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“I was told when I could hold, talk with or kiss our daughter”: Exploring fathers’ experiences of parental alienation within the context of intimate partner violence

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Abstract

Previous research has highlighted that when men describe their experiences of intimate partner violence (IPV), they frequently talk about the use of children by their abusive partners. The behaviours they describe align with descriptions of so-called 'Parental Alienation' (PA) where children are coercively controlled to reject one (alienated) parent in favour of the other. The situation of alienating behaviours within intimate partner and family violence structures is one that has been proposed but rarely explicitly studied. The present study analysed qualitative responses to an online survey by 171 fathers who have experienced alienating behaviours within the context of IPV. Four themes were found: Direct manipulation of contact (including relocation and control of contact), manipulation through systems (including false allegations, and court and school settings), manipulation of children (including lying directly to children about fathers and involving children in abuse), and the wider context of violence (including physical, psychological, and controlling behaviours). The experiences described by men are discussed in relation to the theoretical and practical relationship between IPV and PA, and implications for current debate around the use of PA within family court cases.

Key Words: intimate partner violence; male victims; coercive control; parental alienation; post-separation abuse

Introduction

Despite being chronically overlooked within the academic literature, male victims of intimate partner violence (IPV) are gaining increasing recognition. Indeed, several studies have now documented both the experiences of abused men, and the impact that abusive behaviours have on the men involved (see Scott-Storey et al., 2022 for review). For example, research has uncovered the scope of abuse reported by male victims, from physical aggression (Drijber et al., 2013) and psychological abuse (Bates, 2020), to sexual abuse (Weare, 2018) and financial control (Hine et al., 2020), and has revealed the devastating consequences on both their physical (Hines & Douglas, 2015, 2016) and mental health (Bates, 2019b). As a result, work examining men's help-seeking behaviours and processes has also expanded, demonstrating that men experience gender-specific challenges to help-seeking associated with regressive gender stereotypes (Hine et al., 2020; Taylor et al., in press; Wallace et al., 2019a, 2019b), and that services currently available to men are 'mixed' at best (Bates, 2019b; Bates & Douglas, 2020; Huntley et al., 2019). This has led some to argue that abused men occupy a 'same-but-different' position in relation to their female counterparts, as they simultaneously share many experiences and needs, but also experience gender-specific issues and barriers (Hine, Bates, Graham-Kevan, et al., 2022; Hine, Bates, Mackay, et al., 2022; Hine et al., 2021).

These complexities are seen in several areas of abuse, including that which involves the manipulation of parent-child relationships, particularly post-separation, where baseline similarities are then layered with gendered experiences. For example, several studies have demonstrated how children are utilised against female victims, with the continued abuse of women linked to contact arrangements (Morrison, 2015), and with many often experiencing more significant issues after separation (Anderson & Saunders, 2007; Dijkstra, 2019). Indeed, protection of children has been shown to be pivotal in women's decisions to end abusive relationships (Moe, 2009), and Jaffe et al. (2003) found more than half the women in their sample had experienced psychological or emotional abuse post-separation related to custody negotiations. In studies on women who lose custody within a legal divorce process, findings demonstrate that women are 'punished' for not conforming to motherhood ideals, that there is legal abuse within an adversarial system, and that they struggle with immense loss and attachment confusion as a result of losing contact with their child (Kruk, 2010). Several of the themes from these studies are reflected in work with male victims by Bates (2019a), which highlights that men's experiences of post-separation abuse frequently involve the use of children. For example, men describe how their ex-partners utilise 'children as a weapon' by withholding contact and manipulating the parental relationship (e.g., ignoring custody arrangements), and using the child directly in perpetration of abuse (e.g., to tell lies to the victim). In

this sense, both men and women are vulnerable to abuse involving children, and arrangements around custody, and that both appear equally motivated by the desire to protect their children from an abusive partner.

However, the research also highlighted gender-specific issues experienced by male victims, as men identified how their abusive female partners utilised various systems (e.g., family courts) against them, when describing their experiences of coercive control and psychological violence. This represents what Tilbrook et al. (2010) coined as ‘legal and administrative aggression’, where the construction and operation of various institutions in favour of a particular group (in this case mothers) was utilised by abusive women in their powerful position as ‘mother’. In qualitative studies, men have also described how they have felt unable to leave their abusive relationships, due to their fear of ‘automatically’ losing contact with their children, and their reluctance to leave their children in the care of a partner who was not recognised as or believed to be abusive (Bates, 2019a). Indeed, men reported that children were a significant obstacle to leaving their abusive relationship, and that this was used against them to keep them in abusive settings (Bates, 2019b); a finding echoing the larger scale quantitative case review work of Hine and Douglas (2010) who found that the fear of not being allowed to see children was one of the top reasons why men did not leave their abusive setting. Such concerns are reflected in accounts from practitioners who support abused men, who explain that a significant proportion of callers are concerned about their children and are worried about losing contact after entering a family court system ‘rigged’ against them (Hine et al., 2020).

In further qualitative work, Bates (2020) also noted several references to children in the context of IPV from a female partner *during* a relationship, with results again reflective of several seemingly gender-specific themes. The men in these studies described how children were routinely utilised as part of coercive and controlling behaviours, for example, through the use of false allegations (i.e., of men’s abuse towards their children), and the use of children to humiliate men (i.e., denying paternity; Bates, 2020). These findings supported previous quantitative case review research by Hines et al. (2007), who found that 67.3% of the men reported that their wives threatened to remove the children from the home as a means of control. Importantly, it was noted by Bates (2020) that many of the behaviours described, particularly in relation to false allegations, were only available to female abusers due to stereotypes around IPV which frame men as the unilateral perpetrators of violence towards women (Hine, 2019), which women then utilised against their male partners as part of their abuse. As with post-separation abuse, these experiences therefore arguably not only reflect concerns over children that both men and women *share* whilst in

abusive relationships, but also the gender-specific concerns of men who feel invisible to systems both as victims of IPV and fathers (Hine, in press).

Research in this area has therefore tended to ‘discover’ experiences of abuse utilising children within narratives detailing IPV towards men, rather than looking for these experiences specifically (Hine, in press). However, in the above research, the behaviours described by men appear reflective of findings from research focused specifically on family conflict involving children, commonly referred to as ‘Parental Alienation’ (PA). Coined by Gardner (2002), the term PA is usually utilised to “describe a situation whereby one parent has a negative influence on a child’s relationship with the other parent and makes a deliberate effort to intervene and prevent the relationship from developing/continuing or improving” (McCarten, 2022, p. 2). Other definitions focus on the outcome of this abuse, describing a psychological condition in which a child allies himself or herself strongly with an alienating (or preferred) parent and rejects a relationship with the alienated (or targeted) parent without legitimate justification¹ (Bernet & Lorandos, 2020; Harman, Bernet, et al., 2019; Lorandos et al., 2013), with this condition actualised through the use of ‘alienating behaviours’, described as ‘activities that contribute to the child’s rejection of the alienated parent’ (Rowlands, 2019, p. 317). Across the course of its history, there has been and still is significant debate regarding the practical conceptualisation and measurement of PA, with some arguing about its classification as psychopathology and inclusion within the Diagnostic Statistics Manual (DSM), some questioning its relationship with existing frameworks of interpersonal violence, some questioning the validity of past research, and some denying its existence altogether (Clarkson & Clarkson, 2007; Harman et al., 2022; Mercer & Drew, 2021; Milchman, 2019; Saini et al., 2016). In spite of this, as outlined in Harman et al., 2022, the theoretical conceptualisation of the concept and the fundamental existence of PA are now well supported with a burgeoning literature (40% of eligible papers in the review had been published since 2016).

Specifically, PA is argued to be a distinctive and complex form of violence (Clawar & Rivlin, 2013; Harman et al., 2021; Harman, Bernet, et al., 2019; Harman et al., 2018) that occurs frequently in association with family separation or divorce (Baker & Verrocchio, 2015; Harman, Leder-Elder, et al., 2016), though it should be noted that this too is still disputed (Mercer, 2021, 2022). Some have gone further, arguing that, due to the damage these behaviours have on the children involved, that parental alienation could and/or should be classified as a form of child abuse (Isailă & Hostiu, 2022;

¹ Whilst judgements of what constitutes a ‘legitimate’ deterioration of a parent-child relationship are often based on evaluations with elements of subjectivity, a common example would include where that parent is abusive towards the child, and the ‘alienating’ parent is attempting to protect the child from this behaviour. It is therefore distinct from ‘parental estrangement’ where the absence or negative actions of a parent lead to the relationship deteriorating

von Boch-Galhau, 2018). A substantial body of work now exists (see Harman et al., 2019; Harman et al., 2022; Hine, in press; and Marques et al., 2020 for reviews) cataloguing the types of behaviours utilised to enact PA (Baker & Darnall, 2006; Harman, Biringen, et al., 2016; Harman et al., 2018; Harman & Matthewson, 2020; Verrocchio et al., 2018), how to measure PA (Bernet & Greenhill, 2022), and its impact on both children (Baker, 2005; Baker & Verrocchio, 2013; Verrocchio et al., 2018) and mothers and fathers as the alienated parent (Baker, 2010; Baker & Verrocchio, 2015, 2016; Balmer et al., 2018; Dijkstra, 2019; Kruk, 2015; Lee-Maturana et al., 2020, 2021; Lee-Maturana et al., 2019; Poustie et al., 2018; Tavares et al., 2020, 2021; Taylor-Potter, 2015; Torun et al., 2022). Alienated parent studies highlight that: parents feel the strain of physical and emotional distance from their child(ren); fighting to see their child(ren) incurred significant financial costs; they had poor mental health outcomes associated with worry for their child(ren); and that they considered alienation to be a form of family violence² (Poustie et al., 2018). Many of these are reflected in Lee-Maturana et al.'s work on the subject, including that PA is a form of family violence, that alienated parents fight to be in their children's lives, and that targeted parents are profoundly affected by their experiences (and experience ambiguous loss, depression, and other serious psychological difficulties; 2021). Importantly, the authors call for more research in all areas of PA, particularly around targeted parents.

Most of the work described above has examined the experiences of both mothers and fathers and has focused specifically on alienation (with only Lee-Maturana et al, 2021 exploring how PA was situated within other family violence). At present therefore very few studies have explicitly sought to examine *men's* experiences of PA *within* the context of IPV (instead this has occurred incidentally, for example, in the case of research described above). The necessity of this endeavour is further supported by findings on the prevalence of PA, as, whilst some recent studies suggest that either mothers are more frequently alienated (Balmer et al., 2018), or that there is an equal likelihood of alienation (Harman, Leder-Elder, et al., 2016, 2019), several other studies suggest fathers are the more frequently targeted parent (Bow et al., 2009; Ellis & Boyan, 2010; Gardner, 2002; Johnston, 2003; Kruk, 2015; Meier, 2009; Nichols, 2013; Rand, 1997a, 1997b; Vassilou & Cartwright, 2001). Such findings would complement ONS statistics which suggest that, when men do leave the home (as a result of abuse or otherwise), they are rarely the resident parent (only 3%;

² The terms intimate partner violence and family violence are often used interchangeably to describe similar behaviours perpetrated either specifically by an intimate partner in the former or family member (including intimate partners) in the latter. In the case of parental alienation, both of these terms apply, as this type of violence targets and has negative outcomes for both the partner (as intimate) and the child (as family). Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, we will be mostly speaking about parental alienating behaviours in the context of intimate partner violence, unless participants or authors of studies have used the term family violence specifically

Office for National Statistics, 2013). There is also strong support provided by theoretical work on the impact of stereotypes on post-separation parenting and abuse, where fathers suffer from layers of invisibility and devaluation as men, fathers, and victims (Hine, in press). Compelling evidence is also provided from studies examining the impact of alienation as a form of post-separation abuse on fathers, relating principally to the effect this had on the men's relationships with their children, with men reporting experiences of loss and grief associated with limited contact (Bates, 2019b). Moreover, the negative effect of abusive behaviours involving children on men's mental and physical health, for example PTSD and depression, is also documented elsewhere (Berger et al., 2016). The present study therefore utilised an online qualitative survey to gather the experiences of men who had experienced alienating behaviours, and to examine how and/or whether these behaviours occurred within the context of intimate partner violence.

Method

Participants and Procedure

The online survey was advertised utilising social media (e.g., Twitter, Facebook) and through organisations that support men who have experienced IPV and/or PA (e.g., ManKind Initiative, Families Need Fathers) who advertised on their websites and social media. As with previous work, the aim was to largely recruit UK based men to take part, but the study was shared widely and so the demographic included international participants. There were a total of 171 men who took part and gave final consent for their data to be used (a number of men were removed due to withdrawing before completion or retrospectively). Men were aged between 26 and 78 ($M = 48$). Participants were given a free-text box to identify their nationality and ethnic origin; the majority identified as White British (40.4%) followed by British (17%). The remaining groups are displayed in Table 1.

[Insert Table 1 About Here]

Participants reported the length of their relationships being between three months and over 27 years ($M = 10.12$).

Questionnaire and analysis strategy

The questionnaire was advertised as being for any father who had identified they "are (or have been) in a relationship where there has been manipulation of the parental relationship in some way." A further inclusion criterion was that it was for men who had been in opposite-sex relationships. We purposefully avoided using the terms "domestic violence" and "victim" as previous research has highlighted that many male victims of IPV do not identify their experiences as such (e.g., Bates, 2019b). The only exclusion criteria was if men were describing experiences that had occurred with a male partner, but this was not seen in any responses. The majority of the questions were qualitative in nature, and they began by asking about the nature of the relationship generally

including about conflict and aggression when they were together. Questions about domestic violence were open and worded as asking about “conflict”, “escalation e.g., physical aggression” and “relationship influence”; we focused on asking about behaviours rather than utilising the terminology associated with domestic violence. Questions were not explicitly asked about participant’s perpetration of aggression, only their experiences. The questions then went on to ask about how the relationship ended, who took initial custody and changes to their relationship with the children. These avoided terms such as “parental alienation” and instead asked about the manipulation of the relationship and the impact this had. At the end of the questionnaire, participants were given a full debrief and signposted to sources of support. Thematic analysis was chosen as a useful way of identifying, analysing and reporting themes in qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006); specifically, a descriptive and deductive analysis was chosen with a focus on semantic themes following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) steps.

Results

Thematic analysis revealed a number of theme and sub-themes within the data, these are displayed in Table 2:

[Insert Table 2 About Here]

Main Theme 1: Direct manipulation of contact.

The first main theme included narratives from fathers that related to the very direct ways in which the contact with their children had been manipulated. This was seen in four sub-themes: 1a) relocation; 1b) acting as a gatekeeper; 1c) Control of contact; and 1d) Extended family and stepchildren

Sub-theme 1a: Relocation. This sub-theme refers to the ways in which men’s ex-partners had geographically relocated to create physical distance between fathers and their children. This included when they moved a significant distance away meaning the men had to travel:

“She increased alienation over the 10 years since divorce. Moving over a hundred miles away.” (P139)

“It was hell 600 miles a week for 3 years then she abducted him” (P28)

This also included relocation which happened in secret, with many men not knowing where their children were:

“My ex partner left the country with our child in secret after I moved out of the family home for my safety.” (P3)

“My ex ran away with my daughter I had to find her then fight in court to get to see her.” (P19)

For some men this was after they had reached agreements about custody and finances:

“After we agree...my former spouse disappeared with the children for over 3 years until found by the police” (P105)

For these men the manipulation of the relationship and alienation that occurred was rooted in the physical distance created between them and their children. They used words such as “abducted” which communicated the absolute lack of control they felt in these circumstances to see and communicate with their children.

Sub-theme 1b: Acting as a Gatekeeper. Some men described the ways in which their ex-partner acted as a “gatekeeper” to contact, often using this as a way to control and belittle them. This form of control was seen both pre- and post-separation. For example, one man described the ways in which this control was exerted whilst they were still together:

“I was also told when I could hold, talk with or kiss our daughter. I wasn't allowed on my own with my daughter.” (P72)

Post-separation this was seen through a number of contexts including access to children, childcare arrangements, but also through attempts to hurt and continue to abuse their ex-partners:

“We were called at home as my former wife couldn't reach me on mobile (I'd left at home by mistake) and [stepson] told her where we were and the number of the restaurant. Instead she sent me text messages to say our boys were being 'rushed to hospital' but not to worry as 'daddy number one' (her new boyfriend) was with them. (P145)

This behaviour was also seen through a direct manipulation and “punishment” of the children:

“my youngest 2 children were thrown out after they refused to stop seeing me. They now live with me and have for 3 and half years. I have had no contact with my eldest in 3 and half years.” (P64)

This exertion of control can be seen here through manipulating the father and his behaviour around the children, but also through a form of “punishment” that also impacted the fathers and children. Put simply, children were “punished” and penalised for wishing to have a relationship with their father.

Sub-theme 1c: Control of contact. Control of contact is one of the key markers of alienating behaviour from the existing literature. This was a strong theme within the data of the current study, and interestingly included instances around both pre- and post-separation (most existing literature focuses more on post-separation incidences). Whilst men were still in the relationship, they described the ways in which the time they spent with their children was controlled:

“Wife kept my son away from me while staying together.” (P31)

“Of course. She was the only one who could read bedtime stories. If one of our two children and if pick them up to comfort them, she would take them out of my arms as if she was the only one who could make them feel better.” (P137)

For some men these was seen to be rooted in jealousy and insecurity:

“she was constantly jealous of me having a relationship with the children. if there was anything I did with just them it was discouraged or she had to join in to make it a family thing. access to the children was constantly used to keep me in the relationship” (P64)

After the end of the relationship this behaviour and control was exerted through withholding contact:

“I haven't seen my children for almost 9 years.” (P170)

For some men this included manipulating contact time men spent with their children, for example impacting quantity of time or taking the children away on holiday:

“The children were sent to their grandparents house after dates and times were agreed for drop offs normally when I was about to arrive at their home some 13 miles in the opposite direction. Children’s events sleep overs etc were all arranged when the children were due to spend time with me.” (P6)

“I had to beg and grovel for every pickup and phone call and only got to take one of the children abroad once as she also controlled their passports.” (P21)

For some men they described how their contact was controlled and how this was an extension of control they had felt in the relationship:

“she continues to control everything, even though there is now a shared residence order she continually books the children into activities that clash with my time with them, I have to agree otherwise contact stops” (P116)

These examples demonstrate how children became a tool of coercion before the end of the relationship and continued to be so even after separation.

Sub-theme 1d: Extended Family and Stepchildren. Previous literature has focused on the impact of parental alienation on mothers and fathers, as well as on the children. However, what is less well understood is the way in which parental alienation can impact on the wider family including stepchildren. The men within this sample described the ways in which this alienation extended to grandparents and other family:

“She started distancing my child from my parents, always tried to put him to bed if they were visiting.” (P24)

This was seen pre-separation, as above, but also in cutting contact post-separation which meant that children not only had disruption to the parental relationship but other family members. It could also

be seen in the way in which men lost relationships with their stepchildren, despite having been in a father role for a number of years:

“My ex-partner has a child from a previous relationship. The "dad" role was almost immediately imposed on me. She had fairly recently divorced. The child was less than 6 months old. The bio dad was effectively removed. I should have seen the warning signs. When we separated after 13 years, all access to the first child was removed. She also tried to remove access to a child that I was the biological father.” (P109)

This theme points to the wider impact of this abuse on the whole family, including on other children.

Main Theme 2: Manipulation through systems.

The second main theme involved narratives related to where fathers were manipulated through systems including legal and administrative systems. The sub-themes here were: 2a) False allegations (or threat of); 2b) Breaching of a court order, and 2c) Using schools.

Sub-theme 2a: False allegations (or the threat of). This theme represented the ways in which their ex-partners were making false allegations around IPV, child abuse and sexual violence. This was often related to the children specifically:

“Since separation there have been a number of false allegations about abuse and neglect. I feel like I am constantly defending myself.” (P112)

Other men described the way the threat of these allegations was used as a tool for control:

“When she asked for a divorce, she refused my offer of couple's counselling, and said if I didn't give her what she wanted financially she would prevent me from seeing our children. She then said she would call the police with false allegations of abuse if I didn't give her what she wanted.” (P10)

Here the threat of withholding contact and the threat of the false allegations was a combined attempt to exert continued control towards the end, and then after the end of the relationship.

Sub-theme 2b: Breaching contact orders. Many of the men had contact agreements through the family court system, but experienced their partners breaching these and not complying with the terms:

“despite 3 full sets of court proceedings, each with a final order for “normal” contact of every other weekend. She has unilaterally suspended contact altogether” (P11)

“I should be able to physically see him two hours a week in a contact centre on supported basis. However, she creates issues and do not comply with court order” (P16)

This often-meant numerous hearings and a back and forth to court to get access reinstated:

“When we split my ex-partner agreed that we would share 50/50 custody. We broke this after approximately 6 months and prevented all access. I applied to court and had access

reinstated, but she always found reasons to break the order. We had 7 court hearings in total mostly where I'd apply to the court due to her not following the order" (P45)

Where we see parental alienation and this manipulation impacting on mothers and fathers, it seems that the system currently significantly disadvantages fathers through existing gendered stereotypes prejudicing the family court system.

Subtheme 2c: Using schools. This sub theme specifically represented the numerous occurrences that the school systems were used as part of further exertions of control. This included through blocking (or attempting to block) fathers having access to important school information:

"Not providing [name]'s new school with ANY of my details ie. I didn't exist until I approached them" (P117)

Or through preventing involvement, including with other parents:

"She tries to prevent me from being involved in their nursery and primary school, and has tried to alienate their friends' parents" (P10)

It would also be seen through attempting to get the children to make false allegations to the school.

"he was told to go to school and report to teachers that I pushed him down the stairs, punched him in the face, wouldn't feed him if he didn't finish his homework etc." (P84)

This is an important finding that points to the need to work with schools in awareness raising as they provide an opportunity to prevent this coercion occurring.

Main Theme 3: Manipulation through Children

This theme involved the ways in which fathers were manipulated directly or indirectly through the children. This included sub-themes: 3a) Changing names; 3b) Denigrating father; 3c) Lying; 3d) children engaging in abusive behaviours and 3e) Children feeling guilty for seeing their father.

Subtheme 3a Changing names. This theme represented the ways the men described how their ex-partners changed use of names as part of the denigration. This included avoiding calling him "Dad" or "Daddy", so that children started to call him by his first name instead:

"Her manipulation of her friends and our children against me increased over time. Most notably she stopped calling me Daddy in front of the children - they now call me by my first name as she has done because they are so brainwashed by her." (P37)

Or finding that in a new relationship, their ex-partners were encouraging the children to call their new partners "dad":

"I discovered that my daughter was calling another man 'dad'." (P87)

This small change in name had a significant impact of these men and their identities as fathers. The use of a first name instead of that title represents a subtle encouragement on the ex-partner's behalf to start to distance the child from their father.

Subtheme 3b: Denigration of the father. Another way in which the ex-partners tried to exert this distance was by denigrating and criticising the fathers in front of them:

“She always referred to the children as hers. She belittled me in front of the children. Told the children I had no interest in them” (P65)

This also includes denigrating their status as fathers:

“She refers to me as a “sperm donor”.” (P111)

Sometimes the men described the way in which this would be directed towards the children:

“During the relationship she told my son (age 4 at the time) that she would find another daddy for him” (P94)

Subtheme 3c: Lying. Men also described instances where their ex-partners told lies or fabricated stories to the children:

“There is too much. She manipulated my daughter all the time. Everything she likes was wrong, she told her I try to rip her away from her mother and her friends, she told her she is in danger with me, that I’m aggressive.” (P42)

This included instances of trying to make it look like the father did not care about them:

“Towards the end of our relationship she was telling the children that I spent time at work to get away from them...” (P161)

“She has told our kids that they see their daddy less because he is choosing to spend time with his friends instead.” (P10)

As an extension of this, there was often interference in the communication channels:

“The children are told lies. She tells them I don't want to see them. Deletes me from phones, emails and anything else I use to communicate with them” (P70)

Without clear communication fathers were unable to combat misinformation and challenge the behaviour.

Subtheme 3d: Children engaging in inappropriate or abusive behaviour. Men described the ways in which their children began to become part of the abusive pattern of behaviour. This type of behaviour has controversially been referred to as “parental alienation syndrome”. This included the ex-partners encouraging the children to make allegations:

“My ex wife took all 3 of children to child youth protection services to complain about me. The children told me. She has also taken them to psychologists trying to get a report for the court. This backfired when my daughter showed me the emails between her and her

mother. Her mother was telling her to tell the counsellor I don't provide food or sanity products or any privacy." (P112)

This included (related to subtheme 3a) where the children engaged in not calling their fathers by the name "dad" or "daddy":

"Silly things at first like getting [child's name] to use my name not calling me dad. We would agree something about [child's name] then she Undermine it." (P120)

Main Theme 4: Wider context of abuse

This final main theme captured the ways in which the manipulation and alienation of fathers described above was part of a wider pattern of IPV that existed both pre- and post-separation. We utilised definitions and understandings of IPV from the previous literature and identified these experience through four sub-themes: 1) physical aggression; 2) verbal and psychological aggression; 3) control and isolation; and 4) post-separation experiences.

Sub-theme 4a: Physical aggression. Men described instances of significant and injurious violence that they had experience during the relationship:

"I had my head slammed into the boot of the car because I wasn't packing it correctly. I was punched in the groin whilst lying in bed because she wanted to see me in pain" (P5)

"Shed lose her temper and start sucker punching me. On one occasion attacked me with 10 inch knife. Another broke her hand keep punching back of my head." (P140)

For some this was seen as occurring in a cyclical fashion – here there is also reference to the influence of alcohol that was also seen in a number of accounts:

"Conflict was usually when my wife had been drinking heavily. We would have 4-6 weeks of peace. And then 1 night where she let rip verbally. And then peace. That was the cycle. If my daughter stayed for a weekend I usually slept on the couch and usually got punched with a closed fist whilst asleep." (P169)

Sub-theme 4b: Verbal and psychological aggression. There were also strong themes of verbal and psychological aggression. This included denigration and constantly putting their partner down:

"Psychological abuse was the worst. Constant berating. Sleep deprivation." (P70)

This was also something that occurred in front of the children.

Some participants also described the ways in which the children were manipulated through false accusations:

"She should shout and scream at me in front of the children, constantly pushing me to be violent to her. She would physically stop me leaving the house and if I tried to push passed

her she would throw herself on the floor and shout “stop hitting me” so the children could hear.” (P80)

Other men described instances of gaslighting, where their partner tried to make them doubt their sense of reality:

“She even started hiding my house keys” (P120)

“she gaslighted me constantly, tried to convince me that I was an alcoholic, or intolerant, or undermining her. All lies.” (P121)

Sub-theme 4c: Control and isolation. There were also strong themes of manipulation and control to ultimately isolate men from their wider social networks:

“My partner isolated me from friends and family. She wouldn't allow my friends to visit, and wouldn't allow us to visit them, even for important events such as weddings. I ended up not speaking to my parents for four years” (P10)

This was often part of a wider pattern of coercive control which served to dominate and control men:

“I was not allowed to go out with friends. I was not allowed to leave the house without her unless it was to go to work. She belittled me in front of the children telling them I was a failure. She ran up mountains of debt and demanded I pay for it.” (P65)

Where men were seen to go against these wishes, there were descriptions of “punishments” and silent treatment:

“attempts at gaining employment were sabotaged. I was stranded thousands of miles away from everyone I knew. If I made attempts to communicate with her friends it would result in punishment for weeks at a time. I was told how to dress, when to shave etc” (P73)

Sub-theme 4d: Post-separation abuse. Many of the men also described how this behaviour continued after the end of the relationship and in some cases, escalated:

“It got worse. She sent abusive text messages, made abusive phone calls. She came to my front door and abused me in the street. She also abused my neighbours verbally. So much so that I had to report her behaviour to the police.” (P154)

This was often for periods of a number of years and impacted on men’s mental health significantly:

“carried on for a couple years after, and actually got far far worse, to the point I was considering suicide.” (P88)

This is often exacerbated by the involvement of new partners:

“Since the relationship ended the experiences have magnified substantially. I have been in a constant state of stress and fear for the last 4 years...She has turned her current partner

against me (the same pattern seems to be re-occurring in their relationship). He now harasses me, he makes quite serious claims that are untrue and unsubstantiated.” (P25)
This behaviour links with previously discussed themes where men must maintain a relationship with their ex-partner in order to see their children.

Discussion

The present study sought to examine, in detail and from a large qualitative sample, the experiences of men who have experienced so-called parental alienation (PA), either during or after relationship breakdown, and the relationship between these behaviours and intimate partner violence (IPV). The men in this study provided powerful and moving accounts of their experiences of female (ex)partners, with a wide variety of behaviours utilised to disrupt the father-child bond. Perhaps most importantly, they reported that abuse targeting this relationship did not occur in a vacuum, and instead simply provided an additional, and highly effective avenue for coercion, which was situated within a suite of broader abuse.

Many of the men spoke of specific actions taken by mothers to erode their relationship with their child(ren), most notably the fundamental disruption of contact, thus supporting results from previous studies with male IPV victims (Bates, 2019a, 2019b, 2020). Many of the behaviours described overlap with the list of alienating behaviours provided by Baker and Darnall (2006), including their categories of: Badmouthing, limiting/interfering with visitation/parenting time/contact, limiting/interfering with mail and phone contact, limiting/interfering with symbolic contact, interfering with information, emotional manipulation, unhealthy alliance, and miscellaneous (e.g., telling the targeted parent that child does not love them). The accounts provided here also support the description of parental alienation as occurring over time (Verrocchio et al., 2018), and not as one-off events, and reflect previous research on alienation enacted towards both mothers and fathers (Marques et al., 2020). Put simply, the fathers in this study detailed a wide array of alienating behaviours that they had experienced over an extended period of time, thus providing further convincing evidence that fathers do indeed suffer alienation at the hands of female partners (Hine, in press).

Importantly, fathers spoke of behaviours which utilised children as vehicles for abuse, for example encouraging children to berate their father, or children being encouraged to lie or tell stories. Sadly, in some examples, this actually led to children becoming actively and independently abusive, arguably representing full completion of the alienation process as described by Lorandos et al. (2013). Many of the fathers described that they were fundamentally rejected by their child, supporting previous research showing that alienation leads to a lack of ambivalence in children towards parents (i.e., one parent is all good, one is all bad; Bernet et al., 2018). In other cases,

children still wanted contact with their father, but felt deeply uncomfortable as the disconnect between what they were told to do, and the love they had for the alienated parent, conflicted. Both speak to literature highlighting the profound impact alienating behaviours have on the children involved and the significantly increased lifetime risks of both mental and physical illness for the children involved (Baker, 2005; Baker & Verrocchio, 2013; Marques et al., 2020; Verrocchio et al., 2018), and which highlight the link between alienation and a wide variety of behavioural, emotional and cognitive impairments (Cummings & Davies, 2010; Harman et al., 2018; Harman et al., 2022; Johnston et al., 2005; Seijo et al., 2016). Indeed, there is substantial debate as to whether alienating behaviours constitute a form of child abuse (Harman et al., 2018; Isailă & Hostiuc, 2022; Kruk, 2018), to which this study provides an important contribution (though further research on the impact of PA on children is needed).

As perhaps representative of a more gendered experience of PA by fathers, many of the men spoke about the use of 'systems' to perpetrate alienating and abusive behaviours. Specifically, they spoke of how, when they were able to get custody arrangements through the family courts, that these were often unfair in their allocation of time across the two parents, and that their partners breached agreements put in place. Moreover, mothers were described as using other formal institutions like schools to gatekeep information about their children, or to further their deception (i.e., by planting false allegations in the minds of professionals). Both of these speak to the 'legal and administrative aggression' described by Tilbrook et al. (2010) and others (Bates, 2019a; Berger et al., 2016), where perpetrators utilise systems sympathetic to their position (in this case as mothers) to enact abuse. In both the cases of courts and schools the perpetration of alienating behaviours is likely to be facilitated by powerful beliefs relating to motherhood. Specifically, that, whilst men are identified as providing care for their children, women are resoundingly and robustly identified as the 'primary' caregivers across various cultures (Valiquette-Tessier et al., 2018), and that the bond they have with their children is sacred and should not be disrupted. In this sense, institutions that involve interaction with parents may 'naturally' support mothers or 'automatically' believe their claims and/or requests, leaving fathers fighting for their position as caregiver.

This will undoubtedly fuel the complicated and increasingly fierce debate concerning the utilisation of IPV and PA claims in family court proceedings. At present, several researchers argue that claims of PA (when made by fathers) are largely false, and only done so to counter 'genuine' claims of abusive behaviours from mothers (Barnett, 2020; Meier, 2020; Meier et al., 2022a, 2022b), and that children are too frequently 'transferred' to abusive parents (fathers) or subject to joint custody and unsupervised visitation as a result of alienation claims (Silberg & Dallam, 2019). Indeed, there is some evidence available to suggest that women are indeed fearful of raising and pursuing

allegations of abuse against their male partners in specialist service and court settings as PA will be counter-claimed in an attempt to delegitimise their position as abuse victims (Birchall & Choudhry, 2022; Lapierre & Côté, 2016). Barnett (2020) further claims that, due to lobbying of various ‘fathers’ rights’ groups, claims of PA within the court system have become *too* powerful, and that courts as *too* easily persuaded by such claims, when made (see also Meier, 2020), or that expert witnesses citing PA are unreliable and/or unregulated (Myers & Mercer, 2022; Rao, 2021). This is a position reflected by Meier and Dickson (2017) who argue that the court system is structured to “invisiblise” male violence from custody disputes. Barnett (2014) further argues that this kind of functioning with the family court system is a demonstration of a ‘contact at all costs’ approach, which risks harm to the child by maintaining parental relationships with abusive parents, and some have been explicit in warning against the danger of false positive IDs for alienation in custody disputes, and the necessity for evaluators to understand the complexities surrounding alienation (Warshak, 2020).

In contrast, there are other large-scale case reviews which draw opposite conclusions and speak positively about the evolving role of PA within the court system. Specifically, Lorandos (2020) identifies that, whilst it is true PA has become increasingly introduced into custody cases over time, this is the result of welcomed recognition of the issue, and expert input from experienced jurists, litigators, and mental health professionals. Importantly, in this review, no cases were identified where children were transferred to an abusive parent; a finding supported by other recent case review work in Canada (Paquin-Boudreau et al., 2022). Moreover, Harman and Lorandos (2021) robustly criticize past work on both conceptual and methodological grounds (specifically Meier, 2020), for example, by highlighting that coding procedures are not clearly outlined, or that gendered assumptions appeared to be made within the language used to describe cases and typical case paradigms. They also found in their arguably substantially more robust case review that, whilst parents accused of alienation were likely to lose parenting time and custody, this could happen to both mothers and fathers, and there were no losses or decreases in custody found when the accusing parent was found to be abusive (Harman & Lorandos, 2021). Such findings support assertions that, in reality, cases involving family separation are unlikely to represent such a simple binary of abuse and PA allegations by women and men respectively (or what Meier, 2020 referred to as ‘paradigm cases’). This is especially so when considering arguments for the recategorization or consideration of PA as a form of family violence (Harman et al., 2018), which potentially reconceptualises the above as abusive claims and counter-claims, rather than differential entities. Indeed, when fathers raise allegations of PA ‘in response’ to allegations of abuse, or vice versa, they may simply be highlighting their own victimisation at the hands of an abusive partner.

Findings from the current study support this position, and sit in direct contrast with observations that family courts are overly sympathetic to fathers, particularly when they claim alienation (Barnett, 2020; Meier, 2020). Indeed, it would appear that, in contrast to Meier and Dickson's assertion that court systems 'invisibilise' male violence (2017), these results instead suggest that it is male victimisation which is obscured. Moreover, the fear fathers described at being denied parental contact aligns with research suggesting that men feel unable to leave abusive relationships for this reason, and do not want to leave them with an abusive partner (Bates, 2019a, 2019b; Hine et al., 2020; Hines & Douglas, 2010). Indeed, such findings are representative of the growing literature on men's help seeking in response to IPV, which outlines the significant barriers men face, both as men but also as fathers (Taylor et al., in press). There can be no doubt whatsoever therefore that further research on the influence of alienation claims on custody cases is needed (though there are substantial challenges to such research, particularly in the UK, where family court proceedings are highly inaccessible). However, for now, the results from this study provide valuable insight into how men's experiences of abuse appear to be exacerbated and even facilitated by family court processes.

False allegations (including within family court settings) were also mentioned by several participants, with men describing how women would threaten to and, in some cases enact their threat to claim abusive behaviour towards them and/or the child(ren). It is important to note at this point that it is *without question* that cases exist where men are abusive towards their female partners and children, and that mothers may take protective actions (including disrupting or controlling contact) in an attempt to save themselves and children from abuse (Drozd & Olesen, 2004; Moe, 2009). Specifically, it is explicitly recognised here that a) in some circumstances a parent may seek to block access to a child by an abusive partner, and this may involve behaviours that might be categorised as alienating by the effected parent, and b) that a child may themselves purposively become 'estranged' rather than alienated, again in response to abusive behaviour by the estranged parent (both of which constitute legitimate protective actions by parents and children respectively). However, some academics go further, arguing that it is the claims of parental alienation (by fathers specifically) which are almost unanimously false, and that these are only utilised to counter the genuine claims of abuse put forward by mothers, particularly in family court settings (Barnett, 2020; Meier, 2020). In reality, it is impossible know how truthful either claim is without rigorous investigation (e.g., through court-ordered fact-finding processes). However, it is clear from the accounts provided in this study that in some cases women bring forward domestic abuse claims both to enact abuse and alienation themselves, as well as to respond to and push-back against claims of alienation from fathers.

It is also clear that fathers felt that such allegations are not seriously investigated by various institutions (such as family courts), potentially due to biases and stereotypes which exist around abuse, alienation, and parental roles. It could be argued that one of the reasons that the erroneous abuse claims made by mothers described by participants proved to be so effective is that they are made in the context of pervasive stereotypes which frame domestic abuse as something unilaterally perpetrated solely by men towards women (Hine, 2019). This could thus provide women with a powerful avenue for control as they hold the potentially valid assumption that their claims will be 'automatically' validated by agencies (McCarrick et al., 2016). However, such stereotypes are in stark contrast to the testimony provided in this study which identified a wide range of other abusive behaviours perpetrated towards men by their female partners, within which alienating behaviours were situated. Indeed, the findings from this study support the now burgeoning research outlining men's experiences of abuse (Hine et al., 2021), and demonstrate that men experience many forms of violence. Particularly noteworthy were the testimonials provided in relation to controlling and isolating behaviours, as men described being completely 'cut-off' from friends, family and wider society. This is particularly important when considering the difficulty men face in recognising their victimisation, and the role that third parties play in aiding such revelations (Hine et al., 2020). Crucially, due to the intersection of the various stereotypes described above, the fathers in this study appear to occupy a position of double or even triple jeopardy, as they fight for recognition as loving fathers, as alienated parents, and as victims of abuse.

For IPV and PA scholars, the findings from this study present important theoretical and practical implications. From a theoretical standpoint, results provide clear evidence that, for men, PA and IPV are inextricably linked, and that PA, rather than a separate entity, may simply represent a distinct form of IPV. Indeed, fathers in this study took part because they had experienced behaviours manipulating their relationship with children, which wasn't explicitly labelled as IPV or PA, but which represent both of these concepts. Many talked about these as coercively controlling behaviours, a distinct area within IPV research. This supports observations by Harman et al. (2018) and Hine (in press), and goes against those made by Mercer (2021), that parental alienation seems to represent an unacknowledged form of family violence, and that future academic and societal discourse should seek to identify how PA is incorporated into definitions, research paradigms, and policy frameworks on family and intimate partner violence (Harman et al., 2018; Harman et al., 2022), and whether the term PA serves the right purpose (Hine, in press). Indeed, reframing and resituating PA in this way may also begin to resolve some of issues that result from 'pitting' PA against IPV within family court cases (Meier, 2020). Moreover, concerted effort is also needed to challenge and deconstruct damaging and influential stereotypes around fathers, abuse and alienation which obscure men's

experiences. Indeed, through doing so we may begin to recognise that fathers may, instead of countering claims of abusive behaviour with 'erroneous' claims of alienation, be simply highlighting their own experiences of abuse. However, it should be noted that there is a legitimate argument that before any conceptual realignment can occur, that the construct validity of parental alienation itself must first be established (Milchman, 2019). Indeed, as argued by Milchman, it is up to the academic community to overcome the conceptual and political challenges associated with parental alienation, in an attempt to bring about a positive transition towards the recognition of genuine abuse towards parents involving children, regardless of the gender of the perpetrator.

On a practical level, and with the above in consideration, results have important implications for how family courts operate within the United Kingdom and beyond. At present, it is argued that a lucrative PA 'industry' has eroded all trust and legitimacy around PA claims, with soliciting firms seeking to use PA simply to make money and win cases, regardless of whether claims are erroneous or truthful (Barnett, 2020). Indeed, the authors of this manuscript would not disagree with the assessment that the concept of parental alienation may have become somewhat warped and devoid of meaning within the family court system, and that previous research into the topic has proved questionable (not least in relation to 'parental alienation syndrome'; Gardner, 2002). The cause has also not been helped at times by certain high-profile organisations, who have conflated (sometimes controversial) activism, with legitimate claims of PA, thus delegitimising the latter. However, to use any of these observations as a tool to delegitimise *all* claims of PA by men is unnecessary, unfair, and inappropriate. It is the responsibility of family court systems, and the professionals who work within them, to investigate claims rigorously and without prejudice. As argued above, the reconceptualization of PA as a form of family violence/IPV could in fact aid this process, as cases would no longer be susceptible to the supposed 'silver bullet' of alienation claims sinking custody cases and resulting in transferral of custody and maintenance of contact 'at all costs' (Barnett, 2014, 2020). Indeed, there is some indication from US research that the recognition and assessment of alienation in custody processes is improving (Lorandos, 2020), but further, large-scale case review research (particularly in the UK) is absolutely necessary.

It is important to note that the current study is not without limitations. First, this study was advertised using social media channels, and the men in this study voluntarily responded to those advertisements to provide their accounts of abuse, family breakdown, and abuse involving children. As such, there is the potential for a self-selecting sample, which only described the experiences of a particular group of men (i.e., those who chose to participate). The accounts also exist in isolation (i.e., there is no couple or parent-child data available here) and we did not ask about perpetration, and so no reference or comparative accounts are available. This is particularly important to note

within the context of the debate within parental alienation research, with some claiming that men who claim parental alienation only do so to counter allegations of abuse, and that in doing so, they are in fact enacting further abuse against their female partners (Barnett, 2020). It is entirely possible then that the accounts provided here are actually false narratives. However, it is arguably impossible to ever truly authenticate accounts provided in social science research, particularly within this area, where individuals are likely to provide differential accounts, and to interpret behaviours differently (i.e., as abusive or not). The current study was therefore conducted in a way which afforded the men who chose to take part with the same belief often afforded to women who take part in similar research, and in line with fundamental principals of social science research (i.e., that participants answer questions openly and honestly). However, future research could seek to recruit both fathers and mothers for parental alienation research through avenues that allow for some levels of authentication, for example, recruiting men who have engaged with a support service or by analysing secondary accounts logged by removed individuals (i.e., lawyers), or by analysing court bundles containing testimony and evidence from both parties.

The second issue relating to sampling concerns the mixture of nationalities from respondents, simply because this slightly complicates the interpretation of the results due to the variation in the legislation and court systems policing this issue. However, most of the results and subsequent themes in this study relate to the experiences of men in relation to their partners and their abuse, rather than systems seeking to deal with said violence, and therefore concerns about understanding specific legal or court based systems are not relevant here. Future research could explore any international and cultural differences in greater detail, perhaps in attempts to identify effective practice. Finally, the data from this study provided rich accounts of experience, without exploring fully the impact of alienating behaviours on the fathers and children involved. This exploration will be delivered in an upcoming manuscript, to allow space for an appropriately detailed analysis.

Conclusion

The testimonials provided in this study provide powerful evidence of the existence of alienating behaviours towards fathers, many of which were situated within a context of wider, and wide-ranging, abuse. Results therefore provide a critical contribution to the current literature on the existence of both alienation and IPV towards men and fathers and furthers the debate surrounding the relationship between various forms of family violence. Perhaps most importantly, this piece provides an opportunity to hear the voices of men who are frequently overlooked as a legitimate victim group, and who are societally undervalued as legitimate, loving caregivers. It is beyond doubt that discourse in this area is passionate and complex, as is natural when the welfare of children is

involved. However, it is critical that inquiry in this area is approached in a balanced, compassionate manner, and in a way which recognises the lived experience seen within the evidence base.

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