of qualitative research looking at the experience of individual male victims. At the time of writing, this body of research has remained predominantly hetero-orientated and cis-gendered, focusing on the experiences of male victims of female perpetrated IPA. The experiences of LGBTQ+ victims remain even less explored. Using in-depth and open-ended interview techniques such as narrative and semi-structured interviews, qualitative studies indicate that male victims experience much the same forms of abuse as female victims and share similar physical and mental health outcomes. Abuse suffered by male victims has also been shown to manifest in ways particular to their gender.

4.6.1 *Physical Violence*

The perpetration of physical abuse upon men by women has been a point of contention, with some studies showing men to be more physically violent, whilst other studies show the reverse (Hamberger & Larsen, 2015; Straus, 2011). Counter to some of the data regarding hospital admissions and the differences in male/female perpetration previously discussed, CSEW 2018 found that 4.3% of male victims ($n=122$) reported internal injuries or broken bones/teeth as a result of partner abuse, compared to 0.4% of female victims ($n=319$). With all the methodological difficulties already discussed it is not necessarily helpful to lay out this debate here. However, there is enough evidence to show that when women do perpetrate physical violence upon male intimate partners it can include the full range of attacks, including the use of weapons, and result in the full spectrum of injury, from scratches and bruises, to broken bones, and homicide (Bates 2019b; Corbally, 2015; Entilli and Cipolletta, 2017; Machado, Santos, Graham-Levan, & Matos, 2017; Miglaccio, 2002; Nybergh, Enander, & Krantz, 2016; Strauss 2011).

Some studies have reflected an unwillingness for men to retaliate or defend themselves, citing concepts of chivalry and reluctance to strike a woman, which enabled their partners to abuse them without fear of retaliation (Entilli & Cipolletta, 2017, Bates 2019b&c). This is a narrative element that was reflected in the Hard to Tell Pilot study, complete with the recognisable phrase of being 'brought up not to hit a woman'.

4.6.2 *Sexual Abuse*

There are few studies that have explored male victims' experiences of sexual aggression as a component of their IPA. Historically, studies have supported the idea that women do not perpetrate sexual violence (Hamberger & Larsen, 2015). For example, although Basile's (2004) study of 382 US court applications for 'Protection from Abuse' orders found female parties showed greater psychological and physical aggression, there were no accusations of female perpetrated sexual aggression. However, this perception is beginning to be dispelled by research such as Weare and colleagues' study of the experience of men who had been forced to penetrate women (Weare, 2017; 2018).

The work of Hines & Douglas (2015; 2016; 2018) stands out in its inclusion of sexual aggression within its focus on male victims of IPA. Their study of 611 help-

seeking men who had experienced physical IPA from their female partners, found almost half had experienced some form of sexual aggression, with 28% experiencing 'severe sexual aggression', defined as "threatening or forcing one's partner to engage in vaginal, oral, or anal sex" (Hines & Douglas, 2016, p1137). Bates' (2019a) online survey of 161 self-identifying male victims also found themes of severe sexual aggression, including accounts of sexual torture and abuse perpetrated by female partners.

4.6.3 *Coercive and Controlling Abuse*

Although prevalence studies such as Myhill (2015) report that controlling coercive abuse perpetrated by women upon men is comparatively rare, it is a pervasive feature of accounts of abuse provided in studies of male victim experiences. This includes patterns of isolation, financial control, verbal abuse, psychological manipulation, humiliation, and fear (Machado et al, 2017; Entilli and Cipolletta, 2016; Nybergh et al. 2016; Corbally, 2015; Miglaccio, 2002; Bates 2019b; Strauss 2011, Morgan & Welles 2016). In relationships where the victim and perpetrator had children, fear of losing children is also a common theme preventing men from leaving the relationship (Bates 2019, Miglaccio, 2002; Drijber et al., 2013; Entilli and Cipolletta, 2016, Nybergh et al. 2016). For some, their children became a route of indirect violence when their abuser targeted the children (Machado et al 2017).

Patterns of denigration and humiliation have also been found, where verbal abuse and aggression become a pattern of "something more controlling in the use of name calling, belittling and demeaning them" (Bates 2019b, p7). A theme specifically nuanced to male victims is the use of emasculating insults and ridicule by their perpetrator. In Nybergh's (2016) qualitative study of 24 Swedish male victims, they talked of how their female abusers used their masculinity, or perceived lack thereof, as a form of verbal and psychological abuse. This was also evident within the Hard to Tell pilot study.

Control has also been shown to be maintained through the threat of counter allegations, where their abuser either threatens or carries out the making of false accusations of abuse against them (Entilli and Cipolletta, 2016, Bates 2019b), even to the extent of the abuser self-inflicting wounds to make the victims out as perpetrators (Machado et al 2017). The power of such a tactic is multiplied by another form of abuse that some argue is particular to male victimhood within western culture, that of 'legal and administrative abuse' (Tilbrook et al. 2010).

4.6.4 *Legal and Administrative Abuse*

Originally identified by Tilbrook, Allan, & Dear (2010) in their qualitative study of white, Australian, heterosexual male victims of IPA, and in several studies since (Machado et al 2017; Berger, Douglas, & Hines, 2016; Bates, 2019b&c), this takes the form of perpetrators misusing legitimate services, not only to further harm their victims (e.g., false arrest and criminal charges), but also to prevent them from accessing services and support as legitimate victims. The participants who described this in Tilbrook, Allan, & Dear's (2010) study, believed it was enabled through the assumptions of service employees "that men are always the perpetrators and that females are the victims" (p20).

Legal or administrative abuse has significant implications for the concept of '*parental alienation*'. Originally proposed by Gardner (1985) as *parental alienation syndrome (PAS)*, this concept has been interpreted in several ways and is highly contentious. Gardner focused on the presenting beliefs and behaviour of children in cases of divorce and separation, where they 'love' one parent and, without valid justification, 'hate' the other. Gardner proposed that in some instances it can be the result of one parent's denigration of the other. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to evaluate the legitimacy and use of PAS. As a concept it has caused considerable contention in its use within family courts to mandate contact and address a child's resistance to a relationship with one of their parents following separation (Mercer, 2019). Although attempts are being made to provide a scientifically based framework of assessment of PAS (e.g., Rowlands, 2019), it still lacks the consistent and defining symptomology to be identified as a syndrome and has yet to be acknowledged as such within the DSM-V, or the ICD-10. Furthermore, it raises significant concerns within the arena of child safeguarding. Syndrome or not, the concept of parental alienation provides a counter argument to allegations of abuse within safeguarding and judicial processes. A parent attempting to protect their child having separated from an abusive parent may now have to answer allegations of intentional parental alienation. This potentially increases the risk of continued contact or placement of the child with an abusive parent (Adams 2006; Willis & O'Donahue, 2018). However, as Mercer (2019) points out, despite evidence of wide-spread inappropriate application, there will have been cases where one parent has intentionally alienated a child from their other parent. This is relevant to cases of IPA. In acknowledging the existence of extremely coercive and controlling abusers, it would be remiss not to consider them

capable and motivated to denigrate the other parent (the victim of their abuse) in their child's eyes. In instances where the abuser is female and the victim male, legal administrative abuse can potentially become a powerful weapon in the hands of the abuser seeking to deny their victim a relationship with their child.

4.6.5 *Impact of abuse*

There have been numerous studies linking IPA victimisation with mental ill-health (Spencer et al. 2017), but again, a lack of clarity brought about by a wide range of methods, classifications, and research quality makes meta-analysis difficult. Firstly, it is important to understand that such studies are predominantly looking at correlational relationships between facets of IPA and mental ill-health. As such, it is beyond their scope to identify a causal relationship. It could reasonably be proposed that repeated victimisation will have a considerable detrimental impact upon an individual's mental and emotional functioning. However, it is also reasonable to consider that mental illness and the reduced functioning which can accompany it, could make those living with mental ill-health vulnerable to victimisation. These two possible framings can be seen in studies that show a greater prevalence of IPA experiences within clinical populations (Oram et al. 2013), and studies which show a greater prevalence of mental ill-health within IPA victim samples (e.g., Nathanson et al, 2012; Singh, 2015).

Even though there have been many studies demonstrating the correlation between IPA victimisation and mental ill-health, most have been carried out with female victims (Hines & Douglas, 2015). Such is the dearth of research considering victims other than heterosexual, cis-gendered women, that in carrying out a systematic review of studies focusing on victim experience (rather than prevalence), Laskey, Bates, and Taylor (2019) found themselves unable to consider the experiences of either LGBTQ or male victims.

Regarding male victims, there are some studies that consider both genders. For example, Salom et al. (2015) carried out a longitudinal study of 6,703 parent-infant dyads from the child's birth until they reached the age of 21. Of the young-adult offspring who reported ever having an intimate relationship and for whom they had complete psychiatric data ($n = 1781$), over 40% reported experiencing 'psychological violence' (of whom 44% were male), almost 38% reported experiencing 'physical violence' (49% male), and 6.6% reported experiencing 'severe combined abuse' (rape, forced sex, assault with weapons) (32% male).

Although severe combined abuse was more commonly experienced by women, the relative gender parity found in experiences of physical and psychological abuse, was true across correlations between IPA, mental health, and substance and alcohol use. All three forms of abuse correlated for both genders with increased likelihood of diagnosis of any mental health disorder.

Similarly, Prospero and Kim's (2009) study of 676 heterosexual American students found a positive correlation between self-reported mental health symptoms and IPA victimisation. Experiencing more controlling behaviour and intimate partner abuse significantly correlated with increased symptoms of mental ill-health for both men and women. That same year Rhodes et al (2009), in a study of American men accessing non-urgent health care ($n = 1,026$), found increased numbers of clinical level (moderate/severe) mental ill-health, including depression, PTSD, and suicidality within those who had experienced and/or perpetrated IPA (37% - 20% victimisation only, 6% perpetration only, 11% bidirectional). Again, this was a positive correlation, or as they interpreted it, the factors of IPA and mental health "were related in a dose-response manner" (p51). The greater the 'dose' of IPA, the greater the symptoms of mental ill-health.

Although, as previously discussed, meta-analysis is complicated by different studies focusing in different ways on different aspects of abuse, across the board the correlation between IPA victimisation and mental ill-health is clearly evident amongst male victim populations (Bates, 2019b&c; Berger et al. 2016; Dickerson-Amaya & Coston, 2019; Hines & Douglas, 2015; 2018; Rhodes et al, 2009; Singh, 2016). Specifically, within these studies are significant correlations between different forms of IPA and increased symptoms of PTSD, depression, anxiety, and suicide ideation, as well as physical ill-health symptoms including high blood pressure, asthma, and sexually transmitted infections. The fact that these symptoms are not routinely linked to safeguarding concerns when presented in men, as they may be in women, is a pertinent question.

In many health settings, the health-related indicators that often give away the presence of IPV in women (e.g., broken bones and other bodily injuries, the appearance of low self-esteem, a history of alcohol or drug abuse, and a history of anxiety, depression, or suicide attempt) are often explained away as behavioural or general mental health problems in men (e.g., as a symptom of masculinity itself; Chuick et al., 2009; Cochran & Rabinowitz, 1999). The "boys

will be boys” mentality potentially makes it “easier” for men to hide or explain away the post-traumatic symptoms and scars of IPV,

(Dickerson-Amaya & Coston, 2019, p8-9)

Another proposed answer to difference in service engagement between male and female victims is that the impact of abuse and trauma is dealt with differently by the two sexes and manifests itself in differing ways. A well cited study in this respect is Afifi et al's (2009) of an existing nationally representative U.S. data set ($n = 2,254 - 1,116$ males, 1,138 females) which included comprehensive measurement of psychiatric disorders and suicidal ideation, although their IPA measure was limited to physical violence. They demonstrated a clear correlation with mental health disorders and the trauma of physical IPA victimhood for both men and women. However, the nature of these disorders appeared to be gendered. In comparison with individuals in non-violent relationships, male victims were only more likely to exhibit ‘externalising disorders’ (disruptive behaviour/conduct disorders and substance abuse disorders), whereas female victims were more likely to exhibit both externalising and internalising disorders (depressive and anxiety disorders), as well as suicidal ideation. This is of relevance because the presentation of conduct disorders and drug use is arguably more likely to elicit condemnation and a punitive response, with perpetrators of disorderly conduct being seen as a risk to those around them. Whereas, suicidality, anxiety, and depression, may be more readily met with a therapeutic approach.

4.6.6 *Suicide, Domestic Abuse, and Gender*

The relationship between suicide and mental ill-health is complex and not fully understood. Add factors of gender and IPA for consideration, and it becomes even more complex. Suicide, like both IPA and mental ill-health, is particularly difficult to measure due to its innately personal and socially taboo nature. Distinctions between suicidal thoughts, planning, attempt, and achievement, alongside association and confusion with other self-harming behaviours, makes suicide extremely difficult to operationalise within research measures. Consequently, the data we do have can be confusing and seemingly contradictory.

Within the western world there is a correlation between depressive disorders and suicide with women being considerably more likely to think about, plan, and attempt suicide than men (Klonsky et al, 2016). In considering DA victims and the gendered patterns of suicidal ideation, these wider suicide figures would appear to resonate

with Afifi et al's (2009) findings that male victims are not at increased risk of depression or suicidal ideation. However, if we look at the figures for suicide completion, men are 75% more likely than women to die intentionally by their own hand (Klonsky et al 2016). Furthermore, Afifi et al's (2009) findings do not tally with the most recent National Statistics, informed by the Crime Survey of England and Wales (CSEW 2018, online), which found 11.0% of male victims (n=122) reported attempting suicide as a result of IPA, compared to 7.2% of female victims (n=319). I draw attention to these figures here because the relationship between mental health, suicide, and IPA for men is a confusing one. From the CSEW it would seem that male victims could be at increased risk of attempting suicide. This potentially raises questions regarding the 75% of suicides that are male, and the prevalence of abuse within this population.

Studies of both mental and physical ill-health within male victim populations show an increased prevalence when compared to non-victim populations and demonstrate that IPA victimhood strongly correlates with both physiological and psychological harm for both genders. These findings are reflected in more qualitative studies of how individual victims/survivors experience and make sense of their abuse (Bates, 2019b&c; Morgan et al, 2016; Nybergh et al, 2016). Such data-rich studies can go beyond the numbers and statistical trends to reveal what the experience of abuse was like for their male participants. In doing so, they are revealing a male victim experience that mirrors that of female victims in many ways, yet can also be very different.

4.6.7 *The Qualitatively Different Experience of Male Victims*

Qualitative studies can collect rich data through more in-depth and less-structured methods such as narrative and semi-structured interviews. This can provide much needed insight to the lived reality of male victims. In providing accounts of day-to-day experience, such studies have shown cyclical patterns of isolation and escalating violence similar to those found through studies of female victims (Both, Faveretto, & Freitas, 2019; Machado et al, 2017; Miglaccio, 2002). However, we also see patterns or manifestations of abuse that are particular to the male experience. As discussed previously in this chapter, elements of abuse experienced by men frequently include humiliation and denigration through attacks that target their masculinity (Nybergh, 2016; Hard to Tell Pilot, unpub.). The nature of masculinity and associated narratives, and how they could be critically important to the experience of male victims, will be discussed in the next chapter, but at this

point, suffice to say, it appears to be a consistently explicit element of the research and analysis of male victim experience (Barber 2008; Bates 2019b; Morgan and Wells, 2016).

As well as being a focus of verbal and psychological attack, perception of masculinity, what is expected of men and manly behaviour, is a key determinant of another theme within the literature on male victimhood: not being believed. This theme arises as both a fear, preventing disclosure, and a reality met by those making disclosure. Drijber, Reijnders, and Manon (2013) used an online questionnaire to survey male victims within in the Netherlands ($n = 372$) and found that the majority of respondents did not want to report their abuse to the police as they did not think the police would do anything. A significant number who did tell the police, reported the police did nothing. Not being believed or taken seriously by professional services in turn can be seen to exacerbate abuse. Participants in Machado's et al.'s (2017) Portuguese study of help-seeking male victims, seemed to associate formal help with further negative effects on their wellbeing, and felt that reporting the situation would lead to secondary victimisation and revictimization. In this we see a lack of being believed as an enabling factor of legal and administrative abuse. As Bates found in her online survey of male victims ($n = 161$):

[Participants] described the impact of attitudes toward male victims of IPV as being significant and felt society did not believe men who described these experiences, often perceiving them as 'weak' or in fact 'abusers'

(Bates, 2019c, p1)

As well as the expectations of masculinity, this disbelief could also be directed by a second element: a misunderstanding of the potential dynamics of psychological control and abuse, with people not believing that a woman could physically intimidate or overpower a man (Bates 2019b, 2019c). This was apparent within the Hard to Tell pilot study, where two of the four participants used almost identical phrasing to describe how their physical size meant that people simply didn't believe their smaller partner could abuse them.

A third element as to why male victims may not be believed is that their experience runs counter to dominant narratives of domestic abuse. These gendered understandings of what domestic abuse is, and how it plays out, can direct what we look for and what we believe.

4.7 Existing cultural narratives of IPA

There is a case to be made that contemporary discourse on domestic abuse is an essentially feminist narrative (Bates, 2019a), and as such it prevents consideration of other narratives. As outlined throughout this chapter, we do not have the methods to produce robust enough data to truly know the full extent or nature of domestic abuse, particularly with regard gender patterns of perpetration. Bates (2019a) argues that the feminist literature on IPA makes basic assumptions that she calls into question: that the overwhelming majority of IPA “is perpetrated by men as part of a pattern of control towards their female partners” (p11), and that where perpetrated by women, it is done in self-defence. The danger that lies with such a narrative holding an exclusive position within our understanding of IPA is that its implications can go further than just questioning a man’s victimhood. As touched on in previous section by Bates (2019c), the imposition of the expected dominant narrative seeds the perception that not only is the man not a victim, but in fact must be the abuser, thus enabling continued denigration and abuse through legal and administrative process.

How such a dominant narrative directs our expectations and responses to given scenarios is explored by Hine (2019), who draws on theories of social cognition to propose a ‘domestic violence script’. Hine presented 243 college students (138 female) with different scenarios of IPA. These scenarios varied regarding the types of abuse portrayed, across different couplings (m/f, m/m, f/f), and with differing genders depicted as either perpetrator or victim. Respondents of both genders were most likely to consider the perpetration of physical violence by a man upon a woman as the most serious. Similar results have been found in other studies (Feather, 1996; Felson & Feld, 2009; Hammock et al, 2017; Harris & Cook, 1984), demonstrating that, for the most part, participants will show “more concern for female than male victims, and greater denigration of male than female perpetrators” (Hammock et al, 2017, p357).

As I have discussed previously in this chapter, since the beginning of research into domestic abuse there has been data indicating that male victims and female perpetrators exist in significant numbers. But this has not been reflected in the cultural narratives that have taken prominence. So far in this chapter we have examined IPA on a relational level (victimhood and perpetration of abuse) and an individual level (the physiological and psychological impact of abuse). To consider aspects of social discourse and cultural narratives, we can take a much wider focus

at the collective level, looking at how certain ideas can become dominant and transformative within a culture. As discussed in Chapter 2, the complex systems of human psychosocial construction span all three levels. The narratives that exist at a collective level are born at the individual and relational levels, becoming prominent elements of the cultural milieu, shaping the behaviour of a society as a whole and, in turn, the narratives and behaviour of the individuals within it.

To understand how stories can become highly prominent and influential within a population, Shiller (2017, 2019) proposes a model of 'viral narratives'. He argues that the spread of narratives can be understood to follow a normal distribution curve over time, becoming so prevalent as to affect the behaviour of the whole society. Like other viral models, Shiller argues that certain narratives thrive and become highly 'transmissible' due to the environment of the time. The conditions of any given cultural moment cultivate the spreading of appropriate narratives that can disseminate globally. In understanding IPA narratives, it is therefore important to consider the contextual social conditions that have led to the current cultural status of the male perpetration narrative. In doing so it is possible to map the rising prominence of domestic abuse and IPA alongside that of the fight for gender equality and women's rights. In the 1960s and 70s 'second wave' feminism saw a renewed focus and drive for equality that addressed the more hidden and private aspects of female oppression within the home and workplace (Swinth, 2018). In doing so it was taking a structural perspective of feminism and using it to make sense of experience at the interpersonal and individual level, an ideology perhaps best encapsulated by the slogan 'the personal is political' (Hanisch, 1970). It is to this endeavour that we owe widespread contemporary recognition of DA and IPA. As Bjørnholt (2021) explains, the framing of IPA as "men's violence against women' and therefore a 'women's issue', was pivotal to transforming DV from a marginal phenomenon that was perceived to affect only a few" (p12). Bjørnholt credits this structural approach to the personal experience of domestic abuse as being responsible for enabling large scale support of victims, the criminalisation of IPA, and its recognition as a violation of women's human rights.

This is perhaps a clear illustration of the process outlined in Chapter 2, in which individual narratives become cultural narratives and in turn direct the individual. A specific example can be seen within the 'Duluth Model'. In the early 1970s, professionals working to support female victims in Duluth, Minnesota, developed a model for understanding and combatting perpetration that was derived from the

experiences of individual survivors. It has become one of the most widely recognised elements of contemporary support practice. The Duluth Model frames domestic abuse as patriarchal violence, perpetrated by men upon women, facilitated by and perpetuating the patriarchy. This model was taken up by institutions and agencies across the world in their efforts to make sense of and support victims of domestic abuse. In this process it became, perhaps unavoidably, institutionalised and prescriptive, shaping expectations, and becoming a required model for practice (Price, 2012). One of its most recognisable elements is the 'Power and Control Wheel', which provides a typology of perpetrator behaviour. This was arguably ahead of its time in recognising the harm of coercive and controlling abuse. However, its feminist approach in framing Domestic Violence as almost entirely male perpetrated, including a specific abuse category of 'using male privilege', ignores the significance of male victimhood, female perpetration, and the existence of mutual or situational couple violence.

I would like to stress at this juncture that in seeking to understand how the narrative of male perpetration became so prominent and identifying the feminist struggle for equality as instrumental in this, I am in no way arguing that it is a false narrative or that the feminist movement is at fault. Quite the opposite. It is due to feminist ideology and activism that intimate partner abuse is on the agenda of national and international policy. However, even for female victims, placing the emphasis entirely on gender, as if all women were at equal risk across social, cultural, and economic status, is not necessarily helpful, for it obscures other correlated factors such as socioeconomic position (Ferguson, Featherstone & Morris, 2020). It is also perhaps not entirely true to say that the dominance of the male perpetration narrative is solely due to feminism.

Other potentially enabling narratives are those of gender. The stereotypes of dominant masculinity and submissive femininity are both pervasive and formative, and arguably provide fertile ground for cultivating and enabling male perpetration and female victim narratives. As discussed, the significance of masculinity to the experience of male victims and to our wider cultural understanding of IPA is of critical importance. What masculinity is, and the implications it has for both identity and IPA across the individual, relational, and collective levels of human reality, will be discussed in Chapter 5.

4.8 Summary

Over the last fifty years, our collective awareness and understanding of Intimate Partner Abuse has grown from virtual non-existence to a prominent position within national and international policy. We currently understand IPA to be complex and deeply harmful, comprised not just of physical violence, but of psychological, emotional, sexual, controlling, coercive, and systemic practices. It is not necessarily incidents, but also patterns of insidious and not always overtly abusive behaviour, and we know that both men and women can be perpetrators and victims. There are even indications within some research that mutually perpetrated IPA is more common than the binary depiction of a perpetrator and victim. Beyond this however, our understanding of prevalence and aspects of IPA perpetration is hampered by significant limitations within data collection, and potentially exacerbated by the ontological positions of those who seek to understand it. At the time of writing, the symmetry debate has yet to be resolved. Current official statistics for England and Wales constructed from both administrative data and large population survey estimate that one in every 5 adults has experienced domestic abuse since the age of 16, (ONS, 2018). They also estimate that over 80% of incidents are never reported to the police.

At an individual level, we have a growing awareness of how domestic abuse correlates with mental and physical ill-health and suicidality for both genders. Research is also indicating that although the male and female victim experience of IPA is similar in many ways, there also appear to be aspects of abuse experienced by male victims that are qualitatively different; rooted in their status as a man and shaped by existing gendered narratives of IPA. The coming chapter will explore in greater depth the status and nature of being a man, and how such masculinity can fundamentally shape the experience of being a victim.

Chapter 5: Masculinity

“The Western ideology of essential gender differences says that men are powerful and women are yielding. Men are hard, women are soft, as if such dichotomies and contrasts are all that matters.”

Lindisfarne and Neil, 2016, p37

5.1 Introduction

Masculinity is one element of the wider concept of gender. Contemporary notions of gender are complicated and sometimes confused by several interrelated concepts, which some argue are better understood as separate phenomenon. An illustration of this can be seen in ‘The Genderbread Person’ (Killermann, 2017). This teaching resource presents gender as composed of four separate concepts: *Anatomical Sex* (Male/Female), *Attraction* (Sexuality – Homo/Hetero/Bisexual), *Gender Identity* (Man/Woman), and *Gender Expression* (Feminine/Masculine). This resource explicitly proposes that these related concepts are independent of each other; gender does not equal sexual orientation, identity does not equal expression, and neither of these equal anatomical sex. Within this model, masculinity and femininity are considered independent components of gender expression. This means that individuals have attributes of both masculinity and femininity, and although some may be high in one and low in the other, it is possible to be low in both (gender neutral), or high in both (androgynous).

The Gender Bread Person illustrates how modern ideas of gender and related concepts are often delineated, but although elements of the model draw on academic ideas, its clarity of definition is slightly misleading. Despite the best efforts in over half a century of research, these widely used terms remain poorly defined and contentious (Taylor, Nair, & Braham, 2013). The contentious element of public discourse can make reasoned understanding seem even more elusive. Often framed in moralistic terms, issues of sexuality, gender transition, religion, equality, and human rights are frequently conflated and fought over. From the court room to the classroom, from school gates to toilet cubicles (BBC, 2019; Westbrook and Schilt, 2014), the arenas of modern gender discourse can seem confusing and

conflict-ridden, to be entered into with care, sensitivity, and, for some, more than a little trepidation.

It is beyond the scope of this study to fully explore all the related concepts that can be seen to make up gender. For the purposes of this chapter, I focus upon masculinity, what the authors of the Genderbread Person limit to the confines of Gender Expression (how we behave and act to outwardly express a gender identity). However, as discussed over the coming pages, whether taking a psychological or sociological approach, understandings of masculinity cannot be divorced from ideas about sexuality and anatomical sex.

This chapter maps an understanding of masculinity as it has evolved through both psychological and sociological advances. Particular significance is afforded to the sociological theory of Hegemonic Masculinity (Carrigan, Connell, and Lee, 1985). This theory's capacity to incorporate an understanding of power, at both the relational and collective level, has not only had a large impact on the way manhood and male behaviour is understood, but also bears particular relevance for issues of IPA and the focus of this study. Furthermore, it has been instrumental in advancing a pluralistic understanding of masculinities, acknowledging the diverse ways masculinity can be expressed, whilst explaining how not all masculinities are equal.

Having considered what might define masculinity, I discuss some key theories around how masculinity or masculinities may, or may not, be changing as social expectations of gender and sexuality evolve. Bound up in such literature is the idea that masculinity may be in 'crisis', in both the Eriksonian and the literal understandings of the word. The impact of what it means to be a man in today's world are explored through two related concepts: gender stress and conflict, and precarious masculinity, the advancement of which can be seen in contemporary notions of 'toxic masculinity'.

The final section of this chapter discusses the need for a complex and dynamic understanding of masculinity that considers the personal, relational, and cultural aspects of gender identity.

5.2 What is masculinity?

It is true that in a general and abstract sense, masculinity is predominantly considered as one of two components that make up a social construct of gender, but in a vaguer, although perhaps truer, sense, it can also be said that “Masculinity is what men think it is” (Kimmel and Wade, 2018, p237).

Such an understanding of masculinity as a social construct is arguably the dominant contemporary discourse. However, within it there is a paradox that must acknowledge the importance of more essentialist thinking in making masculinity what it is. If masculinity is whatever men think it is, and a man believes that his masculinity is defined by his physiology, then his physiology will shape his masculinity and gender identity. Because of this, any attempt to understand a man’s gender identity from a constructivist position must consider other perspectives on what makes a man a man, and how those things may inform his behaviour and sense of self. To this end, what follows is a necessarily brief outline of some key perspectives on how we have understood gender over the last century.

5.2.1 *Psychoanalytical approaches*

The psychodynamic understanding of masculinity, as a construct dependent on biological sex, can still be found in modern day gender beliefs that continue to retain an essentialist hue (Friedan, 2013). It set out the constructs of femininity and masculinity as resultant from childhood experiences and gendered relationships with parents that build upon biological sex differences. Drawing upon Freudian concepts such as ‘castration anxiety’ and the ‘Oedipus complex’, the acquisition of a healthy masculinity was dependent on the right kind of childhood experience and could be thwarted by such variables as an overly feminine father or masculine mother, with the resulting ‘deviance’ potentially including homosexuality (Bosson, Vandello, & Caswell 2013).

This approach to gender continues to hamper psychotherapists today as they try to support their clients with transgender presentation without pathologizing their deviance from the expected norm of gender birth sex alignment (Gardiner, 2013). More widely, such an approach has received condemnation for contributing to power-inequality between the sexes and a distorted understanding of childhood.

As long as our culture has tended to support the anatomical illusion that men are haves and women are have-nots, it has been possible to manipulate

psychological configurations to misrepresent the childhood situation as one in which possession of, protection of, envy of, or compensation for the lack of a penis is of exclusive, or even central, concern.

(Fogel, 1996, p11).

5.2.2 *Sex role theories*

Taking a more psycho-social approach, sex role theories applied the concepts of Role Theory to a process of gender orientation in which male or female roles and behavioural traits were acquired through a process of socialisation. Early sex role theorists, such as Parsons and Bales (1956), built upon the still-dominant psychodynamic theories of personality formation as well as the more sociological perspectives of sex role division, but arguably still took the existence of binary gender constructs as a given (Carrigan, Connell, & Lee, 1985).

The second feminist wave of the '60s and '70s, however, saw a significant recalibration in how gender was perceived. One of the most influential figures within this was the American psychologist Sandra Bem, author of the Bem Sex Role Inventory (Bem, 1974). Bem identified that generally, across time and different cultures, masculinity had been seen as being instrumentally orientated, "a cognitive focus on getting the job done" (p156), whilst femininity was seen as being 'expressively' orientated, "an effective concern for the welfare of others" (p156). Bem argued that these two orientations and associated behavioural traits should not be considered as opposite ends of a spectrum, but as independent constructs. Significantly, it is from Bem that we get the idea seen within the Genderbread Person of Masculine, Feminine and Androgenous.

Bem called the assimilation of gendered social roles and norms 'sex typing'. Those who had assimilated either one or other of the two gender constructs were seen as strongly sex-typed. Prior to this, gender had been considered as a bipolar spectrum, with the psychologically healthy individual being aligned to either of the two poles of masculine or feminine. Bem argued that different social situations called for different behaviours, and that strongly sex-typed individuals may find themselves limited in their capacity to adapt between different contexts. In contrast, androgynous individuals, who could be "both masculine and feminine, both assertive and yielding, both instrumental and expressive" (Bem, 1974 p155) were perhaps better placed to deal with the diverse social demands of life, and therefore more likely to be psychologically well-adjusted.

Bem (1981) posited that the process of sex-typing is essentially one of building a cognitive schema for gender that is prioritised over other schemata and takes a key position within our concept of self. This prioritisation is resultant of “society’s ubiquitous insistence on the functional importance of the gender dichotomy” (p362) making the gender schema ever-salient and always cognitively available for the interpretation of reality.

In the previous summary of psychodynamic approaches to gender, I touched upon the perception of homosexuality as a deviation from healthy gender development. Such a view firmly connects attraction in a dependent way to gender identity. I raise this again now because throughout literature the relationship between sexuality and gender is a recurring aspect of focus. For some it is seen as a powerful gendering component, as important to masculinity as the contradistinction from femininity. In addressing this, Bem and Bem (1981) posited the existence of a powerful heterosexual sub-schema. Society’s prescription of heterosexuality was so strong, she argued, that regardless of the strength of an individual’s sex-typing, violation of the heterosexual norm was enough “to call into question the individual’s adequacy as a man or woman” (p361). Thus, the heterosexual sub-schema holds a position of great significance within the overall schema, and one that must be vigilantly attended to.

Bem’s work was highly influential and continues to inform research to this day (e.g., Donnelly and Twenge, 2017). However, as outlined within Chapter 2, there are different levels or approaches to the study of identity, and this is true regarding aspects of gender. Whereas psychodynamic and sex role theories predominantly focused upon the individual level of gender orientation, an equally productive body of work can be found to focus at the relational and collective levels of human experience.

5.2.3 *Sociological perspectives on gender*

The development of a more sociological understanding of masculinity has seen a shift in focus from the individual level of traits and personality, to the relational level of social norms and interpersonal interaction. Within the study of social norms, there is the distinction between *descriptive* norms (how men might actually be) and *prescriptive* norms (how men should ideally be, as deemed by society). The latter points to an understanding of masculinity as an ideology shared at a

societal/collective level that directs individual behaviour. This is often termed 'normative' and, as will be discussed later, is not to be confused with 'normal'.

Several studies over the years have sought to identify the norms of expected male behaviour (e.g. Cicone & Ruble, 1978; Thompson, Pleck, & Ferrera, 1992). These are predominantly developed using a Likert scale measurement of participant response to normative statements, followed by a statistical analysis to identify structural factors and groupings, such as 'status', 'toughness', and 'antifemininity' (Thompson and Pleck, 1986). One of the most widely used and tested has been the Male Role Norms Inventory. Developed by Levant et al. (1992), it initially comprised of 58 items grouped under seven categories of traditional male norms: Avoidance of Femininity, Homophobia, Achievement/status, Attitudes towards sex, Restrictive Emotionality, Self-reliance, and Aggression. Subsequent reviews of its use (Levant and Richmond, 2007; Gerdes *et al.*, 2018) have shown that although there is variation in endorsement across different cultural contexts, there are consistent correlations between endorsement of these norms and other aspects of behaviour.

Endorsement of traditional masculinity ideology, as measured by total scores of the MRNI, is inversely related to physical and psychological help-seeking, family cohesion, life satisfaction, emotional expressivity, paternal engagement, and witness credibility, and correlates positively with higher levels of sexism, negativity toward gay men and other sexual minorities, alexithymia [an inability to discuss feelings due to a lack of emotional awareness], religiousness, fundamentalist beliefs, gender role conflict, hypermasculinity, conflict behaviours, aggression, substance use, and energy drink consumption.

(Gerdes *et al.*, 2018, p594)

These findings are relevant to two of the most significant contributions that the sociological approach has made to our understanding of masculinity: that what is endorsed as a male norm varies across contexts and it may therefore be more helpful to speak of masculinities, plural (Wong and Wester, 2016); and that correlation with treatment towards other minority groups alludes to the significance of social hierarchies.

In their scathing assessment of all that had come before, Carrigan, Connell, and Lee (1985) highlight a "characteristic blindness" (p551) to the importance of power

within most approaches to masculinity. They called for a reframing of gender *differences* as gender *relations* and posit that the maintenance of male power within patriarchal western society is the essence of masculinity. Drawing upon the Gramscian concept of cultural hegemony, they put forward the concept of Hegemonic Masculinity as a normative construct embodying the “currently most honoured way of being a man... [that requires] other men to position themselves in relation to it” (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p832; see also Leone & Parrot, 2017; Nascimento & Connell, 2017). Importantly, the normative nature of hegemonic masculinity does not mean it describes what is normal in a statistical sense, but what is perceived as ideal, in this case being white, western, educated, heterosexual and male (Carrigan et al, 1985).

One of the primary functions of a hegemonic masculinity is the maintenance of male dominance, integral to which is the subjugation of women. However, also bound up in this is competition between men. Hegemonic masculinity occupies a position at the summit of the social hierarchy, meaning that other masculinities are subordinate to it. Arguably this is an intersectional understanding of gender, in which the different aspects of an individual’s cultural identity, such as class, gender, sexuality, and skin colour all dictate their capacity to attain the dominant social position afforded to some men.

Carrigan et al (1985) do not assert that a wholly sociological approach will explain all aspects of masculinity, and state that “the psychodynamics of masculinity, then, are not to be seen as a separate issue from the social relations that invest and construct masculinity. An effective analysis will work at both levels” (p596). However, others have gone so far as to say that the sum of masculinity is its performance, and as such have preferred to switch the term ‘masculinity’ for ‘manhood acts’, in order to better convey its nature and purpose for “claiming privilege, eliciting difference, and resisting exploitation” (Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009). This focus on the performance of masculinity enables an analysis of behaviours as they relate to hegemonic ideals and an individual’s capacity to attain them. Schrock and Schwalbe assert that individuals may have to rely upon some acts of manhood more than others, due to their personal circumstance. For example, they argue that those of a lower socio-economic status may be driven to use violence and intimidation, or displays of physical toughness, to compensate for a lack of wealth, or lack of achievements in career or education. They refer to these as ‘compensatory acts of manhood’ (Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009).

This perception of men constantly vying for status through their behaviour resonates with an understanding of positioning theory (Harre *et al.*, 2009), as outlined in chapter one. Positioning refers to the rhetorical and discursive process that individuals embark upon in interacting with one another. In this, individuals work to occupy an identity position not just in relation to other people's positions, but also to potential alternative or opposing positions. It describes a complex and nuanced practice where roles and identities are not just assumed but crafted, rhetorically fought for, evidenced, and defended against. This is continually attended to through all the discursive tools available to the individual. Positioning oneself in relation to the hegemonic masculinity entails defending against perceptions of femininity, homosexuality, weakness, dependency, inappropriate displays of emotion, or even poverty.

Inherent within a performative, contextually influenced concept of masculinity is an understanding that different contexts call for different performances - in response to which, individuals have different resources to draw upon. This is an observation shared by Bem and Bem (1981) when reasoning for the adaptive advantage that androgeous individuals may have. In reality, we move between different contexts such as work, family, home, and online spaces and in doing so adapt gender performances accordingly. Within this, the traditional (hegemonic) conception of masculinity can be engaged with according to the demands of the situation. Through interviewing both men and women, Robinson and Hockey's (2011) research into masculinity and identity across the domains of work and home led them to conclude that hegemonic masculinity is "a practice which men recognise, and moreover, are able to engage with agentically, at times, whether in pursuit, subversion, or adaptation of its characteristics" (p73), depending on the context in which they find themselves.

As laid out so far, the development of a sociological understanding of masculinity has led to a complex and nuanced conception that changes and adapts according to situational context, individual circumstance, and personal capacities. It depicts a range of masculinities that exist according to a myriad of different factors such as cultural context (Arciniega *et al.*, 2008; Goodwill *et al.*, 2019), physical ability (King *et al.*, 2019), and socioeconomic status (Roberts, 2013), and which adapt and respond to a continual process of discursive positioning around a hegemonic ideal that maintains the status and power of some men over others. However, this is not the whole picture of the gender discourse pertaining to masculinity over the last

half century. An almost contradictory thread has also developed that portrays masculinity as being unable to adapt. Many of the social advances of the latter half of the 20th century have been cast as a liberation from the white heterosexual patriarchy, and have thus been seen to directly challenge the norms of a hegemonic manhood. A challenge some have perceived as triggering a crisis in masculinity.

5.3 **Masculinity in crisis**

There has been much written and debated about how the societal changes of the last century have impacted masculinity, and the idea that, as a result, it may be in crisis (Horrocks, 1994; Roberts, 2014; Robinson, 2000). In the UK, workforce changes have seen the demise of manual labour and industry, alongside the increased presence of women in workplaces that had once been almost exclusively male domains. The emancipatory ideologies of feminism have driven a reconfiguring of gender thought and expectation that has placed 'manhood' at the centre of a critical discourse on gender, signalling "not an affirmation of masculinity, but a dissection of its social privileges" (Tosh, 2016). The rise in concepts of androgyny, with masculinity and femininity as independent constructs, has called for modern man to have a feminine side (Bem, 1974; Bem & Bem, 1981; Carrigan et al, 1985). And the significant steps forward that have been made in sexual equality have meant that the historical fear and hatred of homosexuality, such a defining characteristic of traditional masculinity (Levant *et al.*, 1992; Levant and Richmond, 2007), is no longer seen as socially acceptable.

5.3.1 *Feminism, the Manosphere and Gender Equality*

Perhaps the most significant change brought about by feminist thought and action has been the raising of awareness and combatting of gender inequality. Several authors have pointed out that without feminism there would be little understanding of masculinity, for it is feminist thought that has fuelled the study and analysis of gender as a social construct (Gardiner, 2013). The impact upon men's perception of their own masculinity, and subsequent response to the feminist cause, has been multifaceted. Initially, there arose a Men's Liberation movement that positioned itself as an ally of feminism. Drawing upon the language and concepts of gender role theory, they perceived men as victims of a process of socialisation which cast them to a rigid and damaging masculine ideal (Messner, 1998)

However, such a position was not able to accommodate the relational aspects of gender performance and power that began to play such an important role within gender theory, and which are epitomised within the theory of hegemonic masculinity. Such an understanding of the gender power imbalance undermined any movement that sought to position men as equally victimised. Having to accommodate or respond to such a relational understanding arguably led to a divide within the men's movement. For many, such a portrayal of male power did not fit with their experience of reality. As Messner (citing Pleck, 1974) highlights, there is a paradox within an understanding of a patriarchal society in which most men do not feel powerful. The resulting divide saw the development of the Men's Rights movement which continued to use the language and concepts of role theory and rejected feminist doctrine. Counter to this was the development of the anti-sexist, or pro-feminist, movement that distanced itself from role theory and embraced a relational understanding of gender with a commitment to redress the oppressive nature of manhood (Messner, 1998).

In describing this schism, Messner concluded that although the anti-feminist rhetoric and backlash was evident within the men's rights movement, it was not to be dismissed as a straightforward attempt to preserve male supremacy.

...these activists are not arguing for a return to patriarchal arrangements and traditional masculinity. To the contrary, men's rights advocates are critical of the ways masculinity has entrapped, limited, and harmed men, and they want to reconstruct a masculinity that is more healthful, peaceful, and nurturing. More important, they do not see feminism as the way to accomplish this improvement in men's lives. Just the opposite, they disagree with the feminist contention that men enjoy institutionalized privileges

(Messner 1998, p269).

In the years since, however, the burgeoning use of online platforms and forums by Men's Rights movements has seen the development of an increasingly militant, antifeminist agenda within a collection of online spaces that have become known as the mansphere (Ging, 2019; Jane, 2018; O'Donnell, 2020) This collective title is primarily composed of the websites or forum pages pertaining to Men's Rights Activists (MRA), Pick-up Artists, Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW), elements of gamer/geek culture, and Christian Conservatives (Ging, 2019). These interest groups, although outwardly disparate, all share an understanding of what has become known as the 'red pill' philosophy (Van Valkenburgh, 2018; Ging, 2019).

The concept behind this philosophy is that mainstream perception of reality has been distorted by feminist doctrine, resulting in the oppression of men and vilification of masculinity. The red pill is a reference to the film *The Matrix*, in which the lead character is given the choice of taking either a red pill, in which case the truth about reality will be revealed to him, or taking the blue pill, in which case he would remain in his virtual reality, oblivious to the true nature of things. Contrary to the concept of hegemonic masculinity, these movements argue it is women who hold power, there is no such thing as the patriarchy, and men are considered disposable.

Within the confusing and highly contested discourses that can be found within the manosphere, there are some influential and reasoned concepts that are worth consideration. However, before discussing these it is necessary to acknowledge that within the arena of the manosphere there is an inordinate amount of misogynistic vitriol that deliberately utilises the horrific language of rape and murder, termed by Jane (2018) as 'Rapeglish', and the targeting of individuals, particularly feminists, for harassment, abuse, death threats, and smear campaigns. This has been brought to mainstream attention through events such as 'Gamergate' which saw the public release of online forum content detailing the planning of real-world hate and misinformation campaigns against women working within the gaming industry (O'Donnell, 2020).

Taking an approach rooted in concepts of evolutionary psychology, much discussion within the manosphere is fuelled by an understanding that, through sexual selection, it is women who dictate masculinity. Accordingly, there are Alpha, Beta, and Omega masculinities. A hierarchical understanding in which alphas are the most sexually desirable to women and are therefore afforded success, betas enjoy moderate success but are ultimately women's second choice, and omegas are completely undesirable (Van Valkenburgh, 2018; incels.wiki, online). Such thinking has led to the formation of self-identifying groups such as the voluntarily celibate Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW), and Incels (involuntary celibates). The ideologies of the latter community have been labelled as violent extremism and blamed for several incidents of violence and killings (Casciani & De Simone, 2021).

The online discourse and real-world actions that take place under the banner of Men's Rights can understandably hinder reasonable discussion (Gotell and Dutton, 2016). Academic consideration of the ideologies of the Men's Rights movement is also hampered by a lack of academic engagement by its proponents. There are

many articles and academic publications that provide a feminist critique of the manosphere and men's rights movement (e.g., Gotell and Dutton, 2016; Jane 2019), but the Men's Rights movement itself seemingly prefers to draw upon emotion and ideology and use of individual testimonies to make their case and build online consensus (Ging, 2019).

However, there are some deeply held grievances within the manosphere regarding the way men and masculinity are portrayed, that arguably do not qualify as misogyny or sexism. Fundamental to the Men's Rights Position is the argument that men are disposable, and that traditional masculinity is a component in maintaining this. Historically and evolutionarily, they argue, men are not as important to the proliferation of the human race. In any given year, the potential number of children born is roughly equal to the number of women able to bear children. A far fewer number of men are needed. This, MRA argue, is responsible for 'the women and children first' policies of evacuation, why traditionally only men are sent into battle, and why the most dangerous industries that see the highest number of deaths at work are predominantly worked by men. The perpetuation of such social norms is enabled through types of masculinity that encourage men to put themselves in harm's way, and a culture that demands it.

Such a culture that sees men's death and suffering as somehow less important than that of women and children, is, they argue, manifest in several key domains that demonstrate men's expendability. These were highlighted within interviews with leading MRAs for the documentary film 'The Red Pill: A feminists Journey into the Men's Rights Movement' (2016) and are as follows:

1. Men make up an overwhelmingly large percentage of all deaths in the workplace. For example, in 2021/22 in the UK, 116 (94%) of all worker fatalities were of male workers (HSE, 2022).
2. MRAs perceive little is being said or done to address the large number of men committing suicide. In the UK, men have consistently made up between two-thirds, and three-quarters of all suicide deaths over the last 5 years. In 2021 in England and Wales, that was 4,129 men (ONS, online). An average of over 79 per week.
3. The minimal support and service provision for male victims of domestic abuse is not representative of the number of victims. Although some MRAs

argue that the number of male victims makes up 50% of cases, even the more conservative UK government statistics put the figure at around 30%. A number which is not reflected in the provision of services for male and female victims.

4. Fathers are considered expendable by the family courts, which are biased towards mothers in child custody decisions and divorce law. This grievance is of particular importance as it is the focus of a movement in itself, known as the Father's Rights movement. Alschech and Saini's (2019) review of 52 studies looking at the Father's Rights movement found that most condemn the movement as being misogynistic and anti-feminist in their rhetoric. However, there are some that make the case that the social changes attributable to the progression of gender equality, which have increasingly called for men to have greater paternal involvement and to be more than just financial providers, is yet to be recognised by the courts or related social support services (e.g., Collier, 2015).

Three of the above grievances are specifically relevant to this study and have already been discussed in previous chapters of this literature review: suicide and mental health in populations of abuse victims, gender patterns within domestic abuse perpetration, and the potential for legal and administrative abuse within a system that perceives men as perpetrators and women as victims. For MRAs, all of these are evidence that hegemonic masculinity is a myth, and that whilst the rights and experiences of women are prioritised, those of men are ignored. Thus, they believe the experience of masculinity is, in reality, one of disposability.

5.3.2 *Gay rights and sexual equality*

A second major cultural shift that has arguably had significant effect upon modern masculinity has been the advance of sexual equality and the acceptance of LGBTQ rights.

Gay liberation was the catalyst for opening up a strictly heterosexual male culture to a kaleidoscopic diversity of styles and practices: heady liberation for some, but profoundly disorienting for those whose chief aim is to 'fit in' (Tosh, 2016).

According to Anderson (2009) the rising acceptance of gay rights and culture has driven a new formulation of masculinity. Anderson posits that orthodox

(hegemonic) masculinity, being strongly defined by its aversion to all things homosexual, is stripped of its dominant status in societal contexts where 'homohysteria' (homophobia) does not prevail. Orthodox masculinity, he argues, does not disappear, but in the absence of homohysteria, the hierarchy of masculinities diminishes, and a more inclusive masculinity can exist on a par with more orthodox prescriptions. In other words, traditional homophobic masculinity no-longer holds sway, and men are freer to adopt alternative, more inclusive masculinities. Through numerous interviews and ethnographic studies, predominantly of athletes and sporting arenas, Anderson perceived the increased use of 'metrosexual' personas that went unchallenged in what are traditionally orthodox male settings. This, he argues, could not be explained by the hegemonic model, and led him to conclude that we are now seeing the proliferation of a more 'inclusive masculinity'.

This, however, is not the assessment of others (for example Eisen & Yamashita, 2019). Bridges and Pascoe's (2014) review of research and theory around changes in the 'performance and politics' of masculinity, concluded that such changes were 'more style than substance'. They instead proposed the development of 'hybrid masculinity, that saw the appropriation of elements of identity performance from marginalised and subordinated others by privileged young white males. Bridges and Pascoe perceived that this did not reduce their privilege, nor enhance the status of the marginalised others, but it did serve to confuse the picture and mask the continuation of a status quo.

There is an inherent difficulty in drawing conclusions about the reality of relationships and power from performance phenomena, for how do you know what is performance and what is real? A particularly interesting study by Munsch and Gruys (2018) attempted to address this by examining the boundaries of masculinity on the understanding that 'what threatens, defines'. Their qualitative study of 42 undergraduates at a selective US University, asked each participant to recount experiences of emasculation. They found that "despite acknowledging women's academic achievements and espousing egalitarian and anti-homophobic ideals, our interviewees' accounts centred around the need to exercise power over women and other men, discursively reinforcing the status quo" (p376). Their analysis indicated that most of their participants experienced threats to their masculinity within the context of intimate relationships with women. These included rejection, an inability to maintain a "breadwinner status", and being controlled ("whipped") by

their female romantic partner. Furthermore, supporting the established premise that masculinity is relationally hierarchical in nature, the majority of the sample understood their masculinity by comparison to other men.

It is widely accepted within the academic literature that gender norms/roles/expectations have changed over the last half a century, and thus what it is to be a man, i.e., masculinity, has been subject to the forces of change, leading many to speak in terms of a crisis. Perhaps this is best understood through the psychological conception of an identity crisis: “a necessary turning point, a crucial moment, when development must move one way or the other, marshalling resources of growth, recovery, and further differentiation” (Erikson, 1968, p16). How men have responded to this task is perhaps yet to be fully realised. The reduction in homophobia as a defining characteristic does seem to be an interesting development, and one that was not refuted by such studies as Munsch and Gruys (2018). But the idea that a masculinity that is more inclusive of homosexuality, is also more egalitarian in its approach to gender, appears to be unfounded. As Ging (2019) points out, a reduced presence of homophobia within online discourse, does not seem to have stood in the way of extreme expressions of misogyny.

5.3.3 *Masculinity as a component of a complex dynamic system of gendered identity.*

As outlined so far, contemporary understanding of masculinity is an unresolved and highly contested discursive arena, resulting from a legacy of thought and action that spans the full spectrum of psychosocial thought. From essentialist underpinnings of psychodynamic and evolutionary logic, through the interactional concepts of socialisation and sex role theory, to the macro sociological ideas of intergroup dynamics and theories of hegemonic power, it is all there, and it is all still in flux. But perhaps, as a significant aspect of identity, there is something to be gained from taking a more biosocial (Archer and Lloyd, 2002) or systemic approach that instead of seeing these as competing explanations, sees them all as significant components of the complex, multileveled human construct of identity, as outlined in Chapter 2.

For the last half century, the gender debate has avoided talk of individual nature and biology, for fear of its reductive and essentialist connotations. However, a complex systems approach to identity and masculinity enables us to consider the

role of natural elements, of biology and individual nature, in a way that is not deterministic. Instead, it acknowledges their role in a complex, non-linear relationship with social and cultural processes (Garlick, 2016). Such a systemic, ecological perspective is becoming more accepted within contemporary understanding, and is evident within recent guidance from the American Psychological Association (2018). Arguably the most prominent professional body for psychologists in the world, its 'Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Boys and Men' gave ten specific directions for psychologists in the field, the first of which was that "Psychologists strive to recognize that masculinities are constructed based on social, cultural, and contextual norms" (p6). The document itself is the culmination of a growing understanding that having to engage with such a system can have a detrimental effect on individuals. There has been particular concern for men's mental health, evident within the mainstream discourse around 'toxic masculinity' (Kimmel and Wade, 2018).

5.4 The effects of trying to be a man

As is inherent within some of the discourse found within the mansphere and MRA, there is an understanding that traditional, or orthodox masculinity is not a good thing, nor even in a man's best interest. The concept of emasculation and the identified process of comparison and competition, as seen within Munsch and Gruy's (2018) study, raises an important question regarding the welfare of individual men. What are the consequences for men of continually having to compare themselves to each other, of constant vigilance against accusations of femininity or homosexuality, and what happens when they fail to adequately position themselves in the eyes of their peers?

5.4.1 *Stress, strain, and conflict*

The implications for men of such a normative ideal of masculinity, are considered in Pleck's (1981, 1995) model of Gender Role Strain (GRS). This proposes that gender roles are defined by norms and stereotypes and enforced by the social condemnation of those who violate them. Pleck argues that these Gender Role Norms can be contradictory and inconsistent, and the consequences of violation for men are different to those faced by women. For men, Pleck argues, GRS manifests itself in three ways:

- ‘Gender Role Trauma’, in which the experiences of proving masculinity or attaining manhood can be traumatic.
- ‘Gender Role Dysfunction’ in which some of the traits that define masculinity (e.g., aggression and dominance) are in fact dysfunctional within many arenas, such as intimate relationships; and
- ‘Gender Role Discrepancy’, caused by the difference between the masculine ‘ideal’ and the emotional reality of being human.

Both O’Neil, Helms, and Gable (1986) and Eisler, Skidmore, and Ward (1988) developed scales that sought to measure the conflict and stress that men might experience through trying to live up to the ideal of normative masculinity. Both studies found correlations between perceived gender role deviance (i.e., not following the prescribed masculine norms, or being outperformed by a woman) and negative outcomes across personal and public domains, including anxiety, anger, and poorer health behaviours. However, this last outcome is a difficult factor to analyse with regard men and masculinity. Although some studies have indicated a link between traditional/orthodox/hegemonic masculinity and poor health choices (Gerdes *et al.*, 2018), the relationship is complex, and complicated by contrasting elements of masculinity being either positive or negative for health. For example, the masculine ideal of physical fitness potentially contributes to positive health outcomes, whilst a fear of showing weakness or vulnerability may well prevent self-care (Sloan, Conner and Gough, 2015).

The concept of GRS holds significant implications for male victims. These go beyond just a prohibitive effect on disclosure and help seeking, and include additional negative health implications, both physical and psychological, brought on by the discrepancy between expected gender norms and their victim experience.

5.4.2 *Precarity*

The consequences of gender role violation for men are at the heart of the concept of precarious manhood. Bosson *et al.* (2013) assert that, fundamentally, manhood and masculinity is “a socially conferred status that is achieved and validated through active performance” (p118). In this, it must be constantly earned and affirmed and the possibility of ‘emasculatation’ is an ever-present and socially realised threat.

With several studies, Bosson, Vandello and associates have demonstrated a link between emasculating experiences and both physiological and psychological stress. They have also shown that masculine posturing after an emasculating experience can reduce anxiety (Bosson, Vandello, Burnaford, Weaver, & Wasti 2009; Weaver, et al. 2010; Michniewicz, Vandello, & Bosson 2014; Weaver, Vandello, & Bosson 2013). In one study (Caswell, Bosson, Vandello & Sellers, 2014), they collected saliva samples from men before and after taking a fake personality test that either threatened or affirmed their gender status (n=128). They found a positive correlation between gender role-threatening feedback and increased levels of cortisol (a stress hormone) amongst men with low basal testosterone. Their other studies of men have shown correlations between gender role-threatening tasks and subsequent overt masculine behaviour (e.g., Bosson, Vandello, Burnaford, Weaver, & Wasti, 2009). Drawing on their body of work, Bosson, Vandello, & Caswell (2013) conclude that masculinity is precarious in nature and that “men are highly protective of their manhood status because they are aware that this status can be ‘lost’ via a wide range of behaviours, transgressions, and associations” (p127).

These findings resonate with the work of Fergusson, Eyre, & Ashbaker (2000), who have shown the correlation of feelings of intense shame for men with situations they “perceived to threaten traditionally masculine identities” (p149). The consequence of gender role strain resulting from a precarious manhood, continually measured against a normative but potentially dysfunctional hegemonic masculinity, could be to compound men’s difficulties when circumstances place them at odds with the hegemonic ideal. Javaid (2014, 2015, 2017a, 2017b, 2018) argues that this is true of male rape victims, who risk secondary victimisation due to the incongruency between their victim status and the norms of hegemonic masculinity. Their victim status incorporates characteristics pertaining to powerlessness, emasculation, and weakness, and these are characteristics that optimise subordinate or marginalised masculinities (Javaid, 2018, p201). In interviews of police and voluntary support workers, Javaid (2018) found themes of threat to masculinity through perceived victimhood, lack of sexual assertiveness, and homosexuality. The very concept of rape was perceived as solely effecting the female population and therefore it was not expected for men to fall victim to it. Arguably, there are similar expectations faced by male victims of female perpetrated Intimate Partner Abuse.

5.4.3 *Masculinity and Male Victims of Intimate Partner Abuse*

Whether or not you consider a type of masculinity that prioritises toughness, assertiveness, and independence to be orthodox, traditional, or hegemonic, and whether you believe it serves men or women to be this way, there are two significant implications for male victims of intimate partner abuse. Firstly, in the immediate act of perpetration, the psychological drive to maintain a valid male identity can be weaponised by their abuser through tactics of emasculation, such as questioning the victim's manhood, sexuality, or ability to stand up for themselves. This was evident within the narratives of the pilot study and has been noted by other studies into the male victim experience (Nybergh, 2016; Morgan and Wells, 2016; Barber 2008; Bates 2019b).

Secondly, from the outlines of different approaches to masculinity provided by this chapter, it is evident that's a man's experience of victimhood and abuse is incongruent with most conceptions of masculinity. Neither the orthodox or hegemonic narratives of dominant manhood and female submission, nor the more modern narratives of gender equality (Maclean, Shucard, & Syed, 2017), provide a socially sanctioned script for male subjugation to female abuse. Because of this, both experiencing and recounting such experiences are likely to be emasculating, potentially triggering feelings of shame (Fergusson, Eyre, & Ashbaker, 2000). The logical consequence of this is that male victims will seek to conceal or deny their experiences from others. Or, if they do speak of it, will be instinctively driven to do so in such a way as to maintain a valid masculine identity, despite their victimhood. Again, this was evident within the narratives of pilot study participants and has been found by other studies of male victims (Corbally, 2015).

5.5 **Summary**

Within the modern gender debate, masculinity - what it is, could, or should be - is a deeply divisive concept. As it stands today, there are so many takes on the meaning of masculinity that it is easy to understand why some talk in terms of a crisis. Over the last century, we have seen a progression from essentialist conceptions of masculinity defined by sexual differences, to the other extreme of masculinity as an entirely social construct. The advance of a relational understanding of power within gender dynamics, epitomised within the theory of Hegemonic Masculinity, has enabled a deeper and more intersectional

understanding of masculinities, and how for individual men, the pressures of conformity and competition can feed into negative and damaging behaviours and the perpetuation of social inequalities. However, although both psychological and sociological approaches have, at different times, held dominance within mainstream consciousness, both ends of the spectrum continue to occupy a position within contemporary debate.

At the time of writing, despite the advance of a more ecological perspective evidenced within APA guidance, consideration of a man's nature as a contributing factor to his masculinity, as seen in the language of evolutionary psychology of the men's rights movement, stands in conflict with the sociological concepts of hegemonic masculinity and related theories. The idea of a more nuanced and dynamic model of gender as a complex system, such as that put forward by Garlick (2016), does offer a way forward that could consider all factors, without the dangers of essentialist thinking, nor the shortcomings of untethered social constructionism. But such an approach currently remains on the margins of contemporary discourse.

However, despite the seeming polarisation of debate, there is a shared understanding that there exists, for whatever reason, a form of masculinity that promotes toughness, assertiveness, dominance, and the potential for violence as prescribed attributes of manhood (Levant et al., 1992). Some argue that these attributes are components of a hegemonic form of masculinity that places certain men at the top of the social hierarchy (Carrigan et al, 1985). Others argue the opposite (Elam, 2010), but in both camps there is an acknowledgement that such a masculinity is normative within western culture. Furthermore, there is agreement that such a normative ideal can be detrimental to the health of individual males who are driven to enact such a masculinity at the expense of their own health, and who must psychologically wrestle with their inevitable failure to live up to it (Pleck, 1981, 1995).

Considered in the light of the preceding three chapters of this literature review, masculinity as a component of gender can be understood as a potent aspect of a complex and dynamic system of identity that spans across the three levels of human reality: the individual, the relational, and the collective.

At the relational level, acknowledging the human drive for validity as a key aspect of identity work, combined with an understanding of just how impactful an

emasculating experience can be for men, reveals how gendered the experience of victimhood may be. Concepts of discursive psychology, positioning theory, and narrative identity theory provide insight into how a dilemma of validity vs emasculation must be navigated by male victims of IPA, particularly those who talk about their experiences. However, knowledge of the potential for cultural narratives (be they master, alternative, or hegemonic) to limit or enable narration, and of how the male victim experience runs counter to the dominant narrative of male perpetration, reveals how difficult the task of attaining validation may be for male victims telling their story. This gives cause for concern when considered against evidence that suggests their individual wellbeing could be positively correlated to their ability to narrate their experiences in a meaningful way (McAdams, 2013).

Part 3 - Methodology

Chapter 6: Method and methodology

6.1 Introduction

This chapter sets out the method and process of this research study. The following pages will look first at the conceptual framework and subsequent design of the study, before outlining the process of recruitment and resulting sample composition. The later sections of the chapter will focus on the ethical considerations that significantly shaped this study and I will conclude by detailing the process of analysis. Each step will be discussed with reflections on how and why decisions were made and what happened in carrying out the interviews.

6.2 Conceptual framework

Ontologically and epistemologically, this study is rooted in the constructivist (Bruner, 1991) and interpretivist traditions (Schmidt; 2006). Being several steps removed from an attempt to understand an objective reality, it seeks to make sense of how individuals convey the meaning they have made of their own experience. In researching this, I acknowledge that any individual's experience is filtered through the senses available to them and interpreted through their accumulated knowledge of the world. Furthermore, that any given account is subject to the limitations of a somewhat plastic memory. The focus of this study is therefore the subjective interpretation and reinterpretation of experience and self, played out through the occasion of a research interview.

As set out in chapter one, this study is significantly informed by the writings of Mead and symbolic interactionist thinking (Mead, 1934; Stryker, 2008). A complex dynamic understanding of identity across all three levels of individual, relational, and collective social reality, pivots upon the maintenance of an objective-self forged through social interaction. Within this is a phenomenological understanding of narration and the narrative as a hermeneutic package: a story that contains all that is needed to convey an experience in terms of time and space and meaning, meets the perceived demands of the occasion, and is orientated to fulfil the ever-present requirements of identity work and validation. In examining such a constructed and discursive account, this study is seeking to understand a "narrative truth" (Spence 1982, cited Dunlop 2017, p155). This is a truth that

attends not just to the facts of a situation as perceived by the narrator, but also to the psycho-social needs of the narrator and their audience, at the heart of which is the work of identity.

As highlighted in Chapter 2, narrative in this context is understood to be an act of discourse, and a rhetorical tool. All such acts are occasioned and orientated (Edwards and Potter's, 1992; Gill, 2000), thus, to understand the subject of this study, one must consider the occasion, (the research interview itself) and the orientation (what the narrator was driven to achieve within their narration). The orientation will be the main focus of analysis, but to design the study and to understand the data one must consider the occasion, and all the ingredients that compose this particular interview.

6.3 My position as a researcher

The discursive and interpretivist roots of this study require consideration of myself, as a researcher, recognising that I am a component of the social context that I seek to study (Mishler, 1986; Lumsden 2019). Reflexively, this means examining what has become known as my 'positionality' (Herr & Anderson, 2005). Underlying the need to consider the researcher's position is an understanding that pure objectivity is an illusion (Brenner, 1981; Hollway and Jefferson, 2000), for, as Putnam phrased it, "there is no god's eye point of view" (1981, p50). If I, the researcher, can only perceive and interpret the world from my position in it, an understanding of that position is critical to the design and analysis of this study.

I am driven by certain value positions. Of particular importance in driving this research is that I am against abuse. I could argue from a slightly detached position that domestic abuse forms a significant burden on society. It cuts potentially productive lives short, and costs significant amounts of money in supporting victims as the trauma of the abuse plays out across all aspects of their lives. However, there is also an instinctively emotional foundation to my position: an empathy for adult and child victims, and an indignation at the injustice of the social and interpersonal contexts that enable such abuse. My awareness of this is important, for there is arguably a danger that such an unchecked disposition may cause me to listen uncritically to accounts of abuse, and perhaps accept too readily a binary picture of perpetrator and victim in situations of greater complexity and nuance.

However, a counter to concerns of partiality that speaks directly to the issue of positionality, is that my uncriticising and sympathetic stance could be more supportive of participants sharing their story, providing a safe place within which they can explore potentially traumatic experiences. How participants respond to me as an interviewer is an important consideration and will also have been influenced by my male status. As discussed within Chapter 5, masculinity appears to be discursively managed between men (Bosson et al. 2013) and thus the identity work of participants within these interviews will be unavoidably shaped by the fact that they are talking to a man. Arguably it may also provide me with certain insights or biases due to our shared gender. In this way I might be considered an 'insider' (Malpass, Sales, & Feder, 2016). The debates about insider/outsider positions have been an important feature of ethnographic and action research (Cobyn-Dwyer & Buckle, 2000; Herr & Anderson, 2005; Gelir, 2021), as researchers have sought to account for how their work is shaped by commonalities and shared positions with participants. Applying such concepts to this study helps me to see how, in aspects of gender, I might be considered insider, but in not considering myself a victim or survivor of IPA, I perceive myself as an outsider. As Herr and Anderson (2005) point out, there are many different aspects to each individual's positionality. This study's consideration of identity work across the individual, relational, and cultural levels highlights the importance of this in understanding a process of discourse resultant from the positional differences and similarities between people.

Arguably, any impartiality stemming from my stance against abuse was in part negated by an analysis that focused upon how narrative is constructed, rather than the veracity of the abuse claims. But, despite my will to attend to the act of narration rather than the 'facts' of events, the question of whether participants would tell me the 'truth' as they saw it, is still necessary to address. For the four participants that were contacted through a domestic abuse charity, their engagement with the charity lends some validation to their stories. For the remainder, there were no immediately apparent reasons for them to mislead. They were offered no financial incentives to take part. Although they were offered a £20 gift voucher for their inconvenience, this was not advertised beforehand. As part of the consent process, participants were made aware that I was not connected to any legal or support services, and their engagement with the study would not impact or benefit any legal decisions or service provision. So arguably there were only two readily apparent reasons for taking part. One might be considered therapeutic (the cathartic

opportunity to share their story), and the other generative (to help others by sharing their experiences), neither of which would seem well served by deception. This is not to say that there would not be impetus to narrate in a particular manner. It is the deductive reasoning of this study that participants will be driven to narrate in such a way as to attend to fundamental dilemmas of identity, and the discursive imperatives of coherence and validity. How they do so is the focus of this study.

6.4 Design

This study set out to address the following question:

How do male victims of female-perpetrated Intimate Partner Abuse, incorporate their experiences of abuse within their narrative-identity?

Within this enquiry, analytic focus was directed by the theoretical underpinnings of identity theory, and the nature of this research as a social work study. Regarding identity, the following questions were informed by the existing theory and research set out in Chapters 1 and 2:

- How do participants 'discursively position' themselves during the interview and what are the implications for their narrative?
- How do themes of agency and stability manifest within participant narration?

As a social work study, the following questions were informed by a commitment to the consideration of professional practice and social work theory.

- What parts, if any, do professionals or formal and informal support services play within their narrative?
- How do participants relate their experiences to wider social discourse on domestic abuse?

The foundational understanding of narrative identity theory logically directed this study towards a narrative method in both data collection and analysis. However, there are also other good reasons for a narrative approach. The sensitive and potentially untold nature of domestic abuse experiences (Hyden 2013), and the variety and subtlety of form that abuse can take, means a narrative approach can

be particularly appropriate for interviewing victims of domestic abuse, seeking, as it does, to enable participants to tell their own story, in their own way.

As discussed in Chapter 3, there is an understanding of Narrative Identity as an iterative process, perpetually worked and reworked at an interpersonal/relational level (Fivush, Booker, & Graci, 2017). This infers that the most appropriate data to address the research question would be the personal narrative accounts of male victims. Arguably, how men talk about their abuse could in part be answered by the close friends, family, or professionals who work with male victims, but such an interview would be a study in how such figures interpret the narratives of male victims. The study's focus on autobiographical narration as a process of identity work meant that the most unadulterated data would necessarily come from interviewing male victims directly. This raised a question of feasibility. The experience of carrying out a pilot study revealed that, although male victims could be engaged in narrative interviews, recruitment might not be straightforward. A partnership with a local domestic abuse charity was initially seen as a key route to recruit participants. However, due in part to staff changes, this turned out not to be the case. After several months of no engagement, all four of the pilot study participants were engaged through other routes, including professional contacts, posters, and flyers. In commencing the main study, I therefore took a proactive approach from the outset, attending seminars, contacting national charities, and establishing a presence on the social media platform Twitter.

6.4.1 *The Sample*

Recruitment

The sample consisted of 18, self-reporting, male victims/survivors of female-perpetrated IPA. Information about the study, with an invitation for men to take part, was disseminated to professionals working with men and with victims of domestic abuse. These included Leeway Domestic Violence and Abuse Services, the Men's Shed, and local Independent Domestic Violence Advisors. The study was advertised through its own twitter profile ([@HardtoTell2](#)), as well as on the website of [The Mankind Initiative](#), a national charity supporting male victims of domestic abuse. I also promoted the study through attending conferences on domestic abuse.

In total there were 22 expressions of interest, of which 18 were able to take part in an interview. To maintain anonymity, individual details will not be shared, but the

following information is included to provide a picture of the sample composition. Two participants were recruited whilst attending a conference on male victims, five were put in contact by local charities. Six made contact through social media, and six contacted the study after seeing it advertised on the Mankind Initiative Website.

Although three participants did not disclose their age, two were in their 20s, two in their 30s, six in the 40s, and four in their 50s. They were not asked for details of their religious, socioeconomic, or ethnocultural background, but for some, such aspects were integral to their story and how they made sense of their experience. The majority could ostensibly be classified as white British. Three spoke explicitly about having non-British nationalities. Two spoke of their Islamic faith, three spoke of their Christian faith. Job roles ranged from university professor to manual labourer, student to bank manager.

For three participants, it was not appropriate or possible to identify the length of the abusive relationship, and four participants spoke of more than one. This left 19 abusive relationships with a known approximate length, ranging from six months to 32 years. Although this gave a mean average of 8.6 years, most (twelve) were five years or less, but four of them lasted 20 years or more.

Twelve participants had children with their abusive partner. At the time of interview, three lived with their children and two no longer had any contact with their children. The remainder had contact with their children who lived with their mother.

Where possible, participants were given the opportunity for face-to-face interviews to be carried out either at their home or at a local community venue. Six were conducted in person, three of whom chose to meet at their home. Five were carried out by video call, and seven by phone. Interview length ranged from 52 minutes to 3.5 hours, with the majority lasting between 1 and 2 hours.

Historically within qualitative research, in-person interviews have been seen as the 'gold standard' (Saarijarvi & Bratt, 2021). Containing all the non-vocal forms of communication, theoretically they can thus provide a richer and more attuned dialogue. However, the literature acknowledges that different mediums have their own advantages and limitations. Whereas there may be some reduction in rapport or 'trust' in non-face-to-face interviews, this may be more than made up for by the practicality and convenience of overcoming distance and scheduling problems. Furthermore, the increased level of anonymity that comes with telephone calls

holds relevance for sensitive topics (Block & Erskine, 2012). Within this study, these factors were seen as fundamental to maximising inclusivity and directed my decision to provide a choice of in-person, video, or voice call interviews. Attending to concerns to avoid 'cold calls' and to cultivate an open and honest rapport (Drabble et al, 2016), all interviews were preceded by a brief introductory phone call and the sharing of information sheets and consent forms by email.

Interviews were arranged at times convenient for participants, including evening and weekends. In planning the interview, participants were advised that discussion concerning their experiences of abuse might have a greater emotional impact than they might expect and they may wish to take this into consideration when planning the timing and location of the interview. For example, they may wish to be in a comfortable and private place and allow time after the interview to gather their thoughts.

Reflecting on participants' choice of medium, it was not apparent that interviews restricted to voice were otherwise limited in cultivating engagement. It is, perhaps, even possible that the medium of voice-only calls was more enabling in terms of providing a real freedom to talk. Although the shortest interview was carried out by telephone, so too were the four longest interviews, two of which exceeded 3 hours.

A recruitment dilemma

A dilemma was raised when I was contacted by a friend who wished to take part in the study. Although I had known this person for several years and had also known the partner he identified as abusive, until this point I was not aware of the abuse. Initially I questioned whether it was appropriate to interview him as part of the study. Deciding on this required the untangling of my own feelings from the practical implications that might differentiate interviewing a friend from interviewing a stranger.

My personal response to hearing that a friend had been abused was instinctively an emotional one, followed by elements of critical self-reflection for not being aware of the abuse previously. Ironically, considering the title of this study, I found myself asking why he had not previously told me, and wondering whether this was a reflection on me as a friend. Furthermore, there is a chance that I will again meet the person he claims to be the perpetrator of his abuse. How will I manage that?

But although experienced simultaneously, these emotive questions were separate from questions that related to the research itself. Would the discussion and

narration within an interview with a friend differ so much in character as to render the interview unusable in the study? Would I be able to take a sufficiently objective focus in my analysis of a friend's interview? Would the fact that I might feasibly feature within some of his narratives affect the identity work that he must attend to in positioning himself and others within his narration? Would this provide him with an additional narrative hurdle not faced by other participants?

Paradoxically, however, some of these aspects also supported his inclusion in the study. Would this provide an opportunity to observe how a man might speak differently to a friend about their abuse than they would to a professional researcher? Ultimately, there was an ethical element to the decision, one highlighted by the nature of the study and acknowledgment of how hard it might be for men to talk of their experiences of being abused. There is no moral justification for saying 'no, I do not want to hear about your experiences'. The fact is my friend had chosen to share his experiences within the context of my research. So, although I could and did suggest just talking it through with him friend to friend, that was not what he had asked for. Perhaps the research context was an enabling factor, providing a legitimate space in which to disclose.

Following discussion with my supervisors, it was agreed to proceed with the interview, with the view that should it differ too significantly in character to the other interviews, then it might not be included within the study sample. This conclusion required a more in-depth briefing prior to the interview to ensure that he was aware of my decision-making process and that his interview may not be used in the final data set. I also deemed it important to make sure he had considered whether he really wanted to do an interview, or just talk to me about it as a friend. I made him aware that there were other studies he could get involved in if he would prefer a more straight-forward research interaction.

As it was, the nature of his narration did not ostensibly differ from that of other participants, other than in terms of the individual nature of biographies, and consequently was included in the data set.

6.4.2 *The main interview*

The narrative approach relies on the narrating instincts of the interviewee to both elaborate and contain their answers within the narrative form. Flick (2014) outlines three 'narrative constraints' the narrator will seek to conform to: 'condensing',

constraining the narrator to include only relevant information; 'detailing', providing the detail necessary for the audience to understand the story; and the 'closing gestalt', to bring a conclusion to the narrative once started. These constraints serve to scaffold the interviewee in bringing coherence to their narratives.

My focus on narrative-identity, potentially considering the whole-life story, required allowance for an extended autobiographical narrative. A well-recognised method for this is the Life Story Interview, developed by McAdams and colleagues (McAdams, 2021). Within this method, the interviewee is asked to tell their life story as if it were a book, considering what the main chapters would be about, and how they would be titled. Following this, they are asked to recount examples of pre-ordained occasions, such as high and low points or a time they might consider as a turning point. These interviews can provide a useful structure for interviewees, and can yield rich, in-depth, data. However, it is a structure that is brought to the narration by the interviewer, rather than the interviewee. In seeking to find out how male victims talk of their experiences, this study needed to be open to the possibility that male victims might not seek to do so by dividing their life up into chapters. They may not instinctively want to talk about highs and lows or turning points. Thus, a less structured approach, with greater scope for the interviewee to choose their own structure, would be more appropriate.

Another common approach is to begin an interview with a single open question designed to illicit a narrative response (Corbally & O'Neil, 2014; Wengraf, 2001; Hollway & Jefferson, 2000; Schutz, 1982). In his Biographical Narrative Interview Method, Wengraf (2001) refers to this as the 'SQUIN' (Single Question Aimed at Inducing Narrative), and provides a classic formula as follows:

I would like you to tell me your life story, all the events and experiences which were important for you. I'll listen first, I won't interrupt, I'll just take some notes for afterwards.

(Wengraf, 2001, p134)

Although this approach appeared more appropriate to this study by providing minimal interviewer-led structure, I was aware that this too had a leading element in requesting a life *story*. What if respondents in this study did not instinctively seek to provide a narrative account? What if, for example, they were drawn instead to simply list the types of abuse they experienced, devoid of context or attempts to make sense or meaning? Such an inclination might be suppressed as the

participant attempts to provide the requested story. With this in mind, the initial interview question was carefully worded as follows:

Please tell me about your life so far. You can tell it in any way you want. I won't interrupt, but, if it's ok, I may make a few notes so that I don't forget things I might want to ask later. So, if you're ready, you can start however you like.

From an understanding of the human drive to narrate and the assertions of Narrative Identity Theory (McAdams, 2006; 2018), it was expected that participants would seek to provide a narrative response. But, in also understanding the nature of domestic abuse and the taboo nature of male victimhood within western culture, it was conceivable that male victims/survivors might find it difficult to fulfil such narrative instincts. It was hoped that this open question would provide them with the space, if necessary, to find other ways to respond.

Taking such an approach did, however, raise concern that it could be too open and participants might struggle to know how to respond. In trialling the method within the Hard to Tell pilot study, a follow up question was planned in case participants were simply unable to respond to the initial question.

"If your life was told as a story, how might it go?"

As it turned out, this prompt was not necessary. Three of the four pilot participants had no difficulty in responding at length and in narrative form to the initial question, including details and descriptions of their abusive relationship. The fourth participant responded with a brief outline of his life so far, including aspects of his childhood, and his chosen career. However, he did not include any details regarding his abusive relationship. An improvised follow-up question was needed to ask how his experiences of abuse fitted within his life story. The pilot study surmised that the difficulty faced by the fourth participant in incorporating his abuse within his initial biographical account was potentially due to the nature of his abuse, and the relatively short time that had elapsed since the end of the abusive relationship.

The potential for other participants to face the same difficulty was factored into the design of the full study, with the following question provided as an additional prompt if needed:

"As you know, I am researching men's experience of domestic abuse. Could you tell me about how that relates to you and your life so far?"

As outlined by Jovechelovitch and Bauer (2000), after the initial question and response, the remainder of such a narrative interview provides the opportunity for focused questioning, not only to further explore elements of the participants initial response, but also to focus on specific areas of interest to the research. Wengraf's (2001) Biographical Narrative Interview Method proposes that this is done respectively over two subsequent semi-structured interviews. Due to time and resource constraints, as well as the sporadic engagement of male victims as reported by partnership agencies, I carried out a single interview per respondent, using a narrative interview method outlined by Jovechelovitch and Bauer (2000) and incorporating Wengraf's (2001) three interview stages as follows (for a more detailed interview schedule, see Appendix A):

Stage 1

Initiation: Following introductions, informing participants of the research, and obtaining their informed consent, the interview started with a single question designed to illicit a biographical narrative.

Main narration: Whilst the participants responded, I made occasional notes to inform the subsequent questioning section. However, due to the sensitive nature of the study topic, and the respondent's potential vulnerability in revisiting events or engaging in discourse around their experiences, I was prepared with possible follow up questions to further support them in telling their story, whilst maintaining as relaxed and informal an experience as possible.

Stage 2

Questions and elaboration: After allowing the respondent to come to a natural conclusion in their response to the initial question, I used my notes to ask open questions to further explore elements of their initial response. For example: '*you mentioned that... ..could you tell me a little more about how that came about?*'

Stage 3

The third stage of the interview was used to direct discussion towards specific areas of interest to the study which may have not been raised within the preceding two stages. These included the involvement of professional agencies such as the police or social services, support provided from

friends or family, and their understanding of media portrayals and wider discourse around domestic abuse and male victims.

These open questions were concluded by asking if there was one piece of learning the participant wanted to make sure I took from his interview? This question was specifically designed to draw the interview to a productive and generative conclusion for the interviewee. Refocusing from a retrospective analysis towards a future trajectory, provided the opportunity for the participant to psychologically 'step back' from what may have been a traumatic narrative process, and reframe their thoughts in an act of sense and meaning-making.

Concluding questions: The final part of the interview consisted of a series of closed questions to gather specific details that may not have been covered within the interview, such as the length of time since the relationship ended, how long the relationship lasted, and the number of abusive intimate relationships they have experienced.

Each interview was recorded with the consent of participants, and subsequently transcribed by myself. All identifying information was removed during the transcription process, with names omitted or replaced by pseudonyms.

6.4.3 *Follow-up Interview*

Participants were each asked at the beginning and end of the main interview if they were open to taking part in a follow-up telephone call about their experience of being interviewed (Appendix B). At the point of interview, all 18 participants consented to being contacted to take part in the follow-up phone call, of which 12 subsequently took part.

This follow-up call had three purposes:

- Wellbeing. As discussed previously, it was expected that for some participants the emotional impact of narrating their experiences of abuse may be significant. The follow-up phone call provided an opportunity to reconnect with participants and, if appropriate, provide signposting to appropriate support services.

- Impact. Assessing the positive or negative impact for these men of taking part in such a narrative style interview about their experiences of intimate partner abuse.
- Quality control. Although participants were each provided with the contact details of my PhD supervisor and the head of department, should they wish to feedback or complain about their experience, this follow-up call proactively provided the opportunity for them to do so.

These follow-up calls have not been included within the analysis set out in this thesis, though there remains the potential for their use in a subsequent analysis of the impact of narration in research interviews. However, their contribution to this study was invaluable for informing the iterative process of interview and analysis, enabling subsequent interviews to be informed by an awareness of the impact of previous interviews. For example, the first interview contained accounts and discussion of suicide, and it was clear that the participant was both still struggling with suicidal ideation, and significantly impacted by the emotional demands of narration. At the time of the interview, he was receiving ongoing support for his mental health and with his permission I was able to link with his key worker and make them aware of how difficult the interview had been for him. The follow-up phone call gave the opportunity to check in with him, whilst not committing to an ongoing relationship that I would not be able to sustain. Within the follow-up call he was able to feedback his reflections on how and why the interview had been so difficult for him, describing it as both a positive and negative experience. Negative in terms of the emotional impact, and positive in catalysing a process of consideration regarding his current position and therapeutic avenues available to him for moving forwards. This process not only assuaged my own concerns for his wellbeing and safety, but also underlined the importance of informing subsequent interviewees of the emotive potential of the interview, allowing them to factor this into their plans and consent.

6.4.4 *Ethical Considerations*

Prior to carrying out interviews, ethical approval was gained from the UEA School of Social Work Ethics Committee (Appendix C).

Fundamental to this study are six core principles of ethical research outlined by the economic and social research council (ESRC, online):

- “Research should aim to maximise benefit for individuals and society and minimise risk and harm,
- the rights and dignity of individuals and groups should be respected,
- wherever possible, participation should be voluntary and appropriately informed,
- research should be conducted with integrity and transparency,
- lines of responsibility and accountability should be clearly defined,
- independence of research should be maintained and where conflicts of interest cannot be avoided, they should be made explicit.”

(ESRC, online)

Confidentiality, Anonymity, and Safeguarding

This study aimed to increase our knowledge of how male victims understand their own experiences, and better inform the services supporting them. The rights and dignity of participants, including their right to a private and family life (HRA, 1998, Sched.1, article 8) were respected, with all recorded information anonymised and maintained securely. This assurance of confidentiality is a key component of respect for participants in sharing what may be very sensitive and private details and recognising the dangers they may face in reprisals from abusers. This is a recognition of specific risks whilst respecting them as ‘active agents’ within the research. It consciously avoided labelling them as simply ‘vulnerable’, with the disempowering connotations that can go with such a label (Downes, Kelly and Westmarland, 2014). As survivors of IPA, participants arguably had the greater understanding of the risks they face. Whilst it is important to support them as much as possible in managing those risks, they were respected as autonomous agents within that process. However, although providing anonymity within the research findings, this study did not offer complete anonymity from the researcher, due to the necessary limits of confidentiality. I am aware that within the study of domestic abuse, information relevant to the safeguarding of children or other adults may be disclosed. Were this to happen under blanket anonymity, I would be in a difficult position; having knowledge of potential harm but being unable to act to safeguard those involved. Downes, et al. (2014) argue this would amount to “a dangerous avoidance of responsibility and lack of care and concern for research participants” (p5). Had any safeguarding concerns become apparent during this study, they

would have been conveyed to appropriate safeguarding services. Wherever possible, this would have been done in co-operation with participants. In accordance with the BPS Code of Human Research Ethics (2014), this limitation of confidentiality was explained to all participants prior to interview, detailed in the interview information sheet (Appendices [D](#) & [E](#)) and discussed at the beginning of each interview when confirming consent. Had a safeguarding concern arisen within the interview regarding either themselves or another party, I would have discussed this with my supervisor and made an appropriate safeguarding referral, either to already involved services or to the appropriate Local Authority. This would have been done in dialogue with the participant unless it would have been unsafe to do so. The closest to a safeguarding situation came with the previously discussed participant with suicidal thoughts. As he was already being supported around this, with the participants consent I was able to link with his support worker and ensure that there was no cause for concern that they were not already aware of.

As well as issues of safeguarding, we must also consider the potential of a positive impact for individual participants. The opportunity to speak about experiences and be listened to can be a positive and potentially therapeutic experience (Downes, et al, 2014; Rawcliffe, Philip, & Jordan, 2020). This ties in with the previously discussed assertion of Narrative Identity Theory that being able to narrate is a key part of narrative-identity formation. Therefore, this study strove to ensure the interview was as positive and personable an experience as possible, maximising its potential benefit in line with the first of the ESRC's principles.

In the terms of the ESRC principles, this research was carried out with integrity. At no point was the participant misled, nor was information withheld from them regarding their part in the study. The domestic abuse focus and procedure of the study was explained to the participant through information sheets and discussion, and the lines of responsibility and accountability were provided (Appendices [D](#) & [E](#)). The nature of the study's narrative focus was not discussed with participants until the end of the main interview to prevent their responses being shaped by such knowledge.

Consent

In respecting individual autonomy (Wiles *et al.*, 2008; Banks, 2012) participation was voluntary, and participants were made aware of their rights regarding consent and withdrawal from the study (Gabriel *et al.*, 2017). For this to be fully informed consent, and recognising that ethical responsibility spans the whole of the research

process (Pickering and Kara, 2017), the debrief component included an explanation of the narrative analysis process and how their information may be represented within the study.

The welfare of the researcher was also considered in ensuring that venues were appropriately staffed, and a third party was informed of where and when interviews were taking place. It was also recognised that issues of trauma and abuse will arise within the interviews, and this can have an emotional impact upon the researcher (Gabriel *et al.*, 2017). As a qualified social worker, I was able to draw upon my skills and experience in managing situations of disclosure, and subsequent self-care and supervision processes.

The stories told within this study were emotional, and as a researcher and a human being it was a balancing act between being responsive to the physical and emotional cues without overly interrupting their narrative, allowing them the time to tell their stories in a manner and pace of their choosing. In this way, each interview had a different dynamic, and made different demands on me as a participant in the discourse. I was aware of this and consciously tried to draw on this awareness in managing the interviews.

Potentially even the anticipation (Wainryb & Recchia 2014) of taking part in these interviews will have effect in the meaning-making process of all participants, in ways I cannot measure. This underlines the responsibility of the researcher's role as a participant in the narrative process. If I cannot avoid having some effect, it is important that, where possible, such effect is of a positive and constructive nature. This awareness further emphasised the importance of the debriefing process.

It was expected that the interviews could and would be emotionally demanding on the participants, wholly because of the nature of their experiences. To ensure that participants were aware of this and making an informed decision in participating, a paragraph highlighting this was included in the information sheet provided to participants and discussed with them before the interview (Appendix D). My approach within the interviews was to respond individually to moments of distress. This required me to make a judgement there and then about whether to interject, to ask if they were ok, if they needed to take a break, or to remain silent and let them continue at their own pace. For in-person interviews this was easier, as I had the non-verbal cues to inform my assessment. For telephone conversations it was

more difficult, and at times required a simple verbal check, such as in the following excerpt.

- Kieran** I was given bail for five months with conditions. Those were that I didn't go near my daughter *voice falters* *sigh* This is really hard.
- Interviewer** **Are you alright?**
- Kieran** Yeah yeah yeah so- um, yeah I was bailed for five months, erm, and then there was going to be another trial. So, and then that was that. {uhuh}

This aspect of the emotional demands and commitment of the participant also triggered some significant reflection on my role as a researcher. It is usually only with trusted friends or therapists that such intimate details of trauma and abuse are shared. To ask participants to disclose such personal information and yet offer them neither friendship nor therapeutic support, did not sit comfortably with me at first. The role of the qualitative researcher is unique. Coming from a professional background of support and intervention required some adjustment to the fact that my role was not to act, but to listen, providing 'the courtesy of serious attention' (Back, 2007, p1). For in doing so, in listening and channelling the participants experiences into the substance of research, the researcher is reciprocating in a way that no other party can. Furthermore, for some, the nature of the research relationship may well provide an anonymity and lack of intimacy that is enabling for them to tell their story. In this way, not having to maintain a relationship with me having told their story may be freeing.

Interviews and data management

Due to the national reach of participant recruitment, most interviews were carried out over video-call and telephone according to the preference and availability of the participant. All interviews were recorded and saved to encrypted storage on OneDrive. Each account was then pseudonymised and anonymised at the point of transcription, with all names and identifying details such as job role, locations, or recognisable descriptions removed. The recordings were deleted following analysis to ensure no identifying personal data that can be linked to individuals remains on file.

6.4.5 Analysis

Memos

Throughout this study, across the literature review, data collection, and analysis process, I have used a system of memo writing to record thoughts, insights, and observations as they have arisen. This enables the recording of learning for future review and consolidation and the documentation of an honest and open research process through the charting of thoughts and decisions. Furthermore, it facilitates a process of reflexivity in which I can reflect upon my decision making processes and my role as a component within the research process (Charmaz, 2014). Figure 1 provides an example of a memo that informed the development of the coding process for cultural narratives.

Memo – 03.06.2020

Analogies, cultural narratives, and other turns of phrase.

I think I need to be careful that I am not grouping all turns of phrase and analogies and synonyms etc. as narratives.

Some of them are shorthand for wider narratives that are universally recognised within a culture. For example Pandora's box. When a participant says they don't want to 'open that box' referring to a memory of a relationship it can be argued that they're making a reference to the narrative of Pandora's box as a shorthand for expressing quite a complicated mixture of emotions and fears regarding a memory.

So, in a way, it is an analogy, but one that draws on an existing widely known narrative. Whereas I don't think all analogies or phrases have a narrative source, although they are culturally specific shorthand, e.g. water under the bridge.

Figure 1 – Memo recording thought process regarding the coding of cultural narratives

Analysing the Interviews

One of the potential difficulties of narrative methods is the sheer volume of and wide-ranging nature of the data collected. There are so many ways that the data can be analysed, and so many levels of interpretation that can be brought to bear,

that charting a way forward can be more than a little overwhelming. At this juncture it was important for me to consider how to best address the original questions outlined at the start of this section. However, it was also necessary to go beyond this, to consider the fundamental questions that logically underpin any narrative analysis: What was said? How was it said? And what does that mean? For this study, this entailed an analysis that looked at the content of participant narration (what was actually talked about), an analysis of how it was said (how they told their story), where they started, and how they progressed (how was their account structured?), and finally, the analysis of what this meant for survivors, the professionals that work with them, and our wider culture. This understanding directed a methodical and wide-ranging analysis that sought to consider domestic abuse narratives and identity across individual, relational, and cultural tiers.

Each of the 18 interviews was analysed individually in the following manner:

1. **Transcription** – this was carried out by myself and enabled a detailed knowledge of each transcript (See Appendix F for transcription coding key). Care was taken in planning the transcription to accurately represent not just the meaning made but also the process of meaning-making through the narration. Within the literature on research transcription, there are two identified approaches known as ‘Naturalised’ and ‘Denaturalised’ (Oliver, Serovich, & Mason, 2005; see also Azevedo et al, 2017). The former takes a forensically detailed approach to noting every aspect of the speech, including pause lengths, overlapping speech, and disfluencies (‘ums’ and ‘errs’). The latter, denaturalised approach, attempts to capture the intent of what was said, providing a true account of what the orator meant, without the speech errors and mis-steps that everyone makes, and which when written down detract from the fluency and readability of the text. Borrowing from both approaches, the following transcription format was drawn up.
 - a. Word-for-word transcription - It was considered that if certain things were particularly difficult to say, this might be evidenced in the stumbling of words and multiple attempts to approach a sentence, and so a true word-for-word transcription was important. To this end, disfluencies were included and a hyphen was used to indicate unfinished words or sentences.

- b. Voice change and audible, non-verbal expression - during transcription it became apparent that the emotional work of narration, evidenced by changes in the narrator's voice, was in danger of not being captured within the transcription text. To acknowledge this emotional aspect, and record for potential consideration in subsequent analysis, notations were made within the transcript denoting emotional voice changes. E.g., *voice falters* or *deep sigh*.
- c. Inclusion of the interviewer - In acknowledging the importance of the interviewer's presence as a potentially coproducing audience, my own affirmative annunciations or 'response tokens' (Oliver, Serovich & Mason, 2005) were captured within the transcription. E.g. {uhuh}.

In understanding the importance of coherence and audience comprehension, and to fairly present the voice of participants, I avoided overly intrusive notations that might detract from the flow of the narration. I did not note every slight pause, and text was not arranged to indicate overlapping speech. Significant pauses were noted only where I judged their occurrence may communicate something significant about a participant's response.

- 2. **Coding 1: Intimate Partner Abuse** (see Appendix G for an example of abuse coding) – the transcripts were coded for intimate partner abuse. This included references to all forms of intimate partner abuse, its causes, effects, and discussion of the wider topic.
- 3. **Coding 2: Cultural Narratives** (see Appendix H for an example of cultural narrative coding) – the interviews were coded for the appearance or reference to cultural narratives. This process evolved iteratively over the course of the 18 cases. Initially I coded all forms of rhetoric or turn of phrase that might be considered as a culturally understood narrative. However, this captured an immense amount of data that was arguably not always relevant to the aims of the study. Cultural narratives are used frequently as turns of phrase and short-hand in everyday speech, often as analogies that have their routes in culturally recognised stories. For example (see also figure 1), when Dennis refrained from talking about a previous relationship, he

said he didn't want to "open that box". This was to convey his fear that he might not be able to contain the emotional consequences of beginning to think about it, and arguably a reference to Pandora's Box of Greek mythology. Although it fulfils its purpose in explaining his reluctance, using the phrase in this manner is already well understood and tells us little about the sense making process other than perhaps that it, like other traumatic experiences, might be hampered by an unwillingness to think about it. The analysis of every analogy that has a narrative origin could have consumed too much analytical time and yielded comparatively little new knowledge. Thus, following the analysis of the first five interviews, the focus of this coding stage was narrowed to omit the turns of phrase that were little more than that and to identify those that played a pivotal role in the narration and sense making process. This process was not straightforward and was only possible through careful consideration of the rhetorical use of such cultural narratives in the context of the whole interview. It was important not to miss some small and common turns of phrase that might easily be overlooked, but which are revealing of the narrator's sense making process. An example of this is Malcolm's use of the phrase 'out of the blue', discussed in Chapter 9, which was central to his narrative sense making.

4. **Local Narratives** – Drawing upon the understanding that narrative coherence can be understood on a global (overarching life story) and local (specific incident focused stories) level (Habermas and Bluck, 2000; Agar & Hobbs, 1982), local narratives were identified within the interviews by their structure. Labov (2014) identified a narrative as being complete in having a beginning, middle, and end (p205) but within this identified the following potential elements.
 - a. Abstract – the setting out of what the story is about
 - b. Orientation – the who when what and where of the story
 - c. Complicating Action – what then happened?
 - d. Evaluation – what it means
 - e. Result – what finally happened

- f. Coda – signalling the end of the narrative and returning the audience to the present time

To simplify the identification and coding of local narratives, this format was consolidated into three overarching elements of ‘context setting’ (encompassing the abstract and orientation), ‘event detail’ (what happened) and ‘coda’ - drawing together the evaluation and coda aspects, as well as including the concept of a closing gestalt (Jovchelvitich & Bauer, 2000; Flick, 2014). This format incapsulated Labov’s understanding of the different roles each narrative aspect plays, the basic conception of a start, middle, and end, and was true to the fundamental task of a narrative to attend to time, space, and meaning of events. Practically, this format enabled a straight-forward identification of individual local narratives within the data. Fig.2 provides a small identified local narrative and its structure. However, local narratives could run for considerably longer than this example, incorporating multiple related events, subsequent outcomes, and sections of reflection and explanation. A significant example of such a local

Context setting	I remember, I dunno, I’m gonna say I was 7 or 8, but I could have been 9 or 10. Both myself and my sister were cycling down the road.
Event detail	<p>And we were cycling down the road a bic- or a ball came out, and we’re on the bicycles and so we’re obviously- we fell off the bicycles. My sister went one way, I probably went the other way and I remember we cut our knees and we had a few grazes on us.</p> <p>Looking back, it might not have been a whole lot wrong with us, but obviously because you fell and whatever, I remember my mum coming out and she ran and she picked up my sister and she cradled her and said oh you’ll be ok and whatever. I was actually- I was actually given a slap, say oh man up, you know, oh you’ll be alright or whatever.</p>
Coda	So that stigma was there from a very young age {hmm} and I think it’s the perspective within the society as well.

Figure 2 – Example of identified local narrative (Adam, Local Narrative 3)

narrative was provided by Kieran in detailing his final assault, subsequent arrest, court appearance, and attempted suicide. This is included as Appendix I accompanied by a section of analysis. This account of Kieran's is referred to frequently across the analysis chapters as it coherently illustrates several themes that were found across the interviews. It speaks both to the details of the different forms of abuse he experienced and the impact it had on him, as well as to the narrative sense making process and identity work that he engages in through narrating his story.

Each local narrative was analysed with consideration of the following characteristics.

- a. **Agency** – the framing of actions and choices within a narrative. To what extent the narrator positions themselves as autonomous and conveys a sense of being able to effect change within their world. The antithesis of this is heteronomy, in which the narrator presents as powerless and 'done-to'. This is highlighted by Bamberg (2011) as a key identity dilemma. Positioning – In what way did the participant attempt to position themselves and others within their story – how did they defend against undesirable positions or identities? How did they position other people within their story such as professionals or their abuser?
- b. **Coherence** – to what extent did the narrator achieve temporal, causal, and thematic coherence within this local narrative? In other words: did the participant's account follow a clear chronological sequence or was it hard for the audience to make sense of the timeline of events? Did it make sense in terms of cause and effect? Was it credible that one thing led to another, or did things happen without causal reason? And overall, were there thematic links across their account, or did they move from one focus to another without any apparent thematic connection?
- c. **Meaning-making** – as well as identifying moments where the narrator steps back and speaks of lessons learned or insights gained from his experience, as used frequently in the coding of more quantitative narrative analysis (e.g. Cox & McAdams, 2014), I also considered a wider understanding of sense and meaning-

making through attribution within the narrative; points where the narrator provides explanation for why someone behaved in their way they did, attributing thought and intent to the actions of themselves and others.

- d. **Domestic abuse** – as abuse had already been coded, it was considered at this juncture in terms of its inclusion within the local narrative: its narrative role and impact. For example, the purpose of the local narrative itself may be as an example of abuse, used to illustrate the nature and extent of what they experienced.
 - e. **The local narrative's role** within the initial or whole interview narrative response. It was for this reason that the local narrative analysis was carried out at this stage, in order that I had knowledge of the whole interview, gained through the process of transcription and the first two stages of coding.
5. **Initial Narrative Response** – refocusing to consider global narrative coherence, participants' initial uninterrupted response to the request to tell of their life so far was considered in its potential as a 'global' narrative. In practice, this revealed a difference in response to the first question, potentially directed in some part by their capacity to provide a coherent global narrative, but also by their assessment of the appropriate response to such a question. This is discussed further in chapters 9 and 10. Participant responses differed significantly in terms of starting point and level of detail. Some provided a detailed and coherent narrative; others provided a simple sketch of their life so far. Some started with their childhood, and others began at the beginning of their abusive relationship. For those who were able to provide a substantial response to the initial question, it was analyzed with regard to the above concepts of agency, positioning, coherence, meaning-making, and domestic abuse.
6. **The whole interview** – drawing the focus out again, the whole interview was considered in terms of its global coherence and how the initial narrative response fitted within it. For example, Kieran's initial narrative response was relatively short in providing a brief overview of his life, including his career and the fact that he had experienced two abusive intimate relationships, but it did not go into any depth and contained no local

narratives. However, this did not reflect on his capacity to provide in-depth, detailed, and coherent narrative accounts, both local and global, which he proceeded to do in the rest of the interview. Seen within the context of the whole interview, it is reasonable to assess that the brevity of his initial narrative response resulted from an assessment on his part of what an appropriate response might be to such an opening question.

7. **Summary of cultural narrative use** – how did the narrator use cultural narratives overall? This step also included the consideration of Autobiographical Cultural Coherence (Habermas & Bluck, 2000); i.e., to what extent did their life story, if provided, correspond to culturally expected life events and sequences?
8. **Summary of Abuse** - Reflection on abuse experienced and how it was addressed/spoken about.
9. **Third parties** – how were other people such as professionals, family, or friends spoken of? What were their roles within the narrative and interview as a whole?
10. **Case report** - Each transcript analysis was written up as a report, setting out and summarizing the findings from each aspect of the analysis.

After the first five transcripts were analyzed, the process was reviewed with consideration of the nature of the data collected, insights and understanding gained, and how the cases compared with each other. This review informed the iterative development of the analysis process and was repeated once more after 12. At the 12th case juncture, a model of identity work through autobiographical narration was beginning to emerge (see Chapter 11). This was drawn upon to shape the writing up of the analysis on the final six transcripts. This did not detract or change the analytical steps outlined above, but instead directed the final report to address three main areas: how participants spoke about their abuse, its impact, and their response to it; how they made sense of their experiences through their attendance to cultural narratives; and how they managed their narrative identity throughout this process. These three areas of focus were reasoned to reflect a narrative sensemaking process that included consideration of what happened, why

that happened, and what it means in terms of identity. This framing also informed the progression of Chapters 7, 8, 9, and 10 of this thesis.

The final stage of analysis was to consider all the case analyses as a whole, comparing and contrasting and looking for themes and patterns that could be identified across them. This both informed and was informed by the developing complex dynamic model of identity work through autobiographical narration.

A Sense Checking Process

In the final stages of analysis, initial findings were shared with practitioners and researchers through seminars and discussion. This included presentation at the European Conference of Domestic Violence 2021, the Joint Social Work and Education Conference, 2021, the Centre for Research on Children and Families, as well as local Clinical Commissioning Groups, Independent Domestic Violence Advocates, and Local Authority Safeguarding Staff. All these opportunities enabled feedback and discussion on the nature and implications of emerging findings.

6.5 Summary

This chapter has set out the rationale and design of this study, from its ontological and epistemological foundations in constructivist and relativist philosophy, through its focus on narrative and identity, to the ethical and practical demands of interviewing victims of intimate partner abuse. The result of this process was a study design that included the following key features.

- An open narrative interview with self-identifying male victims/survivors of female perpetrated intimate partner abuse.
- The inclusion of questions that collected views and experiences of engagement with third parties, and the wider social discourse on domestic abuse.
- A multi-layered narrative analysis that reflected the nature of the data collected, and the focus on narrative and identity at the heart of this study.
- An ethical and person-centred approach that respected the confidentiality, autonomy, and wellbeing of participants at each stage of the research process.

Part 4 - Analysis and Discussion

Analysis: Introduction

The following four chapters set out the findings and analysis of this research. This study sought to better understand how these men made narrative sense of their experience and its identity implications. Importantly, it did not seek to compare and contrast male and female victim experiences. Where there is reference to gender differences, it is led by, and integral to, these male victim's narration and sensemaking endeavours.

The sequence of analysis chapters mirrors a process of narrative sense making: first seeking to establish what happened; then why it happened; and finally, what that means moving forward. Therefore, the analysis evolves over the course of these four chapters, moving from a more descriptive presentation of the abuse, as detailed by participants, to a deeper analysis of how they made sense of their experience, and the processes of identity work at the heart of their narration.

Firstly, Chapter 7 considers how participants talked about their abuse: what they described and how they described it. A key finding was the way in which some forms of abuse were easier to narrate than other. Those that could be talked about with descriptions of specific incidents such as physical violence or sexual abuse, were narratively more straight forward to tell. Whilst those characterised by more pervasive patterns of psychological control and denigration were more difficult to speak of. Respectively, I will use the terms *Incident Focused* and *Pervasive* to distinguish between these two narratively different manifestations of abuse.

Chapter 8 focuses upon how these men described their own responses to the abuse, both in the immediate moment of a physical attack, and over time, as they changed their behaviour and routines to try and manage their abuser's mood. This chapter also considers how these men understood the impact and harm of the abuse, both in the short and long term. For the more pervasive forms of abuse, the harm described in terms of mental and physical health problems, PTSD, and suicidality, was perhaps the most powerful way they had of illustrating the extent of abuse.

Chapter 9 examines the power and use of 'cultural narratives' within these men's stories. Several cultural narratives were identified within their accounts and this analysis highlights a significant difference in the way they manifest. Male victim experiences transgress powerful and widely understood narratives of masculinity

and male perpetration, and because of this, participants were driven to attend to and defend against them. To highlight this, I refer to such cultural narratives as *mandated*. On the other hand, there were several cultural narratives that weren't mandated, but which participants were able to draw upon to communicate, make sense of, and validate their experience. I refer to these as *available* narratives and they included narratives of Coercive Control, Feminism, Mental Health, and Childhood Trauma.

Chapter 10 draws on existing theory and research to examine the identity work of participants within their stories, including key concepts of agency, coherence, and validity. The final section of this chapter considers all aspects of this analysis to present a complex and dynamic model of identity work within autobiographical narration, outlining how the narrator works with their audience at the relational level, to align with accepted narratives at the cultural level, and achieve validation at the individual level.

Although each of these chapters has a particular focus, narration and identity work are complex and dynamic processes, and accordingly there are key themes that weave between all four chapters. These include themes of masculinity such as size and strength and expectations of male dominance; the power of third parties in recognising abuse and helping to frame the victim's understanding of their own experiences; and the critical nature of the 'why don't they leave?' question, which pervaded all participant accounts.

The many things the narrator had to attend to in telling their story include their perception of the occasion, myself as their audience, and the ever present need to orientate to some form of identity validation. Thus, this is an analysis of a narrative sense making process, not an attempt to establish the detailed facts of any specific incident or sequence of events. Most participants appeared driven to give up their time to support this research out of a will to inform future understanding and support for victims. As such, their accounts are taken in good faith and considered as iterative narrative attempts to make sense of their lived experience.

Adam For me personally, if this was my son, if this was a neighbour, or anybody else out there and whatever, the same thing has happened to other people and until we actually speak out, until people like myself, we speak out, let the people know what is actually happening, what is going on in people's lives- I like to think that it will help the next person.

Chapter 7: Analysis 1 – Telling of abuse

7.1 Introduction

As outlined in the previous section, this chapter will focus on how participants described their experiences of abuse. Between them, this depicts the full range of abuse identified in contemporary literature, including physical, sexual, emotional, psychological, financial, controlling coercive, and legal administrative abuse. Each form is considered in terms of its incident focused or pervasive nature and described as it appeared within these men's stories. Incident-focused abuse is that which could be tied to specific dramatic moments or events that when isolated as an incident could be clearly perceived as abusive. Pervasive abuse is seen in the form of consistent patterns of behaviour that when played out or accumulated over time amount to abuse.

A general finding presented in this chapter is that participants faced different narrative tasks in trying to describe the nature of their abuse depending on which of these two categories it fell into. Physical and sexual abuse could be evidenced through reference to, and description of specific incidents as powerful local narratives. Arguably, these narratives were further validated through their correlation with existing cultural narratives of abuse. Such incident focused accounts of abuse served different narrative purposes: evidencing the abuse, illustrating the extreme nature of the violence, and serving as a narrative device, providing turning points within their overarching narratives.

Abuse that did not manifest in clearly identified incidents, such as emotional and psychological abuse, were not so easy to convey in narrative form. Participants faced a categorically different task in attempting to describe the nature and extent of their partners abusive behaviour, without being able to draw on powerful local narratives of violent incidents. In attempting to do so they had to talk in more generalised terms, building a picture of their abusive circumstances through the descriptions of the impact it had upon them, and the impossible positions they found themselves in.

A significant proportion of pervasive abuse fell under the banner of control. This appeared in different forms, including isolation, financial abuse, and the management of routines and diets. For those who were fathers, control could be

exerted by the abuser using legal and administrative frameworks to target their relationship with their child. This had the potential to continue long after the end of the intimate relationship and appeared for some to be the most feared aspect of their abuse.

7.2 Incident-focused abuse

Incident focused abuse predominantly concerned physical and sexual abuse, although emotional abuse could also manifest itself in ways that could be conveyed within a local narrative.

Kieran One day she made a comment about well I haven't got time to cut the grass and look at the state of the place.
So I thought tomorrow I'm going to cut the grass, make sure it's all lovely for when she gets home.
Two days screaming and shouting and calling me all the names under the sun because I'd cut the grass.

Both physical and sexual abuse, by their nature, can frequently be linked to specific incidents, creating episodic memories that are well suited to a narrative form, with a beginning, middle, and end (context setting, event detail, and coda). Through this loosely defined structure, narrators can present a coherent understanding of an incident regarding its dimensions of time, space and meaning. Resultant from, and contributing to, this ease of narration is the existence of many examples of such violent events in books and film. These are stories that are recognisable and thus inform both the narrator (in terms of how to evidence their abuse) and the audience (in identifying that what they are hearing is abuse). For this reason, physical abuse was perhaps the most narratively straightforward element for participants to evidence.

7.2.1 *Physical violence*

Of the 18 men who took part in this study, 14 of them described being physically assaulted. The nature of this physical abuse varied, from kicking, punching, biting, scratching, and strangulation to the use of implements and weapons. The extent

ranged from single incidents to repeated assaults over many years. Depending on the nature and extent of the physical violence, these men faced different narrative tasks in speaking about it.

For five of them (Callum, Dennis, Jacob, Malcolm, and Paulo), the physical violence was confined to one or two incidents, and when it came to talking about them, they were mostly dismissive.

Callum She slapped me a couple of times but that's all.
Nothing, well, that's bad enough, but nothing to talk of.

It was notable that these men didn't feel the need to go into narrative detail about the incidents of physical assault, as for them, physical violence was not the most prominent or harmful aspect of their abuse. Their stories were ones of emotional, psychological, and controlling abuse, aspects of which will be discussed later in this chapter. However, Paulo, who experienced significant controlling abuse, did provide a coherent local narrative for the time that he was hit by his wife. He sets the scene by providing clear chronological references for when it took place, and then details the events of the night that led to his wife slapping him across the face. Arguably Paulo is driven to provide such a local narrative because it was a turning point; it was the single incident of physical violence that enabled him to recognise the abuse and exit the relationship.

Paulo When she hit me I decided I didn't- you know, I couldn't deal with that.
I could I could deal with having to give up my life for the sake of our son.
I could have dealt with that and I would have-I think I would have carried on.
I think if she hadn't hit me, I think I would have carried on with-With whatever I had to deal with, to be honest.

Nine participants (Adam, Eli, Finn, Grant, Ivan, Kieran, Leonard, Rod, and Silas) experienced repeated episodes of physical violence, eight of which could straightforwardly be classified as severe to extreme. What makes Rod's account less straightforward to classify is how he narrated and understood his own

experience. At the beginning of his interview, in providing an overview of his relationship, he is quite clear that he does not understand his experience of abuse as severe.

Rod There have been arguments over the years and occasionally those have progressed to the point of low-level physical violence, so erm, always by my wife against me.
I think I've sort of held her wrists to stop her from hitting me, but I've never hit her.

However, arguably his judgement is only justified in terms of the outcomes of individual incidents rather than the intent or potential for harm that existed in the moment.

Rod Once I think she grabbed me around the throat and tried to throttle me. Erm, but being bigger and stronger, I'd- I just grabbed her wrists and- and took her hands away from my neck, and that was the time when she then dug her fingernails into my wrists to try and escape from me.
I think that's probably the only time she's ever drawn blood and it was maybe a one centimetre cut on my- on my forearm so, you know, these are infrequent, rare events that, um, have never escalated beyond that.

Rod's minimising of the threat of his wife's behaviour resonates with that of other participants who would not have spoken about the abuse during the relationship perhaps out of a duty to protect their partner, or to manage their own identity.

Eli She was my wife, I was always keen to stick up for her you know. I did become her worried and attentive carer. Um, and so there's no way I would have told people about it, because it would have created an even more negative perception of her. And I was trying to, you know, give her a chance and that went on for many years.

For others, the extent of the violence drove an imperative to provide a narrative account that illustrated the severity of abuse. Those who experienced repeated incidents of assault were required to be selective, and it was apparent that local narratives of assault served different rhetorical purposes: to illustrate the nature of the abuse, and/or to highlight specific incidence of severity or importance within the overarching story, such as turning points. The first of these were characterised by short narrative illustrations, sometimes specifically named as examples.

Silas She would go from being affectionate to physically violent in what seemed to be a second.
A good exa- I can give you an example.
I were sat next to her and she was smoking. I never smoked, never liked to smoke, and I coughed.
And she broke my nose with the ashtray.
In- I didn't even blink if you know what I mean.

The second form of local assault narrative, highlighting specific incidents of narrative importance, were usually larger narratives with greater detail, more effort spent in the telling, and would frequently run to include subsequent consequential events. An example of such a narrative and its attending analysis is provided as Appendix I. In this, Kieran sets out the context in which the events are about to unfold, including his living arrangements and the reasoning that led up to his abuser being in his flat when she assaulted him. He then provides significant detail of how the assault progressed, including a reflective segue in which he shifts to more recent events to defend against questions about why he did not use his greater size and strength to fight back.

7.2.2 *Physical violence and physical size*

Participants who experienced physical violence, when telling their story, seemed driven to attend to the size difference between them and their abuser. Although they did this in different ways, ultimately they were all attending to a cultural understanding that links masculinity with physical dominance and makes it difficult for men to be seen as victims.

Kieran's attention to the question of why, as a physically larger and stronger male, he did not fight back (Appendix I) was a reoccurring aspect of narration, across both the pilot and main study. Two of the pilot study participants used almost identical language to describe how they were physically so much larger than their partner and how this contributed to the incredulity of others regarding their abuse.

This trope was revealed in different facets within the main study. Rod's assertion that his wife's attacks were not a threat resonated with the existing cultural narrative that men are physically stronger, and therefore women are not a danger to them.

Rod I'm a lot bigger than she is, and, you know, they're not attacks designed to hurt me, they're attacks that are a safety valve when- when she's so angry she doesn't know what else to do and it came out like that.

The expectation that physical size and strength is what defines an abusive dynamic, that someone bigger and stronger than their assailant cannot be under threat, was also seen in Jacob's account, but, conversely, he was able to use it to his defence.

Jacob She reckoned I'd pinned her down on the bed. She is 6 times the size of me... ..I pushed her on the bed to get her out of the way, but me pushing her wouldn't have done anything.

For Rod and Jacob, the expectation of physical dominance was advantageous to their narrative task, either assuring the audience that he was not in danger (Rod), or in defending himself against allegations as if they were physically impossible (Jacob).

For others, however, this expectation needed to be defended against. Leonard attempted to achieve this through an appeal to almost chivalric values.

Leonard She's only four foot 11 and I'm 6 foot tall so, you know, physically there's quite a difference... ..so when she was violent, you know, I mean physically, I guess I could easily have overpowered her. But never did, because I was always brought up- well, when I say I was brought up, one, you didn't hit women.

Whereas Ivan appealed to a reasoning that it doesn't matter how big you are, some things hurt.

Ivan We all know [laughs] men are bigger, stronger as it were, than women blah blah blah, but erm, I think our ear lobes are the same whether you're a man or a woman, and there are certain bits of your anatomy that hurt just as much if your male or female. Erm, there is not a lot of difference, I don't think, when someone shoves a fingernail into your eyeball or anything else like that. It just hurts. It doesn't matter if you're 6 foot 5, 7 foot 5, or 4 foot nothing.

In this Ivan is attending to, and attempting to dispel, an understanding of masculine toughness that connects physical size with strength and pain endurance. The existence and power of such an understanding of masculinity was explored within the literature review and will be returned to in greater depth in the chapter after next. Suffice to say at this juncture, attending to the reality of their physical size and strength in comparison to that of their abuser, was seen by some as a necessary task in their narration of physical abuse.

7.2.3 *Self-harm*

Physical violence was not always so straightforwardly directed at the victim. It also manifested in perpetrator self-harm that, in the eyes of participants, was intended to hurt them. In this way the physical violence of self-harm was experienced by these men as a form of emotional and psychological or controlling abuse. Although arguably a pervasive form of abuse, in the form of abuser self-harm this could be understood with reference to specific incidents and was therefore more narratable. Specific incidents could be provided or listed enabling the narrator to convey the extent and nature of these events. When away from home working, Owen

described receiving picture messages of his wife's self-inflicted cuts, causing him to drop everything to return home. Jacob felt his wife's cuts were a form of punishment on him.

Jacob From then on she then started- she didn't hit me, but she started cutting herself [deep sigh] and then saying it was all my fault.
One time she got herself that bad that it...ambulance had to come round and put a bandage around her arm and basically they took me in the other room said, 'Why is this happening?'
I said, 'To tell you the truth, I think she's doing it on purpose. Because of me, basically. Because I wouldn't do stuff that she wants me to do.'

Jacob's and Owen's accounts of their wife's self-harming behaviour reveal the complex nature of abusive relationships. As discussed within the literature review, research indicates a significant correlation of mental ill-health with domestic abuse perpetration. As will be discussed in subsequent chapters of analysis, such comorbidity can place heavy demands on their partner/victim who may well assume the role of carer. But what must be kept in mind, lest we lose sight of the abuse, is the way such self-harming behaviours can be weaponised. They can be both symptomatic of a deeply unwell person, and a method of emotional, psychological, and coercive controlling abuse.

7.2.4 *Sexual abuse*

The correlation of sex and abuse appeared within six participant accounts. For three of them (Brian, Finn, and Grant) this manifested in their intimate partner responding abusively when they were unwilling or unable to have sex. For Brian and Grant this abuse was verbal and emotional.

Brian [The] first time we had sex was pretty unpleasant from my perspective, and I thought it'd get better, and then from the start she then started to humiliate me.
Erm.
I thought it was just a joke. I thought it was a phase.
But even then, I knew something was wrong, how she was behaving to me.

Whereas for Finn, it was physical abuse.

Finn There were sexual attacks that if I didn't comply to her demands I would actually be hurt.
And I said, 'You think that I can tell that to another man, you, or police? Do you know what the reaction is gonna be?'
'Oh, I wish my girlfriend, or my wife was so horny.'
'Good God you must be lucky that she's demanding it because my wife only gives it to me once every year.'
That's a typical type of reaction, so that is why it becomes hard to tell, doesn't it?
Because you don't want to reveal some things which people are gonna think are totally ridiculous.

For these three participants, the abuse was in response to expectations and demands for sex, but for Hassan, Ivan, and Callum, it was the acts of sex that were abusive.

Hassan There was the threat of violence all the time.
Not just shouting, but erm, she wanted an extremely rough sex, bordering on violence.
And- and- and obviously, what two adults consent to is- is absolutely fine as long as the other person is being heard. But I said, 'Look- I'm not- but this doesn't sit right with me. Okay?'
And at that point, she just said, 'You know, you are-you are such a worrier, just- it's just really pathetic'...
...And the sex was sort of like BDSM sex.
There was a lot of demeaning in it.
And then I began to experience sexual dysfunction because it was so bloody terrifying a lot of the time, about the next period of demeaning- that I got to be demeaned even more.

Ivan During sex, erm, she would bite, extremely hard.
Erm, and- and this was on things that you can't make harder, i.e., nipples, chest, erm penis, erm, and actually incredibly painful.

This was not something I had ever experienced before in my life.
 Erm. I didn't find it kinky. I didn't find it sexy.
 I- I actually found it pretty unpleasant.
 Really quite unpleasant.

Callum also experienced sexual abuse, but whereas Hassan and Ivan's experiences took place repeatedly on different occasions throughout their relationship, Callum's experience centred around a single traumatic event akin to rape. As discussed regarding narratives of physical violence, we see a difference in the form of local narrative depending on the frequency of an event and the role of a particular incident in the overarching narrative. As with Paulo's account of his wife hitting him, and Kieran's final horrific assault (Appendix I), Callum's sexual assault takes place at the end of his relationship, is singular in its nature, and acts a turning point within the overarching narrative. Thus, Callum provides a detailed local narrative that includes subsequent consequential events.

Callum	
<i>Context setting</i>	<p>I was sleeping downstairs and I sat on the settee. I think I'd got- I think I'd got my sorta pyjamas on. And I sat down on the settee. In corner of room, waiting to go to bed</p>
<i>Event Detail</i>	<p>and she came in and sat right next to me. Right sort of, right next to me, on top of me, and started sort of coming on to me and trying to kiss me, and I pushed her away. And I don't want this. I don't want that. I don't want- I'm not interested. It's over, it's finished its done with, and she eventually pulled my trousers off and started giving me oral sex and I'm pushing her away, and pushing her away, and pushing her away. The children are upstairs asleep in the room above.</p>

Figure 2 – Callum, Local Narrative of sexual assault

And I just kept saying no. I don't want this. I don't want this at all. This is- this is not happen- I don't want this.

And this were- it would been about ten o'clock at night it started, and at about 3 o'clock in- 2 or 3 o'clock in morning I eventually had sex with her because I [voice faltering] just wanted it to stop. I just wanted it to stop. Totally.

An- I- she wouldn't stop, she just kept going on and on and on.

We had sex.

And I faked- I faked an orgasm, jus- just to get it over and done with and then absolutely panicked and thought no, 'cause what if she sees [voice faltering further] I've not cum inside her, and then she'll be even more cross.

So I carried on.

An- [sniff and intake of breath] when it were all over with I just curled and just wanted to [voice breaking down] not be there.

It was awful and- I don't know if she went to bed or what.

I can't really remember on that.

Figure 3 continued - Callum, Local Narrative of sexual assault

These experiences were incredibly difficult for these men to talk about. But the incident-focused nature of this abuse enabled a level of specificity and coherence to their narration. They were able to tie their abuse to specific acts, or moments, that enabled a narrative account. The abuse took place during sex. Whether the first time, the last time, or every time, it could be tied concretely in terms of time and space, and with our cultural understanding of sex as something of the greatest trust and intimacy, it also brought a degree of meaning to the telling. This was not just something hurtful, it was something hurtful when we are at our most vulnerable. It stands perhaps as the ultimate betrayal by an intimate partner, and thus carries a particular narrative power. The experiences of sexual abuse told by these men

stands in stark contrast to mainstream expectations of sexual abuse and male sexuality. As such this study contributes to contemporary research (Bates, 2019a, Weare, 2017; 2018) calling for greater recognition of sexual abuse as an aspect of male victim's experience.

7.3 Pervasive abuse

Some forms of abuse, including those described as emotional and psychological, appear to be more pervasive and relentless. They are not confined to specific dramatic incidents but are bound up in the mundane and moment-to-moment experience of life. This made it difficult for participants to describe in narrative terms.

Brian ...the ongoing nature of it over very trivial things, which erm, so, the- the abuse is continual about everything.

It was always potentially there. So, if I cite an example of it, it appears that that's just someone being difficult and it's a one-off thing.

Jacob It's hard to describe how she was really, it's just mental things.

Leonard It'd be like, oh, you've been unreasonable, you've done this, and that's unreasonable.

Uh, and you're stupid and-

It was just- it was just constant- constant barrage of abuse, I mean, it- that was a daily basis that was, you know, every day there'd be something.

Pervasive abuse included forms of emotional and psychological abuse, as well as other more direct forms of control, including isolation and financial abuse. Controlling abuse was also seen to incorporate legal and administrative abuse and the weaponization of the victims' relationship with their children.

7.3.1 *Emotional and Psychological abuse*

Continual criticism and verbal attacks are often understood as emotional and psychological abuse. The lack of singular dramatic incidents of perpetration, and the difficulty this creates in trying to describe them, means that emotional and psychological abuse appears to be most powerfully evidenced in terms of its impact on the victim's emotional and psychological state. At this juncture I will set out some of the emotionally and psychologically abusive behaviours that participants spoke of, but the effect of these will be explored in greater depth in the subsequent chapter when considering the impact of abuse.

Participants spoke frequently about the continual put downs, insults, and denigration that they faced from their abuser.

Adam 'You're nothing but a spastic or retard', or these words, [voice faltering]
'You're useless to me.'
'You can't even drop the children to school.'
You can't do this.
You can't do that.

Hassan She began to demean me around that.
Around, you know, being decrepit, and she would call me, you know, I
allowed her to call me a cunt and a retard and her bitch.

Without the rhetorical device of a local narrative to illustrate abuse, participants tried to find other ways of talking about it. Callum frequently turned to the emphasis of repetition to portray the relentless nature of his wife's criticism.

Callum She's the one that has control of everything, and y- you'd be driving
along in passenger seat and she's on at you, and on at you, and on at
you, and on at you, and on at you and I just wanted to get out of the car
and I tried on several occasions to get out of the car.

Another approach was to choose a particular focus of the abuse and try to explain why and how it was abusive with reference to its effects, but without recourse to a detailed local narrative. The following excerpt is from Dennis' interview, in which he attempts to convey the pressure that he experienced concerning things he felt an audience might consider mundane.

Dennis We had to watch tv shows every evening for hours.
Erm, and it was very hard because I can't remember everything, and she knew that.
So this is it, I- she knew that- so let's say we watched love island for 5 hours of tv. She'd test me on things.
And if I didn't know, she'd scold me.
She'd say, 'You're not paying attention.'
'You don't want to be with me.'
But I can't memorize everything and she knows that.
And so what I used to do is I used to have conversations with her about the show.
Saying, you know, well that's interesting so and so said that.
I was actually trying to memorise it.
Using that way to talk about it to memorise it.
She knew that, so she'd just tell me to shut up.
You know.
You know.
Erm.
So- and then I tried to write notes on my phone.
She was testing me.
People don't realise how hard that is.
And I can't open up to people and say it was torture watching love island.
Like, it sounds like nothing.
It was- I was being tested, like, and if I failed it was bad news.
And I didn't know how to memorise- I was so stressed, how to memorise the [incoherent] on love island, who the characters, and what's the latest news.
I started watching it at home, like, on b- on YouTube, or something, just to make sure I was up to date with everything.
T- to show that I'm interested.
'Cause it's all about showing I'm interested in her and her things.
I had to- it was so much pressure.

This way of telling was similarly evident in Nigel's interview, in which he attempted to convey a sense of powerlessness in the face of his partner's unpredictability.

Nigel Every time we meet, like, I seem to upset her, like, something happens or there's some drama or You know, and- and I was trying my best to, you know, think well, it's me if I'm in this situation.
If I- I- I can go, I can either do A, B or C.
I'll try A, that's wrong.
The next time I try B, that's wrong, and then the next one, oh, it's gotta be C then. I'll do C, and I'm, like, that's wrong as well and see, you know, whatever decision you seem to make seems to be the wrong one and you think, well, next time I'll do it the other way. But then you do it and it's wrong and you're just really confused

Participants described how the cumulative effect of such pervasive abuse had a significant impact on their emotional and psychological wellbeing. In the most direct fashion, the criticism and denigration could be seen to be internalised, directing how they perceived themselves and the world around them.

Dennis When someone's cutting you down and mocking everything you say, you actually think that's what everyone else is going to be like.

Eli I was getting counselling at the time, but that was because my wife told me I was such a miserable failure, that I needed to get some counselling to become a better person.
So I wasn't getting counselling because of the abuse, for me the counselling was trying to work out why I was such a shit person.

7.3.2 *Control*

Controlling abuse is defined within the Serious Crime Act (2015) as follows:

A range of acts designed to make a person subordinate and/or dependent by isolating them from sources of support, exploiting their resources and capacities

for personal gain, depriving them of the means needed for independence, resistance and escape and regulating their everyday behaviour.

(H.O. 2015, p3)

Although all of the abusive behaviours illustrated within this chapter so far can form a pattern of coercive or controlling behaviour, participant experience of control also included pervasive tactics that stripped them of their agency, isolated them from their support networks, and controlled every aspect of their lives. This included distinct forms of control, such as isolation, and financial abuse, as well the micromanagement of their victim.

This included dictating the jobs they could hold:

Kieran I eventually had to offer to give up the bar business.
Because she wasn't happy with the amount of hours I was having to put in.
Even though we only did bars at weekends.
But she didn't like the way summer was our busiest time.
I said, 'Look you're more important to- our relationship, our marriage.'
She's more important to me than the business so I'll sell the business.
So I refunded all the deposits, put that on the back burners and then it was time- I had to go out and get a job...
...So I went and got a job and when I came back she said, 'No you can't take that job.'
'Why can't I take this job?' and she had give me a list of reasons.
So I went out and got another job, and again, I came back and I went, brilliant, okay, I've got this job.
No you can't take that job, these are the reasons.
So I was like right okay so I went to get another job.
I said there's a problem here, because one of the reasons she gave me for the last two jobs is- also applies to this one, No, it won't matter for this one because I feel that job is far more suitable for you and- and er, and- I can't remember the word she used.
pause I appro- I approve of you having that job.
So this job I was allowed to take because she deemed it to be a- a better job.

The food they ate:

Kieran It just got worse and worse and eventually I was hiding food in the boot of my car because she would only allow me to eat certain foods.

Jacob So she was controlling exactly what I was eating. Which was basically nothing. She would buy me a few things to last me a month. Which, you can imagine, didn't. Basically, I was living off of fresh air, basically. And my neighbour was basically feeding me when she could, without, sort of, my wife knowing. Just to make sure I was not getting too ill.

And the clothes they wore:

Paulo Yeah, like she'd tell, like if I'm wearing particular items of clothing and stuff like that, and she was, like, I don't like those jeans, or don't like that colour, or- and she would send me a text to dye my hair and- just weird, you know.

Brian She had done that several times about my clothes.
Laughing about clothes, getting me to change clothes and stuff like that.
And so she- that's how she started off very- very early on.
And just undermining me about clothes and things like that.

Isolation

A frequent theme of control was also evident in how they talked of isolation. Adam had suffered considerable physical injury in an accident, leaving him with ongoing health and mobility difficulties. However, access to support was prevented by his wife, who mediated his engagement with professionals.

Adam So you had no one to turn to.
Absolutely no one to turn to.
They offered support.
Doctors offered support and the health and the home help and stuff like

this.
But my wife used to turn it down.
She used to speak for me.

But it wasn't just speaking for him. Adam also told of measures she took to prevent him accessing support or calling for help himself.

Adam My ex-wife used to go and collect the children and stuff.
She used to plug the phone out from the wall, so I couldn't get down to plug it in, in case I would ring somebody for help

Some told of how isolation was achieved through attempts to destroy family relationships.

Callum One particular day [my brother] rang me up, and she came into the kitchen while I were on phone.
'Who you on phone to?'
'Oh, I'm talking to my brother.'
'WELL WHAT YOU ON THE PHONE TO HIM FOR?
YOU CAN'T FUCKING STAND HIM.
YOU HATE HIM. WHAT YOU DOING FUCKING TALKING TO HIM?
YOU HATE HIM.
Y'CAN'T STAND HIM.'
An- an' talking so he could hear.

Eli Isolating me from my family, getting me to believe that they favoured one child over the other, that they are the cause of my stress, that I haven't grown up because of them, that- that was a deliberate attempt to isolate me.

And the destruction of friendships and social opportunities:

Jacob If I did manage to go out she would constantly ring me on my mobile every five minutes, literally every five minutes. I'd get down the road and the phone would ring. If I didn't answer it she'd keep ringing it. And then she'd leave nasty voicemail messages and then she'd start texting me and leaving nasty text messages.

Why you not replying? I want you home. I've just had a fall. When she hasn't.

She used to pretend she had hurt herself when she hadn't. Just to get me home. Because she knew if I knew she had hurt herself, I'd come running.

Owen It just got to a point where it just wasn't worth me doing these things because of the aggro I'd get when I come back. Just wasn't worth it at all and- but quickly you start becoming isolated.

The link between isolation and domestic abuse has been long established within studies of female victims (Farris & Fenaughty, 2002; Coohy, 2007), and this study indicates that it is similarly present within male victim experiences. As a characteristic of abuse, isolation is not only abusive in itself, depriving the victim of the emotional bonds of family and friendship, but it also carries the potential to enable further abuse and dependency. The more isolated the victim becomes, the harder it is for them to seek support, the greater their dependency on their abuser, and the less opportunity there is for the abuse to be seen by others.

Financial Abuse

There has been a growing understanding of financial or economic abuse within IPA driven by studies of female victims. Arguably, this has been characterised by the cultivation of victim's financial dependency on their abuser, stripping them of their own means of earning and controlling what income they do have (Postmus et al, 2012). However, for the three men within this study who explicitly described financial abuse, it appeared differently. Perhaps in keeping with cultural expectations of breadwinner masculinity, these men's financial abuse appeared as an exploitation of their earner status.

Paulo As soon as we moved in, she said to me that- not just her, but her family said to me that right 'oh, so in our culture, erm, the man pays for everything.'

Uhm, so she mentioned that she- she wouldn't be paying any of the bills, because Islamically, I should pay all her bills, pay all the rent and- and all that kind of stuff.

Jacob Instead of us sharing the bills like it should have been, she was basically making me pay for everything, erm I was paying for the electric, gas water tv licence, rental service that she wanted, everything basically, while she was living on her money and doing exactly what she wanted with it. [Intake of breath] Erm she put me in a lot of debt

The element of debt mentioned here by Jacob ties to another powerful form of abuse that relied on wider legal and administrative frameworks to control and hurt victims.

Legal and Administrative abuse

The concept of legal and administrative abuse (Tilbrook, Alan, and Dear, 2010), took many forms within participant narratives. During the relationship, it could be seen manifesting in two ways. One was in the maintenance of control over administrative elements of the couple's shared life, which included the financial abuse, but also included things like whether they were named on their childrens' birth certificates.

Paulo I got a text message a couple of days later to say that, oh, 'Just because of the way that you treated me, I've decided not to put you on your son's birth certificate, and until you treat me better, it will remain like that way'.

Kieran The reason I didn't leave... ..the main reason was that when our daughter was born she did not put my name on the birth certificate. She refused.
Um and because we're not married that means, as you're probably aware, under UK law, parental rights, zero.

For Kieran, this put him in a particularly difficult position, as his partner had also withheld his name from the tenancy. Thus, Kieran felt he could not leave for fear of losing contact with his child, but at the same time had no legal rights to stay in the home.

Kieran I wasn't allowed to have my name on the rent agreement. Er, which I didn't really think about that much at the time, but obviously later on.....you know, that was just another element of control because she called the shots. If I upset her, or if I didn't take what she dished out, I was out on the street.

Jacob's abusive living situation was also perpetuated by the legitimating power of the tenancy agreement, but in a slightly different manner.

Jacob She ended up coming back again because [housing provider] was not very helpful. Um, I told them the reason she had left and said look, I can't have her back, I know she's on the tenancy, but, I said, I know there must be something you can do.
'Nothing we can do until she writes and corrects her tenancy.'
I said, 'So I've got to have her back then?'
She said, 'Yes. You can't stop her coming into the house.'
And I said, 'Well what about moving me out?'
'No, can't help you.'

The second aspect of legal and administrative abuse described during the intimate relationship was the manipulation of the professionals and existing expectations of male perpetration and female victimhood. Several participants felt that the police response when called out to the home, was to treat them as if they were the perpetrator and their partner the victim, regardless of the situation. The reality of this meant being asked to leave or being physically removed from the home.

Finn This is the type of problem which is throughout the entire system. They don't care a damn about men.

But whenever the police came to the door because of a- a situation, I was told that I had to leave the property. Even in midwinter. And I used to drive for 8 hours to keep the heater on in my car when it is freezing cold. And it didn't matter whether I was the victim or whether they thought I was the perpetrator.

Grant They took a statement from me and a statement from her. And she- she was in there when- she was in with the police, I could hear her crying through two walls, and th- and then she came out from there to have a cigarette, and as she came past me she wasn't crying and she said 'I'm going to break you,' and then went outside to have a fag and then came back in and said, 'Right, this is it', and went back in again. So- and then she cried again... Then she- er, the police came through to me and said, 'Right, we need to get you to a hotel.'

In Kieran's account, where he was kept off both his child's birth certificate and the tenancy agreement, it was possible to see how different legal and administrative aspects could come together to reinforce their abuser's control.

Kieran What happened was the police turned round and said, 'Well whose flat is this?' Of course, it was my abuser's flat because she was the only one with a name on the rent agreement. So the police straight away turned to me and said, 'Well you've got to leave.' 'We'll drive you to a local hotel,' was the offer. A straight offer, but again my finances are being controlled by my partner so I can't afford a hotel. But I'm not going to sit there in front of her and say, 'But you know what, actually, I can't afford it because she controls my money.' Because the repercussions of that would probably have been me being kicked out and being homeless. As soon as I said that I couldn't afford the hotel, these two huge coppers jumped on me on the sofa, handcuffed me and dragged me out of that- literally dragged me out of the house. The way I view it now is that those two police officers in effect became a tool of the abuser. You know, that was an extension of her abuse.

In the eyes of participants, one of the most frightening and powerful methods of legal and administrative abuse was in the form of malicious allegations. Over half of men spoke of either the threat or the reality of such accusations. For Finn and Grant, the threat of such an attack was enough. So fearful were they of the consequences, and so seemingly powerless in the face of it, that it acted as a turning point, providing the impetus for them to leave.

Finn I was eventually told that if I do not get out of the flat, she's going to accuse me of rape.
I went to the police and I asked them advice, what would happen? And I got told I would actually be arrested and I would be, you know, put into a jail to await a court case and I wouldn't be able to see my child. So, it became very, very vital for me to actually get out of that scenario, but the minute that the man leaves the house, then of course the- the whole emphasis is, oh, the child goes over to the mother.

Grant I realised she would quite happily screw my career by making a false allegation against me, so I got out of there.

Most participants who spoke of this, described it happening after the end of the intimate relationship.

Owen You might think when you leave that relationship, that's a line that you've gone over and things are going to be- you might expect six months of tough times.
This has been going on for years and it's...it's evolved. The threat and all that sort of stuff has changed.

Participants spoke of facing allegations of criminality, rape, domestic violence, and child abuse.

Dennis I was literally walking along the street, and erm,
I got a phone call from my director saying you've been doing this this

and this.

I said really, I didn't know what'd gone on.

I had no idea what's going on and the best I could make is my partner, her mother and sister had phoned my work and made allegations.

Owen ...just a whole raft of lies, like, I'd abducted the children.
I'd taken their passports.
I've been pinching [employer's] fuel and put it in my car. Had HRMC come out to dip my tank at work

Paulo She mentioned that, you know, I'd been abusive towards her. I was pulling her hair, I was shouting and swearing...
You know, I've been, yeah, beating her up and ridiculing her religion and-she also mentioned that, erm, I'd-I'd raped her as well.
So, in the court bundle, she said that I'd raped her on numerous- numerous occasions as well.
So, then I- then I was kind of stuck 'cause I was, kinda like, I didn't really understand the difference between criminal law and family law at that point, so I remember- I remember nights where I just didn't sleep.

They talked of how allegations destroyed their support networks. Through their social circles, participants felt maligned and turned into social pariahs.

Ivan Mutual friends, er, completely- well they basically looked at me as if I was a- a monster.
You could tell by the look in their eyes.
It was just shock and horror.
Erm, you know, people I'd got on well- really quite well with.
Erm, friendly even.
Had laughed and joked, and just normal relationship.
They would suddenly look at me as if, you know, I had leprosy or something.

Whereas for Owen's story, not only was he the target of allegations, but so were the professionals involved in his case.

Owen I would suggest about 120 professionals have been under investigation...[because of his ex-partners allegations against them] ...it's life changing stuff that all the professionals have had. The nursery manager's too scared to sit downstairs with the curtains open.
[Names a professional] same thing.
[Names a 2nd professional] same thing...
She attacks me via other people, like my support circle. I've been accused of affairs with a worker from here. A worker from the children's centre.
Putting complaints in. There's so many officers that start stuff, police officers, and then they're removed because of complaints.
She was phoning- Her parents were phoning police,
Erm, PSD, you know, Professional Standards Department? Five or six times a day.

Across the interviews, there was a sense of pervasive psychological, emotional, and controlling abuse that for some far outweighed the physical violence. Such control extended beyond the confines and privacy of the domestic realm to utilize legal and administrative frameworks to control their victim. In doing so, as some participants pointed out, professionals became instruments of the abuse, implementing a framework that had been manipulated by the abuser to control and harm their victim. Although aspects of legal and administrative frameworks were used within the relationship to maintain control and cultivate dependency, much occurred once the intimate relationship had ended, particularly for those who had children with their abuser.

The Role of Children

Only 4 participants did not have children and it is unsurprising that for those who did, children played a significant role in their narratives. This was not just in terms of their lives as parents, but in accounts of both incident-focused, and pervasive forms of abuse. In the narratives of incident-focused violence, the presence of children added an additional level of heightened emotion to the account, and a significant concern for participants who sought to protect them. This can be seen within Kieran's account ([Appendix I](#)) where he describes his efforts to prevent his drunken and violent partner from taking their child, whilst she assaults him. Another heartrending account was given by Adam. The excerpt below is taken from a larger

local narrative, that, like others discussed previously, served as an example of the extent of the violence, whilst also telling of a turning point. The assault he describes was the end of the intimate relationship, and by his account, the last time that he saw his child.

Adam You could hear the little footprints running,
 through the other door and around to me. And my daughter climbed up
 on top of me the quickest she ever did.
 Climbed up on top of me and she sat here, and I never forget it.
 Her two hands were clenched inside here, or her one hand was
 clenched inside here and the other behind here.
 Bearing in mind she was only 3.
 So that was ok.
 I tried to comfort her as best I could.
 And she was shaking.
 She was shaking. I can still feel, to this day, the little handprint inside
 here.
 Things calmed down.
 You could hear that she was gone into the bed.
 So, I opened the living room kitchen door to get out the patio.
 That was my safe zone.
 To get out.
 By the time I got from the door to the patio door, she was after jumping
 up out of bed.
 She was after hitting me in the head, she got me by the throat, started
 punching me in the side of my head.
 My daughter was terrified, absolutely terrified, that's all I could think
 about was my daughter.

Although children's presence within accounts of violent incidents added another level of concern, their role in more pervasive controlling abuse featured more prominently across the interviews. When Kieran stated that his omission from his child's birth certificate was the main reason he did not leave, he was revealing the control that could be wielded by an abuser through their victim's relationship to the child. This can also be seen in the previously discussed malicious allegations that targeted this connection. For some participants, the threat of harm to their relationship with their children was greater and more feared than anything else. As Ivan reflected:

Ivan There's a lot more at stake than just a slap around the face or a punch to the balls, or whatever.

Where it was most prominent in these men's stories was after the end of the intimate relationship, where there was a shared feeling that the children, and their relationship with them, became the focus of their abuser's efforts to hurt and control them.

Leonard She would use the kids as weapons, you know, like, then, you know, uh, in as much as you won't be able to see them.

For Callum, the fear of the harm his ex-wife could do to him and to his children through his pursuit of a relationship with them was too much for him to face, and thus he felt unable to see them at all.

Callum [My son] rung his mum, or his mum rung [him], and he was talking to her and talking to her and talking to her.
And we got in the car he's still talking to her.
And she's absolutely screaming down the phone at him.
I could hear it.
I could hear, driving along, I could hear her screaming at him about spending time with me and wanting me to go back to 'em and all this.
And poor kid.
Wh- what chance has he got.
[voice faltering]...
I- I couldn't face taking them out.
No way.
I couldn't face having any- anything to do with him, knowing that he's gonna get so much grief when he gets back home...
...She's clearly controlling what the children are doing.
Telling them a load of rubbish about me.
I mean it- it- it's so awful.
It's literally they still live [nearby]

and I'm- I've got to drive past their house every time I go out, more or less.

Knowing that I don't see them anymore.

And I want to see them [voice faltering] but I daren't.

I don't have anythi- I'm petrified of having anything to do with them for fear of she's going say- is she going to say I've assaulted children? Is she going to say I've done whatever or done this or done that or done the other, who knows?

For those participants who fought to maintain their relationship with their children after the end of the intimate relationship, the fear of such accusations remained. One of the, if not the, most important thing in the world for these fathers was the thing that remains tethering them to their abuser, long after the end of the intimate partnership. An enduring potential for their abuser to harm them or their children.

Paulo

So the hardest thing continues to be the hardest thing.

It's that, I guess, I just- I just want access, I just- I just want to make sure that I've got a full and meaningful relationship with- with our son.

I mean, the whole process of going through the whole courts and, you know, the-

You- you know, I'm still dealing with that and I'm still afraid, if I'm honest, that, you know, at some point, if I don't do what she says, or, you know what, I- I know what's coming next.

It's gonna be that, oh, you're not religious. You shouldn't have that much access to your son.

You're not this, you're that. you know and-and these are things that in a way, you know, and that's the thing- that's the only thing I'm really, like, I think- I think the thing that I worry about is that what happens to- to our son when, you know, when he comes home and he's decided that he's had a great time with his father, or when he's, you know, happy to spend time here and, you know, how is she gonna react to him?

I think that- I think that's the hardest thing, 'cause I think that if she's capable of doing stuff like this to me, is- I, you know, I'm deeply worried about what she's potentially gonna do.

7.4 Summary

This chapter addressed the different forms of abuse as described in participants' life narratives. These reflect the types already recognised in literature, including physical violence, sexual abuse, emotional and psychological abuse, controlling coercive abuse, and legal and administrative abuse. Such a typology can be useful to dissect the different way abuse can manifest, but participant accounts evidenced how complex and overlapping the reality is, such as physical violence as emotional and controlling abuse in the form of abuser self-harm. Or sexual abuse that amounted to psychological and emotional abuse through emasculation.

A notable difference between how they spoke of different forms of abuse, seems to hinge upon the ways in which the abuse manifested. Abuse that focused around violent or dramatic events could be more easily conveyed in narrative form, told as the story of specific incidents. The more pervasive forms of abuse were harder for participants to narrate, and thus more difficult to convey.

Where participants were able to talk of incident-focused abuse, they could provide local narratives that appeared to serve different rhetorical purposes: to provide an illustrative example of what the abuse was like; to evidence a particularly extreme incident; or to explain a turning point within the overarching narrative, such as the end of the intimate relationship. In detailing these examples, the framing of abuse severity appeared to be influenced by the status of the intimate relationship. Arguably, whilst in an abusive relationship, a drive to protect their abuser, or to defend against the potential 'Why don't they leave?' question, provides an impetus for victims to downplay the severity of the abuse.

Participants who experienced the more pervasive forms of abuse were faced with a different task in conveying the nature and extent of their partner's abusive behaviour without recourse to detailed stories. In doing so, they attempted to explain in different and generalised ways, the focuses of their abuse, and through the compilation of details and the impossible positions some found themselves in, a more complex narrative of abuse was depicted. One that could be enabled and exacerbated by the legal and administrative frameworks around them. Furthermore, for those with children, their abuser's capacity to control or attack them through the father-child relationship, for some not only outweighed their fear of other forms of abuse, but also had the potential to continue long after the intimate relationship had ended.

Those whose story contained emotional and psychological abuse, seemed most successful in conveying its severity by detailing the impact that it had on them in terms of stress, loss of self-esteem, PTSD, and suicidality, which will be discussed in greater depth in the next chapter.

Chapter 8: Analysis 2 – Living with abuse

8.1 Introduction

Chapter 7 set out the different forms of abuse, as described by participants, and examined how those that could be attributed to specific incidents or events were easier to narrate than the more pervasive forms of control and denigration. However, it is the nature of intimate partner abuse (IPA) that it takes place within or around a relationship. Thus, even the most singular incident of abuse did not happen in a vacuum. The victims and survivors who took part in this study had to manage the ongoing impact of this abuse and what it meant within the context of their relationship. This chapter will examine how they described managing that, and the impact their experience had on them.

Participants described how, when subject to physical attacks, they felt powerless to stop them and unable to defend themselves for fear of being seen as violent themselves. Attempting to avoid the abuse led participants to a lifestyle of perpetual placation, attempting to modify their behaviour in order to manage their abuser's moods. As described in Chapter 7, even leaving the intimate relationship did not necessarily stop the abuse, but for some it finally enabled them to assert some boundaries and establish a sense of agency once more.

Suffering this abuse and the accumulative stress of daily vigilance caused significant emotional and psychological harm to these men. This included an aspect of emasculation specific to the male experience. For many, the concepts and language of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) provided a way of communicating the harm they experienced. Furthermore, as a culturally recognised phenomenon, the narrative of PTSD acted as testament to the severity of their abuse, evidencing its seriousness even if the abuse itself had been hard to describe. But few things evidenced this as powerfully as the accounts of attempted suicide and ideation that featured within several of these men's accounts.

The final section of this chapter considers how these men came to recognise their abuse. For most, this appeared to happen towards the end of the relationship. This resonates with a stages of change model (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1992) that sees a recognition of the problem, in this case the abuse, as necessary for the planning and action of change. In this light, the recognition of abuse for these men

appears as a catalyst, enabling the planning of change, and heralding the end of the intimate relationship. However, for some it was not until after they had left that they were able to gain enough perspective to see the abuse for what it was. Importantly, for many of these men, the recognition of their abuse came initially from others. These third parties appeared key in providing the concepts and language that enabled these men to recognise and label their abuse.

8.2 How they described managing the abuse

8.2.1 *Defending*

In the face of abuse, participants were driven to manage their situation in the best way they could. In the case of physical violence, this involved defending themselves in the moment. As we saw in the discussion of size difference, participants sought to attend to the question of why they did not fight back.

Ivan I never felt the need to sort of hit her back or anything like that. It's just not part of who I am.

For some, as we saw with Leonard's assertion that he was brought up not to hit women, gender seemed to play an important role in their understanding of themselves and how they positioned themselves within their story.

Kieran I'm not the kind of guy who wants to lay a hand on a woman.

And again, an awareness of size difference, or their own potential physical strength, appeared to influence some.

Grant all the time I'm thinking I can't hit her back, if I hit her she's going to know she's been walloped.

This left them attempting to limit the harm without retaliation. Rod told of how he restrained his assailant by gripping her wrists, but others explained how this was not always possible, nor helpful in the long run.

Leonard On a couple occasions when she hit me I grabbed her wrists to stop her from, you know, from doing any more damage. Umm, and- and afterwards she would go 'look what you've done to me!' Because her wrists would be bruised, it's like, 'look what you've done to me. Oh my God, what have you done?' you know, 'you've done this to me!'

And I'd be like. 'But I was trying to protect myself. '

Erm Yeah. To the point, I think I did it like two or three times and then after that I stopped because even though, you know, I was trying to protect myself, she was the one that was getting the marks, if you see what I mean.

Ivan For some reason, in our society a little woman is deemed incapable of causing physical injury to a man.
An-an- and a man, you know, people always assume it's a man, just grabs a woman's wrists and can hold her back, and therefore she's safe, he's safe, and no one's fighting and whatever.

That is not the truth at all.

There are a thousand and one opportunities to get you when you are not ready for it and cause you damage.

Ivan's observation around vulnerability and timing resonated with both Finn and Kieran's accounts of being attacked during their sleep, rendering them unable to prevent or avoid the assault.

Finn One of the worst forms, and it took me 7 years to recover from, was when you are in deep sleep between say, twelve o'clock and two o'clock. And you're lying in bed. You are suddenly assaulted while you are sleeping deep.

And it triggers a nightmare because you think that people have entered the house and you're being attacked. And it's only when you wake up that you find that you've been attacked by your partner. You cannot sleep after that.

Kieran What I started to do was to take myself away at a certain stage
And I remember this one particular evening erm obviously look I don't want any trouble.
I'm gonna go to bed.
Obviously she's just slagging me off, you know, calling me all the names under the sun.
Telling me how pathetic I am, you know, you can imagine.
So I went to bed.
Fell asleep.
And the next thing I know she's on top of me on the bed... [incoherent] obviously I've got the quilt over me.
She's jumped on me, legs astride, I can't get my arms out, and she's just repeatedly punching me in the face.
I managed to get my- I managed to break free erm and push her away and then she leaves the room.
you know, just again, bad language and everything else.
And that kind of thing was a regular occurrence really.

There was also an added fear that any self-defence that unintentionally harmed their assailant, could be used against them in the form of legal and administrative repercussions. This was alluded to by Leonard in his concerns that his wife was getting marked when he restrained her wrists but was explicitly explained by both Kieran and Ivan.

Ivan Knowing the law, you're a crazy man even trying to defend yourself.
There's absolutely no point doing it what-so-ever.
And even if she's coming at you with a knife or whatever.
The answer is just don't try and defend yourself because the chances are that the police will immediately arrest you, you'll be thrown into prison.

Kieran It's hard enough getting the police to listen to you as a man when they turn up to a domestic but if- if you've struck out and she's marked or got a bleeding nose or something, game over.
Forget it. You're not- you're not going to have a leg to stand on and they're not going to be interested in what led up to that.

Some participants described how an unwillingness or inability to fight back thus left them with no choice but to endure the assault whilst protecting themselves as much as they could for its duration.

Grant in the end I just wrapped myself up in the duvet and she just kicked the hell out of me inside the duvet.

Ivan A boxers guard is where you put one hand on either side of your head and you just put your hands there.
Let's say you're sitting down.
And you just put your hands there while she slaps you around the head and punches you and whatever.
And you just keep your hands down there, and erm [until] she wears herself out.
And then of course she might just change tactic and she might just punch you in the balls.

8.2.2 *Placating*

The excerpts so far have detailed individual attacks and how participants dealt with them in the moment, but these moments took place within an ongoing relationship, and some participants described how this led them to a daily, moment-to-moment effort to avoid incidents of abuse or criticism, modifying their own behaviour to manage their abuser's.

Grant describes this in terms of a wariness around his partner.

Grant I thought about it and I couldn't see anything, and in the subsequent ones, I didn't see them coming. Even though I was more ready for them,

I didn't see them coming. So, it made me much more wary around the relationship and around her.
It did make me watch.

Many other participants, describing this same position, used the analogy of 'walking on egg-shells'.

Rod I find myself, you know, walking on eggshells, for fear of upsetting her quite a lot of the time. But I don't- I- I'm not sure where the line is drawn between being a considerate, thoughtful member of a relationship and putting my wife first and trying to be kind and attentive, and when it boils over to erm, fear or, yeah, being- being scared of upsetting them.

Although for Kieran, it was more akin to navigating a minefield.

Kieran A lot of people say it's like walking on egg shells.
Now I used to say it was like being dropped in a mi- a different minefield every day.
You'd wake up, it was a different minefield, you knew that you'd be able to negotiate a certain amount of time through there, but at some time during that day you were going to step on a mine.
There was no avoiding it.
It was just trying to avoid it for as long as you could.
You know, before she came home from work I found myself- I would spend at least an hour going through every room in the house looking at things and saying what can I get screamed and shouted at for today?
You know, what is it going to be? Just desperately trying to make sure that everything was Immaculate.
Always had the dinner ready.

In this excerpt from Kieran, we can see the lengths that he describes going to, to placate his partner and minimise the chance of abuse. For Eli this meant taking on

tactics of deception that evidently felt wrong, but necessary. He illustrates this with a small local narrative where he covers up his actions to avoid his partner's wrath.

Eli ...spend your whole life, everyday working out how you're going to outsmart her triggers.
So you never stop plotting and planning.
You yourself become manipulative.
You yourself become a liar, because you're trying to outsmart those triggers.
So you know, daft example, I broke her favourite wine glass. And I remember breaking it while washing up but she was upstairs at the time so I sneaked it out into the neighbour's bin rather than admit to her that I'd broken her favourite wine glass.
And breathed a sigh of relief when the rubbish truck came the following day. You know, you yourself become a manipulator when you're in that situation because all that matters is keeping your abuser happy.

This last sentiment, of keeping their abuser happy, was evident across several interviews. From Rod's will to be an attentive, considerate husband, to Dennis' constant attempts to please.

Dennis You were constantly trying to please.
Not because to make her happy, just so you could survive and not be criticised.

8.2.3 *Leaving*

For most participants the biggest, or most significant, effort to manage their abuse was in making the decision to leave. Although difficult, and not without its own repercussions, for some this enabled them to attain a position from which they could once more assert some agency and boundaries.

Leonard As she starts uh, being, you know, being abusive, or whatever, I say- I- I- I- I put a stop to it. I go 'No', you know, 'we're not married anymore. You can't speak to me like that' and I'm not prepared to take it.

But for others, leaving their abuser was just the end of one chapter of abuse, and the beginning of another. These participants told of how the abuse evolved to take on different forms, characterised by accounts of legal and administrative abuse and the manipulation of their relationship with their children.

Owen It was absolute hell, and it's been hell since I left her. In a different way, but it's equally as bad, probably I- I feel, although the stuff she says endangers, I still feel safer now because I'm not with her all the time. Whereas there I'd be ha- not being able to be myself because I couldn't be, because it would elevate those risks to me, to the kids.

But now it's different because I don't know where the- the problem is. You know what I mean? I don't know who's following me or anything like that.

Whereas there I could sort of- I knew that if I went along, up to a point, with what she was saying, I'd be safe.

8.3 Describing the impact of abuse

8.3.1 *Emotional and psychological harm*

The impact of the abuse described by participants ranged from immediate physical injury to the ongoing effect of psychological and emotional abuse over many years. Participants told of how the stress of living constantly on edge impacted their physical health and functioning.

Eli I didn't look well I- I definitely- I look at photos- I looked stressed and like I've got the world on my shoulders.
I did have-
I totally, I never lived a day not on edge.
So even the good days you- Even if you're having wonderful times and

she's laughing and she's joking and all the rest of it, and you've done something nice and she's really grateful, y- you're always on edge just in case.

Finn Eventually there is a breakdown where my- your brain cannot cope with that situation. You- you start forgetting things and you fall asleep while you're driving a vehicle.

As we saw with the reflections on emasculation and demeaning behaviour during sex, there was a physiological impact on the victim, but the psychological impact also had the power to spill into other areas of life, outside of the intimate relationship.

Grant if somebody is abusing your physic- sexual prowess it- it- I don't know if this is usual or not, but what I noticed was, if blokes were being blokes I didn't feel like I could join in anymore.
So- so it had- it definitely had affect- an effect on how I saw myself as a man.
Because I was being hammered for not being able to be one.
And I know I remember feeling that, it's gone now, but I remember feeling it at the time and thinking I- I can't- this really hurts, this banter.
Their just having fun, but that banter didn't- I didn't like it at all.
So I started removing myself from situations like that, where I thought it might go on.

Later in the interview, Grant, who had experienced two abusive relationships, described this emasculation as the hardest element of the abuse to recover from.

Grant The attack on my masculinity it was actually worse than the physical assaults.
It had a much more lasting effect.
The physical assault was, right I've been hit, fine.
The bruises are going to disappear.
But the attack on my masculinity and gradually taking me apart as a bloke, and as a reasonable person, that- that had a much longer effect.

Um, in fact again, recalling this to talk to you I can still feel a feeling even though I've got evidence now that everything is okay, I still can- still can feel that feeling.

And it was one of the most disabling and *sigh* I don't know if this is the right word, but it just- my self-esteem was through the floor, um, and my confidence in myself went.

Following the end of the relationship, participants, particularly for those with children, described how the physiological and psychological effects continued.

Paulo What I understand is to be like a fight or flight response so, yeah, I remember every time I used to go to contact I used to have to go to the toilet erm so, you see, you know, had like severe diarrhoea and stuff like that.

Ah, I think the contents of various emails and various allegations. You know, of which there was numerous like, honestly, I just can't count them all, uhm, just put me on edge and it was kind of 'cause whatever I would do there will always be another allegation, another allegation.

8.3.2 *Post Traumatic Stress Disorder*

For some the impact of their abuse manifested post separation in what participants understood to be Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Hassan I began to experience significant post traumatic symptoms. I knew what they were because when [names prior traumatic personal experience] I experienced post traumatic symptoms. So, I knew what they were, bodily.

Finn ...he stated you've got PD- what is it?
Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and he said I must go for consultations or something. I didn't do that.
Uh, but I know that I went through absolute hell through that.

Arguably the narrative of PTSD has become a powerful way of legitimizing an individual's experience, providing a lexicon of terms that helps them to understand and communicate their experience. This language of trauma, 'flashbacks' and 'triggers', was seen across multiple participant accounts.

Jacob ...a lot of flashbacks came back after that as well. That's the reason I'm having trauma counselling because I'm having bad nightmares at the moment. I'm basically waking up with her calling me. When she's actually- she's not even here but I can actually hear her as clear as day.

Callum every so often something will trigger me, and I look back and God that were like that

Dennis I love being back to work, but, the shaming is very, very difficult and I get a lot of my flashbacks at work.

Nigel I now recognize that behavior in a- in a personal relationship, to a professional, it triggers me and I get a bit traumatized, and so I've had to learn to build boundaries, to disengage.

The impact of the abuse on participants mental health was significant across all participants, with many describing depression, anxiety, and symptoms of trauma. But one of the starkest manifestations of this was in participants' talk of suicide.

8.3.3 *Suicide*

Seven of the participants talked about taking their own life, ranging from ideation to substantial and repeated attempts.

Hassan she started to make jokes about suicide, told me that, you know, even if I attempted suicide, I'd probably fail at it.
And at that point, I was actually actively- I was feeling suicidal.
I did actually believe that she was- she was right, that I did need to er, take my own life.

Callum I'd go into the house and she would be on at me from the minute you stepped into the house. I'd go home for my breakfast, and she just on at you, and on at you, and on at you, and on at you, and on at you and on at you, eventually I just walked out and climbed on a- a fridge freezer that was in a barn, and hung myself.
The police came and cut me down, arrested me.
Took me off to a mental ward- a mental health ward and I were in there for a few weeks.

In this excerpt from Callum's story, there is the impression that suicide was seen as an escape from a situation he felt trapped in, unable to retaliate, unable to avoid the landmine's, unable to escape, an act of ultimate agency in a story of disempowerment, degradation, and emasculation.

Brian by this time, I've lost the ability to know how to get out of the relationship and how to get out in one piece, and so I made a second suicide attempt.
Erm, I- when I slashed my wrists.

Across all participants who talked of suicide, there was a clear connection within their narrative between their thoughts and attempts, and the situation they were in. Some attributed their attempts to the abuse they were experiencing from their partner.

Callum She were killing me.
The reason she were gonna kill me is by pushing me to kill myself, you know I literally I- I attempted suicide so many times over the years.
I drove my car into a tree once, and it missed.

Brian the nearest parallel I can find is between myself and er Sally Challen, and I said, you know there are differences obviously, but th- th- the difference is that she turned the violence on her husband in the end, I turned the violence on myself.

But equally concerning, is that others saw the intervention of third parties as the catalyst to attempts to take their own life; the potentially fatal consequence of legal and administrative abuse. This can be seen in Kieran's account (Appendix I), where he attempted to hang himself, but was also evident in Jacob's narrative.

Jacob How am I going to prove that it wasn't me? If she had gone and bruised herself by making herself fall which is- which is what she used to do a lot, and I know what the police are like. If they see a bruise, that's it, basically they'll go and put one and one together.

Then I thought, Oh, I'm in trouble. Um, I called someone, but they said 'no, don't worry until the police come to your door.' And- and to me that was not- that was making me even more worried, thinking that someone might turn up at the door and come and arrest me. I think I basically just had enough of all the grief she had gave me. I think it just hit me I [just wanted] to end it. Someone- one of my neighbours went and called the mental health team, and they went and came in and took the rope away.

Much like the incident-focused nature of physical violence, participant's attempts to take their own life, seemed able to act as a narrative focus to illustrate their reality. It evidenced the extreme damage that their experience of abuse had done to their mental health, continuing long after the end of the intimate relationship, and which was still affecting participants such as Kieran (Appendix I) many years afterwards.

Brian long term I'm fairly certain, and this means about 10years, I probably will end my own life.
I'm fairly certain of that.
[30+] years of my life have been taken by an abusive relationship...
...it's difficult to tell people stories about my past and- and I don't really

think I- I'm gonna do much in 10 years.
Hopefully see the kids grow up, but at some point I will realise that,
pretty much, my life has been wasted and, I'll not want to stay 'til the
end.

Brian's narrative of abuse did not include physical violence, and perhaps stands as testimony to the devastating harm of controlling coercive abuse. But the bleak narrative trajectory that he envisaged for himself at the time of interview, was not shared by all participants. As will be discussed in greater depth in the third chapter of this analysis, there were other participants who had achieved a different, more positive, narrative having left the abusive relationship.

Eli I've talked a lot with parents and friends, um and I've um, in becoming a coach, I do a lot of sort of, you know coaching work and self-exploratory work and I'm in a good place.
I genuinely don't, I don't feel scarred, And I don't have any symptoms of that...

...I'm fairly neutral when I- when I talk about it.
It feels like another life. It feels like- I feel quite sorry for the guy that I used to know. And, um, but it almost feels like it wasn't me. It almost feels like I'm talking about somebody else. So, you know I'm quite matter of fact.
It doesn't scar me, and maybe that's also because I'm in a really happy healthy place as well and I've got no reasons to feel bitter against anyone, including my ex-wife.

The impact of intimate partner abuse as described by participants, including that of physical violence, was unquestionably psychological and emotional, long lasting, and potentially fatal. It stretched beyond the end of the intimate relationship, and where children were involved, carried the potential to continue for as long as the children were children.

8.4 Recognition of abuse

By its nature, domestic abuse predominantly manifests within the private domestic arena. For this reason, it remains hidden until it is either disclosed to friends, family,

or professionals; or it escapes that private domain and is witnessed by others. Until such a point, it might be assumed that the abuse is known only to those within the relationship. However, for participants of this study this frequently was not the case, for they themselves did not recognise the abuse for what it was.

Nigel I never viewed it as domestic abuse just because there's this drama, like, fires were always set and you're too busy putting out the fires to really kind of think, like, what is actually going on here?

Hassan I said to her, you know, This is demeaning behaviour. I didn't use the word abuse, it just didn't come into my- into my- wasn't part of my vocabulary until maybe a week or two after the- when the relationship finished.
I just found a sense of distance.
And I just thought, hold on this is just plainly abusive.

Like Hassan, it was not until after the end of the intimate relationship that some participants felt they recognised, and began to understand, their experiences as domestic abuse.

Eli It was only after the relationship when I came out where I could see it more clearly, I could see the lies, I could see the way I'd been played and lots of things.

Leonard I mean obviously I knew the violence wasn't- wasn't right. But I just accepted that, whereas the controlling behaviour it sort of didn't occur to me until after I had left.

Critically, but perhaps counterintuitively, for many participants it was not until the abuse was recognised by people outside of the relationship, that they themselves were able to see it.

Dennis I just didn't know I was being abused and then when I saw a domestic abuse worker, she educated me in what's going on.
What's actually abuse.
It's interesting that I saw that therapist for anxiety, and she discharged me after three weeks.
She said I'm- I'm not of any use to you because you don't have anxiety.
What you are experiencing is real and I'm going to refer you to a domestic abuse worker in my team. I actually didn't even know.

Understandably, such a revelation was, for some, a significant turning point in their story and warranted a detailed local narrative, as can be seen in Eli's narration of an incident of domestic abuse and its recognition by a third party.

Eli You would never know what would happen next. threatening with knives and all that kind of stuff. but the - the humiliation, the screaming. her outbursts, temper outbursts, were very regular. Um. And I basically juggled a successful business and the kids and trying to keep her happy really that was what my life was all about.
And then I think about- She'd attacked me. she stabbed me with a pencil, sounds a bit bizarre, it was a sharpened pencil.
And a neighbour came in on it, um and the neighbour later said to me you do realise this is domestic abuse.
And that was the first time I actually thought, you know, this really is abuse.

The power of this recognition, and acknowledgement within participant life stories, cannot be understated. As will be discussed in the next chapter, the narrative sensemaking that participants engaged in was one of coproduction; not only could third parties provide the language and narrative with which participants could begin to make sense of their life experiences, but it also provided much needed recognition and validation.

Kieran That day that I was in social services.
That's one woman who um- who looked - I mean I sat there in front of

her and I don't know how long I was there, but I was just sobbing like a child.

She could see that I was absolutely broken.

Um, I mean they had to take immediate action anyway, obviously because of our daughter, but erm, the fact that she actually acknowledged and said you need to go home and pack your bags and leave because it's only going to get worse.

Just that little bit of acknowledgement, you know, when you're so used to having a couple of coppers standing in front of you, slapping handcuffs on you and dragging you out of your house.

Who couldn't give a shit whether you are the victim or not. Just that- that small piece of acknowledgement, for me, that was massive, and I've never forgotten it.

8.5 Summary

This chapter has set out how participants described their attempts to manage their situation, and the impact of their abuse. For those whose story was one of pervasive abuse, in talking about its impact on their health and behaviour, they were able to better illustrate the extreme nature of abuse. They were able to draw on analogies such as eggshells and minefields, the language of PTSD, and, most powerfully, on local narratives of suicide.

In the face of abuse, far from being passive, participants told how they, as victims, actively tried to manage the situation, to placate their abuser and avoid the worst extents of their abuse. However, in doing so, they explained how limited they found their options to be. Although no participant used the word trapped, this is the sense that was conveyed. Seemingly unable to restrain or fight back, unable to predict their abuser's behaviour, and further threatened by the intrusion of third parties such as police, participant narratives often seemed like ones of powerlessness, internalised impotence, and near fatal desperation.

Far from being confined to the intimate relationship, participant's stories of abuse and its impact lasted long after it had ended. For those with children, maintaining a relationship with their offspring meant remaining tethered to their abuser, and with it the ongoing threat of further controlling and coercive abuse.

Over the last two chapters, in setting out how participants told of their abuse, their own response to it, and the impact it had upon them, we have established several

themes that will be explored in greater depth over the coming chapters. This includes: the importance of the 'why don't they leave' question; the prominence of masculine ideals of size, strength, and toughness; the power of third parties; and the criticality of recognising abuse for what it is. This last issue will be explored in depth in the next chapter, as we look at how narratives drive the process of sense making, in particular, how narrative understanding can be critical to a victim's recognition of their abuse, and the role third parties can play in this.

Chapter 9: Analysis 3 – Cultural narratives and making sense of abuse

9.1 Introduction

Over the preceding two chapters, I have set out how these men experienced and responded to their abuse, as well as its impact upon them in terms of physical and mental health. This chapter will develop a narrative analysis to examine how participants made sense of their experiences by drawing upon, and defending against, cultural narratives: pre-existing stories and ideas that are collectively understood within our culture.

As discussed across chapters 1 and 2, identity can be understood across the three levels of individual, relational, and collective (Schwartz et al, 2011). Cultural narratives exist within the collective level, are communicated at the relational level, and are internalised at the individual level.

...different cultures offer different menus of images, themes, and plots for the construction of narrative identity, and individuals within these cultures appropriate, sustain, and modify these narrative forms as they tell their own stories.

(McAdams & Mclean, 2013, p237)

Unlike the personal stories told by participants that could be seen to follow a complete structure of context setting, event detail, and coda, cultural narratives did not appear in complete form. They were referenced or alluded to by participants and can be seen reflected in their reasoning and sense-making, as well as in the way they construct their accounts.

Two notable ways in which participants used cultural narratives were as a shorthand for widely understood and culturally validated stories, and to frame and make sense of their experiences in a culturally acceptable fashion. Furthermore, by examining how they appeared within narration, cultural narratives could be identified as either 'mandated' or 'available'.

Mandated cultural narratives are those in which participants were driven to attend to due to the nature of the occasion (a life-story interview with male victims of

IPA). Within this study, two dominant mandated narratives are those of *masculinity* and *male perpetration of domestic abuse*, both of which had to be taken into account by participants in attempting to explain and validate their experience. However, these two mandated narratives were counter to the experiences of these male victims and unhelpful in making sense of their own story. They were thus driven to find alternative culturally available narratives to try to explain, justify, and validate their experience.

Available cultural narratives are collectively understood ideas that individual participants drew upon to communicate and make sense of their story. The availability of such narratives is arguably enabled by several factors, including the narrator's biographical experience, professional knowledge, or different subcultures or interest groups, through which they may be exposed to alternative narratives. Within this study, the available cultural narratives included Coercive Control, drawn upon to explain their experience of abuse; Childhood Trauma, used to explain both their partner's and their own behaviour; Mental Ill-Health, which again could be applied to both themselves and their abusive partner to differing extents; and Feminism, used to make sense of the dominance of male perpetration narratives. In the case of Feminism, a small number of participants reframed the feminist pursuit of gender equality as instead being an effort to dominate and control men, leading to a narrative of corruption and conspiracy.

The available cultural narratives of childhood trauma and mental ill-health are of particular interest as they attend to the dynamic of the relationship and the behaviour of both parties. Within this chapter, I will explain how they appeared to help participants to make sense of their experience and defend against the threat of masculinity and male perpetration narratives. However, as will be explored, narratives of childhood trauma and mental ill-health acted in certain ways to excuse and mask the abuse, either by placing blame on the victim's mental state, or by framing the victim as carer, and the abuser as in need of help. The specific narrative of narcissism and personality disorder, was, however, seen to avoid these pitfalls, enabling participants to frame their partner's abusive behaviour within a narrative of mental ill-health, without placing an onus of care and responsibility upon the victim.

The final section of this chapter will examine the role of people outside of the abusive relationship, and the communication of cultural narratives as an important element in the sense-making process. Although the transmission of

such narratives could be enabling, their potential to provide helpful and revelatory understanding, they could also be inhibitive, with the potential to impose ill-fitting or unhelpful narratives.

9.2 **Mandated narratives**

Across the interviews, there appeared to be two powerful cultural narratives that in different ways directed participant narration as they worked to attend to, defend against, or explain themselves and their experiences. Arguably the most expansive of the two was the cultural narrative of Masculinity, which was also a defining component of the second mandated cultural narrative of Male Perpetrated Domestic Abuse.

To understand, in part, the influence of these narratives, it is useful to consider participants' accounts as a discourse and, as such, their 'occasion' (what was the nature of the occasion in which their narrative took place) and 'orientation' (what were they trying to achieve in narrating) (Edwards & Potter, 1992). As the occasion was an interview for a study of male victims of IPA, they were also mandated to talk about their experience of abuse. In doing so, many were driven to attend to the apparent difference between their own experience and the dominant cultural narrative of Male Perpetration. In providing a biographical account, participants were talking about themselves and, in doing so, were driven to manage their identity. As men, they were mandated to attend to aspects of their masculinity and the dominant cultural narratives that shape them. This was difficult for participants of this study due to the proscribed nature of victimhood within the western hegemonic conception of masculinity. In this light, a narrative of male victimhood could be seen to undermine their ability to maintain a valid masculine identity position.

9.2.1 *Masculinity as a Cultural Narrative*

As discussed in Chapter 5 of the literature review, cultural expectations of masculinity can play a powerful role in directing how individuals act and perceive themselves (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Leone & Parrot, 2005; Nascimento & Connell, 2017). This is understood in a narrative sense in terms of how men should act and behave in different scenarios, the culturally valorised way of being a man. Despite increasing plurality of understanding and expectation of

masculinity (Anderson, 2009; Bridges and Pascoe, 2014; Wong and Wester, 2016), there remains a stereotypical expectation of men to be tough, unemotional, potentially violent, heterosexual, not 'feminine', and dominant. This was put into words by several participants.

Adam Men are not, cannot be victims.

Jacob Men were supposed to be this muscly strength, man of the house, be able to cope with anything, don't have no emotions , erm women are the ones that's got all the emotions and- everything else.
And we're supposed to be there to pick them up and- I think that's what society thinks it's supposed to be like

Such an expectation of how a man should be, played an important part in how participants made sense of their own behaviour and victimisation. For some, it appeared to encourage a denial of their victimhood and self-reproach for not being man enough.

Hassan even though I was aware of what she was, the saying and doing was deeply unpleasant I- erm I- I sort of interjected that, and turned into, well, 'man up'. Actually, this is about you being over-sensitive.

Malcolm There is societal and cultural expectations that kind of skew,
Yeah, how things are and- and- and- You think, well, you know.
Was I? Well, Was I hurt by that? Was- you know, or am I just being a wuss?

But it was not just their own self-perception that impacted how participants told of their experiences, there was also a fear of what other people would think regarding their victimhood and status as a man. Mirroring Malcolm's language, Ivan talked of having to reject the possibility of being a 'wuss' in the eyes of others.

Ivan You could be 6ft6, 6ft8, and regardless of the situation or the environment it's still going to feel slightly humiliating and upsetting to say that this is what happened to me, and I don't like it and on the one side you think you're going to be made fun of as some big wuss.

This wasn't just an unfounded fear. For some, the emasculating judgements of others were real, and came from friends, professionals, and colleagues.

Jacob My best friend, he has got a fault with, He- he classes me as weak for not standing up to her and everything.
and I said no, I'm not.
It's not that I'm weak.
It's that- it's abuse. um. he doesn't see it as that.

Owen I've had 'man-up' from police. Words of advice of 'Man up'.

Leonard [talking of how his wife would phone him at work to verbally abuse him]
One of my colleagues... always thought it was just so funny.
And you know 'here we go again, you know I wouldn't take it! Ha ha. What have you done now?' sort of thing....
...He always used to say, 'oh, he's got too many female hormones'.

Adam How do you open up to somebody?
So, for me, because you're in a male dominant workforce, they were all macho, or apparently macho I suppose.

The inhibiting effect of a macho ideal was also seen in Grant's account. In Chapter 8, when discussing the emasculating impact of his abuse, Grant spoke of no longer being able to engage on the same level with other men, in this section of his interview he went on to link this to a macho work culture.

Grant ...my self-esteem was through the floor um, and my confidence in myself went, and I managed to work okay, but yeah I wasn't nearly as confident, and especially around blokes, because if somebody is being all ma- and the industry I was in... [*identifying information removed – referring to outdoors active work*] ...You know, there's a lot of macho people about, or people who behave like they are and it- every time somebody did something like that, it was like me being hit between the eyes with it.

Grant returns twice more in his interview to the concept of macho behavior, the final time in specifically naming it as inhibiting disclosure, not just for himself, but for men in general.

Grant Blokes will hide it, for the reasons that I did, because it's not macho to be-admit that you've been, or are, in an abusive relationship.

The importance of maintaining alignment with this hegemonic narrative of masculinity is arguably what makes it such a powerful target for emotional and psychological abuse. Abusers could use the power of emasculation as a weapon. In Chapter 8 we saw this in Grant's account of his wife's derision and accusations of homosexuality regarding his sexual performance. This was also apparent in Hassan's narration.

Hassan the demeaning, it just- it just got really full on.
But by that point, I was really quite broken.
And then when I started to talk about- what she focused on, it was very deliberate, really. It was the weakness of me being a man with mental health problems.
And that mental health scared her.
Also- also a pathetic man because I was beginning to have some difficulties with um, with sexual function really.

Across these accounts we see the importance and impact of a cultural narrative of masculinity that holds men as strong, dominant, and invulnerable. It shaped how some participants made sense of their abuse, drove fears of what other

people thought of them, and served as a target of emotional abuse from their partners. But perhaps one of the clearest indications of the masculinity narrative and its perceived power, is found in the exceptions. The pervasive power of masculinity was clearly illustrated by participants who felt their situation was an exception. Both Adam and Malcolm lived with significant physical disability and both reflected on what their disability revealed about expectations of masculinity and male victims.

Malcolm I think with the physical side, I'm in a different position 'cause. I imagine that for a lot of men who have been physically attacked by a partner, it might- it might be very hard for them to talk about, particularly if they're physically capable.

Whereas I am- *pause* physically vulnerable and don't quite embody the masculine ideal in terms of physicality. It's easier for me to talk about being attacked physically because I'm used to being physically vulnerable.

Adam I don't think my story's any different to the next person. The next person is the same. If they wouldn't believe somebody inside a wheelchair, that was very restricted in what they could do in any shape or form, what chance as has another man, that is able bodied? and that's what society is telling us.

In these excerpts, Malcolm and Adam are reflecting on an expectation that society neither believes nor validates male victims, and that it is humiliating for a man to speak out about victimisation. They are both speaking to the conflation of manhood and physical prowess, a sentiment also echoed in participants' attendance to the size difference between them and their abuser. This conflation is the 'masculine ideal' that Malcolm speaks of. Through his physical disabilities, Malcolm feels he is afforded a valid vulnerability, otherwise not available to men, that allows him to speak of victimisation. But Adam's experience has led him to the conclusion that even with such a validated vulnerability, he is still not recognised as a victim because he is a man, because the narrative of what it is

to be a man places the onus upon men to maintain dominance. This is what Rod referred to as a 'social weight of expectation'.

Rod I mean, certainly the media and you know, one might argue the general population, I'm aware of that erm, expectation that the masculine behavioural traits are more aggressive ones, and you might imagine tabloid media to be critical, or to look down on male victims of female abusers and I'm, you know, aware of that social weight of expectation.

However, there is more to the implications of the mandated narrative of masculinity than just a rejection of male victimhood. The conflation of aggression, physical dominance, and maleness arguably plays a significant part in a second mandated narrative that appeared frequently across the interviews, the narrative of male perpetration of domestic abuse.

9.2.2 *Male Perpetration as a Cultural Narrative*

The dominant cultural narrative of domestic abuse is one of male perpetration and female victimhood. As discussed in Chapter 4, this has been informed by data sets that consistently indicate domestic abuse against women and girls is significantly more prevalent than that perpetrated against men (twice as frequent in the UK (ONS, 2018; 2022)). There is a substantial body of literature and accompanying lexicon that focuses upon the experience of female victims (wife beating, battered woman, etc) (Dobash & Dobash 2015), as well as the previously discussed hegemony of a dominating and violent masculinity. As touched upon by Rod in the preceding excerpt, participants were acutely aware that their experience did not fit the gender profiles they saw within the media.

Kieran you know if you see a report about domestic abuse in the papers, it's always headed by a picture of a man with a clenched fist standing over a cowering woman...

Jacob when I went into refuge, I started watching the news to see what they were doing about domestic abuse because for some reason it was on

the news quite a lot.
And all the time they kept saying was about women.
And I was thinking, well hang on a minute, what about us? There's us
out there and they're saying these blokes are doing this.
This bloke's doing that.
And then they had a talk show where this woman came on and said well
this bloke was hurting me and this- and I'm thinking well where's the-
where's the bloke that's been hurt by his missus?

The power of such a dominant gendered narrative is potentially harmful to those whose experience does not match it. For participants, it shaped their understanding of what domestic abuse could be and therefore their interpretation of what was happening to them.

Grant looking at it now, you'd think it's blindingly obvious, but then it- it just never entered my mind that a woman would attack a bloke.

And beyond their own perceptions, participants felt it shaped the understanding of professionals, and the narratives they expected to find.

Kieran The whole stereotype is that the man always has to be the perpetrator and the women always has to be the victim.
and the police turn up with a- certainly every incident that I was involved in,
the police turn up and straight away they've got that preconceived [idea].

And to be honest it's quite a natural thing.

This statement, that it is 'quite a natural thing' is testament to the workings of a cultural narrative. As a member of the same social and professional culture as the police officers who attended his home, Kieran is able to make sense of their behaviour. Through an understanding of the dominant narrative, not only was he able to perceive their expectations, but arguably also to empathise with them.

Kieran being in the [police] I went to many, many domestics over the years and I never ever considered that the man could be the victim, you know.

However, it is important to be clear that such an understanding did not, in any of the participants' eyes, excuse such expectations. As stated previously, Kieran was explicit in identifying the police as becoming instruments of abuse, and the cause of long-term damage to his wellbeing.

Kieran It still affects me a lot to this day, the way I was treated by the authorities, particularly, obviously, the police when I say that.

These two interrelated cultural narratives of Masculinity and Male Perpetrated Domestic Abuse were tangible across all participant accounts and appeared to have numerous significant effects within their stories. In terms of emotional and psychological abuse (emasculatation), as well as legal and administrative abuse, these two cultural narratives enabled, and arguably at times directed, the abuse. Furthermore, they shaped how participants perceived and made sense of their own abuse, as well as how others outside of the relationship (colleagues, police officers, etc.) all interpreted and responded to the abuse. When we come to consider the 'why don't they leave?' question, it is not difficult to see how the culmination of these effects prevented participants from disclosing their abuse earlier due to their own lack of comprehension that they as men could be victims, as well as the fear of not being believed, of being perceived as somehow less of a man, of being laughed at, or even of perhaps being seen as the abuser.

The examples discussed illustrate how dominant mandated narratives of masculinity and male perpetration could not account for participant experiences of abuse, and did not equip them with the language to talk about or establish a non-transgressive position in the eyes of others. Participants were thus driven to use other narratives that could perhaps explain, excuse, and validate their story.

9.3 Available narratives

Available cultural narratives are collectively held ideas and understandings that participants were able to draw upon to communicate and make sense of their experience. These narrative understandings were made available to them through various means, from soap operas and websites, to friends and professional third parties. They helped participants to account for what had happened and why it had happened to them. I will focus upon four such available narratives that were repeatedly used by participants within this study, those of *coercive control*, *feminism*, *childhood trauma*, and *mental ill-health*.

The first of these was a narrative that helped participants describe and communicate the abuse. As discussed within the first analysis chapter, simply telling of abuse was not a straightforward narrative task, and the availability of the more recent cultural recognition of *coercive control* enabled participants to recognise and communicate that abuse. The second available narrative I discuss goes beyond just the identification and telling of what happened, and attends to the question of why. The narrative of *feminism* enabled the possibility for some to understand how and why the expectation of male perpetration was so dominant and why their own story was met with ridicule or refutation by others. Furthermore, for a small number of participants, it provided an explanation for elements of legal and administrative abuse within their story. Cultural narratives of *childhood trauma* and *mental ill-health* appeared to serve important purposes in explaining both their own and their partners' behaviour, and potentially the dynamic of the relationship itself. However, these last two cultural narratives were not without risk. Whilst they provided possible explanations as to the deviation of the abuser from the stereotypes of femininity and perhaps excused the abusive behaviour, they also placed further responsibility on the victim to remain in the relationship as a caring and supportive partner.

9.3.1 *Coercive Control as a Cultural Narrative*

As discussed in Chapter 4, the study of domestic abuse has led to the recognition of different forms and manifestations. These typological understandings have arguably filtered into mainstream consciousness, creating a more diverse set of cultural narratives of domestic abuse for individuals to draw upon. For example, a story in which one person controls another's money, may now be widely recognised, understood, and communicated as a narrative of financial abuse.

For several participants, the typological narrative of coercive controlling abuse appeared useful. Being able to label their experience as one of coercive control was perhaps particularly helpful to explain the forms of abuse that were otherwise narratively difficult to convey. As discussed in Chapter 8, a pattern of control that pervades everyday life appeared difficult for participants to narrate due to its non-incident focused nature. A recognised narrative of coercive control may therefore afford the narrator a shorthand for a shared understanding that would otherwise be a difficult to convey.

Finn this whole problem which- which is- which I faced, Ummh has been to deal with what is known as coercive control.

But not only this, exposure to the cultural narrative of coercive control, such as in the form of news items or dramatic plotlines, also appeared to provide validation.

Dennis There was one article about the first woman in the UK to be charged under that law, the coercive control, have you seen it? **{yes, yeah}** and er, everything spoke to me there.

Furthermore, for those who had yet to identify their abuse for what it was, exposure to this cultural narrative was revelatory. Both Brian and Callum spoke of hearing a storyline on a radio soap, that although depicting a female victim and male perpetrator, still resonated with them and exposed their experience as one of abuse.

Callum I don't know if you've heard The Archers on radio 4?
I listen to that and they had this con- coercive control story an- and I listen to that and that was possibly the first time I actually thought this is like me...

As discussed, within our culture the term 'domestic abuse' has become characterised by a gendered narrative of male perpetration and female victimhood. However, the essence of a typological approach is to focus upon specific differentiating characteristics of abuse rather than the gender dynamic of the relationship. A cultural narrative based around the recognition of coercive control as an abuse type, focuses on the details of that abusive behaviour and in doing so appeared to provide participants with a counter to the mandated narratives of masculinity and male perpetration. It enabled participants to sidestep the gender aspect, and to recognise and communicate their abuse in culturally validated terms.

9.3.2 *Feminism as a cultural narrative*

Moving beyond the identification and communication of what happened, other available narratives served to try and explain why things happened as they did. For some participants, it was simply not enough to accept that a cultural narrative of male perpetration and female victimhood rendered their experience unbelievable or invisible by directing the perceptions and judgements of others. In seeking further explanation for why such a framing had come to be so dominant, they referred to a narrative of *feminism*.

Feminist scholarship, and activism to address gender inequalities across all areas of society, have been the driving forces behind widespread legislative and cultural change (Bjørnholt, 2021; Bates 2019a). A significant aspect of this has been the impetus to prevent violence against women and girls, including that of domestic abuse. The success of the feminist movement in driving recognition of such violence and making it a priority of national and international policy, is both hard-won and ongoing (Bjørnholt, 2021), for violence against and oppression of women remains a global reality (WHO, 2018). Within the arena of domestic abuse, feminism has been catalytic in the research, understanding, and provision of support for domestic abuse victims (WHO, 2018). The cultural narrative of '*feminism*', as it appeared within participant accounts, was a recognition of such progress and change over the last half century but culminating in a contemporary understanding of domestic abuse that is so heavily gendered as to prevent empathy and support for male victims. Such a narrative understanding was difficult for some participants, who were sympathetic to the feminist perspective, but also felt that it left no room for them to tell their story of abuse.

Leonard I don't want to minimize it, but the whole feminist paradigm, you know, women, to be fair, throughout history have had a really, really bum deal from men.

And now the, Yeah, the feminist movement, whatever, has highlighted what men have done to women

Uh, It's- It's gone to the opposite extreme in that area.

So- It felt- almost feels like, you know, you know, men are physically bigger, physically stronger and-

It's just, you know,

I read of a term the other day, Benevolent sexism basically, and whereas men, men feel this need to protect women.

Uh, whereas it's not reciprocated to men. You know, men should be able to- we're self-reliant. We're stoic, we're physically stronger, you know, we- we just get on with it.

Although not referring to feminism itself, this feeling was also mirrored in Hassan's account

Hassan I think the thing that I'd like to restate is the- just the taboo and stigma, particularly of- of- of a man who comes forward, and- and actually uses the word abuse.

I think it's a step too far for society to- to even, you know, to even consider it and- and it's interesting that actually the most- some of the most erm, vicious commentary comes from- from- from- you know, other women or agencies where, you know, they've experienced, obviously diabolical abuse themselves.

And it's very hard for them to suspend their disbelief because of their own horrific experiences.

And I think that I- I like a lot of other men, you know, would not want to stick my head above the parapet publicly.

For Hassan and Leonard this remained a point of tension. On the one hand, they acknowledged the importance of feminism in addressing sexism against women and were conflicted in not wishing to undermine this, whilst at the same time they felt that the success of feminist activism

left no room for their experience of victimhood to be heard. Such a position arguably left them unwilling to speak of their experience for fear of 'undermining' the feminist cause, and not believing they would be heard if they did; a potentially inhibited position to be when it comes to narrative sensemaking. However, the injustice that others felt regarding this, led them to a less inhibited and arguably more confrontational position, attributing to feminism the injustice and lack of support they felt as victims.

Callum there's all these so-called feminists, I think that's an insult that these people are just out there and just saying yeah it's absolutely fine to- for men to not get any support.

Finn ...don't think that I do not know the effects of radical- radical feminism, which has infiltrated everything.

Ivan there is another agenda at play.
And I don't know what it is.
And I don't know what game it is.
I like to call it feminism, or feminist ideology, or where if you're a man you're just guilty anyway.
Whether it's Alison Saunders, ex head of the CPS, whether she put these things into p- I don't know.
But all I know is what happened to me and what's happened to me seems to be happening quite a lot.
To a lot of people.

For both Finn and Ivan, the disconnect between what they had personally experienced, including their perceived injustice and ill-treatment by professionals, and the cultural narrative of male perpetrated domestic abuse, could not be ignored or just accepted. Their search for understanding had led them to what amounted to a feminist conspiracy narrative. A story of corrupt systems and processes that knowingly contributes to the abuse of male victims.

Ivan [police]culture is, you know, if you're a man, you're just guilty. and it if y- and, you know, even if you're not guilty we'll just hide the evidence.
And if she's guilty we'll just hide that evidence too.
And fuck the evidence.
And fuck the judges, fuck the magistrates.
Fuck it all and you know, when all else fails, lets lie.
And they do lie and they get away with it...

Finn The most destructive thing has been the influence of feminism into this whole aspect, from academic facilities, streets with police, to the medical profession.
It's- it's there, and it's wrong...
...and the final thing I say is that because of the money, you're dealing with a domestic violence industry.
And what has happened, Women's Aid are demanding something in the line of £360 odd million a year.
Who are the people who are driving fancy cars and working in fancy offices?
You look at that, and you start looking and dig and look at the money, see where the money lies, see where they run, and then you find out are we really trying to solve the problem? or is it just a perpetuation of keeping everyone in fancy jobs and things as if they're helping?

Understanding the dominance of the male perpetration narrative by couching it within a wider story that charts feminism as the driving force behind contemporary discourse on domestic abuse, is logical and not without evidence (Bates, 2019a). The subsequent step to a narrative of institutionalised misandry, conspiracy, and corruption, is perhaps not a big step for these men in the absence of other validating narratives.

The success of a narrative to provide explanation and meaning is reliant upon its potential to coherently map onto the world. A significant disconnect or discrepancy between a given narrative and the reality of experience arguably provides two options: question one's experience or question the narrative. Perhaps a one-off discrepancy might be dismissed as an anomaly or a misunderstanding. But a repeated occurrence could understandably drive an

individual to question the dominant cultural narrative and seek alternative narratives to inform a recalibration of their 'narrative schema' (Singer 2004).

A male victim of female-perpetrated abuse could face several narrative recalibrations. Any thoughts that men cannot be victims, or that only men perpetrate domestic abuse, will need to be recalibrated. Idealised cultural narratives that 'the truth will out', or 'justice prevail' might conflict with individual experiences of legal and administrative abuse, where they have repeatedly not been believed, faced wrongful court outcomes, or been treated as an abuser. In such a position, in the absence of mainstream validating narratives, one is driven to find new narratives to explain what is going on. Both Ivan and Finn's stories contained experiences of legal battles, of not being believed by professionals, of legal and administrative abuse in which their experience of abuse was denied and their abuser's lies and manipulations were given precedence. They both spoke of their subsequent research, of 'looking into' and 'reading up on it'. As discussed in Chapter 5, narratives of misandry and feminist conspiracy are readily available online and will find fertile ground in those looking for explanations for experiences that are not validated by mainstream culture. Ivan and Finn's use of a feminist conspiracy narrative reveals a danger of having a single-gendered narrative of abuse to the exclusion of others. Those who cannot find validation and explanation within mainstream culture may well be driven to adopt more divisive narratives. Ones that, to them, appear to better fit their lived experience.

9.3.3 *Childhood Trauma*

The narrative of childhood trauma is simply that traumatic childhood experiences can lead to adult dysfunction. This common narrative is a staple of every Hollywood villain's backstory; is grounded in established academic literature, from psychoanalytic thought to attachment theory; and is starkly evident in correlative data that links adverse childhood experiences to negative life outcomes (Dube, 2020). Within participant narration, it appeared in application to their partner and to themselves. Arguably both applications served the ever-present task of answering the question of why they did not leave – because they wanted to care for their wife, or because they did not know any different themselves. However, they could also be seen to serve different purposes in addressing deviations from the expected gender norms. A narrative of childhood trauma, when applied to their partner, explains their transgression from the feminine

stereotype of gentle caring attentiveness. On the other hand, in applying it to themselves, perhaps it provided a more socially and psychologically palatable victim status. A narrative of childhood vulnerability, as opposed to that of adult male victim.

Their partner's childhood trauma.

This available narrative was not drawn upon by all participants, but for some it was grounded in their abuser's explicit disclosure, and as such was perhaps indicative of a co-production. The narrative of a 'troubled woman' living with past trauma may have been one that both parties clung to make sense of, and perhaps excuse, incidents of abuse.

Hassan she also told me that she was sexually abused by her brother as a child, and I've no reason to believe that that wasn't true.

Testament to the need for answers and the power of the cultural narrative of childhood trauma to provide them, it was also applied without explicit knowledge or disclosure.

Owen My feeling is something happened to her, er- in the background, growing up. She'd a toxic relationship with her parents.

However, using a narrative to explain behaviour can be potentially dangerous. There is a fine line between explaining and excusing, and in excusing the inexcusable, victims are left without recourse to wholly condemn the abuse. Furthermore, in a more complex narrative development, it then linked to another cultural narrative which saw participants acknowledging a wish within themselves to be able to 'fix' or rescue their partner.

Hassan I thought, well, I don't care, I'm absolutely mad on her and I can fix her.

Although present within several participants accounts, this was specifically named by Kieran as 'White Knight Syndrome', and again can be understood as working to address the question of why they did not leave.

Kieran It's only a term that I came to see recently, this whole white Knight syndrome, if you- if you want to call it that.
And I guess that's kind of the way I saw myself.
I was really attracted to her.
I did fall for her...
...I found out that when she was a child erm, something really horrific had happened to her, and I thought that if I stood by her through thick and thin that eventually one day she would wake up and realise that I wasn't like the guys that had used her and abused her and let her down.
So erm so, you know, I- I just took it.
Every time she dished out a beating I took it.
And I thought no, you know, one day she'll realise that I'm not like the other guys.

Narratively speaking, 'White Knight Syndrome' is a complex and potentially insidious story. It draws classically on long established narratives of right vs wrong (white knight vs black knight) and gender roles (knight rescuing damsel in distress) and forms a more modern cultural narrative in which the actions of a man seeking to come to the aid of a woman are given a negative, pathological slant as a syndrome. It is perhaps a manifestation of broader western individualistic principles and the therapeutic approach; an approach that directs us to take responsibility for a situation by looking within ourselves. You are not rescuing someone because they need to be rescued, but because of a drive within yourself to be the knight in shining armour. In this light, and in the context of male IPA victimhood, it is arguably not far from being a victim-blaming narrative, in which you are the victim because you wanted to play the white knight.

Their own childhood trauma

The opening interview request to tell of their life so far, in any way they wished, provided participants with the option of starting with their childhood, but not all did. Some provided just a brief life overview, before describing the story of their abusive relationship. Some didn't even mention their childhood. But, for those

who did delve into their early years, it was seemingly because there was something there that helped them to make sense of their later adult victimhood. Two of the starkest examples of this were Adam and Silas.

Adam's initial narrative response to the opening question was as follows:

Adam I was bought up with erm 7 other siblings, erm, I came from a broken-broken marriage er, family, erm, there was an awful lot of abuse there both sexually abused, there was mental abuse and physical abuse s-so I came from that background.
My stepdads and stuff that used to come in and what not.
Er, it didn't really come to light, as nobody spoke about it because you were afraid to speak about it, so you wouldn't speak to your other siblings about the situation. Although we all knew it wasn't right we didn't know how to deal with it.
Our mother, or- or stepfather or whatever, were the abusers.
So, my journey started from er, quite a young age, erm started from a very young age.

Adam's narration was one of the most coherent of the interviews. He had attained a considerable degree of sense and meaning-making, arguably assisted by therapeutic engagement, and in this opening scene he is providing a narrative of his childhood and establishing a context which he later draws upon to explain his adult behaviours in remaining in the abusive relationship and not recognising it for what it was.

Adam So for me I didn't realise this was controlling behaviour, but I know why now because I wasn't educated.
I grew up on a background of controlling behaviour from, from both mum and stepdads, and, and whatnot what went down in our lives.

This was evident in several participants, but starkly mirrored by Silas, who also began his interview with a detailed account of a childhood of traumatic abuse and neglect that he later used to explain his engagement in a pattern of abusive relationships in adult life.

Silas It's almost like a muscle memory to you.
It's auto pilot, you- you fall back there.
Again I- I truly believe it's based on not having any gauge when I was younger to see the difference between a caring home and a violent home.
I had no- no opposite to test.

In both applications of the childhood trauma narrative, we see participants attempting to make sense of their own behaviour. Although in application to their abuser, it initially seems to explain the abuse, it forms part of a more complex narrative attempt to explain their own behaviours, again to explain why they were drawn to their abuser, and why they did not leave. This pattern is also evident in the application of another common cultural narrative, that of mental ill-health.

9.3.4 *Mental Ill-health*

Many participants talked about their own mental ill-health. As discussed in the preceding chapter, this was frequently in terms of the impact of their abuse upon them. However, for some, it was drawn upon to help them make sense of their experience in terms of identifying a culturally validated vulnerability that would explain their victimhood; perhaps akin to that of physical disability discussed previously.

Brian I was erm, I've- I'm diagnosed with a personality disorder of, er, anxiety and dependency, so I was anx- anxie- an- anxious of her moods, but erm, was dependent and therefore within a situation, I would stay with it because of the depen- nature of dependency.
So, she exploited the vulnerability that I- that I had.

This was similar to how other participants drew upon conditions such as ADHD, Autism, or learning difficulties. In this way, these different cultural narratives of developmental, learning, and mental health difficulties served the same purpose and were applied to themselves to make sense of, and validate their victimhood, and in doing so justify the potential transgression from the masculine ideal.

Dennis My life so far, I'm in a constant battle erm.
To erm, respect myself and forgive myself and change myself, erm, in the right way.
Erm, I found out two years ago that I had ADHD and Dyslexia. It was a profound moment because I realised from that point that I had a habit of getting into abusive relationships because I always need help.

This was Dennis' opening response to my initial request to tell me of his life so far. Whereas some started with childhood trauma to set a context for their later life, for Dennis the context was set by reference to his diagnosis. The profound nature of this diagnosis for him can be understood in part though its existence as a cultural narrative, which might explain the difficulties he has faced and why he, as an individual, has faced them.

Much like the childhood trauma narrative, the Mental Ill-health narrative was also applied by some participants to their abusive partner. This was not an understanding driven by or sparked by a diagnosis, for some the abuser did not have a diagnosis. The mental health narrative was arrived at out of a need to explain the abusive behaviours.

Finn I viewed it at the time that it's almost like a person who is mentally ill and tried to find a solution to it.
Uhm, and from mediation and different groups and friends and eventually trying to get a medical evaluation by a nurse

Eli She was a troubled woman.
She probably has a whole bunch of mental health issues, but, you know, there's a lot of people with mental health issues, They're un- they're undiagnosed.

However, like the childhood trauma narrative, the application of the Mental Ill Health narrative to the abuser placed the victim in a potentially dangerous position. Contemporary discourse on mental health is often informed by an understanding of recovery (Jacob, 2015). Fundamentally, this is a narrative understanding that promotes a trajectory of recovery in which people learn to manage their symptoms and mental wellbeing in a way that enables them to live

independently and minimise the impact of their ill-health. Arguably, such an understanding can place victims in the role of carer, excusing the abuse and struggling to support their partner to 'get better'.

Eli I became her carer quite quickly in the sense of just kinda, I guess help her, but she had all the control. I was terrified of her as well.

Owen [it] kind of becomes the norm, you like live in a cloud because you think that behaviour is just normal and she's gonna sort herself out she's gonna get better. I don't know, you just do.

This insidious position not only has the power to excuse the abuse, but potentially also places responsibility upon the victim/carer. Their abuser's failure to 'get better' was also a failure on the part of the carer to provide adequate support. This is perhaps supported by the narrative of 'the good husband' (Corbally REF), which was evidenced in several participants narratives, such as Rod, Kieran, and Eli.

Eli Definite focus on it all being my fault and keeping me focused on that, but w- when she had outbursts she recognised sometimes when she went too far, um violence, Whatever, but it was always because she'd been provoked, had I done this, had I done that, and there was a real sense of me being an abject failure.
um, that was very much a part of it. and like I said, that was why I had counselling.
She used to describe me as a child, and it hurt, it really did, but you know when you're in it, it's very hard to think outside of it.

Furthermore, the framing of abuse perpetration as a mental health problem has the potential not just to excuse abusive behaviour, but to mask it altogether. This is not to say that their partners did not suffer from mental ill-health, but such a focus prevented full recognition of the abuse.

Hassan ...because I actually was clearly focused on the pathology, as opposed to actually what- what practically was happening. What was going on was coercive control and domestic abuse. and- an- You know, it was only- it was only later that I- I started to- I started to see it in those terms.

There was, however, another mental ill-health narrative that almost half of all participants applied to their abuser, that of personality disorder. Several of these were specific in referencing 'narcissism' or 'narcissistic personality disorder'. For those who spoke of their abuser being a narcissist, this seemed a particularly powerful and revelatory narrative with which they could make sense of their abuser's behaviour. Such was the importance of this revelation, that they could provide a localised narrative of when they heard of it, and who provided it to them.

Brian I told [the triage nurse], you know, very very briefly how, how erm [my wife's] behaviour was or is, and she said 'she sounds like a narcissist.' And I didn't realise it was a medical term I just thought it was you know a descriptive term. I didn't realise it was, coz I always thought she was a sociopath, but I've looked up subsequently what a narcissist is, and it does actually fit her- her behavioural patterns.

Like others, once told about narcissism, Brian was able to do his own research, and in doing so was able to flesh out the narrative and apply it to his own situation.

Brian the narcissist one is that they actually- their successes depend upon someone else's failure. And they particularly turn nasty against someone who spots the difference between who they present themselves as, to what they realise that person is. Which was me, so that's it turned really vicious towards me because I could see that.

The narrative of mental ill-health and recovery appeared to feature earlier on in participants' narration of their abusive relationship. In this respect, it was arguably used to answer the question of why they did not leave at the time. They remained because they were duty-bound as a good husband and attentive carer to stay and support their partner. Counter to this, the narrative of personality disorders and narcissism seemed to play a role later in the relationship, a turning point of revelation that helped them make sense of their experience but did not risk making them culpable for their own abuse.

Within our culture, the narrative of recovery has yet to be applied to personality disorders (Ng, Bourke, & Grenyer, 2016). Within mainstream understanding, people with a personality disorder are not going to change, it is not viewed as a mental illness from which patients recover. The implication of this is that there is no responsibility on the part of the carer, for the narcissist is never going to change. Our understanding of narcissism is evolving and has undergone a revolution in recent years with the identification of alternative manifestations of the narcissistic personality type, including 'covert', 'closet', or 'vulnerable' narcissism (Levine & Faust, 2013; Ponti, Ghinassi, & Tani, 2020). It would seem this interest and understanding of narcissism is filtering into the mainstream and has become part of a powerful and complex cultural narrative. Participants spoke of reading books and watching online videos about it and told of how it has informed their understanding, with terms such as 'narcissistic abuse', and 'narcissistic rage' used as shorthand to convey experience.

The power of the narcissist narrative potentially came from several aspects. Like the narratives of childhood trauma and broader mental health narratives, it was sometimes provided by a professional third party and had academic and clinical validation. However, it differed from these by not placing an onus on the victim to remain as carer, for their partner was never going to change or recover. It was also possible to weave it in with other cultural narratives, such as childhood trauma, to provide a coherent, culturally validated understanding of everything. This was most starkly demonstrated by Nigel, who had made sense of his experience through what seemed to be an extensively researched understanding that drew upon both his and his abusive partner's childhood traumas to explain their adult personalities and why he was potentially vulnerable to her covert narcissism. With such an understanding, there was perhaps a sense of closure,

an absolution from personal responsibility, and a meaning-making objectivity that enabled him to step back and see a future in which he could heal.

Nigel part of me understands why she is the way that she is. It doesn't excuse her behavior. Nothing ever excuses abuse.

You don't get a get out of jail for free card because you were abu- I was abused as a child by a really nasty grandparent, but equally, you know, she come over a couple of days a week so, you know, I was OK for the majority of the time. The majority of my life I've had good people around me.

You know, I understand why you are like you are, I understand that unfortunately, you're never gonna get better, just like I'm never gonna fully heal. But at least I can heal.

You're never even going to admit to yourself there's anything wrong with you, because the extent- level of abuse that you've got will prohibit you from doing that.

The cultural narrative of narcissism was provided to Nigel by a friend in what was evidently a revelatory moment for him. Perhaps this is more important for a wider understanding of narrative processes than the identification of the narrative itself. Across many of the interviews, the involvement of a third party in providing and enabling a process of narrative sensemaking was clear, and signified the importance of other people in a co-production of narrative sensemaking.

9.4 **Coproduction and the transmission of cultural narratives**

An important characteristic of how narratives work across the three levels of cultural, interpersonal, and individual, is their transmission, i.e., how they are communicated and passed on. Numerous times across the interviews, participants provided a source for the cultural narratives they drew upon, be it a professional, a friend, or a media source. These third parties played an important role in the individuals' ongoing task of narrative sense making. As detailed previously, Brian was introduced to the concept of narcissism by a triage nurse, Nigel heard it from his friend, Dennis from his therapist. The narrative of coercive abuse was transmitted through radio dramas, and high-profile news stories such

as Alex Skeel, or Sally Chadden. These transmissions were important to participants who spoke of them as revelatory, and they frequently appeared as turning points within their global narrative.

At the time they took part in the study, most participants had already taken on board certain cultural narratives and incorporated them into the telling of their life story. This was evident in Adam and Silas' narration; both men set a context for their adult victim experiences by starting with an account of their childhood trauma. However, in contrast to the coherent, whole-life trajectories of Adam and Silas, Jacob struggled to provide such a coherent narrative. Having only left his abusive marriage in the preceding year, the timing of the interview in relation to his personal journey meant I was meeting him before he had come to fully make sense of his experience. In this, it captured a process of transmission as Jacob was beginning to take on board a cultural narrative provided to him by a third party.

Towards the end of the interview, I asked Jacob about his experience of therapy. He explained that he had only just started a course of 1-2-1 counselling. He then said the following about his therapist:

Jacob she thinks it's to do with my childhood.
That the reason I'm going through abusive relationships , because I was abused when I was little, erm, She thinks- basically, they've sussed out in research that people who've been abused when they are small basically go for abusive relationships because they think that's the normal.
So she's basically going back into my childhood which *slight laugh* I'm not looking forward to tomorrow *sigh* so that's gonna be really hard tomorrow.

Interviewer Does that make sense to you?

Jacob After she said about it I've been thinking since I last saw her, yes it does. Basically the abuse I suffered from when I was little was basically the sort of abuse I was suffering with [my wife].
Basically getting trapped.
I'm basically being controlled.
Basically not allowing me allowed out, it's basically what I had when I was little.

In this excerpt, we see the transmission of a cultural narrative in progress: a third party, his therapist, providing Jacob with a narrative framework with which to make sense of his own experience. Perhaps with the opportunity to explore such an understanding in dialogue with his counsellor, Jacob will come to form a more coherent narrative understanding of his whole-life story that is not dissimilar to that of Adam and Silas. One where his adult victim experience is couched within a context of childhood trauma.

Such a sharing of narrative components provides insight into the co-production of personal narratives. In this we see elements of a collective understanding, shared and explored at a relational level, and incorporated by the individual within their narrative identity. With the sharing of narratives such as childhood trauma and narcissistic personality disorder, there is an empowering aspect to their transmission. They provided participants with the language to communicate and make sense of their experiences in a socially validated manner. However, there is also a danger that a third party can put forward a narrative that isn't helpful, with potentially detrimental effect. This was evident in the supposition of male perpetration by police officers but was also seen in other well-meaning attempts to support. Brian spoke of how he had been signposted to Alcoholics Anonymous for support but, although admitting to his alcoholism, he felt that the AA narrative of recovery and personal responsibility did not fit his position as a victim of domestic abuse.

Brian ...they talk about service and like doing washing up and things like that and being helpful and things, I've- I've- I've always been that. You know, you know 'I've learnt since I've been sober not to be selfish.' I- I- thought why is that an achievement? I mean. Why are you boasting about something that I just think that's normal isn't it? er, so that- so that- it-it-it's obviously part of my personality that the recovery out of this situation is-causes a lot of problems for me. I don't feel that the support is there. I also don't feel that there is the understanding there for erm, why I'm- why my- I'm upset. So, its driving me back into the situation where I stop talking about this, erm, because if I open up now, people start telling me and giving me solutions to the problems and all I want to do is get stuff off my chest, to at least get some of the sense of trauma out my system, so I can stop carrying it around, so I can just explain to people

Whereas the male perpetration narrative may be clearly erroneous when applied to a male victim's experience, here the imposition of the AA recovery narrative is partially appropriate. Brian readily acknowledged his alcoholism. But the narrative was ill-fitting, as it failed to acknowledge the domestic abuse aspect of his experience in which his service to others was an existing negative characteristic of controlling coercive abuse.

Brian's insights to his situation reveal how important an audience is in providing the right context and understanding to enable people to tell their story. And how, in its absence, an individual can be driven to reject an inaccurately applied narrative, and to actively avoid speaking lest it invite further erroneous judgements or well-meaning impositions. So potentially destructive is such inhibition, that Brian included it within his talk of suicide.

Brian I probably will end my own life.
I'm fairly certain of that.
I'm 54 erm, 32 years of my life have been taken by an abusive relationship.
Erm.
I remember it, I try and factor it out but it's difficult to tell people stories about my past and- and I don't really think I- I'm gonna do much in 10 years.

It is evident from participant accounts that third parties such as professionals and friends played an important part at the relational level, with an active role in the narration. In sharing cultural narratives and providing an audience that validates and aids understanding, third parties co-produced these personal narratives, enabling narration in culturally validated ways. However, when narratives from others did not map sufficiently onto participants perceptions of reality, they had the potential to become an unwanted and harmful imposition.

9.5 Summary

In this chapter I set out how mandated narratives of masculinity and male perpetration threaten male victims. Psychologically, they threaten in terms of the

emasculatation that victimhood can bring, as well as in terms of increasing the risk that they and others will not recognise the abuse for what it is. Thus, male victims are vulnerable to prolonged victimisation, and secondary victimisation through the actions of others who misapply the dominant narrative to their situation. However, as discussed, participants were able to draw on several available narratives that help them make sense of and defend against these mandated narratives.

Growing recognition of coercive, controlling abuse stories provided a narrative that some participants were able to use as shorthand for a form of abuse that might otherwise be difficult to narrate, and furthermore provided a validated understanding of their abuse that sidestepped the gendered narrative of perpetration and victimhood. To make sense of why the dominant cultural narrative of abuse is so gendered, some participants referred to the development of feminism and its role in highlighting domestic abuse within a wider understanding of violence against women and girls. However, for some, this understanding formed part of a potentially more divisive narrative that explained their perception of injustice and corruption, through a conspiracy to deny male victimhood.

Many participants drew on cultural narratives of childhood trauma and mental ill-health to make sense of both their own behaviour and that of their abuser, and in doing so defend against the question of why they did not leave. In application to themselves, this could be seen to work in two ways. By foregrounding their own mental health difficulties or childhood trauma, participants were able to position themselves as vulnerable in a socially acceptable and recognised fashion, and to understand that because of the normalisation of abuse within their own childhood, or the undermining of their own mental capacities, they were not equipped to recognise their partner's behaviour as truly unacceptable.

Applying such narratives to their partner was also a double-edged sword. Whilst they were in the relationship, such an understanding of their partner's trauma or mental ill-health, was seen to excuse the abuse, prevent the victim from seeing the abuse for what it was, and place a responsibility upon them to be a better carer. After the end of the relationship, however, with hindsight participants were able to use this to explain their behaviour at the time, and in doing so attend to the question of why they did not leave. Perhaps the safest such narrative was that of narcissistic personality disorder, which enabled participants to make sense

of their partner's behaviour, without assuming a recovery narrative and their responsibility as a dutiful carer.

A key aspect of how cultural narratives work was evident in how they were seen to be provided by third parties such as friends, professionals, and media sources. In these instances, we can see the narrative transmission from the collective, through the relational, to the individual level of human identity. At times this could be welcomed, revelatory, and empowering, but there were also attempted transmissions of ill-fitting or erroneous narratives, which, however well meaning, could have detrimental effect. This speaks to the power and responsibility of third parties in the co-production of personal narratives.

The importance of other people in the narrative process cannot be underestimated. Not only can they be pivotal in the transmission of powerful, explanatory cultural narratives, but they also act as arbiter and co-producers of coherence. Furthermore, concern for the perception of others can also be seen within the consideration of the 'why don't they leave' question. Attempts to answer this are arguably attempts to attend to the otherwise unspoken insinuation behind such a question, that in an intimate relationship some culpability lies with both parts of the dynamic. Such a perception is rooted in the understanding that domestic abuse is categorically different to other forms of violence and abuse, and because of the relationship aspect, the victim in some way holds a key to understanding it. This and the co-production of coherence, will be explored in depth in the next chapter in considering the implications of narration for the identity of male victims.

Chapter 10: Analysis 4 – Narrative identity

10.1 Introduction

The last three chapters examined how participants described their abuse, how they responded to their abuse, the impact it had on them, and the role of cultural narratives in making sense of that abuse. This chapter examines what all these elements mean in terms of the narrative identity of these male survivors. To do this, I first return to the concepts of identity and identity work, including agency, stability and validity, as outlined in Chapter 2. Subsequent discussion will focus upon how these interviews revealed the struggle for participants in working to resolve the contradictory aspects of victimhood and agency. This was driven, in part, by a cultural demand for them to account for their part in the abusive relationship. This social expectation is perhaps specific to Intimate Partner Abuse (IPA) and is most evident in the ‘why don’t they leave?’ question. To understand how this question of culpability was addressed by participants, discussion will return to the use of the two cultural narratives of Childhood Trauma and Mental ill-health. These narratives appeared to provide less threatening identity positions that alleviated the demand for agency and culpability.

The second section of this chapter will examine concepts of coherence and validity within participant narratives, and their implications for narrative identity. Through examining and contrasting the most and least coherent narrative accounts, discussion identifies key factors in the production of coherence. These include time, individual capability, selective editing, and audience capacity.

Lastly, this chapter proposes a model for understanding how participants engaged in a complex dynamic process of autobiographical narration to attend to identity across the three levels of individual, relational, and cultural human experience. This model depicts how an individual’s narration is orientated according to the demands of identity and context. They meet these demands by attending to, and drawing upon, cultural narratives to establish credibility, coherence, and validation in the eyes of their audience, and themselves.

Key to this analysis is an understanding that there are fundamental tasks to identity work which can be understood to focus around three core dilemmas (Bamberg, 2011): *stability* (continuity vs change over time – the diachronic dilemma),

individuality (difference vs sameness to others), and *agency* (autonomy vs heteronomy). Importantly, in Bamberg's conception of identity work, these dilemmas are not binary, but more of a spectrum within which individual positions are negotiated. As with all discourse, this negotiation is always occasioned and orientated, and as a task of identity it is necessarily orientated towards validation: the attainment of an acceptable identity position and successful defence against threatening or undesirable positions (Harre et al. 2009, McVee et al, 2018).

Applying a concept of positioning to the analysis of participant accounts means considering how, throughout their narration, they were necessarily working to be seen (and see themselves) in a positive or valid light, whilst defending against alternative positions that might cast them otherwise. Importantly, as Pasupathi (2019) explains, there are two aspects of these accounts that need to be considered.

Autobiographical Narration has at least two distinct 'layers' – the world of the narrative itself, concerned with the past, and the world of the narrating act in the present, in which the concern is with the narrator and the audience."

(Pasupathi , 2019, p584)

This means there are two selves to be positioned: the former self (the character of themselves within their story) and the present self (their identity in the here-and-now of the interview). In the light of the first of Bamberg's dilemmas, the need for stability over time, there is an impetus upon participants to, wherever possible, maintain congruity between the two. However, they are not the same. There will be times where separation might be desirable to defend against a stigmatised position of the former self. Furthermore, this analysis perceives identity to be a complex dynamic system that spans the three levels of individual, relational, and cultural human reality. Thus, this final chapter of analysis will examine how individual participants worked narratively, informed by cultural expectations, to validate their past and present identities at a relational and individual level.

10.2 **Masculinity, agency, stability, and responsibility.**

As men, there was an apparent impetus for participants to maintain an identity that aligned with the hegemonic conception of masculinity in the face of a potentially

threatening victim status. A way of doing this seemed to be to highlight positive aspects of their masculine identity before exploring or acknowledging the abuse. There was a glimpse of this earlier in Eli's short narrative about the time he first realised that he was experiencing domestic abuse. In setting the context for his story he highlighted his accomplishments and positive aspects of his identity before he detailed the abusive incident.

Eli I basically juggled a successful business and the kids and trying to keep her happy really that was what my life was all about.
and then I think about... [date removed] She'd attacked me...

Such an act of positioning was evident in Ivan's account when also addressing how he came to recognise the abuse. Towards the end of Ivan's interview, I specifically asked when such a realisation happened. The most substantial part of his answer was to highlight aspects of his identity that might qualify as overtly masculine and use such a position to explain why he would not recognise his abuse. In doing so, he was perhaps working, however unconsciously, to defend a masculine position for both his current and former self, whilst exploring his victimhood.

Ivan Strangely enough it took me a long time to get there purely because I- you know, I mentioned it earlier today, erm.
I am naturally quite tough and you know I'm used to hard physical labour and hard sports.
I'm quite fit.
Erm.
Think of sort of heavy duty gardening or tree felling, or stuff like that.
Where things hit you, fall on you.
You hurt yourself.
And in a funny way I always thought I'd got quite a high pain threshold, so I tended to dismiss a lot of what she did.
And its only over time that I actually realised that what she was doing was actually just physically abusive.

A drive to maintain a masculine position resonates, perhaps even amplifies, the core identity task of agency. The very concept of western masculinity appears bound up with the agentic ideal, to 'get the job done' (Bem, 1974). Within this study, establishing a position of agency for their former victim self appeared to be a primary objective for participants. However, there is an innate difficulty to this task as victimhood is antithetical to agency. To be a victim is to be done to. To abuse and control another human being is to rob them of their choice and, in doing so, strip them of their capacity to attain a valid agentic identity. This was evident in participants' accounts of the level of control their partners had in decision making, of being treated like a child, of being denied their adult capacity to make decisions. This, for Dennis, felt very much like a loss of identity.

Dennis That's how it was in the relationship.
I had lost myself.

A logical, yet potentially toxic, conclusion of a victim's endeavour to attain a position of agency within their abusive relationship, is to accept some degree of complicity in their own abuse. This was evident in several participants' accounts, yet understandably, such a position was extremely difficult for them to bear.

Adam The hardest part of it for me would be accepting it.
Why did I accept it?
And I look back and, why did you accept it?
'cause you allowed it to happen to yourself.
You can blame the perpetrator, or you can blame anyone you want, or people not listening, or whatever, but you allowed it to happen to you.
Yeah I was at a disadvantage of course, through my disability. Why did I allow that? That's the hardest part.
Why did you actually- why didn't you speak up before, in putting your needs before anybody else's needs? Why didn't you just-
It's hard to accept within yourself.

Leonard I allowed her to have the control. That's the worst of it. I think...
You know, I just gave up. Um, you know, I- I- I abdicated responsibility, in just saying, right, ok, you know, here you go. You've got the control, fine and I'll- I'll just- I'll just erm, do whatever.

So, and then I start thinking, oh, I've got myself to blame for that, but really? you know. I don't know, I- I mean, obviously I've gotta take my part in it. I've gotta take responsibility. I was responsible for 50% of that, because really, if I've said from the outset, no, this is not acceptable. Uh, things might have been different.

This need to attend to the dilemma of agency is bound up in the reoccurring question of why they did not leave. At its heart, this question is based upon an assumption that all adults have the agency to stay or go. The consequence of such an assumption is evident in both Leonard's and Adam's excerpts. But in keeping with a complex dynamic model, this drive is not just an individual drive, it exists as a cultural narrative and is an expected response from others at the relational level. As Kieran states, in talking about himself prior to his own experience of abuse:

Kieran I was one of those people who said, 'Well I don't understand. Why don't you just walk away?'

In referring to 'those people', Kieran is revealing an expected shared understanding between himself and the interviewer that people ask this question. Viewed from a certain angle, and evident in previous excerpts, such a question is akin to victim-blaming. However, it is arguably an inevitable conclusion of a wider recognition that domestic abuse is categorically different because it happens within an intimate relationship. In asking 'why don't they leave?', our culture focuses upon the relationship and assumes a degree of agency within it. With such an assumption, it is perhaps unavoidable that the question of the victim's part in the dynamic, will be an 'elephant in the room'; The question that, even when unspoken, must be navigated around or accounted for in any telling.

Once again, the existence of such an underlying approach, and its connotations for sense making and identity work, were most starkly apparent in an exception. Unlike all other participants, Malcolm's account of domestic violence centred around an assault that took place after the end of his otherwise non-abusive intimate relationship. After weeks without contact, Malcolm's ex-girlfriend forced her way into his home and violently attacked him. Due to their prior relationship,

the police and relevant support services categorised this as a domestic abuse incident. The imposition of the domestic abuse narrative to his situation, complicated Malcolm's sense making process. It directed his efforts towards examining his own culpability for what had happened. It is this which, like others, he clearly states as the hardest part to deal with. Harder to deal with than the physicality of the assault.

Malcom I know what it's like to be physically vulnerable, I don't feel that- that wasn't the hard part for me to deal with. Or it wasn't the hardest part for me to deal with.

Interviewer **So what was the hardest part?**

Malcom Trying to understand why it happened. Whether it was my fault? What did I do wrong?
That was- that was the- that was the real question that dogged me for a while.

The fact that Malcolm already knew his assailant in such a way also drew others to the same endeavour.

Malcolm There were conversations where people were like 'well you must have done something, right?'

It is unclear how much this was due to a tendency in male victim situations to think that the man must have done something to deserve it. Or perhaps it was just friends trying to work out why he was attacked, but arguably they would not have felt the need to ask such a question had Malcolm not known his assailant.

However, Malcolm was able to find a more useful cultural narrative that permitted him to stop searching for his own culpability and come to terms with the attack as something beyond his control. Through therapeutic counselling, Malcolm was able to reframe his story as something that happened 'out of the blue.'

Malcolm Through the counselling I had, I was- I was made to understand, you didn't do anything wrong.
It was an unprovoked, unexpected, out of the blue act of physical violence that left horrible marks, both physically and otherwise.

The 'out of the blue' cultural narrative helps us to understand things that are beyond our control and validates them for being just that. It absolves individuals of culpability, validates the cessation of trying to make sense of something, and enables a trajectory for life to continue. But Malcolm's journey to this conclusion, his battle with the assumption of the domestic abuse narrative, reveals the task facing all other participants - that because of the relationship, there was some culpability on them. Those with no recourse to the 'out of the blue' narrative were driven to find alternatives. Alternatives that sometimes came with additional problems.

10.3 The problematic nature of some available narratives

In the last chapter, I discussed different available cultural narratives that participants drew upon, both during their experience and in making narrative sense in hindsight. The last two such narratives, those of childhood trauma and mental ill-health, are of particular interest because, in trying to explain the behaviour of both parties, they speak to the dynamic of the relationship itself. Arguably, even when trying to explain their abuser's behaviour, participants were also attempting to explain and validate their own. As individuals they are accounting for their part in that dynamic, attending to that question of why they didn't leave by taking an agentic position in which they chose to stay as an attentive partner and carer. However, such a position is threatening to the present self. For those who had taken on the caring identity, this logically required a significant reckoning in leaving the relationship and their decision to no longer care for their partner.

Jacob ...there were times I was [at the refuge] I was thinking what am I doing here? I felt so guilty because I- I knew she was lonely, and I felt- and she kept sending me message saying oh you're supposed to be caring and all this, and that sort of made me think what am I doing?

It was Jacob who, as discussed in the previous chapter, appeared to be in the process of taking on a new narrative of his own childhood trauma, conveyed to him through his therapist. Perhaps this was necessary for him to replace his previous understanding that obscured the abuse within a narrative of his wife's ill-health.

In applying the childhood trauma and mental ill-health narrative to themselves, participants were potentially able to achieve two things. Firstly, as demonstrated in the following accounts, participants were able to make sense of why they didn't realize that what they were experiencing was abuse, or didn't trust their own judgement as to whether it was abnormal or abusive.

Silas It's based on not having any gauge when I was younger to see the difference between a caring home and a violent home.
I had no- no, opposite to test.

Hassan And I would think, well, this is your mental health.
She's only playing around.
She's only messing around.
And she doesn't really mean it. {uhuh}
Yeah, so it was- it was very, very hard to disentangle my own- my own expectations of myself.

Secondly, there is the possibility that, in assuming a mental ill-health or child victim identity, they are embracing a less threatening position. These are both positions of vulnerability that are acknowledged within our culture, they are validated and acceptable, and counter the demands for invulnerability made by hegemonic masculinity.

However, neither the position of being mentally unwell, nor of being an adult or childhood victim, are desirable. And although they held explanatory power for the behaviour of the former self, they are not necessarily helpful for the narrator in managing their current identity. As such, it is understandable how several participants seemed driven to renegotiate the first of Bamberg's dilemmas, to forsake their need for stability and embrace change for the possibility of an agentic identity in the present.

Eli I can look back now and just think what the fuck was I doing. but I was a young man. I was naive and stupid.

This is a complex and seemingly contradictory position, in which the narrator is driven to defend their past self because it is them, and yet distance themselves from their past self by asserting that it isn't them anymore. The potential dissonance of failing to achieve such a distance was put into words by Hassan, in explaining how, despite the passing of time, he has not been able to fully separate himself from his victim self and his abuser.

Hassan But I think the biggest thing that I- that I- the most difficult thing that I experienced post relationship is the erm, the- I remain bonded to this person, I still think about them a lot.
I have no contact with them. And erm, I still yearn for this person, even though I know that there's- erm, I still dream, I still think, I still have flashbacks.
No- no amount of therapy, well, things have improved an awful lot. But this is now nearly four years down the line.
And it's irrevocably changed me, and how I feel irrevocably bonded to this person who abused me.
And I find the cognitive dissonance of dealing with- knowing that rationally this person treated me in this way and still feeling like I feel, very hard to square.
I feel a great deal of shame still with regards to that.
And a lot of anger.

In summary then, within this multifaceted dynamic of discursive identity positioning, our cultural understanding of IPA demands that account be taken of the victims' role in that partnership. This is most evident in the existence of a 'why don't they leave?' question. This taking of account is loaded with an expectation of agency. Not only is agency a qualifying characteristic of adulthood, but it is also seemingly a fundamental task of identity work, and a criterion of masculinity. The narrative of victimhood is antithetical to agency and participants described consciously taking responsibility for their part in such a relationship as the hardest of things to endure.

However, available cultural narratives such as those of childhood trauma and mental ill-health enabled a potential counter to such an unbearable position. In applying these narratives to their abuser, participants were able to claim agency in staying and assume a validated identity of the caring partner. In applying the narratives of childhood trauma and mental ill-health to themselves, they were able to provide a valid explanation for their vulnerability and claim a less threatening identity.

The task facing participants in this study, in telling of their experience of abuse, was complex. They had to chart a narrative course that married seemingly opposite ends of key identity objectives: to find agency in victimhood and continuity with change. Furthermore, they had to do so in accordance with the relational and cultural demands of coherence (Linde, 1993). As discussed within Chapter 3, the concepts of sense making and coherence are not straightforwardly defined or reduced to quantifiable measures, but it is none the less critical to the practice of narration and validation and manifested in different ways for different participants.

10.4 **Coherence, meaning-making, and validity**

Coherence is inherent to narrative, for without coherence, without some form of narrative cohesion, there is merely a series of statements, a list perhaps, or an assortment of unrelated utterances. But what precisely constitutes coherence, and how it can be measured, is yet to be agreed upon. This is complicated by coherence being bound up with concepts of meaning-making and validity. Arguably, the process of narration is an act of meaning-making. A hermeneutic, sense-making endeavour that attempts to account not just for the what, where, and when, but also the how, why, and therefore. However, there is also an understanding of meaning-making as the final achievement in the sense-making process, where the narrator can reflect on the implications of their experience in order to gain insights or learn lessons. In much narrative analysis, this is identified when the narrator 'steps back' from the telling of what, when, and where, and reflects on the why and therefore.

Others perceive meaning-making not as an aspect of the narrative, but in the application of learning to future life choices. This might be seen in participants who have taken on a 'survivor identity' (Delker, Salton, & Mclean 2020), using their lived experience to raise awareness and support for victims of domestic abuse. Whether

one perceives meaning-making as a component of coherence, or as something that is built upon the attainment of coherence, they are inextricably linked. So, too, is the concept of validation. This was considered in Chapter 2 in terms of identity and the human need for validation. To attain validation at a relational level, a narrative must logically hold some form of coherence to be understood and validated by its audience. In turn, the degree of validation that a story receives lets the narrator know how coherent their story is. A coherent story, therefore, has greater validity than an incoherent one, and better enables potential meaning-making, whether in reflection or future projection.

Chapter 3 set out how different authors have attempted to identify and operationalise various dimensions of coherence and meaning-making. Some differentiate between local narrative coherence (individual events) and global narrative coherence (overarching multiple events) (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). Furthermore, within these concepts, different authors have sought to identify different dimensions (see Adler et al 2018; Baerger & McAdams, 1999; Bluck, 2000; Reese et al., 2011; Lysaker et al. 2002). Although all attempt to better understand, in a more granular fashion, what is going on in the creation and assessment of coherence, they mostly focus upon the narrative as isolated data, removed from context and devoid of the relational and discursive nature of its birth. But critically, it is in this relational aspect that Linde (1993) perceives coherence to be forged as a “co-operative achievement” (p12). In this respect, and in accord with an understanding of all discourse as occasioned and orientated, narrative coherence cannot be fully understood without comprehending the context and audience of any given narration. As Linde describes, there is a social obligation to coherence. In its absence, the audience is justified in asking for clarification, in probing further. An inability to provide coherence may lead to an audience dismissing the story and, by implication, its teller. It is to the audience then, as arbiter of credibility and validation, that all attempts for coherence are directed. In this way, coherence is almost wholly subjective. It is subject to the comprehension of both the narrator and their audience, and their shared understanding of each other and the context in which they meet.

Coherence is fundamental to a complex dynamic understanding of narration and narrative identity across individual, relational, and culture levels. Variables such as chronology, causation, and thematic composition, all contribute to coherence and meaning-making, and are all forged through coproduction with an audience within

the context of their meeting and their shared or differing cultures. This understanding can be seen within Habermas and Bluck's (2000) conception of cultural biography. The alignment of a narrator's life story with audience expectations of how a life should be is at the core of how cultural narratives work.

Across all the analysis so far, my examination of how participants talked about, responded to, and made sense of their experience of abuse has been, in some part, an analysis of coherence. This analysis revealed that some forms of abuse, such as physical violence, lent themselves to the local coherence of incident-focused narratives. Whereas other, more pervasive, forms of abuse required a degree of thematic global coherence to be conveyed. Cultural narratives pivot upon a shared understanding with their audience to achieve coherence. Where that understanding was not shared, additional work was necessary to make sense and appeal for validation. The degree to which participants were able to weave cultural narratives around their own experience and understanding was an aspect of coherence attainment. The need to attend to the mandated cultural narratives of masculinity and male perpetration was also an appeal to coherence, for in going against such cultural prescriptions, the male victim narrative may not make much sense to some audiences.

In taking all of this into consideration, from temporal and causal details to the thematic and culturally validated aspects, there was a spectrum of coherence across the 18 participants. At one edge, there were participants such as Kieran and Eli, who told a coherent narrative that made sense chronologically, causally, thematically, and culturally. They had clear moments of meaning-making, both at the level of local coherence in the selection of appropriately detailed incident-focused accounts, and global coherence that spanned the overarching narrative of their abusive relationships. On the other hand, Dennis and Jacob moved backwards and forwards chronologically, omitting potentially pertinent information and including other, seemingly tangential details as they struggled to provide local and global coherence within the context of their interview. Both were seemingly unsure what information was relevant, and in what order to present it.

10.4.1 *The Coherence of Kieran and Eli*

Notably, both Kieran and Eli had escaped abusive intimate relationships many years ago, although Kieran experienced a second abusive relationship which ended 3 years before the interview. Both had fathered children with their abusive

partner; both had experienced physical, emotional, and controlling coercive abuse, and both had taken on a 'survivor identity' (Delker, Salton, & Mclean 2020), using their testimony to raise awareness of domestic abuse.

Neither Kieran nor Eli drew upon cultural narratives of their own childhood trauma to make sense of their experience, and so neither delved into their childhood at the beginning of the interview. Kieran gave the name of the town he was born in, but then moved straight to his adulthood. Eli began at the beginning of the abusive relationship. They both signalled from the start that they had some understanding of the narration they were about to undertake.

Kieran Well you might need more than two hours.
 laughs Okay my name is [Kieran Erm I was born in [location] at 18 I
 joined the military,

Eli Yeah, I'll tell it to you concisely, um, just cut to the main details. I think
 it's probably the easiest. So, um, I met my ex-wife when I was-

Eli and Kieran both provided a narrative that followed a coherent chronological and causal trajectory. Attending to the context of the interview, they used specific, appropriately detailed, clearly structured local narratives to illustrate the severity of their abuse, as well as to act as turning points within the global narrative. Not only were they able to provide event detail, attending to both chronology and causation, but they were also able to step back from the description to provide insights and reflections, evidencing a significant degree of meaning-making. This is illustrated well within Kieran's account, (Appendix I) in which, as well as describing the turning point of his final assault and subsequent events, he reflects on wider cultural expectations, previous audience responses, and the policy and practice of the police at the time of his arrest.

Both Kieran and Eli talked of other times they had told their story, and Eli reflected on how such an experience had enabled them to do so more coherently. Again, this speaks to the relational aspect of narrative, the role of the audience and the act of narration in helping individuals attain coherence.

Eli I had to think long and hard about this for my talk, so you've probably caught me at a good time. Had you asked me six months ago you would have just got a garbled mess.

Importantly Kieran and Eli revealed how, for different reasons, they were selective of what they included and reflected on the reasons for this. This not only demonstrated their command of their narrative, but, in their reasoning for certain omissions, they spoke to the powerful narrative factors of identity and perceived culpability. Kieran spoke of how he found it difficult to talk about his second abusive relationship.

Kieran I don't normally talk about the second one in- when I give my talks, because to be honest with you I still find it quite- I struggled to accept. I- I left that relationship, it's got to be three years ago now, and I still find that quite hard to deal with to be honest. That I came out of one and went straight into another. Um, it is fairly typical as far as domestic abuse is concerned. A lot of people do come out of one abusive relationship and find themselves in another. Yeah, well, I find that quite hard to talk about.

This excerpt speaks to an element of Kieran's narrative that, despite the overall level of coherence, seems to present an ongoing dissonance between his identity as a self-reliant and independent man, and his experience of victimhood. Early in the interview he explained that:

Kieran I just didn't think I was the kind of person to become a victim of domestic abuse.
[incoherent – though I know?] There's no such thing as a typical victim.

Again, he refers to his knowledge of domestic abuse patterns and norms, but there is a dissonance when it comes to applying that to himself. This perhaps speaks to the dilemmas of agency and stability. The narrative of reclaiming agency upon exiting the abusive relationship, offering the chance of a separation between the former victim self and a present-day agentic self, is complicated by the second abusive relationship. Hypothetically, having two such abusive relationships could make it harder to defend against a culturally endorsed questioning of the victim's role in their abuse. The unspoken question becomes not only 'why don't they leave?' but also, 'why did they do it again?' It is significant that this is the element that Kieran finds hardest to talk about, that he chooses not to tell, as this is the element which remains a potential threat to the reestablishment of an agentic masculine identity.

Eli's reasoning for holding back some of his story in previous narrations again contained elements of the culpability question and evidenced the difficulty that some forms of abuse pose in trying to convey an understanding to others.

Eli She made me think, this- so this didn't make it into my talk, I just couldn't- kind of, describe it properly without it sounding a bit *sigh* trivial, but it was quite a big deal.

I basically cut all contact with my parents for a while because she managed to convince me that, you know, I was immature and I needed to grow up, and I was too reliant on them, and they were the problem, and so I actually rang them and said that I didn't want to contact them for six months which, obviously, they were on the floor, because I've always been very close to my parents.

In his reference to a fear that his experience might seem trivial, Eli is mirroring the feelings expressed by Dennis, who described how watching Love Island was unbearable and abusive, but not in a way that might be understood by an audience. Again, we see those aspects of abuse that do not fit the dramatic event-focused narrative being the hardest to talk about. Secondly, perhaps the 'why don't they leave?' question seems harder to defend against in situations such as this, where it was Eli's actions, in cutting ties with his parents, that might be seen as contributing to his abusive situation.

Eli and Kieran provided coherent global narratives on both a local and global level that showed significant evidence of meaning-making. However, even with such command of their story, and even though they had both reached a point where they could use their narrative in a generative sense, to help raise awareness of domestic abuse, there remained aspects of their story which were hard to tell, which remained un-narrated.

10.4.2 *Dennis and Jacob's struggle for coherence*

At the other edge of the coherence spectrum, Dennis and Jacob struggled to provide a coherent global narrative within the context of their interview. In further contrast to Kieran and Eli, Dennis and Jacob had been out of their abusive relationships for no more than a year. This perhaps speaks to the importance of time in the forging of coherence, which may be due to more than one factor. Firstly, time provides individuals with the opportunity to contemplate and to tell their story through sharing with friends and family, therapeutic discussion, or, as Kieran and Eli had done, in giving testimony as a survivor of domestic abuse. Each telling provides a rich opportunity to frame and reframe their experience towards a goal of a coherent narrative that is valid in the eyes of both themselves and their audience. Put simply, perhaps neither Dennis nor Jacob had had the time to contemplate and make sense of their experience, and this was reflected in the incoherence of their narration.

The more time that has passed the greater the temporal distance between the act of narration and the event. Psychologically speaking, this perhaps enables a clearer division between the subjective self, narrating in the here and now, and the objective self of memory. Such a splitting might allow for the application of different cultural narratives which, as discussed previously in this chapter, may not be welcome for their current agentic identity, but can be used to validate the behaviours of their former self.

In beginning their accounts, Jacob and Dennis differed from each other. Jacob was less sure of where to begin.

Jacob W-What—do you want- what, from when it first happened? or-

Following this initial uncertainty, Jacob was able to provide a brief but relatively coherent overview of his abusive marriage. On the other hand, Dennis appeared at first to have a clearer understanding, beginning with a thematic statement to summarise and contextualise his life story.

Dennis My life so far, I'm in a constant battle erm, to erm, respect myself and forgive myself and change myself, erm, in the right way.
erm. I found out two years ago that I had ADHD and dyslexia. It was a profound moment because I realised from that point that I had a habit of getting into abusive relationships because I always need help.

However, beyond this opening statement, Dennis didn't go into his childhood, nor start at the beginning of his abusive relationship. Instead, he talked about how his domestic abuse support worker has helped him understand that needing help isn't a reason to be abused (again, the importance of a third party) and about how he gets frustrated and into negative thought patterns when he gets things wrong. Only then did he begin a more chronologically sequenced narrative, starting from the end of the abusive intimate relationship and attempting to provide an account of what has happened since. Dennis' opening response gave no details about the abusive intimate relationship prior to their separation. Instead, it consisted of repeated attempts to provide an account of his suspension from work following allegations he believes were made by people close to his ex-partner. Each effort to do so was stifled, as it occurred to him that there was prior information that his audience might need to make sense of it all. Knowing what information to present and in what order is what is necessary to create the hermeneutic narrative package, it is a fundamental task of coherence, and what Dennis and Jacob appeared to struggle most with.

Jacob was able to chart a narrative course across his 20+ year relationship that started at the beginning and ended with his present-day situation, but the sequence of events was not always clear, and it lacked the details that would validate or evidence his experience. Furthermore, there was a distinct lack of meaning-making reflections. An example of a lack of detail can be seen in his reference to his wife becoming unwell but omitting to say in what way. Although I attempted to get him

to elaborate on this narratively, it took a direct question of whether she was physically or mentally unwell to find out.

Jacob they did put her down that she had got a personality disorder. which I think is, I've been told by my counsellor that I shouldn't use this as an excuse, but I think it's her personality disorder that is setting her off like that, because one minute she could be the person I used to know, and the next minute she would be this nasty person you don't want to know.

Here again we see the power of the personality disorder narrative being drawn upon to explain an abuser's behaviour. This excerpt reveals that Jacob did have some details and associated meaning-making to draw upon, but perhaps he had not brought them together to make a coherent global narrative, or he wasn't aware that these were details that might help an audience to understand his story. However, in this instance it is difficult to know what was behind such an inhibition. Jacob's reference to his counsellor's advice that his wife's illness does not excuse her behaviour, could again speak to the power of audience and co-production over time. His counsellor's resistance to the use of a personality disorder narrative in his previous narration, perhaps directed Jacob to avoid using it subsequently.

Furthermore, in seeking to understand the different factors in any given narration, it is important to consider the narrative capacity of individual narrators. Dennis was clear in detailing his dyslexia, and research is beginning to show a link between dyslexia, narrative comprehension difficulties, and reduced executive functioning (Twait, Farah, & Horowitz-Kraus, 2018). It is not unreasonable, therefore, to consider that such a learning difficulty may affect how an individual makes narrative sense of their own biography, and how such a difference in narrative capability between a narrator and audience may influence the attainment of coherence.

In considering other factors that may shape the attainment of narrative coherence, it is also important to consider cultural differences. Dennis came from a cultural background that has a rich story-telling heritage that has been noted as markedly different to the story telling traditions of the western world. Perhaps my perception of a lack of coherence in his telling was more to do with a disconnect between our respective understanding of how to go about telling a story. After several attempts

by me to steer Dennis towards providing a more coherent narrative, I asked the following:

Interviewer **So if somebody was to write a book, or if you were to write a book about your life, how would that go?**

Dennis I wrote a book about my life actually...
... So I basically go to [Dennis' country of origin] and I get kidnapped at the airport, and my son has to go on this massive adventure all around the country solving puzzles and clues, meeting people, [native people], different cultures.
Coz this is wh- how I grew up, and I want him to see life from my perspective.
And he rescues me in the end.
Pause [3sec]
And um. That's how it was in the relationship.
I had lost myself.
And I could never show him this but if I- through this book I could show who I really am, and that I'm still here and that I- and that I wrote this story to tell my son that no matter where I am he will always find me.
Because he really is the hero of my story, you know?
And I do feel in the relationship, I was kidnapped.
The real me.
I was kidnapped, and he's saving me every time.
And that's- that's how it is.

In this, Dennis revealed that although he was not able to provide a coherent life story for the occasion of his interview, he had made a narrative sense of his experience. In saying he had written a book about his life, Dennis did not mean in terms of a biographical narrative account, setting out the sequence of events and trajectory of a life. Instead, he appears to use a fictional conceit of himself being kidnapped, and his son having to rescue him, to convey something about his life. In the brief outline provided, his book appears to follow the plot of the 'monomyth', the hero's quest (Cambell, 1988), possibly one of the most prolific narratives within our culture, featuring as the basic plot for many a myth, novel, and film. However different from the way in which other participants went about it, Dennis has been able to draw upon a cultural narrative (the hero's quest) to structure a coherent

story that he hopes will validate his identity within the eyes of his seemingly most important audience, his son.

The occasion of a research interview, however, implicitly calls for a different form of account. And arguably Dennis knew this, as he did not initially embark on providing me with the kidnap story. But for potentially many reasons, including individual narrative capabilities, cultural differences, and the lack of temporal distance from events, Dennis was unable to construct a narrative that I, as his audience, found fully coherent.

As the interviews progressed, and both Dennis and Jacob struggled to provide a chronologically or causally coherent account, I was instinctively drawn into a co-production, using open questions to attempt to find out what happened, how it happened, and in what order. This was testament to the power of the collaborative impetus to achieve coherence described by Linde (1993).

Due to the discursive, relational, and occasioned nature of narration, it is not a straight-forward task to assess individual meaning-making and coherence. Although much insight might be gained from a narrative account, there are clearly some narratives that are highly coherent to their audience, and others that aren't. A lack of coherence may indicate that the narrator is still trying to make sense of it all, and this may be in part due to having little opportunity to tell their story. However, it could also be influenced by an individual's cognitive capacity for narration, or their command of the culture or language, and there is also the possibility of just basic misunderstanding. There are so many factors that direct the occasion, so many variables within each constituent of that co-production, that a seeming lack of coherence may not reflect its absence in the narrator's mind, but more a failure of understanding and communication at the relational level.

In coming to understand these different factors and the dynamics of their interaction, this analysis has provided the constituent parts of a model that could help in understanding the process of autobiographical narration. The proposed model that I will set out in the remainder of this chapter is the culmination of my analysis of how these male victim participants managed their identity in relation to the context of this study.

10.5 A complex model of narrative identity for male victims

In the process of this study, I have composed a model of identity work within autobiographical narration. This incorporates the existing identity theory and knowledge from multiple disciplines, as set out across Chapter 2 and 3; builds upon Kaplan and Garner's (2017) proposal that identity can be understood as a complex and dynamic system that traverses the three tiers of individual, relational, and collective human experience; and is empirically grounded through the analysis of these men's accounts. Arguably, this model is an incremental step forward in conceptualising how such an identity system is managed through narration, and the various factors and drivers that shape it. It shows how these men were driven to account for dominant cultural narratives of masculinity and male perpetration, whilst managing identity objectives of agency and stability, to attain coherence and validity within the occasion of their interview. To this end, they drew upon available cultural narratives to attain less threatening identity positions and validate their narrative and themselves.

A true descriptive title would be a 'complex and dynamic model of identity work within autobiographical narration'. However, for brevity, I will refer to it as the 'Complex Model of Narrative Identity' (CMNI). The following diagrams set out the composition of the CMNI, beginning with its basic components and processes, before populating it with the findings of this study.

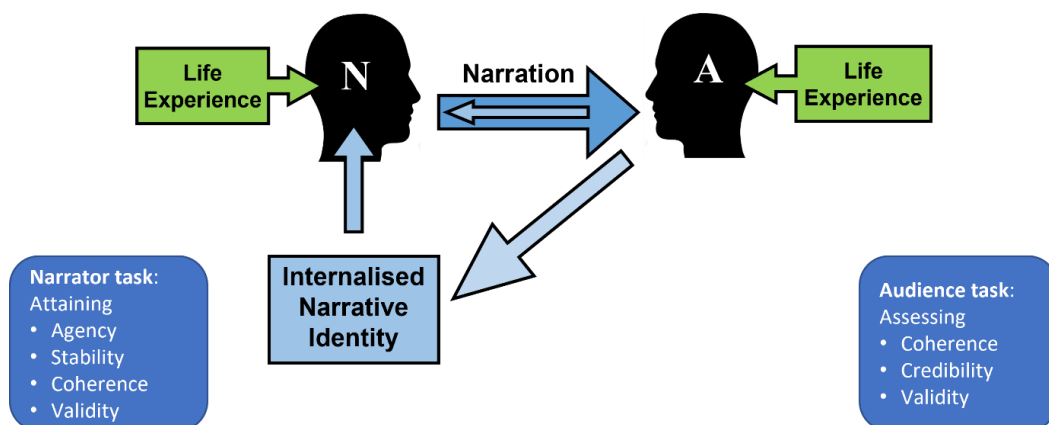


Figure 4 – The act of narration

Figure 4. illustrates a basic dynamic of autobiographical narration between the narrator (N) and their audience (A), with their differing objectives outlined in the

dark blue boxes. The narrator is composed of their subjective and objective identity, respectively the narrator and their 'Internalised Narrative Identity' (the 'I' and the 'Me'). This diagram represents the individual acting at the relational level. The co-productive nature is represented by the arrows between the figures. In telling their story the narrator (N) draws upon their internalised narrative identity and strives to achieve their identity objectives (tasks of agency, stability, coherence and validation). In turn, the audience (A) assesses the coherence and credibility of what they are hearing and, through their questions and responses, shapes the way the story is told. How the audience responds provides the narrator with a sense of validation which is internalised and subsequently shapes the way they will tell their story in the future.

Both the narrator and their audience bring to the occasion their whole life experience (green boxes). For the Narrator their life experience will shape how they go about their narration. This includes factors such as previous experience of telling their story; of hearing similar stories; of being interviewed; etc. All of which shape how they approach and manage the task. For the Audience, their life experience will be used to gauge the coherence of what they are hearing. Does it correspond with other such stories they have heard? Does it resonate with or contradict what the audience has personally experienced? Although just two small boxes within the CMNI, these represent the accumulated life experience of each party and all the preconceptions, prejudices, and predilections, built over a lifetime, and uniquely nuanced to each party.

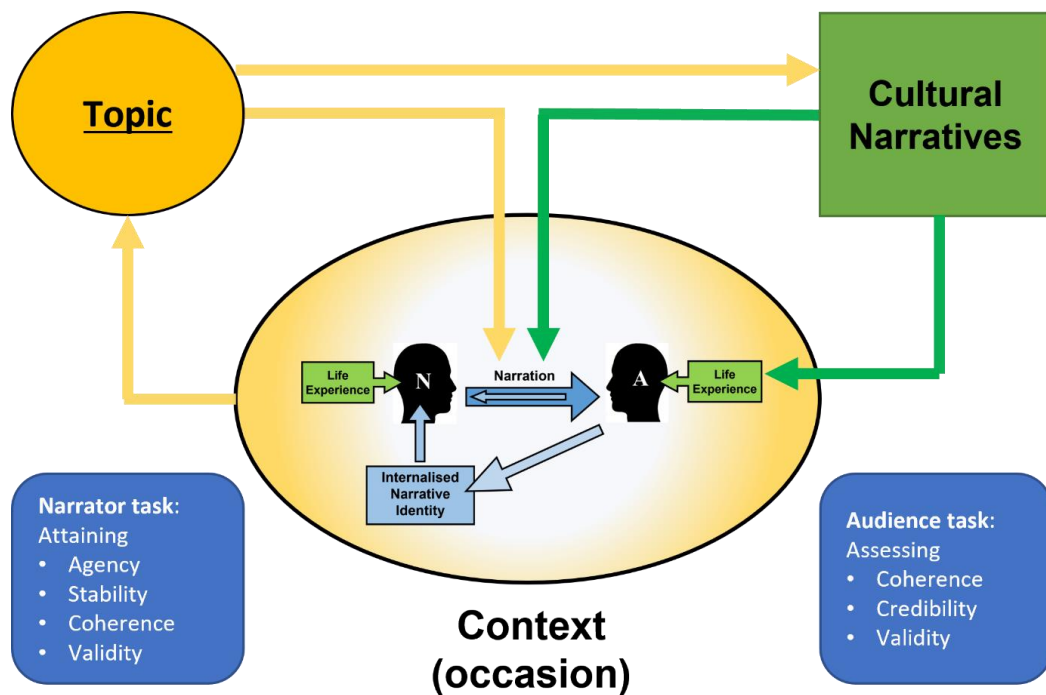


Figure 5 – The inclusion of context, topic, and cultural narratives to complete a complex and dynamic model of identity work within autobiographical narration

Figure 5. introduces the context of the narration (shown in yellow) and the influence of cultural narratives (shown in green). The context includes all the variables which make up the occasion, including the role, relationship, and status of the narrator and audience, the environment in which the narration takes place, and the reason for the occasion to occur. The culmination of these factors has the potential to create significant variability between narrations. For example, the narration that might take place at a police station, between a suspect and officer, might differ hugely from the narration of the same events between two friends at a social occasion.

Importantly, as shown in Figure 5. the context also directs the topic focus of narration. The context of this study was a research interview with male survivors of domestic abuse. This orientated the focus to participants' experience of abuse. These men were asked to tell of their life so far, and although some gave a brief cursory overview of their life, for most, their narrative simply started with the beginning of their abusive relationship. Those who did delve into their childhood did so because it was important to their understanding of their adult experience of domestic abuse. Logically, if the interview had concerned another aspect of their life, such as career or hobby, then context would have directed the narrative focus

to a different topic. Arguably, different topics of conversation will enable or require attendance to different cultural narratives.

Cultural narratives influence the form and content of narration by directing attendance to mandated narratives, whilst also enabling meaning and understanding through available narratives. The audience, in attempting to assess the coherence, credibility, and validity of what they are hearing, will also draw upon their own understanding of these cultural narratives. The audience's engagement may be directed by a wish to attend to discrepancies they perceive between their existing understanding of the cultural narratives, and what the narrator is presenting. In doing so, the audience may also introduce cultural narratives themselves, transmitting them to the narrator and aiding an ongoing, iterative process of narrative sense-making.

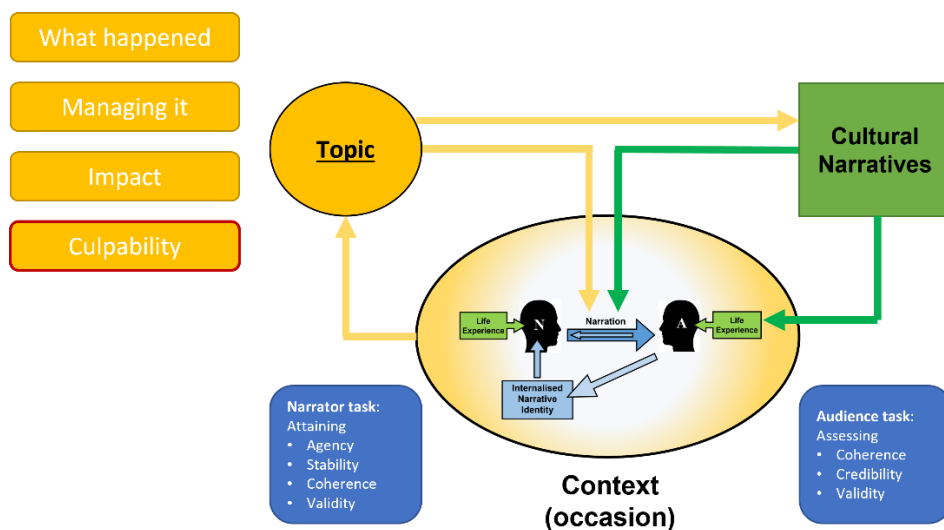


Figure 6 - How these men attended to the topic

Figure 6 sets out how these men approached the topic of IPA within their narration. As detailed in Chapter 8 and Chapter 9, in addressing the topic of domestic abuse participants spoke to three aspects: what happened, how they responded or managed, and what was the short- and long-term impact of the abuse. To qualify for participation in this study, participants reported that they had been victims of female perpetrated IPA. It is understandable to consider, therefore, that there was an onus, a social contract perhaps, for them to evidence this. It was also readily apparent, in carrying out a study of male victims, this was a topic I was interested

in hearing about. Thus, in speaking to the topic of domestic abuse their narration included attempts to describe that abuse, to tell of what happened and the effect it had upon them. *Figure 6.* also includes the element of ‘culpability’ as a component of the topic focus. As previously discussed, this was a powerful drive felt by participants to account for their role within the abusive relationship. This was driven by several factors, not least the need to attain a position of agency, as well as a cultural expectation to answer the ‘why don’t they leave?’ question. This is included here as it makes demands on the way the narrator accounts for their abuse. It is logical to think this may be a feature of narrating most experiences that go against cultural norms and values, but perhaps it is not characteristic of all autobiographical narration.

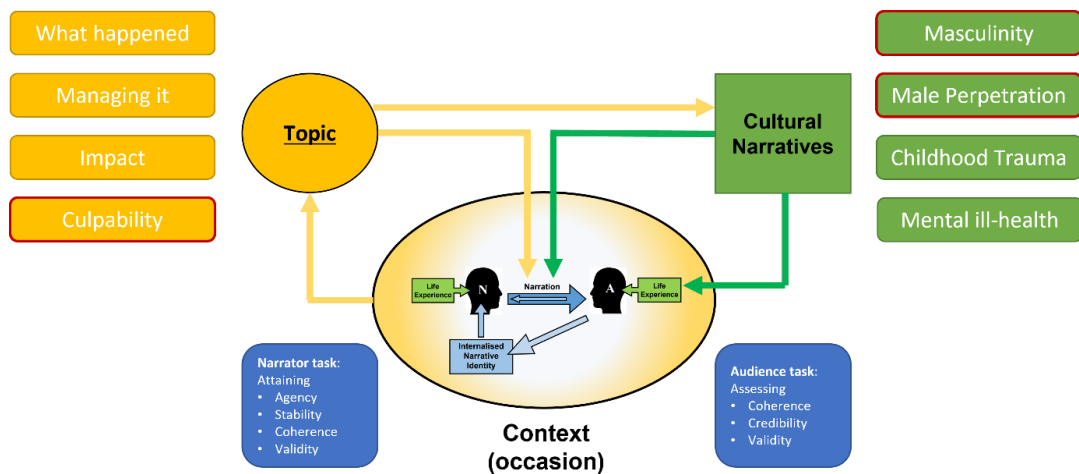


Figure 7 - The cultural narratives directed by the topic and relevant to these men's stories

The topic of domestic abuse, in turn, directed the cultural narratives required and available for narration (*Figure 7*). For male victims in this study, this included cultural narratives of Masculinity and Male Perpetration: that men are meant to be dominant and are usually seen to be the abuser, not the abused. In working to communicate and make sense of the abuse, and to establish a valid identity, there were several other cultural narratives available to participants. These were dependent on their individual biographies and personal circumstances. *Figure 7.* includes childhood trauma, and mental ill-health for illustrative purposes, but as discussed in Chapter 9, there were others, including contemporary typological understandings of domestic abuse and Feminism. Participants also included

narratives of fatherhood and the good husband/partner. These last two, although not explored in depth within this study, were evident, and have previously been identified by others (Corbally, 2011).

Within this study, not only did participants draw upon a range of available cultural narratives to try and make sense of their experiences, but they also evidenced how some of these cultural narratives had been transmitted to them by others in previous narrations. This is an important component of the CMNI and illustrates its complex and dynamic character. Not only is narration co-produced in the relational moment, but also iteratively, over time, through repeated narrations. Each narration builds upon the experience of previous narrations to hone the weaving of personal experience with cultural knowledge towards the goal of identity validation. For victims of IPA, this is a difficult task due to the antithesis of victimhood to agency. For male victims, the dominant cultural narratives of masculinity and male perpetration make it difficult to weave the personal with the cultural in a way that attains validity. Furthermore, there appeared to be few available cultural narratives that were unproblematic, whether by masking the abuse, necessitating other stigmatised identity positions, or placing a burden of caring responsibility upon the victim.

10.6 **Summary**

This chapter examined how participants engaged in a discursive process of autobiographical narration to try and attain a coherent and valid identity position as a male survivor of female-perpetrated IPA. Key and overlapping identity objectives of masculinity and agency resonated with a cultural inclination to consider the victim as an agent in their own abuse, whilst being diametrically opposed to the concept of victimhood. The consideration of their own agency in relation to the abuse was described as the hardest part to deal with.

In attending to the threat to their masculinity and adult agentic identity, participants drew upon available cultural narratives to establish less threatening, and more validated, identity positions. The achievement of validity for both their former and current self, pivoted on the attainment of coherence, a subjective construct co-produced at the relational level of narration. This attainment was thus dependent on many factors across these levels, including the individual capacities and cultural

biographies of the narrator and audience, as well as the context within which the narration takes place.

The CMNI set out in this chapter, illustrates how the core components (the internalised narrative identity, the narrator, the audience, and the context) interacted to orientate to the topic of domestic abuse, attend to the relevant mandated cultural narratives, and draw upon available cultural narratives to cooperatively achieve as coherent an account as possible. In engaging with this process, the narrator works with their audience at the relational level, to align with accepted narratives at the cultural level, and achieve validation at the individual level.

The CMNI has the potential to assist in understanding what is going on in such narrative occasions: what is trying to be achieved, and how the different parties play their role. This study shows how it applies to these male victims of IPA, by revealing the pressures of mandated narratives that come to bear on a survivor's narration, as well as some of the potentially helpful narratives that might be available. The potential use of such the CMNI by professionals will be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 11 – Discussion

11.1 Introduction

This thesis is an examination of how male victims talk about their experiences and what it means for their identity. I began by describing a model of identity that included both psychological and sociological approaches and considered how a person's identity is forged between individuals within a wider cultural context (Chapter 2). Integral to this process is the act of narration, the study of which has driven the interdisciplinary field of Narrative Identity (Chapter 3). This study sought to use this model as a lens, through which to better understand how male victims make sense of their experiences of Intimate Partner Abuse (IPA). To do this it was important to consider contemporary understandings of both domestic abuse and masculinity (Chapters 4 and 5).

The theoretical foundations of identity and narration that underpin this study directed the methods of data collection and analysis (Chapter 6). The four chapters of analysis (Chapter 7 – 10) examine how these male participants talked about their experiences of abuse, their narrative sense making, and the identity tasks that directed much of what they said, and how they said it. This concluding discussion chapter considers some key learning from this study and its implications for male victims/survivors, social work professionals, and our collective understanding of the male victim experience.

This study acknowledged that some aspects of what men experience and how they make sense of it may be specific to their gender. The spectrums of sex and gender are characteristic of the human species, and thus all human experience can be gendered in some manner. It is therefore important when supporting victims of abuse, to consider the way in which their experience is shaped by their gender. Much of what participants spoke of is potentially universal. Both men and women can be physically, emotionally, psychologically, and sexually abused, controlled, separated from their children, and suffer long term physical and mental ill health as a result (Salom et al. 2015). However, the nature of how these men experienced abuse, some of the abuse they received, and how they made sense of and talked about it, was shaped by the fact that they were men. This chapter considers both the universal implications of what was said in terms of narrative identity and

supporting victims of IPA, as well as how male status shaped experience and sense making, and what that might mean for the support needs of male victims.

This study makes significant contributions to knowledge in the following ways:

- It reveals how male victims may speak about their abuse, including how some forms of abuse are harder to narrate and make sense of than others, and how different cultural narratives can be inhibiting, emancipatory, enabling, or divisive.
- It proposes a complex and dynamic model of identity work through autobiographical narration (CMNI) applied specifically to the context of male victims and survivors, but also contributing to the wider field of identity theory.

Furthermore, this study highlights the potential harm of not developing our understanding of how male victims experience IPA. This was evident in the small number who talked of feminist conspiracy and corruption, but was most starkly demonstrated within participants' talk of suicide. All this learning holds implications for individuals, professionals, and wider society in how we understand identity, intimate partner abuse, and male survivors.

11.2 **Strengths and limitations of this study**

A key strength of this study is the congruence between the focus of its enquiry (narrative identity), the nature of its data (life story interviews), and the method of analysis (narrative analysis). Furthermore such a wholly narrative approach provided a free canvas for these men to tell their own story in their own words. It provided the space to reveal the unexpected, the nuanced, and the infinitely variable ways that abuse can manifest within individual lives. In starting with such an open request 'to tell of their life so far', this method captured more natural accounts of how men may talk about their abuse than would have been possible by more structured interview and survey methods. However, it is important to recognise the nuanced nature of such naturalness. As the proposed model outlines, context will shape narration, and the context of the research interview may be very different to other occasions. However, this does not detract from the validity of these accounts. Individuals may face many different contexts in which they are asked, or seek, to tell their story. From therapeutic couches to police

interviews, intimate conversations to social work assessments, all contexts carry their own agenda and narration will be shaped accordingly. What this methodology enables is the opportunity for a narrator-led account, with few interviewer directions, and a glimpse, perhaps, of a more instinctive narrative process.

The sample of 18 men was limited to those who identified as victims of female perpetrated IPA, i.e., those who took part were already aware that what they experienced was abusive. However, this study does provide some insight into how non-aware victims make sense of their experience. Participants such as Eli and Hassan were able to describe how they made sense of their situation at the time in terms of believing their abuser was ill, or that their own psychological difficulties were to blame for the conflict. The significant insight these participants were able to provide was richer for them having the clarity of hindsight, as well as being able to reflect on their experience of not knowing at the time. This has the potential to help inform professionals working with male victims who do not recognize the abuse for what it is.

Although all participants had identified what they experienced as abusive, there was considerable variation in the sense they were able to make of it at the time of the interview. As well as those who could reflect coherently and insightfully on their experience of recognizing and not recognizing their abuse, this sample also included some who had yet to make coherent sense of their story. To understand why there was such variety it is important to consider individual life situations at the time of the interview and the different reasons they may have had for taking part. Those who had left their abusive relationships relatively recently, and who were sometimes still dealing with the entanglement of their lives with their abusive partner (primarily through their relationship with their children), were perhaps partially driven to take part in this research by a need to make sense of their experience themselves. Those who had passed many years since the end of their abusive relationships, who had the time to process and make sense of their experience, were perhaps driven by a more generative impulse, seeking to share the sense they had made and contribute to wider support and understanding. As will be discussed further in this chapter, this has implications for professionals in considering where individuals are in their sense making journey when engaging with services.

A further strength of this study is the diversity of participants. Cultural context is integral to the dynamic process of narration, this includes not just the setting in

which two people meet and talk, but also the cultural background and personal biography of each person taking part. I did not seek to specifically collect data from participants on their ethnocultural background. However, for some, such details were important to their sense making process and thus were included in their narration. Because of this it was possible to gauge aspects of diversity within the sample, including differing nationalities, religion, physical ability, socioeconomic status, and learning differences. The richness of this diversity meant that it was possible to see how such differences significantly shaped how people told their story and made sense of their experience. For example, Malcolm's framing of masculinity with reference to his physical disability, or Dennis' understanding of his vulnerability through his ADHD diagnosis. The diversity within these 18 in-depth case studies reveals how the lived experience of each person's biography shapes the way cultural narratives can be engaged with, to weave a life story that attends to our basic identity needs of agency, stability, and validation.

11.3 Contributions to knowledge of male victims and how they may speak of their abuse

When Brown et al. (2009) chose the term 'ghost fathers' to describe the presence of men within child welfare practice they did so "*because in order to see a ghost, one has to first believe in their existence and relevance*" (p26). This is perhaps even more relevant to male victims. The marginalisation of men and fathers within social work practice (Brown et al, 2009; Critchley, 2022, Philip et al., 2021) means that male victims can be hidden within a population that is itself already largely hidden. This study contributes to a growing body of research that speaks to the existence of male victims and how they can suffer from the full range of abuse identified within studies of female victim experiences. As discussed in Chapter 7, these include psychological and emotional abuse, financial abuse, sexual abuse, legal administrative abuse, physical violence, and coercive control. Furthermore, this study speaks particularly to two aspects of abuse less explored in existing literature, those of sexual and legal administrative abuse.

11.3.1 Sexual abuse, emasculation, and male victims

Six of the 18 participants spoke of sexual elements of their abuse. For three of them, this was characterised by verbal, psychological, or physical abuse in

response to an unwillingness to engage in sex. For the other three their abuse involved sexual acts. This included psychological, emotional, and physical violence during sex, as well as coerced acts of intercourse.

Sexual abuse perpetrated by female intimate partners on men is one of the least recognised forms of abuse. As discussed within the literature review, it was believed for some time that it simply didn't happen, but recent research with male victims (Bates, 2019a, Weare, 2017; 2018) is beginning to dispel this assumption. Participant accounts within this study add to this understanding, confirming its existence and evidencing some of the diversity of form that it can take: from the violent consequences of not having sex, to sexual violence, and coerced penetration. Furthermore, accounts such as Brian's, Grant's and Hassan's, evidence a facet of sexual abuse that manifests in a particular way for men. The emasculating nature of their sexual humiliation can be understood as the weaponization of hegemonic masculinity. Dominant cultural narratives of male sexual prowess and heterosexuality gave power to their abusers to cast those who do not conform, as pathetic or homosexual. For Grant and Hassan, such emasculation caused extended harm on an emotional and psychological level. In this we see a facet of sexual abuse that is specifically nuanced to male victim experience, and therefore particularly relevant to the consideration of male victim support.

If masculinity is the precarious social construct that Bosson et al (2013) assert, then in speaking to other men about their experience of emasculation, men risk a sense of further emasculation. This was perhaps glimpsed within Grant's interview in his statement that "in fact again, recalling this to talk to you I can still feel a feeling". When considered alongside Caswell et al.'s (2014) research indicating that threats of emasculation may be met not only with masculine posturing, but also a physiological stress response, this may have specific implications for social workers engaging with male victims of IPA. Masculine posturing amounts to the acting out of hegemonic ideals of what it is to be a man. For those who do not have access to certain aspects of the hegemonic masculinity, such as financial status, the work of Schrock and Schwalbe (2009) would suggest there is a drive for 'compensatory' acts of masculinity, such as aggression. This is not to say that behind every aggressive man a social worker meets, is a victim of emasculating IPA, but that when working with a male survivor, their victim status may be instinctively masked by behaviours that are not associated with victimhood. In such

situations, both the posturing and the potential dismissal of victimhood are directed by cultural narratives of what it is to be a victim and what it is to be a man.

11.3.2 *Legal and administrative abuse and male victims*

16 of the 18 participants described incidents and patterns of abuse where their partner utilized legal and administrative frameworks to control them. In such situations professionals became instruments of the abuse, implementing a framework that had been manipulated by the abuser to control and harm their victim. Much of this occurred once the intimate relationship had ended but importantly it was not just confined to this. Key aspects of legal and administrative frameworks were used within the relationship to maintain control and cultivate dependency. This involved the withholding of their names from birth certificates and tenancy agreements, and false accusations of assault.

Legal administrative abuse appears to be particularly characteristic to research on male victim experience. The term was first coined within an Australian study of male victims where it was identified as a hitherto unexamined theme:

...participants reported that some perpetrators manipulate legal and administrative resources to the detriment of their male partners. They believed that this happened because employees of the relevant non-governmental and government agencies hold stereotypes that men are always the perpetrators and that females are the victims.

(Tilbrook et al, 2010)

The ability for abusers to weaponize legal and administrative systems is enabled in significant part by the prominence and power of cultural narratives of male perpetration and masculinity. As Tilbrook et al identified, and as explicitly stated by participants such as Kieran, professionals' expectations of the male perpetration narrative empowered their abuser and enabled further abuse. For those with children, following the end of the intimate relationship, legal and administrative abuse was one of the few remaining avenues for the abuser to continue to control and hurt their victim. Arguably, the continuation of what might be referred to as second wave abuse (Corbally, Hughes & Delay, 2016) is thus heavily dependent on the dominance of such cultural narratives of masculinity and male perpetration. This poses a problem within the wider field of domestic abuse, for the dominance of such a narrative is underpinned by government statistics that show women are

twice as likely to be victims of IPA than men. An awareness of the prominence and probability of male perpetration, which has been so instrumental in demonstrating the need for female victim support, in turn exacerbates the abuse of male victims whose partners use the male perpetration narrative to weaponize legal and administrative systems.

This is a controversial area of discussion that links with the contested concept of parental alienation. As discussed in Chapter 4, this is not an abstract discussion, but a matter of child safeguarding that plays out within the family courts. Within public discourse there is a realistic fear that abusers will use concepts of parental alienation to enable court directed contact with their children and place children in danger (Adams 2006; Willis & O'Donahue, 2018; Birchall, 2021). But, to deny parental alienation takes place is to blinker one's understanding of what abusers are capable of. Regardless of gender, sadistic and controlling abusers are capable of using any means to hurt and control their victim. This logically can include alienating a victim from their children, and to such an end, making false accusations of abuse as described in the accounts of Owen, Paulo, and Callum. Although this may happen regardless of the genders of perpetrator and victim, the analysis of this study indicates that dominant cultural narratives of masculinity and male perpetration, in participant's eyes, enable female abusers to weaponize legal and administrative systems to deprive male victims of a relationship with their children.

It is important to note that regardless of their gender, legal and administrative systems have historically not been seen as effective in supporting victims of domestic abuse. As Humphreys and Absler document (2011), the response of social work to domestic abuse has been characterised as one of ignorance and callous indifference. With the prioritisation of child safeguarding, mothers who are victims of IPA have been 'responsibilised' (Arnall & Stewart, 2021) for the abuse, and seen as the victim, the cause, and the solution (Hester, 2010). In describing a particular case study of a victim-mother Keeling and Wormer (2012) note that:

"From the woman's perspective the tactics used [by social workers] accentuated her powerlessness in much the same way as did those she was experiencing at the hands of her abusive partner."

(p1366).

From such research it is evident that the misguided and, at times, abusive response of legal and administrative systems does not just characterise male victim experience, and the fear of losing one's children to the abuser, or to the state, can be true of both male and female victims. But within the accounts of this study, it is possible to see how such abusive and sometimes intentionally manipulated professional responses are seemingly directed by prejudgments specific to the male victims' gender.

For both sexual and legal administrative abuse, this study reveals the nuanced ways in which dominant gendered narratives of masculinity and male perpetration served to make the situation worse for the victim by shaping how participants and others made sense of what was happening. This, however, was just one aspect of narrative sensemaking and its real world affects. On a more fundamental level, there were some forms of abuse that were simply more narratable than others.

11.3.3 *Pervasive Abuse is Narratively Harder to Tell*

Across the interviews, there was a sense of pervasive psychological, emotional, and controlling abuse that for some far outweighed the physical violence, but which was more difficult to talk about. This study identifies how abuse that centred around specific incidents, such as physical violence, or sexual abuse, were more straightforward to narrate than more pervasive abuse such as emotional or psychological attacks. This has several implications. If, as some propose, humans make sense of the world through narrative (Singer, 2004), then logically those aspects of abuse that are harder to narrate, are thus harder to make sense of. Being unable to narrate has the potential to hinder the establishment of a coherent understanding of what has happened and prevent validation in one's own eyes, as well as those of others. The opportunity for attaining validation through telling their story is thus hampered for victims of pervasive forms of abuse due to the nature of the abuse they experienced. However, not only does this study highlight this difficulty for male survivors, but it also reveals how participants sought to address such hurdles with the use of available cultural narratives through a process of narrative co-production.

11.4 The use of cultural narratives

The distinction made by this study between *mandated* and *available* cultural narratives is helpful to understand the process of narration. Analysis identified two mandated narratives for male victims - 'Masculinity' and of 'Male Perpetration of IPA'. Participants were driven to address these in relation to their own experience. To do this they drew upon available narratives, such as 'mental ill-health', or 'coercive controlling abuse', to validate their identity and make sense of their experience.

Findings indicate that these two mandated narratives can shape the experience of abuse by directing the judgements of others and enabling emasculation as an instrument of abuse. However, they also act as powerful influencers on how the victim tells their story. The mandated narrative of masculinity, combined with the identity need for agency, can be seen to drive the ever-present question of 'why didn't they leave?'. On the one hand the need for agency led some to take on a level of culpability for the abuse, reasoning that because they didn't leave, they were therefore part responsible. Yet, on the other hand, they also defended against this culpability by drawing upon available narratives to explain why they didn't leave. The available narratives identified within this study reveal ways in which participants worked to attain a valid identity position within their own story. However, some of these narratives came with their own dangers that could undermine the victim's position.

Using a cultural narrative of mental ill-health or childhood trauma to explain an abusive partner's behaviour can cast the victim as a carer: potentially unable to recognize the abuse for what it is, and duty bound to remain in the relationship to help their abuser to recover. This duty of care to a loved one is a very real factor within relationship decisions. Enshrined in the vows to care for each other "in sickness and in health", it is part of the powerful cultural narrative of marriage. When working to support families, such commitment is respected and expected in many circumstances. But, as this study reveals, practitioners need to be aware that such narratives may stand in the way of the recognition and disclosure of abuse, prolonging the abusive relationship and increasing exposure to harm.

The double-edged nature of the mental health or childhood trauma narratives when applied to the abuser, potentially helps explain the power of narcissism and personality disorders as a cultural narrative appearing in so many participant

accounts. The Narcissist narrative pathologizes and explains the abuser's deviance from both the ideal of a loving partner and the stereotype of femininity, yet does not place responsibility on the victim to stay and care for their abuser. This sets the narcissism narrative apart from other mental health narratives. Instead of acting to keep the victim duty bound to the relationship, it seemed to act as a turning point, appearing later in participant's stories and helping them understand that nothing was going to change; their abuser's lack of 'recovery' was not their failure.

This study also reveals the power of typological understandings of domestic abuse, i.e. the breaking down of domestic abuse into specific definitions of forms of abuse, with concrete examples of the actions and behaviours that it can involve. Doing so potentially sidesteps the gendered expectations found in the established, catch-all understanding of domestic abuse. This was particularly evident with coercive control. As a pervasive form of abuse this was difficult to convey as a narrative, but was understood narratively by participants thanks in part to the way it was communicated to them through stories both fictional (*The Archers*) and real (*Alex Skeel*, *Sally Challen*). This highlights how powerful and helpful the development of such a typology can be for male victims. The dissemination of such typological understandings, and the use of non-gendered conceptions of how abuse can manifest in intimate relationships, could be a positive avenue for practice development.

A focus on the details and patterns of what is happening, in the language we use and approach that we take to assessment and planning, may provide greater space for male victims to speak of their experience. This would entail a commitment to identify and describe the nature of the abuse that is taking place, to avoid where possible the blanket terms of 'domestic abuse' but be specific in terms of individuals being victim to, or experiencing, 'physical abuse' or 'controlling coercive abuse'. This focus would not negate a recognition of how gender can direct the manifestation of abuse, nor deny the misogyny and patriarchal elements of much abuse against women. But these must be considered as characteristics of abuse, rather than the primary definition.

A danger of not having a cultural understanding of abuse that can accommodate male victimhood was revealed within this study in the appearance of feminist conspiracy and corruption narratives. The dominance of feminist thought and activism within the field of domestic abuse was felt by some participants to leave

little room for the validation of their experiences of abuse. For a small number this was seen as a denial of male victim experience which fuelled their abuse, and evidenced a more systematic campaign to undermine, control, and attack men. Such an understanding runs the risk of empowering counter narratives that in turn deny the reality of feminism. The divisive nature of the resulting antifeminist discourse threatens to undermine the advances of gender equality that have been at the core of feminist philosophy and action. As discussed within Chapter 5, the anti-feminist and misogynistic narratives that can be found within certain corners of the online ‘manosphere’, are readily available to those looking for explanations as to why their experience has been so unjustly denied. Such a situation underlines the importance of the production and dissemination of cultural narratives that can accommodate male victimhood.

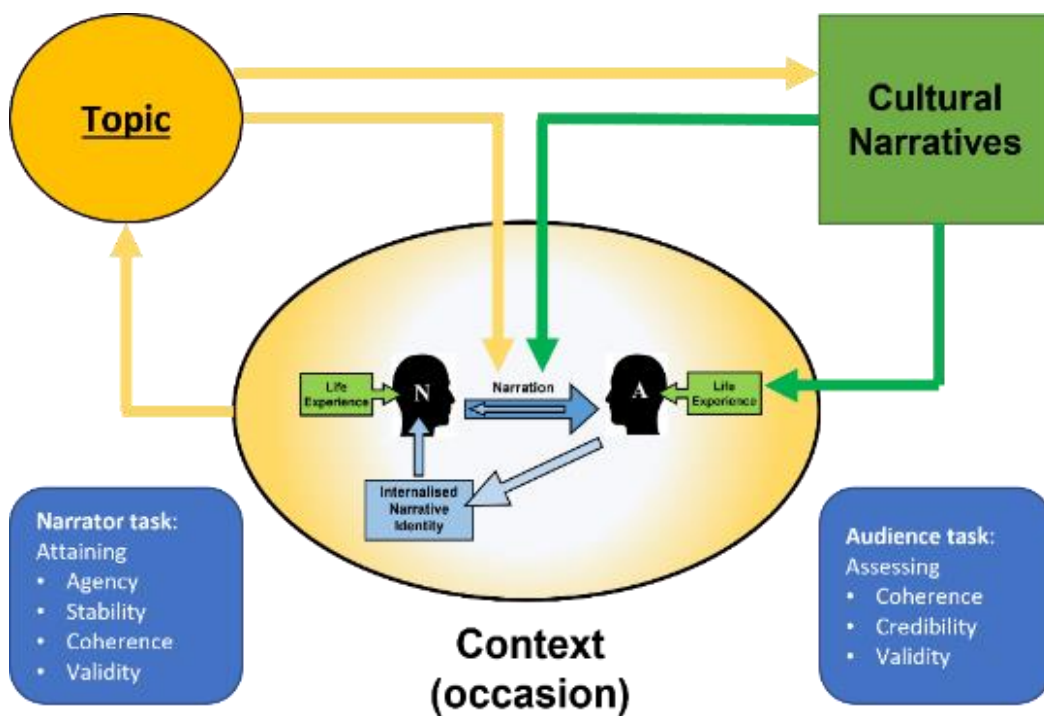


Figure 8 – Complex Model of Narrative Identity (CMNI).

This study not only demonstrates some of the content of male victim narration in terms of the abuse they spoke of, and the cultural narratives referred to, but also maps the dynamics of their use in accordance with fundamental identity tasks. Understanding how and why these cultural narratives are drawn upon, as well as the strengths and pitfalls of each, can help inform those working to support male victims. Understanding the nature of different cultural narratives, informs and potentially empowers the role of the audience in co-production. The importance of

the audience to helping victims recognise and make sense of their experience is another powerful message from this study.

11.5 **The audience role: co-production, validation, and recognition**

This analysis and resulting model of identity work within autobiographical narration (figure 8), identifies the audience as critically important to the narrative sensemaking process. The Audience plays a fundamental role providing feedback, validation, and the transmission of new and potentially revelatory cultural narratives. The individual's ability to coherently weave different cultural narratives with their own lived experience and attain a valid identity position, is thus dependent upon the audience for success. As described by Kieran in recounting his interaction with a social worker, merely the recognition of a domestic abuse narrative that acknowledges a victim's status can be immensely powerful and validating. The flipside of this is that the consequences of a non-validating audience are potentially catastrophic, not merely in a lack of validation, but also, in the potential for wrongful arrest, further legal administrative abuse, and the prevention of access to support and therapeutic services. This, in turn, can further inhibit the process of narration, and thwart the attainment of a valid narrative identity.

Cultivating a validating experience for male victims when they tell their story must start with environments in which they are enabled to tell their story. Current service provision is characterised by a lack of awareness and understanding of male victims. Additional difficulties that victims may present with, such as drug and alcohol dependency or mental ill-health, might therefore be prioritised, as these issues are more widely recognised and provided for. Thus, male victims may well be directed to support for other co-morbid issues without accommodation for the trauma of their abuse experience. This could be seen in Brian's account of not feeling able to narrate an experience of abuse that was at odds with the expected narrative of personal responsibility and service that he found within the 12 steps programme. For Brian this narrative inhibition fed into suicidal ideation. Thus, it is not just that a lack of understanding makes it difficult for audiences to comprehend what they are hearing, but it prevents the contexts and situations from arising in which a male victim feels able to tell their story in the first place. To enable more validating narrating experiences for male victims of IPA, there needs to be a cultural shift, a greater societal awareness of male victim narratives in order to

cultivate spaces and services in which male victims and survivors feel able to tell their story.

In finding themselves in an environment where they wish to tell their story, the narrator's success is heavily dependent upon the response of their audience. In turn, the audience's response can pivot on if they recognise that what they are hearing is a story of abuse. This may not be readily apparent. The differing levels of coherence within these men's stories, suggests that coherence may develop over time. A victim of abuse may struggle to form a coherent account the first time they narrate. When witnessing an incoherent account, the response of a professional is critical and has the power to either inhibit or enable further narration. Their response may hinge upon whether they understand that an apparent incoherence is not necessarily a question of credibility, but a potential feature of the initial narrative sensemaking process. This may be particularly true for aspects of pervasive abuse that do not easily fit a narrative form. Thus, important ingredients for successful narration include factors of acceptance and recognition from the environment, the narrator, and the audience.

A victim's ability to recognise and make sense of their abuse is a key aspect of the five stages of change identified within Prochaska and DiClemente's Transtheoretical Model of Change (1986; Prochaska, DiClemente, & Norcross, 1992). Originally working with addiction treatment, Prochaska and DiClemente identified that the achievement of change required progression through stages of 'pre-contemplation', 'contemplation', 'preparation', 'action', and ultimately 'maintenance'. Melchiorre and Vis (2013) proposed that, with many victims, the initial focus of a social worker's support will need to be in helping the victim recognise their situation as abusive and thus transition from 'precontemplation' to 'contemplation', and subsequent preparation for action.

Many authors have drawn upon an understanding of Stages of Change to inform domestic abuse support and intervention. However, to date, discussion has overwhelmingly focused on female victims and male perpetrators. Although more recent studies may mention male victims (e.g., Craven, Carlson, & Waddington, 2022) they do not feature in discussion beyond merely recognising their existence. It is a conclusion of this study that these stages of change not only have as much relevance to male victims as female, but that the challenges facing male victims in transitioning from precontemplation to action, are nuanced because of their gender

and the dominant narratives of masculinity and male perpetration. As Grant reflected “it just never entered my mind that a woman would attack a bloke.”

Within these men’s accounts it is possible to identify a pre-contemplative stage in the use of available narratives of their partners mental ill-health and childhood trauma, to explain away the abuse during the relationship. When participants spoke of revelatory conversations with third parties, this can be framed within the stages of change as the transition from precontemplation to contemplation, enabled by the transmission of an explanatory and potentially emancipatory cultural narrative.

Appropriate support for male victims to recognise their abuse and transition through contemplation to preparation and action, would be best equipped by acknowledging that the incoherence of a man’s initial understanding may stem from:

- the difficulty of narrating pervasive forms of control and abuse, and
- the competing and contradictory drives to make sense of a victim experience that goes against cultural expectations, whilst maintaining a valid masculine identity.

In meeting victims at this juncture, in working to help them contemplate and make narrative sense of their experiences, a social worker needs to recognise their role as party to the co-production of that narrative. It is to this understanding that the proposed model of identity work within autobiographical narration may prove useful.

11.6 Contribution to social work of the Complex Model of Narrative Identity.

11.6.1 *The importance to social work of understanding Identity and Narrative*

Although this study focused upon the narratives and narration of male victims of IPA, the model of identity work that it proposes has the potential for wider application within social work theory and practice. As discussed throughout this thesis, at the heart of identity work appears to be a drive for agency (Bamberg, 2011), the capacity to enact change (Bandurra, 2011). It is what we strive for and what is expected of us and arguably it is the ideal that underpins the concepts of

empowerment and resilience that pepper the creeds of the social work profession (SWE 2022; IFSW, online; BASW, 2014). Agency lies at the heart of the social worker's role as 'change agents' (BASW, 2014). If empowering, change-enabling social work is fundamentally about cultivating agency and if agency is at the heart of identity work, then understanding identity is therefore key to social work practice.

Chapter 2 discussed how, historically, our understanding of identity has been constrained to the different fields in which it has been studied (Schwartz et al, 2011), with psychological approaches conceiving of identity as an individualised attainment, more interactional psycho-social approaches perceiving it as a more fluid, interpersonal accomplishment, and macro-sociological approaches seeing it as a top-down cultural imposition. Arguably, social work has also been subject to such ideological constraints. Traditionally this has been loosely framed as the dichotomy of 'therapeutic' and 'radical' social work, with a therapeutic approach supporting change at the individual level, and radical practice perceiving the need for systemic, societal change (Payne, 2006; Thompson, 2021). The CMNI provides a lens that encapsulates both, enabling consideration of individual identity needs, as well as an understanding of how the wider structural factors of cultural narratives enable or constrain those individual needs, and how this is played out between people in the telling and retelling of our stories. Importantly, the CMNI shows explicitly where the social worker fits within this process. As an audience to an individual's story, the social worker acts, knowingly or not, as an arbiter of coherence, credibility, and validity. This has direct implications for practice such as when carrying out a social work assessment. The CMNI reveals how in hearing another's story the practitioner is inextricably involved in a continuous process of positioning, sensemaking, and identity management and shows how the context of the situation will direct the identity demands, the stories told, and the questions asked.

Consider, for example, the differing social work contexts of an adult care assessment (Care Act, 2014, s9) and a child protection enquiry (Children Act, 1989, s47). In both these circumstances, a social worker may encounter victims of intimate partner abuse, and occasionally the victim will be male. Participants within this study have illustrated how dominant cultural narratives of masculinity may direct narration in ways that defend masculinity and prevent both the victim and the audience (the social worker) from recognising victimhood. However, as well as this, the differing contexts will also bring other competing identity threats that a male victim may be driven to defend against. Within the context of a care

assessment the masculine ideal of independence and agency may well drive narration that illustrates past independence and achievement (Stephenson et al, 1999) which in turn run counter to cultural narratives of victimhood and dependency. Within the context of a child protection inquiry there are additional threats to masculinity around bread winning status and the protection of family. Not only might a male victim need to defend against a victim status through the narration of stories that affirm their validity as a man, but they must also defend against a potential threat to their role as a good husband and father. It is perhaps in these circumstances that the most sensitive and considered practice is needed. Our culture is steeped in the narratives of righteous violent masculinity in relation to the protection or vengeance of family (e.g., film franchises such as Die Hard, Taken, The Punisher, etc). In contexts where our families are threatened, our culture implores men to assert themselves, to be prepared for conflict and violence, to fight back. In such contexts there appears little room for men to narrate to their own victimhood, even if it was something they had fully acknowledged to themselves.

The proposed model provides a tool for social work practitioners to consider what is perhaps going on in these situations. It can help identify what cultural narratives might exist around any given context, and how they may interact with an individual's identity needs and personal biography, to direct how they tell their story. Furthermore, it can inform the social worker's own engagement, helping them to identify potentially problematic cultural narratives, or those that could be more enabling.

11.6.2 *Using the CMNI*

There are 5 key components to this proposed model of identity work in autobiographical narration (fig.9). The four components of Narrator, Audience, Context, and Culture are clearly identified within the diagram. However, it must also be understood as an iterative phenomenon, a dynamic and continually evolving process that evolves not just within any individual act of narration, but also across and between narrations. Thus, a fifth component is that of Time. In considering all five aspects, this model enables us to contemplate our roles in the coproduction of narrative identity and better understand the processes we are involved in when we tell our story or hear another's.

For narrators, such an understanding might empower them against the pitfalls of adopting unhealthy narratives. Narratives such as those of mental ill-health, can provide a powerful explanation for transgressive and abusive behaviour, and can be helpful in some circumstances. But, as this study indicates, it can also be important to consider why such narratives are so alluring in terms of identity work and validation, and how their power to explain can prevent the recognition of abuse and place the victim in an even more difficult position.

For the audience this model may enable greater insight into their role in narrative coproduction and an awareness of the impact they may have. For social workers and those in the helping professions, this model facilitates a mapping of a subject to better equip them for what they might encounter. The example of this study reveals that professionals working with male victims may encounter narratives of childhood trauma and mental ill-health. Arguably this is already evident from correlational studies (Spencer et al. 2017) but what this study reveals is the narrative power and role that such elements may play in a victim's sense making process.

Specifically, this study identifies how professionals may wish to equip themselves with knowledge of contemporary understandings of narcissism. They may also need to consider how the identified mandated narratives of hegemonic masculinity and male perpetration can a) inhibit individuals from telling their story or understanding it as abuse, and b) cloud or prejudice practitioner expectations and assessment. In response to this knowledge, professionals would do well to inform themselves of other potentially helpful narratives, such as a more detailed typological understanding of abuse and coercive control.

On a cultural, collective level, the mapping of this topic through the CMNI could shape wider discourse, informing discussion and behaviour, potentially tempering the power of mandated narratives, and informing attempts to raise awareness of more enabling ones.

In considering the processes illustrated within this model, the combined desirable outcome for the individual narrator, their audience, and the wider culture, would be to make victims experience of abuse easier to tell. The lifesaving potential of such a goal is starkly illustrated in several participant's accounts of attempts to take their own life.

11.7 Suicide and male victims

Seven participants talked about taking their own life, ranging from ideation to repeated suicide attempts. Contemporary discourse on the intersection of suicide, gender, and intimate partner abuse is complex and beyond the scope of this study to analyze in depth. However, the prevalence of suicidal thought and action within these men's accounts warrants attention. Within their narration, discussion of suicide served as a powerful illustration of the extreme psychological harm abuse can cause. Furthermore, as we see in Kieran's account (Appendix I), the impulse to take one's own life could be triggered not by the abuse itself, but by the actions of professionals. As discussed, such actions could be considered a form of legal and administrative abuse enabled in part by cultural narratives that deny male victim status, and instead cast them as perpetrator. Considered in full, this highlights the potentially fatal consequences of applying ill-fitting or erroneous cultural narratives.

The repeated appearance of suicide within these men's narration resonates with an aspect of discussion in the literature review on the impact of domestic abuse and gender patterns in wider suicide statistics. The growing awareness of a link between suicide and domestic abuse has predominantly focused on female victims where a clear link has been established, with estimates that 34% of female suicides are in some way related to experiences of domestic abuse (Walby, 2004). As outlined (Chapter 4.) men appear less likely than women to attempt suicide but are significantly more likely to succeed (Klonsky et al 2016). However, the CSEW 2018 indicates that within the population of IPA victims, men might be more disposed to attempting suicide than women (ONS, 2018). Both suicide and domestic abuse are complex phenomena that elude definitive measure, but the conflation of both within this study mirrors a growing understanding in the wider domestic abuse discourse. For male victims, this may be of high importance. For if male victims are more likely to attempt to kill themselves, and men are more likely to complete suicide, of the 3,925 men (more than 10 per day) who killed themselves in England and Wales during 2020 (ONS, 2021), how many were victims of an abusive relationship? This rhetorical question speaks to the importance of further research. The relationship between domestic abuse, suicide, and gender that is alluded to within both this study and wider population data, warrants further investigation to better understand the extent of fatality, as well as the dynamics between these three factors. Without greater awareness, recognition, and validation of male victim narratives, legal and administrative services continue to run the risk of feeding into potentially deadly

cycles of abuse in the manner illustrated within the accounts of Brian, Callum, and Kieran.

11.8 Concluding comments

In keeping with a complex and dynamic understanding, this study has revealed both how narratives can shape abuse, and how abuse can shape narration. For these male victims, telling their stories was an iterative process of sensemaking and validation, potentially achieved through alignment with cultural narratives and mediated by their audience through a process of narrative co-production. This was complicated by the contradiction between their experiences of abuse and dominant cultural narratives of masculinity and male perpetration. Although other available cultural narratives were drawn upon to explain and defend against this contradiction, many carried their own negative implications that could potentially excuse the abuse, maintain the abusive relationship, and prevent these participants from recognizing the abuse for what it was. Yet, one of the most powerful learnings to come from this study concerns the potential importance of professionals as audience - not only in providing validation, but also in the transmission and co-production of more empowering and emancipatory narratives.

This open narrative interview method has provided a snapshot of identity work within autobiographical narration that is arguably more spontaneous and instinctive than more structured life-story interviews. The accounts provided by these 18 participants has informed a model of identity narration, which maps the coproduction of male victim's accounts of abuse. The understanding of how the components of this model interact has the potential to inform all aspects of the narrative process, contributing to a more inclusive cultural environment, more informed and appropriately responsive audiences, and ultimately more validating experiences for individual victims when they tell their story.

To better support male victims of female perpetrated intimate partner abuse, this study proposes the following for practicing social workers, and related professions:

Social workers need to be aware that:

- Not all intimate partner abuse is perpetrated by men upon women, and men can experience all forms of intimate partner abuse from female partners.

- Abuse experienced by men can be shaped by their gender and include elements of emasculation that are characteristic to the male victim experience.
- Recognition, sensemaking, and disclosure of abuse by male victims will be complicated by the dominance of the cultural narratives of masculinity and male perpetration.
- How men talk about their abuse can be directed by the need to maintain a valid identity position, account for their masculinity, and defend against unqualified victimhood. The real-world implications of this are that the way a man speaks and postures within a situation in which their masculinity is threatened, may be driven by the need to establish a masculine identity and mask vulnerability, and thus not reflect the reality of their situation.
- Social workers are often audience to deeply personal and difficult stories and this is never a neutral role. How they acknowledge and respond to what they hear can have powerful implications for the sense making process of the victim and their identity. The model of identity work within narration that this study sets out can help the social worker understand what is going on. It can help to understand the context in which stories are told and the critical roles of narrator, audience, and culture in the process of sensemaking and validation.

Greater awareness in these areas, directs social workers to develop their practice in the following ways:

- By taking an approach to IPA that identifies forms of abuse by specific behaviours and harms. This typological approach can help to avoid mis-prioritising gender as a defining element, whilst still enabling space to consider how gender can play a role in any abusive relationship. This requires practitioners to equip themselves with a up to date understanding of different forms of IPA, including coercive and controlling as well as legal and administrative abuse.
- Consider incoherence within a person's story as potentially
 - a) the result of pervasive forms of abuse that do not lend themselves to succinct and easily identifiable stories, and

- b) characteristic of the early stages of a narrative sense making process.

A key social work task within assessment is to make sense of what might be happening. This task is complicated if someone cannot provide a coherent story. In bringing to that context an understanding of the different forms of domestic abuse, practitioners can help victims to make sense of their experience and find a coherent way to speak of it. This may be particularly powerful for male victims whose recognition of their abuse can be clouded by a lack of acknowledgement in mainstream culture and the demands of masculinity.

- Equipping themselves with a critical understanding of dominant and contemporary narratives around abuse, including what they are, the purposes they may serve, and their potential risks and benefits. For example, narratives of narcissism and narcissistic abuse are prominent in modern culture and featured frequently within the accounts of these men. The rise to prominence in recent years of narratives of narcissistic personality disorder and abuse, arguably risks pathologizing the abuse. Such a process not only carries the potential to excuse the abuser of responsibility for their behaviour, but also prevents the examination of wider social and cultural factors. As such, particularly in the absence of a formal diagnosis, practitioners may find themselves instinctively resisting such narratives and this may get in the way of fulfilling the critical role they can play as an audience. Regardless of whether their abuser was, or wasn't, a narcissist, such a narrative can help the victim by framing their experience in a way that enables them to acknowledge their abuse and validate their decision to leave. Therefore, on the one hand the social worker may be called upon to recognise and validate the possibly life changing role of the narcissistic abuse narrative for the victim, whilst also being fully aware of the dangers of cod-psychology.
- Promoting policy, literature, and resources that use non-gendered language to describe what abuse is, and the details of its different forms. Although it is important to recognise the way gender can shape the experience of abuse, resources that focus upon the victimisation of a single gender, class, or culture, risk feeding cultural narratives of abuse that exclude by omission other demographic groups. The importance of being

able to recognise our own experience within cultural narratives appears crucial to the process of individual sensemaking and identity validation. As was evident within this analysis, the failure to provide space for the acknowledgment of male victimhood, cedes ground for the cultivation of more divisive narratives such as those of feminist conspiracy and corruption. Taking a radical approach requires addressing our collective understanding and promoting a greater diversity of cultural narratives that speak to all demographic groups, including male victims.

The practice implications of this study must be considered within the wider context of domestic abuse and social work. Social work operates within contested and difficult arenas, 'dilemmatic spaces' (Honig, 1994) where decisions need to be made despite the uncertainty and risk that might lie with every outcome. Within the high-stake context of adult and child safeguarding, there is an understandable appeal to reductive models. They provide a generic shortcut to answers where decisions need to be made. The dominance of the gendered narrative of male perpetration and female victimhood arguably runs this risk. Although potentially fitting many situations, it does not fit the experiences of the men who took part in this study. But, because of its dominance within mainstream understanding it can stand in the way of their recognition and support.

There is an understandable anxiety that, in raising the profile of male victims, we sow doubt about female victim stories, that we detract from the hard-won ground of female victim advocates, muddy the water, and prevent clarity. This is understandable because controlling and coercive abusers will try and sow confusion, portray themselves as the victim, and utilise a lack of certainty amongst professionals. But this will happen regardless of the gender of the abuser, and as illustrated within this study, the dominant narrative of male perpetration can already be used by female perpetrators to this effect. Domestic abuse is a complex phenomenon. That complexity sits within the abusive relationship, it exists within our cultural understanding of abuse, and it is ever present in the task of supporting families who are victim to it. To better understand IPA, we need to acknowledge that complexity and commit to better understanding it, rather than refuting it.

This study focuses upon the experiences of male victims and in doing so it speaks to their existence, something that has not always been apparent in the discourse around domestic abuse. In this it does contribute to a more complex picture of intimate partner abuse. However, the focus of its contribution is to a better

understanding of the complex nature of the task faced by these men in telling their story and managing their identity. But amongst the analysis and all the talk of coherence, positioning, and identity, it is easy to lose sight of the emotional toil these men undertook. The interviews were emotional, and telling their stories was difficult. They did it with the expressed hope that their engagement would help inform future support for male victims. In doing so they have given voice to the male victim experience, and revealed the critical importance of other people, of us, as professionals, neighbors, family, and friends, and highlighted our responsibility for coproducing, validating, and enabling change.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview schedule

Opening points for confidentiality discussion

Although we respect your privacy and will do everything we can to protect your confidentiality, we cannot do this if we think you, or somebody else, is in danger.

If we believe somebody is in danger, we will need to pass that information to safeguarding authorities, which might include the police or social services.

We will, wherever possible, do this with you, so you know what is going on.

This is most likely to be the case if you are still in the abusive relationship. However, it may not be necessary if the relevant people are aware and you are already getting support.

Please consider this carefully before agreeing to continue with this interview.

Initial Question

“Please tell me about your life so far. You can tell it in any way you want. I won’t interrupt, but, if it’s ok, I may make a few notes so that I don’t forget things I might want to ask later. So, if you’re ready, you can start however you like.”

The pilot study suggests participants may respond to this with their own question seeking to confirm or clarify what is expected of them. This is to be expected, considering the method’s aim to engage the participant in directing the narrative. The goal is to elicit a spontaneous narrative with as little moulding from the researcher as possible. It is important to provide as much scope as possible for them to approach their answer in any way they feel comfortable. Thus, it is appropriate to respond to such clarifying queries by simply reiterating or rephrasing that they can tell of their life so far, in any way they wish, starting wherever and however they like.

Possible supplemental questions (for use if participant does not know how to respond to the initial question) –

“If your life was told as a story, how might it go?”

“As you know, I am researching men’s experience of domestic abuse. Could you tell me about how that relates to you and your life so far?”

Subsequent questions –

Informed by literature, directed by identified research interests, and responsive to the initial narrative response, these will be composed using the terms and information provided during the narration stage.

The currently identified areas of enquiry, and possible prompts are as follows:

- **The extent and nature of Domestic Abuse experienced by the respondent.**
 - You described a time where.... Would you say that was typical of the what you experienced?
 - What for you were the most difficult parts of the abuse you experienced? •
 - You mentioned that.... Why do you think that...?
 - You mentioned that.... Could you describe a little more about that and what led to that/those incidents? Or why do you think it happened like that?
 - You used a phrase earlier that was interesting/I hear a lot... could you explain a little more about what that means/how that played out?

- **Their experiences of professional support or contact with professional agencies such as the police around their experiences of abuse.**
 - Were there ever times when you wanted to report what was happening to the police? Could you tell me about that time... and why you chose not to?
 - You talked about what happened when the... were called/got involved...
 - ...could you tell me a little more about what happened there and why you think it happened the way it did?
 - ...was that the only time?
 - ...why do you think they responded like that?

- ...how did you feel about that whole episode afterwards?
- **The nature and extent of any informal support available to them**
 - you talked about [person] knowing what was going on....
 - What was it that enabled you to speak with them?
 - How do you think they might have helped you more?
 - Did you find that helpful?
 - Why don't you think they....?
 - Were there any points where you did turn to friends or family?
 - Did you ever want to speak to friends or family about what was happening?
 - You mentioned several times where.... Or was there anything that any of your friends or family said that you found helpful, and what made it so?
 - Or was there anything that friends or family said that was particularly unhelpful or made things worse?
- **Their understanding of wider social narratives around IPV.**
 - Have you ever read or seen anything in the news or programmes that you thought was relevant to your situation and what you were going through?
 - You mentioned a time when you saw or read something about... could you tell me some more about what was going on at the time and what you were thinking?
 - You mentioned thinking that.... Why do you think that? Or why do you think that is the way it is?

Final Questions.

1. How many abusive intimate partners have you had?
2. How long did each relationship last?
3. How long ago did they finish?
4. Have you received any form of counselling from professionals or friends?
If so what kind of counselling was it?
5. How have you found the interview experience?

6. What made you interested in taking part in this research?
7. If there was one message you wanted me to take away from our conversation what would it be?
8. Would you like a summarised copy of the findings of this study?
9. Are you open to being contacted at a later date to discuss their experiences of the interview process?

Appendix B: Feed-back interview schedule

This interview is to take the form of an informal chat to be carried out over a phone.

The following sample questions cover areas currently identified as useful to the study. It is expected that further enquiry will be facilitated by the researcher in a responsive manner and directed by the content of the individual interview and shaped by learning from preceding follow up interviews.

The interview must be open to direction from the participant into any areas they wish to focus on, beyond those identified by the researcher. This calls on the interviewer to allow the participant to take discussion where they wish, using open questions, allowing the time for respondents to respond fully, and listening for alternative themes or topics introduced by the participant.

Questions

1 – Having had some time to think about it, would you describe taking part in this study as a positive or negative experience, or neither? ... and why is that?

2 – Has taking part in this study effected how you think about your experiences and your life story?

3 – have you thought about your experiences more, or less since taking part in our first interview?

4 – Was there anything in the study that you feel made it easier to talk about your experiences, or do you feel there were things that made it harder?

Appendix C: Ethics Committee approval



22 February 2019

Cassian Rawcliffe

School of Social Work
Faculty of Social
Sciences
University of East Anglia
Elizabeth Fry Building
Research Park
Norwich
Norfolk NR4 7TJ

Dear Cassian,

Hard to Tell: Understanding the lived reality of male survivors of intimate partner violence

The Research Ethics Committee considered your application for ethical approval for the above project in February 2019. The reviewers were in agreement that the ethics issues had been satisfactorily considered and addressed. I am happy to confirm that ethical approval was granted and you are able to begin your study subject to any other necessary approvals being given.

It is a requirement of your approval that you should report any adverse events that may have occurred, these being defined as “any unanticipated problem involving risk to subjects which ultimately results in harm to the subject or others”.

If you plan to make any significant changes to the design of your study, you should also contact me.

With best wishes – I hope your research goes well.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read 'Peter Jordan', is shown on a light-colored background.

Dr Peter Jordan
Chair of SWK Ethics Committee

Appendix D: Participant information sheet

Hard to Tell: Male Survivors' experiences of Intimate Partner Violence and Abuse

Why is this research being done?

This study is about men who have survived domestic abuse and enabling them to tell their story. It is hoped this will help future research and support male survivors to be heard.

Who is doing the research?

I am a student at the University of East Anglia, and this is a study for my doctorate.

What will I be asked to do?

I would like to talk with you for between one and two hours. At first I would like to hear your story without me interrupting you. I will save any questions for the second half of the interview, when I may want to ask more about what you have told me.

At the end of the interview you will be asked to complete a short questionnaire about your health and wellbeing.

You may also be invited to take part in a follow up interview, at a later date, about your experience of taking part in this research.

Participants in similar studies have described taking part in the interview as a positive and helpful experience. However, although you will not be asked

to talk about anything you do not want to, the topics covered can be deeply personal and may be upsetting to talk about.

In return

For your time and participation in the interview you will be given a store voucher equivalent to £20.

My Commitment to you

I respect your privacy and will keep anything you say confidential, unless I think you or someone else is in serious or immediate danger. If this happens and it is safe to do so, I will speak with you about what would be the best thing to do next.

All of the information you provide for this research will be anonymised and stored securely (password protected). I will remove your name, and any information that might be identifiable. This will be stored securely and may be used for further study.

Anonymised versions of the interview will be read by my academic supervisor and some of the things you say may be used as examples within my report. However, although people will read the words, they will not know who said them, and they will not include any identifying information.

If you change your mind about taking part in this study you can withdraw during the interview, or within a reasonable time after. Once the transcript from your interview is anonymised, all personal information linking you to it will be deleted. After this point it will not be possible to remove your contribution from the study.

Appendix E: Research agreement form

Please tick the appropriate boxes and sign below to show that I have explained the research project and answered any other questions that you have about taking part.

I have read and understood the project information sheet

I have been given the chance to ask questions about the project.

I understand that whether I take part in this study or not, it will not affect my entitlement to support from any partnership agencies (eg Leeway).

I understand that the information I provide will be stored anonymously and securely and may be used in further research studies.

I understand and agree to this interview being digitally recorded for research purposes

I would be happy to be contacted at a later date for a follow up interview about my experience of taking part in this study

YES / NO

Research participant:

I agree to take part in this project, and I understand that I can change my mind about this at any time during the interview, and for up to 14 days after.

Name.....
.....

Signed.....Date.....
.....

Researcher:

I have discussed with the research participant what taking part in the study involves and given them the chance to ask questions about it. I will make sure that all identifying details are removed from subsequent documentation and data.

Name.....
.....

Signed.....Date.....
.....

Contact details for the researcher are on the back of this sheet

If you want to contact me:

I am Cassian Rawcliffe:

[number no longer in operation]

cassian.rawcliffe@uea.ac.uk

The project supervisor is Dr Beth Neil, contactable at E.Neil@uea.ac.uk

If you want to make a complaint or provide feedback you can contact the Head of School, Professor Johnathan Dickens at j.dickens@uea.ac.uk

Appendix F: Transcription key

Bold type	Interviewer
Normal type	Interviewee
{ <i>text</i> }	Denotes interjection or affirmational utterance of either the interviewer or the interviewee within the others oration.
* <i>word</i> *	Asterix used to denote descriptive annotation – e.g. laughter or changes of voice
-	Words ending in- or cut short with- indicates premature end or cutting short of a word or sentence. This was often followed by a repetition of the word, or the beginning of a new sentence or rephrasing of what they were attempting to say.
[incoh.]	Incoherent speech that cannot to be accurately transcribed. More than just a word or two will include an indication of the duration of unintelligible section and may include a suggestion of what might have been said.
[id.info]	The removal of identifying information. If this is more than a sentence, then this will include the length of time removed.
[person]	Identifying information such as names may be replaced with a description of the relationship/role of the mentioned person. E.g. [eldest son]
...	word or two removed (within the interview transcript this will be due to incoherence or identifying information and accompanied by an explanation in []). Within excerpts this could indicate the omission of text for reasons of clarity and brevity.
... ..	A larger amount of text removed (several words or a sentence or two).
... <i>line-break</i> ...	A significant amount of text omitted.

Appendix G: Abuse coding

Excerpt from Eli

Excerpt	Comment and analysis
<p>before I knew it I was in this relationship with someone and I became her carer quite quickly in the sense of just kinda, I guess help her, but she had all ,the control I was terrified of her as well.</p>	<p>Summarising the start relationship characterized by a power differential , he became her carer, though she had control.</p> <p>perhaps a chivalrous element of trying to save her to care for her. Positioning himself , perhaps in his own eyes at the time, as her Knight in shining Armour.</p> <p>Talks of being terrified of her but does not detail why.</p>
<p>it wasn't as bad, I guess, at the beginning.</p> <p>Um, its got worse. but she was always- I always knew there were some behavioural challenges there</p>	<p>Although previously he says there was no pretence in the relationship And he knew from the start what she was like he says here that it wasn't as bad to begin with, A pattern of worsening abusive behaviours that is familiar too many abuse victims experience.</p> <p>Behavioural challenges -almost minimising. Pathologising her abusive behaviour. Also positioning himself with some agency in the situation.</p> <p>Taking responsibility. Perhaps a masculine requirement.</p>

<p>we had our first daughter um and it was getting worse and worse- because recruitment firms are quite - they're not very human firms really.</p>	<p>By worse and worse he is referring not only to his wives behaviour but also the additional demands placed on him as a father and their impacts upon his ability to do his job outside of the home.</p> <p>(The impact of abuse upon working life etc is noted as a defining characteristic of controlling coercive abuse by Myhill, 2015)</p>
<p>it was really bad when the- When our first daughter was born. a lot of violence. a lot of crazy outbursts and screaming and shouting and not being able to cope. so I was trying to look after her and the kids</p>	<p>Remaining focused upon the period following the birth of his first daughter Ely becomes slightly more explicit about her behaviour but again does not go into detail. He does characterise his wife as not being able to cope, again positioning her almost as a victim of circumstances.</p> <p>Positioning himself here as the man trying to hold it all together , looking after both his ex and the children.</p>
<p>Life in [other country]was brilliant but the marriage was always very difficult.</p>	<p>Again almost dismissive of his abusive relationship as“ very difficult”.</p> <p>Contrasting it with an otherwise brilliant life , making it sound as if it's just a small thing he has to deal with.</p>
<p>Terrified of my wife. Violence, everything from biting, scratching, punching, the metal watering can slammed into my ribs</p>	<p>Again talks of being terrified of his wife this time providing a little more detail of her abusive behaviours.</p> <p>Not remembering what caused the watering can incident almost illustrates</p>

<p>half full of water. Can't remember what that was for,</p>	<p>how these things could be for anything even things small enough to forget , also Alludes to how frequently or how many times he was assaulted. often enough to not remember each incident clearly.</p>
<p>but i wouldn't say it was every week. {uhuh} probably there would be a violent outburst every couple of months, but it was terrifying when she was. She was just- you would never know what would happen next. threatening with knives and all that kind of stuff. but the - the humiliation, the screaming. her outbursts, temper outbursts, were very regular.</p>	<p>Describing the extreme nature of her violence and countering the fact that the physical violence did not happen every week by explaining that other abusive and perhaps more pernicious elements of her behaviour were very regular. Also describes the stress inducing elements of the perpetual uncertainty and fear that it could happen at anytime.</p>
<p>then I think about- She'd attacked me- I think it was about [date] -she stabbed me with a pencil, sounds a bit bizarre, it was a sharpened pencil. And a neighbour came in on it, um and the neighbour later said to me you do realise this is domestic abuse. And that was the first time I actually thought, you know actually, this really is abuse.</p>	<p>His second reference to a specific incident. Again not providing much detail but is able to invoke some validity through specificity in his reference to a date. Acknowledging his attempt 2 think about what it might seem like to another person and again being almost dismissive and his use of the term a bit bizarre. it is perhaps the only incident that could in theory be corroborated by a third party (other than his children) his neighbour. Perhaps This is also why he relies on it heavily as an illustration off his abuse.</p>

	<p>It is also, according to his account, a turning point , a moment of realisation in seeing the abuse for what it is , that was triggered by his neighbour. Again this provides validation through the words of a third party.</p>
<p>I was getting counselling at the time, but that was because my wife told me I was such a miserable failure, that I needed to get some counselling to become a better person.</p> <p>So I wasn't getting counselling because of the abuse, for me the counselling was trying to work out why it was such shitperson, and so that was quite a revelation when the neighbour said that.</p>	<p>Describing another element of his abuse , his denigration and belittlement by his wife. The destruction of his self esteem. It also illustrates the internalisation of this abuse.</p> <p>In this, his counselling is almost an aspect, or extension of his abuse. It's almost psychological munchausen , being convinced he is still and having to take he appropriate remedies.</p> <p>It is against this backdrop that is neighbour's revelation occurs.</p>
<p>it was often on my mind you know how much more can I take of this. and that, if it wasn't for that stabbing, it was really the neighbour kind of, it was a bit of a wake up call.</p>	<p>Almost contradictory in saying how he was aware that he couldn't take much more of "this" but was not aware he was being abused.</p> <p>In this he is almost considering or positioning the stabbing as itself a life saving moment , triggering his neighbour to say what she said which in turn triggered his epiphany.</p>
<p>she kicked me out Because she- she figured he was a better proposition.</p>	<p>His ex's infidelity Leading her to finish the relationship which climaxed in a</p>

<p>um, And- on kicking me out, You know, I was gutted.</p> <p>And I did all my begging and pleading but she, you know, it got really violent.</p> <p>she attacked, i think it Was like a lot of punching and kicking and screaming and my daughters could hear it upstairs and crying.</p>	<p>physically violent episode. Although not a blow by blow account ,provides details of the nature with her attack.</p> <p>the detail that it was heard by his daughters brings two elements to the narrative: it adds to the trauma, and offers theoretical corroboration.</p>
<p>so things got really bad in the relationship with my ex wife. {uhuh}</p> <p>Nothing, you know, i'm not in partnership with her anymore, so no violence.</p> <p>But you know [incoh. Possibly 'hate-hostility'?, twitter?] campaigns, Blocking access and in the end she completely blocked my access saying that I was a kidnap threat, saying that I was going to kidnap the children, She was ringing the school, there was all- blew it all up.</p> <p>Not that there is - like why, why would I kidnap my own children who I'm seeing every fortnight, it was all a bit bizarre.</p>	<p>Describing legal and administrative abuse postseparation. Elements of parental alienation. Involvement of other agencies (schools)</p> <p>The term bizarre again, minimalizing downplaying perhaps, dismissive, positioning his ex as irrational, treating it as absurd rather than serious.</p>

Appendix H: Cultural narrative coding

Excerpt from Hassan

Excerpt	Comment and analysis
<p>I come out of a family background that is [hesitation] turbulent.</p> <p>And erm, my understanding at the age that I'm at now is that a lot of the difficulties that I experience, or have experienced in my life can be traced back to that time.</p>	<p>Childhood trauma narrative</p> <p>roots current difficulties in child victim position</p>
<p>This was the first one, then that was abusive, so it hasn't been a pattern for me entering into relationships that have been like this.</p>	<p>Referencing a cultural narrative of repeated victim relationships.</p> <p>Defending against this position</p>
<p>then I thought, well, I don't care, I'm absolutely mad on her and I can fix her</p>	<p>cultural narrative that love is blind or hopelessly optimistic, also perhaps resonating with the siren narrative</p>

<p>I think that it became- it became very quickly because partly on account of who I am as a person and my- my innate sort of character, partly because of my erm lack of confidence.</p> <p>18 years not in a relationship, partly because of the cumulative impact of living with a mental health problem and how that affects your confidence status.</p> <p>I was involved with somebody who was very confident, grandiose, attractive.</p> <p>Erm, And even though I was aware of what she was the saying and doing was deeply unpleasant I- erm I- I sort of interjected that turned into, well, 'man up'.</p> <p>Actually, this is about you being over sensitive {uhuh}.</p> <p>almost from day one,</p>	<p>Aspects of Several cultural narratives within this section , including victim mental health, the importance of physical attraction, perpetrator mental health, As well as masculinity - man up.</p>
<p>she also told me that she was sexually abused by her brother as a child.</p> <p>And I've no reason to believe that that wasn't true.</p>	<p>Childhood trauma narrative to explain perpetrator behaviour</p>

<p>what was going through my mind was this is reminiscent of some of my clients that I'm working with, {uhuh}with a particular diagnosis, you know I work with a lot of people with personality disorders and diagnosis, and this was just running through or on the cusp of my consciousness.</p>	<p>mental illness health cultural narrative- personality disorder - to explain perpetrator behaviour</p>
<p>And erm there was this complete disconnect. And I can see that what she was doing was not crying in response to something that was happening to me when she was crying. Just saw me an extension of her own emotional issues, and the crying felt like it was all about Her, and it felt completely.</p>	<p>Psychodynamic cultural narratives - projection</p>
<p>I felt like I was with a 50 year old mother of three who was just like, you know, an 11 year old girl, prepubescent girl, she was just excited about, you know, discovering erm herself and her sexuality.</p>	<p>Cultural narrative about expected or even appropriate behaviour concerning different life stages</p>
<p>her disclosing that sexual abuse occurred, the behaviour. I was scared myself, I was also trying to sort of figure out how to, you know, how to manage what's going on.</p>	<p>childhood trauma narrative - perpetrator Perhaps masculinity- managing the situation</p>

<p>It was the weakness of me being a man with mental health problems. And that mental health scared her. also also a pathetic man because I was beginning to have some difficulties with um, with sexual function really.</p>	<p>mental health narrative – victim’s linking to negative stereotypes, Also masculinity view the Association of virility and sexual function</p>
<p>I didn't know where to go. And I tried to speak to some friends. And unfortunately, um the view was that it was all about my mental health, you know, and then they said you know, you are there are-, you need to get some support around your mental health.</p>	<p>mental health narrative's- third party expectations</p>
<p>a couple of people that were- when I tried to describe what was happening. I think they just assumed that I was catastrophising or I was overdramatising what was actually really happening. {uhuh} So, I, I didn't have a steer, anybody who actually said, Have you have you thought about the fact that this is completely unacceptable.</p>	<p>Perhaps linking to cultural narratives of how relationships should be, informing a disbelief in third parties of how his relationship really was, coupled with an understanding of mental ill health and catastrophizing behaviour.</p>

<p>then, what I couldn't fathom, that I began to experience significant post traumatic symptoms.{uhuh}</p> <p>I knew what they were because when I found my partner who committed suicide, I experienced post traumatic symptoms.</p> <p>So I knew what they were, bodily.</p>	<p>PTSD narrative - he did not feel that he had to detail what those symptoms were, it was sufficient within this context and culture to assume that I had some understanding of what PTSD was. no further elaboration was called for.</p>
<p>this is somebody with a personality disorder from my point of view and I just looked up, you know, I just started to read a bit more about psychopathology.</p> <p>And the- and er- and erm Then I sort of Yeah, began a journey of just sort of being able to try to understand just exactly what had happened to me, but it completely and utterly um, Yeah, broke me down.</p>	<p>Mental health narrative- perpetrator - personality disorder</p> <p>describing how he developed this understanding overtime through autonomous research</p>
<p>there, was a view from a couple of men that you know, well, why don't you just stick up yourself, for God's sake, if think this is going on, you need to speak up, you know, you need to- you just need to address it.</p>	<p>third party masculinity narrative- almost the man up put your foot down stereotype</p>

Appendix I: Kieran - local narrative #7

- Context** So I'm in my flat on my own, you know, it's furnished, I'm getting my life back together, but it's a very, very, very tiny village and everybody knew everybody- {uhuh} in the middle of nowhere and everybody new everybody's business, And Erm you couldn't walk down the street without bumping into each other, and obviously I had to go down there to get my daughter anyway.
- Erm
- Event** So one day she contacted me and said oh I'm taking our daughter down to- down to the park, do you want to come along , we can go for a walk you can spend some time with our daughter and maybe we can talk about, you know, what happened and erm, maybe we can sort things out.
- So I- you know this was a grave error on my part, you know, I was really getting myself back together, and so I went along and then while we were- while we were out she said oh, her mother had travelled up from [location 1]. She said mums staying with me. She won't let me drink at home erm, can I come round later? We can have a couple of drinks and we can maybe talk about how we can sort this out and give it another go.
- So again, stupidly, really stupidly, I said yeah okay {uhuh}
- So I had our daughter for the weekend.
- I took her straight- when we left that place, I took her home.
- And in the evening she was in her cot, and my partner- my ex-partner, she got really drunk, I mean really drunk. I knew she had taken some erm drugs, cocaine.
- And she was- very, very quickly she- her mood changed.
- I asked her to leave because obviously, I can- I can see the signs, I said look I don't want any trouble, you know there's fogies next door, look, can you just leave. {uhuh}
- And that was basically like pouring petrol just over a fire.
- She absolutely exploded.
- And it was the worst- of all the years I was with her, and not with

her, of all the time I knew her, this was the worst incident.
She violently attacked me in the living room.
She picked up my laptop, threw that across the living room.
Started stamping all over that.
Started to, you know, knock things off the table and starts to smash the place up.
So I was pleading with her to go, you know, think about our daughter She's next door blah blah blah.
She refused.
And she just kept attacking me to the point where I dialled 999.
She was still attacking me when I was on the phone to the operator.
So they could hear what was going on.
She managed to wrestle the phone from me, um and this went backwards and forwards she said that she was taking our daughter she made a bolt for - for the room that our daughter was in.
I stood in front of the door. She had her- the phone in her hand- home phone- the hands free set, and she was basically smashing me in the face with it.
I was very conscious and always have been about n- because one of the- the question I always get asked in my talks is- a police officer said to me one day why don't you just lay her out.
Those were his exact words.
And in the talk I gave on Thursday a lady said you know I can't stand, you know this is the thing I can't get my head around is that men are mostly more powerful and bigger and certainly stronger than women.
Why didn't you just, you know, push her aside or knock her on her backside.
You know this is the kind of thing I get all the time.
I said firstly, I'm not the kind of guy who wants to lay a hand on a woman.
Secondly, I'm an ex police officer and so I'm very aware- I mean if I- it's- it's hard enough getting the police to listen to you as a man when they turn up to a domestic but if- if you've struck out and she's marked or got a bleeding nose or something game over.

Forget it. You're not- you're not going to have a leg to stand on and they're not going to be interested in what led up to that. Because they're not most of the time anyway.

If she's got any kind of injury, forget it.

So I stood in front of the door, but she was- she was beating me so hard that I actually broke away from the door to just try and get away from her.

She then stormed into our daughters room.

Makes a grab for our daughter.

I composed myself and go in after her.

I pull her away from the cot.

and I grabbed her by the wrists and I try and pull her out of our daughters room.

At this point she sits down on the floor to make it harder for me and I literally pull her by the wrists out of our daughters room and close the door behind me.

I managed to wrestle the phone back off her.

I dial 999 again, screaming down the phone for help.

Um, again she's fighting me for the phone.

erm and this goes backwards and forwards for a bit.

And I- eventually I just think I've got to get out of here so I run.

I grab the keys and I run.

I lock the door to the flat so that she can't take our daughter.

And I call the police again.

I dial 999 again.

Whilst I'm sat by the roadside.

The police turn up they go into the flat one- then one comes out to speak to me while one stays in there with her.

We are both arrested.

We are both taken in separate police cars down to the police station.

Erm, we are both taken in and interviewed separately while a police officer looks after our daughter.

And I tell it how it is.

{uhuh} I think I admit grabbing her by- I d- I use the word admit but I just told the story as it happened.

Well yeah, I know I grabbed her by the wrist and I dragged her out

of the bedroom blah blah blah.

And um er, now bearing in mind this is not under cau- well, yeah I'd been arrested so it's under caution, But it's not a tape recorded interview.

cough So they go away and then I'm sat there probably for half an hour.

And then I can hear our daughters voice and I can hear our daughter being handed over and her leaving.

The copper comes back in to speak to me, and he said your partner, I said ex-partner, he said yeah ex-partner, she's been very clever and refused to say anything.

But you have admitted grabbing her by the wrists and dragging her out of the bedroom is that right, I said yes.

He said well I've got to stop you there and caution you again.

You've been arrested for assault, you're going to be detained.

So because I admitted grabbing her by the wrists and pulling her out of the bedroom I was charged with assault.

I was kept in a police cell overnight and taken in a prison van the next day in handcuffs.

I was driven straight to court.

um and I was taken up in front of the judge.

I was given bail for five months with conditions.

Those were that I didn't go near my daughter *voice falters*

sigh

This is really hard

Are you alright?

Yeah, yeah, yeah so- um, yeah I was bailed for five months, erm, and then there was going to be another trial.

So and then that was that. {uhuh}

So I left the court.

I went home.

And erm it was probably maybe a week after that that I put a rope round my neck and tied it round the rafters in the kitchen in the flat.

I stood on a chair in the dark sobbing like a child and, um, but

luckily I didn't go through with it.

I stood there for ages, but it was the thought of my eldest daughter , not my youngest that stopped me going through with it.

Because she had always had the attitude that people who committed suicide was selfish and she could never forgive somebody for doing that.

Her attitude has changed now, that was a long time ago.

But I just thought she would never forgive me if I do this.

so I didn't.

{uhuh} But those five months were hell.

I just thought I'm going to prison what have I done to des- You know, the whole injustice of it.

deep inhalation of breath.

Anyway.

I turned up on the day at court.

I didn't even go into court.

Case was dropped, er, on the day.

No case to answer.

Coda

So, I later discover that, like [previous location] police, where, erm, a policy is put in place.

Those officers have to follow that policy through {uhuh}.

When they turn up to a domestic.

They're not allowed to use common sense, they're not allowed to do x, y, and z.

This is the policy and this is what's got to happen.

[location 2] police- at the time there was a massive, massive issue with domestic abuse [locally], But their policy was that when they turned up they had to do something.

They weren't- it wasn't good enough to separate people.

There had to be action taken.

So arrests had to be made and that had to be followed through.

So basically, um it basically was a paper exercise.

To show- to- to- they had been called to a domestic {uhuh}.

Because that's logged, they then have to follow that through.

They have to take action.

So it was all a paper exercise.

On the day, as I say, the case was dropped.
No case to answer.
And that was the end of it.
Just like that.
That was the end of it.
It didn't matter that I had nearly killed myself.
That I'd been kept away from my daughter for five months and that she'd being kept away from me.
It didn't matter that the long term psychological effects that it's had on me.
You know.
That I'm still trying to deal with now.

Analysis

Setting the context, Kieran gives a clear understanding of where in his story he is, that he is now living independently and explaining his continued contact with his ex, not just because he was maintaining contact with his daughter, but also because the town was too small for anyone to avoid anyone.

The story takes place over several different episodes

Initial scene - where he agrees to let her come round to his flat when their daughter is asleep. He does this clearly stating with the gift of hindsight that he feels it was a stupid thing to agree with. He emphasises this twice in a few lines. In stating this he is able to separate his current self from his former self. He is not trying to defend himself. His current self is wiser now, however he is able to position himself as justified in seeing this as an opportunity to not only see his daughter but also repair their relationship, again looking to fix or mend, to make things better, echoing the white knight narrative. However, he also states that the reason she wants to come around is to drink, a named aspect of her abusive behaviour and foreshadowing the subsequent events.

The second scene gives a detailed description of the assault that took place at his house including physical violence and damage to property. He includes details that she had taken cocaine as well as alcohol, positioning her as the violent drunk and drug fuelled abuser. Throughout this he is positioned as the non-aggressor, attempting to avoid the situation getting any worse and attempting to protect their daughter. He is clear about phoning the police and

stating that they would have heard everything, again this is setting up his position for subsequent events.

The level of detail is high and gives for a coherent narrative. Arguably it is a story that was first narrated immediately following the incident when he was interviewed by police (which he attends to in the subsequent scene) it is perhaps this aspect which has informed the level of detail, and the specifics regarding the extent of his actions.

This section reveals a high degree of meaning making, pausing in his narration of events to attend to the expectations of previous audiences, as well as the wider public, that men cannot truly be unwitting victims to female aggression. This aspect of his narration reveals a familiarity with telling the story that enables him to move in and out of the action. Revealing reflection and processing that go beyond just making sense of what happened, but also attending to how it matches up with wider existing cultural narratives and expectations.

Kierans narration of his arrest and interview and subsequent charge is narrated with coherent detail and he is almost brought to tears in coming to talk about the direct impact of this in his attempted suicide. Although he has attained a level of coherence, processing, and meaning making of his story, he still finds it emotionally difficult to speak about it, and as he says in the final line of his coda it still effects him to this day.

This story is clearly a significant LN to his overall story and acts as a turning point. It illustrates the extent of her abuse, positions him as the attentive father putting his daughters needs first, it attends to why he did not fight back, and illustrates how the police would have known what was going on yet still charged him with assault. It illustrates the devastating impact of Legal and Administrative abuse, and reveals how it is still effecting him to this day.