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“There is no part of my life that hasn't been destroyed”: the impact of parental alienation and intimate partner violence on fathers

Hine, Ben ORCID logo ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9732-4631> (2023) “There is no part of my life that hasn't been destroyed”: the impact of parental alienation and intimate partner violence on fathers. Partner Abuse. ISSN 1946-6560

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Abstract

Previous research has demonstrated the profound negative impact of both intimate partner violence (IPV) and parental alienation (PA) on both the mental and physical health of fathers. However, considering the increasing arguments for PA to be categorised and examined as a form of IPV, there is an urgent need to explore the impact of PA as part of a broader pattern of IPV. This is a particularly relevant line inquiry for fathers for fathers, as men are largely invisibilised in research examining IPV. The present study analysed qualitative responses to an online survey by 171 fathers who have experienced alienating behaviours within the context of IPV. Three themes were identified: Impact on fathers (including health, finances, grief, identity, and relationships), perceived impact on children (including siblings and extended family, health and wellbeing, loss of childhood), and impact on relationships with children (including lack of closeness, feeling responsible, and improvements over time). The impacts described by men are discussed in relation to the theoretical and practical relationship between IPV and PA, and implications for support and help seeking for men experiencing this form of abuse.

Keywords: Parental Alienation, Domestic Violence and Abuse, Fathers, Intimate Partner Violence

Introduction

There is a rapidly growing evidence base around co-called 'Parental Alienation' (PA; Harman, Warshak, et al., 2022). PA is described as '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); a process enacted by the perpetration of 'parental alienating behaviours' or PABs (Harman, Warshak, et al., 2022). Examples of PABs include bad mouthing, changing of a child's name, and restriction of access and/or information (Baker & Darnall, 2006; Harman & Matthewson, 2020), with these three examples respectively representing the various levels of PA that can occur – mild, moderate, and severe (McCarten, 2022). Moreover, a recent systematic review by Harman, Warshak, et al. (2022) has demonstrated the existence of a solid empirical evidence base for: the existence of PABs, manifestations of PA in children, negative outcomes for parents and children who experience PA, the affect and role of third parties/institutions, intervention efficacy, alienating parent behaviour, prevalence, and the demographics of alienated children. This led the authors to conclude that 'Parental alienation research has moved beyond an early stage of scientific development and has produced a scientifically trustworthy knowledge base' (p. 1), and to highlight that research on PA is currently burgeoning.

As the evidence on this phenomenon has grown, so has research seeking to understand how it fits within existing frameworks relating to violence and coercive control. Indeed, a convincing case has been made that PA and PABs can be situated as a form of family violence, emotional/psychological abuse, and child abuse (Harman et al., 2018; Kruk, 2018). This is supported by work which has explored experiences of this type of abuse specifically within the context of IPV, in which alienating

behaviours are described by both female and male participants as a form of control and emotional abuse (Lee-Maturana et al., 2022). Such work has also highlighted the range of alienating behaviours that are experienced by parents, the use of systems in facilitation of the abuse, how children themselves are used to enact abuse, and how alienating behaviours are situated within a wider experience of violence (Bates & Hine, in press). Therefore, whilst Lee-Maturana et al. (2022) rightly suggest that further research on targeted parents is needed, especially from a family violence perspective (Haines et al., 2020; Harman et al., 2018), there is some preliminary evidence that targeted parents do indeed view PA as a form of IPV.

With increasing discussion around PA as a form of IPV/family violence, research has also sought to explore the impact of these behaviours on targeted parents and children, and how this compares to evidence on the effect of other abuse types, particularly in relation to mental health. Lee-Maturana et al. (2022) and Harman, Warhak, et al.'s (2022) reviews provide robust insight, finding for example, that alienated parents are likely to suffer from severe psychological difficulties, and to have considerable anxiety, depression, stress, sadness, distress, frustration, anger, and physical symptoms, as well as reporting feeling powerless, hopeless, and socially isolated (Tavares et al., 2021). Particularly concerning is the high levels of suicidality amongst alienated parents (Harman et al., 2019), often related to the loss of part of their parent identity, and the intense negative emotions associated with loss of child contact. Moreover, Harman, Warshak, et al. (2022) highlight that the experiences reported by parents are overtly similar to those given by survivors of other forms of coercive and controlling behaviour (Spencer et al., 2019). This is unsurprising when considering the growing argument for considering PA simply as a form a coercive control. Such findings would also tentatively suggest that observations that

experiences of PA can be mapped onto other frameworks of violence are mirrored in relation to the *impact* of these behaviours.

However, at present there is little explicit research examining the impact of PA when such behaviours are also part of a wider pattern of abuse. Indeed, as outlined above, there is research which has examined the impact of PA in isolation, highlighting devastating consequences. Similarly, there is extant evidence on the impact of IPV on both women (Ellsberg et al., 2008; Ferrari et al., 2016; Loxton et al., 2006) and men when assessed separately (Hine et al., 2020; Hines & Douglas, 2011, 2015, 2016; Hines & Straus, 2007; Tsui, 2014) and in comparison (Alejo, 2014; Coker et al., 2002; Coker et al., 2000). Moreover, Coker et al.'s work demonstrates that this effect is found in relation to psychological abuse specifically, and that both men and women report psychological abuse to be more impactful than physical abuse (Coker et al., 2002; Coker et al., 2000). However, few studies have sought to establish the extent of the overlap between these two bodies of literature, beyond simple observations of similarity of outcome.

However, within the wider evidence base we can see that as awareness of coercive control as a distinct form of abuse has grown, evidence has correspondingly demonstrated its profound negative psychological and physical impact on both women (Nevala, 2017) and men (Bates & Taylor, 2021; Graham-Kevan et al., 2021). Thus, when considering then the importance of the parenting role for both men and women, any behaviour which would target, disrupt, manipulate, or erode this role would likely also result in the highest form of damage. Establishing this empirically would help support both theoretical and practical (i.e., policy-based) discussions around where/if PA is situated as a form of abuse. Moreover, as a clearly distinctly psychologically

disruptive form of abuse, if PA is occurring within the context of additional violence, effects are likely to be even further exaggerated.

Fathers are worthy of particular attention in this area for several reasons. First, they may experience additional vulnerabilities to this form of post-separation abuse as they constitute the vast majority of non-resident parents (up to 97%; Office for National Statistics, 2013), though it should be noted that residency does not protect a parent from alienating behaviours. Second, they have experienced chronic invisibilisation within the IPV literature (Hine et al., 2021) which has resulted in a substantially less robust literature around their experiences of IPV and the associated impact. Third, they are also likely to experience additional risks relating to the impact of coercive and controlling behaviour due to gendered issues around barriers to help-seeking and support (Huntley et al., 2019) and 'unhealthy' coping mechanisms in response to abuse such as social isolation and substance misuse (Hine et al., 2020), and increased suicidality during separation and divorce (Evans et al., 2016; Scourfield, 2015). Finally, they may also be particularly vulnerable to system's based abuse, otherwise known as legal and administrative aggression (Tilbrook et al., 2010), due to their position as fathers within systems that typically place high levels of power to mothers (i.e., family courts). Put simply, there is evidence available demonstrating that PA occurs within the broader context of IPV, but very little research has explored how this impacts on fathers from a gendered perspective.

The present study therefore utilised an online qualitative survey to explore the impact on men who had experienced alienating behaviours within the context of IPV. This is the same survey utilised in previous work examining the experiences of fathers of the behaviours themselves, as well as the context in which these occurred (Bates & Hine, in press). The current study is therefore intended as a complement to that

research, and to develop understandings on the impact on fathers of alienating behaviours that occur within the context of broader violence, as well as their children (as reported by those fathers).

Method

The participants and procedure are the same as reported in Bates and Hine (in press), however the central points are also included below.

Participants and Procedure

The methodology chosen was utilised to address gaps that existed in the literature (see Bates, 2020, for full discussion); by using an anonymous, online, qualitative survey, with careful language choice (i.e., avoiding terms like domestic violence) it was hoped that the reach in recruitment may be much broader. The online survey was advertised utilising social media (e.g., Twitter, Facebook) and through organisations that support men who have experienced IPV and PA (e.g., *ManKind Initiative*, *Families Need Fathers*). The study was shared more widely and so the demographic configuration of the sample was more varied than in previous research. There was a total of 171 men who took part and gave final consent for their data to be used (n = 34 men were removed due to withdrawing part way through or retrospectively). Men were aged between 26 and 78 ($M = 48.29$; $SD = 8.79$). Participants were given a free-text box to identify their nationality and ethnic origin; the majority identified as White British (40.5%) followed by British (16.8%). The remaining groups are displayed in Table 1.

[Table 1 about here]

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.”. Further it was advertised 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. We began by asking about the nature of the relationship generally including about conflict and aggression when they were together. The questions then went on to ask about how the relationship ended and post-separation experiences. The questions for this specific part of the analysis involved asking about the impact of the IPV and alienating behaviours on men, their health and wellbeing, their relationships with their children and also how they felt it had impacted their children. 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 deductive analysis was chosen with a focus on semantic themes.

Results

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

[Table 2 about here]

Main Theme 1: Impact on Fathers

This theme represented the impact that the PA experiences had had on fathers through a number of domains. This was seen through five sub-themes: 1) health; 2) finances; 3) grief; 4) identity; and 5) relationships.

Sub-theme 1a: Health. The experiences of PA were seen to significantly impact on the mental health of the fathers in this sample, including suicidal thoughts and attempts:

“I felt suicidal on a number of occasions and would often phone the Samaritans on Christmas day.” (P2)

“I tried to kill myself and ended up sleeping rough for 2 years” (P5)

For other fathers this had included a diagnosis and need for medication:

“I suffer with PTSD, can't sleep well, need anti-depressants.” (P30)

This was described as being a consequence of the process/experience of alienation, but also ongoing separation:

“Sometimes I will just cry on my own because I miss him it's taken a toll on my mental health” (P43)

We know the wider impact of experiencing IPV can have on physical and mental health, it is associated with numerous adverse outcomes similar to those above. This data reinforces that for father this experience is exacerbated because of the ways in which the children have become part of the abuse.

Sub-theme 1b: Finances. The family court is known to be an expensive and often acrimonious process. The men within this sample described the financial impact of their PA experiences through this:

“I am hounded by endless litigation for money. I almost never see my child, when I do it is generally a sad meeting that is hard on my daughter.” (P58)

The long terms impact of this had also caused a number of men to describe the financial burden this had created:

“With no exaggeration it has completely destroyed my life. I became effectively bankrupt.” (P98)

The concern of managing the cost of living, child maintenance, and the addition of court fees was creating a significant burden. This was also coupled with guilt of the impact this was often having on new partners and the impact on their quality of life:

“My new wife is struggling with how to best serve my children. She is resentful of the money I have spent trying to protect them and how it stops us from having a life.” (P81)

The financial impact of court litigation is well known in the wider literature base, but the ongoing and often repeated nature of family court visits, especially after breaches of child contact orders, was seen frequently within this sample.

Sub-themes 1c: Grief. A strong theme within the data was around an experience of grief; this was something that many of the fathers found difficult to be able to express:

“How hard is it to express how much pain you go through losing a child that is still living?” (P1117)

They described how they felt they were grieving and that it included their extended family:

“Massively. Feel like I am constantly almost grieving for my own son...I feel sad that he is having to grow up not knowing his extended paternal family” (P11)

Some men likened it to it being similar to an actual bereavement but also complicated by the anticipated reactions from others:

“When my older daughter ceased contact, it was like she had died. I experienced the same type of grief that I imagine those parents who lose a child experience. It was shocking, and I felt barely able to cope. I found it really difficult to confide in anyone, because I expected a reaction like “What did you do to her, to make her stop contact.”” (P41)

The loss these men discussed was described as being worse than the other impacts of IPV and impacted them in a deeper and more long-lasting way. The multi-faceted way in which grief can impact health and wellbeing is well known, but the added

complication of an almost “living grief” because the children are alive, but the relationship has been manipulated was seen powerfully within these accounts.

Sub-theme 1d: Identity. In this sub-theme, men described the ways the experience had impacted on their identity as a father and as a person:

“It broke me. I look back & don't know the guy back then. Something inside me has gone forever” (P72)

“There is no part of my life that hasn't been destroyed.” (P84)

For some this was described as being evident through the long process of trying to rebuild a damaged relationship:

“It has had an effect on my identity as a person, and I have spent years rebuilding the damage that was caused aside from the damage to my relationship with my kids” (P15)

We know from the previous literature that non-resident fathers have described the loss of access to their children as leaving them at a loss and feeling unsure in their identity.

Sub-theme 1e: Relationships. The experience of abuse and alienation had impacted on men’s willingness to engage in another intimate relationship:

“I don’t have or want another relationship. I don’t need another abandonment in my life.” (P36)

Where men had another relationship, the ongoing alienation had been seen to impact detrimentally including through the perceptions of others:

“My partner thinks I am too secretive about it, but the truth is it is painful, and I would just cry” (P75)

“Recently lost my partner because when her mum found out I don’t see my boys, she said it must mean I’m dangerous and shouldn’t be around children” (P20)

Some men also described that where they had built a new relationship with a supportive partner, they were often fearful of the reaction of their ex-partner:

“My current partner is very understanding but wants to move the relationship on. However, I am scared to mention it to my ex” (P74)

Main Theme 2: Perceived impact on children

This theme represented the narratives that discussed the men’s perceptions of the impact on their children. We did not speak with their children and so recognise that this is a proxy account. Nonetheless, the accounts provided strongly reflect men’s perceptions of just how damaging this experience has been for their children. It can be seen through three sub-themes: 1) siblings and extended family; 2) health and wellbeing; and 3) loss of childhood.

Sub-theme 2a: Sibling and extended family. The men described their perceptions of the impact of not seeing their extended family:

“There is a big gap of 6-7 years of not seeing me or my mum/dad extended family etc and I don’t know how she is going to reconcile that in the future.”
(P103)

“They have never met their real grandparent.” (P143)

For some men they had got contact or custody but reflected that the children missed contact with their siblings (including stepsiblings).

“My son is happier now he doesn't see his mother but misses his sister.” (P62)

The impact of either estrangement or alienation from the wider family is an area that has remained relatively unexplored but is really significant within the current narratives.

Sub-theme 2b: Health and wellbeing. Accounts of how the experiences had affected their children were seen through the perceptions of fathers and also via observations from the extended family:

“The children have suffered enormous emotional and psychological harm.”
(P55)

“They look emotionally confused and traumatised.” (P37)

“My parents have seen the boys recently. The oldest is not doing well at school since contact stopped.” (P45)

Some men described really significant physical and psychological issues that were seen in the children:

“My children have psychological problems as a result. My son has anger management problems and self-harms. My daughter has body dysmorphia and borderline anorexia and also self-harms.” (P53)

“The eldest was suicidal for a while.” (P109)

Again, these are proxy reports of the effects, but there were really similar accounts seen across the whole data set. Whilst a greater exploration of this is needed with children themselves, it points to the impact this is having and the potential for this to be positioned as a child welfare issue.

Sub-theme 2c: Loss of childhood. For some men, they reflected on the ways in which the experiences of being alienated and manipulated in this way had affected their children through an almost loss of childhood:

“I believe it has destroyed his childhood.” (P11)

Some men described the way they felt it meant their children had had to mature and grow up more quickly than they would have under other circumstances:

“But being forced to reject a parent and being surrounded by negativity has made them grow up too quickly” (P21)

Some men further posited and wondered about the impact, including the possibility that the children may blame themselves as has been seen around other family issues (e.g., divorce).

“It must be very confusing. She could be wondering "why does my father not call me or visit me?" She might be blaming herself.” (P40)

The impact of this could be to force children into an almost parental type of role which places an inappropriate amount of pressure on them and will likely propel their journey into coping with adult issues.

Main Theme 3: Impact on relationship with children

This theme described the ways in which these experiences had affected the relationships between the fathers and their children. This was seen through three sub-themes: 1) closeness; 2) feelings of responsibility; and 3) improvements over time.

Sub-theme 3a: Closeness. The manipulation and withdrawal of contact had inevitably impacted on how close some fathers felt their relationships were with their children. For example, after periods of separation, some men felt they had struggled to re-build that close relationship:

“But it's hard for me to communicate intimately with him as he refuses to engage with me on any personal level - we have a good, and I'd say loving relationship but sadly not a close one” (P151)

For some men, it was not just that they were not as close but also that they were more hostile:

“I saw them far less. The closeness and warmth they showed with me disappeared, to be replaced with hostility, contempt, and denigration.” (P55)

For some men, they described the way that it was not just withdrawal of contact and separation, but the ways their ex-partner had manipulated the relationship:

“I saw them half the time I used to, and they felt uncomfortable around me as their mother was constantly talking about how horrible I was” (P119)

This closeness, or clear lack thereof, was something that men were striving to address but they were facing a number of barriers.

Sub-theme 3b: Feelings of responsibility. Linked to an earlier sub-theme around loss of childhood, the men described the ways in which their children had begun to feel the responsibility of managing the relationships and behaviours:

“My eldest has turned one eighty seemingly over night, I knew she wanted to protect everyone, and felt the hurts like none of the others did, but mum made her the 'best friend' rather than daughter, mum confided in her how lonely she is when they are with me, daddy has this huge family, with or without them, but she's left with no one once they are with me.” (P78)

They described the ways in which they perceived the children were feeling guilt at spending time with their fathers due to the pressure their mothers were placing on them.

“Always making them feel guilty and in trouble if they enjoy time with me or especially if they had fun with my wife that makes her red line!” (P119)

This also included placing an emotional burden of their mother’s distress on the children which was then an unfair responsibility for any child to carry.

“She told them that mummy is sad and mummy cries when they are not with her. She dismisses their opinions to make them feel silly if they disagree with her.” (P69)

The responsibility placed on the children here is apparent but the true extent of the impact of this can only be understood from working with the children in these scenarios. As above, the burden this places on children at a young age is going to affect their health and wellbeing, and the perception they have of their role in the family.

Sub-theme 3c: Improvements over time. It was positive to see within the data that some men had managed to repair and rebuild their relationships with their children:

“As she’s got older and matured, we have different kinds of conversation about it together. I offer her the outlet to talk about it, she’s told me that she never talks about it with her mother. She’s able to confide thoughts and feelings with me that she won’t share with her mother. Especially over the last couple of years, my relationship with my daughter has got stronger, strengthened too by me moving (and her being one of the major reasons) closer, halving the distance we were for most of the rest of her life.” (P49)

The fact this was seen as a theme within the data will provide hope for men who are currently experiencing this type of alienating abuse. It also points to the ways in which we could start to facilitate these relationships again through service and support involvement.

Discussion

The present study sought to examine the impact on fathers of parental alienation (PA) within the context of intimate partner violence (IPV). The men in this study described the profound impact these behaviours had on the mental and physical health of themselves, their children, and their relationships. Importantly, the effects seen in these men reflected an impact on a key aspect of their identity, their role as a father.

This appeared more impactful than the effects seen from the other forms of IPV they reported. Results will therefore enrich the discussion as to the relationship between PA and IPV, the positioning of PA as a form of psychologically disruptive coercive control, as well as the vulnerabilities and gendered experiences of fathers to this form of abuse.

In speaking about the impact on themselves, the men in this study spoke about the effects of this abuse on their mental and physical health, mirroring previous results (Harman, Warshak, et al., 2022; Lee-Maturana et al., 2022). Indeed, the effect this form of abuse had on men was profound, and led to suicide ideation, as well as formal diagnoses (e.g., of depression, and PTSD): effects that were exacerbated due to the presence of multiple other forms of abuse (as detailed in Bates & Hine, 2022). Men also spoke about the financial impact of this abuse, as they fought to remain part of their children's lives, and the further strain this put on their overall health. Indeed, alienated parents do not simply stop attempting to remain in their children's lives (Lee-Maturana et al., 2022), and the financial and emotional strain of this ongoing battle was evident in the accounts of many of the fathers in the sample. This is supported by other work which highlights how the family court process places incredible strain on the mental and physical health of fathers (Bates & Hine, in press; Burhai et al., 2022; Hine & Hine, 2022; Hine & Roy, 2023). Moreover, the limiting, disruption, and/or cessation of contact between fathers and their children was frequently described as a 'loss' of their child(ren) (Haines et al., 2020), drawing parallels to the 'grief' experienced in response to full physical death, and similar to findings described by Bates (2020a). The negative impact of grief processes on both physical and mental health is well established (Worden, 2018), and it is therefore unsurprising that fathers reported the health impacts outlined above when their feelings of loss were so strong.

Feelings of loss were also reported in relation to the parenting role itself. Many of the fathers in this study highly prized and valued their position as engaged and loving fathers, a finding shown in previous research amongst US men (Tichenor et al., 2011). To have this role targeted, and in some cases forcibly removed from them (i.e., through relocation or court order; Bates & Hine, 2022), had a significant and detrimental impact. Equally affected was the ability to then generate new relationships, as fathers found it tough to trust future partners, again, reflective of previous research on IPV (Bates, 2020a), and post-separation abuse involving children (Bates, 2019; Hine & Hine, 2022). Taken together, results suggest that PA has severely negative psychological consequences, leaving them in positions of helplessness and despair.

Whilst it was through the testimony of the fathers, the perceived impact on children was equally profound. Specifically, the impact on children's health mirrored the experiences of fathers, particularly in relation to mental health. This supports a wealth of review research outlining the negative effects of both IPV (McTavish et al., 2016) and PA on children (Haines et al., 2020; Harman, Warshak, et al., 2022; Miralles et al., 2021; Verhaar et al., 2022), including the long-term consequences of anxiety, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms, emotional dysregulation, identity development disruption, substance abuse, and poor peer and romantic relationships, as well as externalizing behaviors (e.g., attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, oppositional defiance disorder). These outcomes are similar to other forms of child abuse (Yule et al., 2019), and provide yet further evidence as to the severe impact of PA on children's wellbeing.

There was also support from this study for the notion that children subjected to alienating behaviours find themselves losing their childhood as a result of the position alienating and alienated parents place them in. Indeed, the findings that children are

made to 'grow up too quickly' and to make adult decisions/think in an adult way or about adult issues suggests that these children are 'parentified' and 'adultified' (Haxhe, 2016), and that they are subject to 'emotional parentification' specifically (Jurkovic et al., 2001) where the child is 'expected to meet a parents' particular emotional or psychological need' (p. 45). Men also mentioned that their relationship with their children was affected due to children having to manage the parental conflict (again an example of parentification), as well as the mothers' abusive behaviours and reactions to these. There are significant negative consequences currently known to be associated with parentification (Haines et al., 2020), including disruption of attachment (Engelhardt, 2012), and negative mental health consequences (Jankowski et al., 2013), which therefore position PA as *particularly* damaging to young children due to this associated outcome. These effects are also likely to be exaggerated through the loss of other childhood relationships (e.g., siblings/stepsiblings/extended family) that are associated with paternal relationship breakdown. Indeed, Harman, Matthewson, et al., (2022) position such losses within a broader suite of losses that children experience, including loss of identity, opportunity for engagement in life, and the loss of a 'good enough' parent.

Unsurprisingly, the most crucial relationship to suffer was that between fathers and their child(ren), with a lack of closeness reported as the biggest impact. This supports previous work which highlights how fathers are constantly 'playing catch-up' with their children, as well as trying to repair the damage done by the alienating parent (Hine & Hine, 2022). Again, this was particularly painful for the men in this study, who were driven to fulfil the role of an attentive and present parent to their child(ren). Encouragingly, there were some reports of improvement over time, but these were more often a consequence of the child(ren) becoming older and 'seeing through' the

abuse, than a cessation of the abusive behaviour itself. Sadly, many men do not get the opportunity to attempt relationship resolution, as they are too deeply alienated from their children in the first instance (Bates & Hine, in press), or they complete suicide before a resolution is possible (Hine & Roy, 2023).

The results from this study have important theoretical implications. As outlined previously, there is ongoing debate regarding the relationship of PA as a distinct concept to existing frameworks of interpersonal violence within family systems. Recent research has made a convincing case that, experientially, PA sits within family violence as a distinct form of psychological abuse, and coercive control (Harman et al., 2018; Lee-Maturana et al., 2022). This study provides further evidence for this positioning, specifically in relation to impact and outcome of these experiences. Indeed, the impact reported by the men in this study on behalf of themselves and their children strongly suggests that PA is a deeply damaging form of psychological abuse and coercive control which results in widespread negative health outcomes for those targeted. Crucially, some fathers appeared pushed to a 'breaking point', culminating in concerning levels of suicidal ideation. Correspondingly, children appear to experience severe psychological distress related to the confusion they experience upon disruption of a previously healthy attachment (Kneier, 2021; Lowenstein, 2010). It is therefore crucial that any future conceptualisation of IPV and family violence integrates and considers this extremely damaging form of abuse.

Practically, implications are also substantial, particularly when considering this as testimony from fathers. It is well established that men experience difficulties help-seeking across several domains, including health (Galdas et al., 2005), mental health (Parent et al., 2016), and after experiences of domestic (Huntley et al., 2019) and sexual violence (Widanaralalage et al., 2022), with both internal (i.e., lack of

identification of an issue/need, internalised regressive masculine stereotypes) and external/structural issues identified (i.e., lack of available support, societal judgement). Although help-seeking was not explicitly assessed in this study, it can be inferred from the narratives provided that the health and psychological issues experienced by both the men and their children as outlined in this study would benefit from support. This would fit with existing literature that highlights: (a) lack of visibility for male victims of IPV (Hine et al., 2021), (b) a devaluation of the importance of the role of fathers (see Hine & Hine, 2022), and (c) a lack of close support networks for men following family breakdown (Coley & Hernandez, 2006). Recent research has in fact made clear suggestions as to how better support men following family breakdown, specifically that (a) greater community support be established to assist with de-escalation, mediation, and relationship support, (b) a presumption of 50:50 parental responsibility following separation is introduced in UK law, (b) systems facilitative of PA be reviewed and transformed (i.e., family court systems), and (d) that cultural attitudes around fathering are challenged (Hine & Roy, 2023); all of which would help support not only fathers, but their (ex)partners and children.

The provision of appropriate support is arguably most pressing, due to the worrying levels of suicidality revealed by some men in this sample. Indeed, previous research supports an elevated risk of suicide for men following family breakdown (Evans et al., 2016; Hine & Roy, 2023; Scourfield & Evans, 2014; Sher, 2015b), and in relation to PA specifically (Lee-Maturana et al., 2022), but particularly fathers (Sher, 2015a, 2017). Suicide is also the leading cause of death for men aged 20-49 (Public Health England, 2017), a common age range to experience family separation and potential disruption to the parental role. It is therefore by no means hyperbolic to suggest that men's poor mental health in relation to family breakdown processes

potentially represents an endemic public health issue within the United Kingdom that is worthy of urgent and significant attention. As outlined above, important first steps include ensuring there is readily available support for couples experiencing family breakdown at the community level, before involvement of adversarial court processes that potentially hinders any reasonable chance of amicable resolution of disputes around parental responsibility. Importantly, this support must extend to children, especially when considering the elevated suicide risk found in adults alienated as children (Verhaar et al., 2022).

It is important to note that the current study has some limitations, some of which are outlined in previous work drawing from this sample (Bates & Hine, in press), including recruitment through social media channels and the mixture of nationalities of the respondents (with appropriate future research outlined in that piece). One limitation not previously mentioned but worthy of note is that this work focuses exclusively on fathers. As stated in the introduction, there are good reasons to do so, as they may potentially experience elevated risk of post-separation abuse and PA due to their overwhelming role as non-resident parents, as well as their chronic 'invisibilisation' within the IPV literature. However, the authors recognise that IPV and PA (both in isolation and together) also frequently occur towards women and that their experiences are worthy of attention and investigation (and work on this topic is upcoming).

Limitations specific to this study relate principally to testimony provided around the effects of PA on children, in that, the accounts were provided second hand by fathers rather than from children themselves. It could therefore be argued that fathers' interpretations of children's feelings and behaviours may be inaccurate due to their lack of contact/relationship. However, as argued in Bates and Hine (2022), the present

study was conducted on the principle of affording men the same belief afforded to women who take part in such research, and social science research generally. It is also noted that getting testimony directly from children, especially in relation to abuse and mental health, is particularly challenging, due to issues around accessing samples, the validity of testimony by children, the triggering effect of recounting abuse, and the impact of alienation on the accounts that would be given (i.e., manipulation of narrative). Nonetheless, and in spite of these challenges, future research should attempt to speak with children who are actively experiencing alienating behaviours, in an attempt to assess the lived impact of abuse at the time of perpetration, rather than once in adulthood.

Conclusion

The accounts provided in this study provide an important insight into the impact of PA within the broader context of IPV on fathers and their children. As with research on experiences of PA specifically, these findings on impact further reinforce the positioning of PA as a deeply damaging form of psychological abuse and coercive control, that perhaps has more destabilising psychological effects than other forms of abuse. The men in this study constitute those who are still alive, and who are pursuing relationships with their alienated children, despite the extreme toll the abuse has taken on their mental health and propensity for suicide ideation. There is no doubt a significant population who have not survived this process. This study, and previous work from this sample (Bates & Hine, in press), thus provides a call to action to researchers in PA, IPV, or both, alongside policymakers, service providers, and campaigners, to better recognise and support fathers experiencing this form of abuse in the context of other IPV and family breakdown.

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Tables

Table 1 – Nationality and ethnic origin of participants

Group	
Australian ¹ (8.8%)	Canadian (2.9%)
Indian (5.8%)	Bangladeshi (.6%)
European ² (9.4%)	Black African (.6%)
White (2.6%)	Black British (.6%)
American/White American (5.8%)	Malaysian Chinese (.6%)
New Zealand (2.3%)	African (.6%)
Asian British (.6%)	Missing (1%)

¹ Including “White Australian”

² Including Danish, German, Romanian, Italian, Polish, French, Dutch

Table 2 – Themes and sub-themes from the thematic analysis

Themes	Sub themes
Impact on Fathers	Health Finances Grief Identity Relationships
Perceived impact on Children	Siblings and extended family Health and wellbeing Loss of childhood
Impact on relationships with children	Closeness Feeling responsible Improvements over time