

**Exploring how Men with Children Experience Bi-directional Intimate Partner
Aggression (IPA) and Help-seeking**

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigated how men who lived with their female partner and children experienced bi-directional intimate partner aggression (IPA) and help-seeking in their relationships in Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ). Semi structured interviews with 13 men who had disclosed living with bi-directional IPA were analysed by taking an inductive, semantic, and realist/essentialist approach to reflexive thematic analysis. Five themes were identified that related to the men's experiences of IPA and help-seeking. The first theme identified *the cycle of bi-directional aggression* and comprised four subthemes: 1) unstable relationship foundations, 2) the build-up, 3) caught up in the challenge, and 4) point of de-escalation. Second, *the impact of gender roles on bi-directional aggression* was identified and comprised three subthemes: 1) gendered norms shape men's aggression, 2) response to incongruence in gender roles, and 3) female resourcefulness. The third theme described how the *maintenance of the abusive relationship* was enabled and consisted of four subthemes: 1) misinformed perspective of IPA, 2) denial and normalisation of IPA, 3) attachment to children kept men stuck, and 4) barriers to accessing services. The *multi-layered impact of the abusive relationship* was described in the fourth theme and comprised three subthemes: 1) negative psychological impact on men, 2) awareness of impact on partner, and 3) children caught in the crossfire. *The power of positive help-seeking* was identified in the final theme which comprised two subthemes: 1) facilitators to seeking help, and 2) making positive changes. Collectively the findings show how bi-directional aggression perpetuates over time and how the lack of individual and professional understanding can impact men's help-seeking and maintenance of the aggression. The need for research, policy, and practice to address this common form of IPA is discussed, specifically with regards to how society conceptualises IPA and the importance of providing education on the nature of bi-directional aggression.

Keywords: IPA, bi-directional, help-seeking, male victimisation, children.

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Introduction

Intimate partner aggression (IPA) is a widespread public health issue that results in significant damage to individuals, families, communities, and societies (Fanslow & Kelly, 2016; Krug et al., 2002). IPA is typically classified into three broad forms of abuse: physical, psychological, and sexual (Ministry of Justice, 2015). Controlling behaviours, such as insults, threats, intimidation, possessive behaviour, and economic/financial deprivation are also included in several country's legal definitions of IPA (e.g., Domestic Violence Act, 1995 in New Zealand). Despite methodological difficulties in measuring the true prevalence of IPA, worldwide prevalence rates estimate that 20-30% of people experience IPA in their lifetime (Esquivel-Santoveña & Dixon, 2012). In the United States, Center for Disease Control lifetime prevalence estimates indicate that approximately 30.6% of women and 31% of men have experienced physical violence from an intimate partner; and 36.4% of women and 34.2% of men have experienced psychological violence from an intimate partner (Smith et al., 2018). Aotearoa NZ has the highest reported rate of IPA among the developed world countries (Turquet et al., 2011), with approximately 563,000 people, or 16% of the adult population, are estimated to have experienced one or more incidents of IPA across their lifetime (Ministry of Justice, 2019).

Although some researchers identify IPA as a problem of men perpetrating violence towards women, robust national representative surveys show men and women perpetrate IPA at similar rates in Western countries. This was first found in the United States National Family Violence Surveys carried out by Murray Straus in 1975 and 1985 (Dobash et al., 1992; Fergusson, Horwood & Ridder, 2005; Fiebert, 2014; Straus & Gelles, 1986). In Aotearoa NZ, statistics from the Crime and Victims Survey 2018/2019 found that of those who reported IPA victimisation, 60% were women and 40% were men (Ministry of Justice, 2019). A variety of negative short- and long-term impacts of IPA have been identified across

genders, spanning multiple life domains including mental, physical, social, and financial wellbeing (Krug et al., 2002). For both men and women, IPA victimisation increases risk of substance use, depression, and chronic physical and mental health issues (Coker et al., 2002). In addition, statistics shows that children are exposed to IPA at a high rate. For example, over 63% of all family violence incidences attended by NZ Police in 2013 involved the presence of a child (New Zealand Police, 2014). Furthermore, IPA and child physical abuse are estimated to co-occur at around 40% (Appel & Holden, 1998; Edleson, 2001; Smith Slep & O'Leary, 2005). This highlights the importance of understanding how the impact of IPA extends beyond the couple onto individuals living within the aggressive environment (Kernic et al., 2005; Martinez-Torteya et al., 2009; Sternberg et al., 2006).

Such findings have led to inclusive definitions which highlight that IPA can be experienced by a range of individuals of any demographic (Archer, 2000; Dixon & Graham-Kevan, 2011; 2020; Krug et al., 2002; Moffitt et al., 2001). Despite this the majority of research, policy, and practice has focused on men's violence towards women to date (Dixon & Graham Kevan, 2020). In this thesis, it is argued that adopting a violence against women lens to study IPA is too narrow and does not take into account the growing body of work that shows the importance of understanding men's victimisation and bi-directional aggression in relationships (Bates, 2016). This study adopted an inclusive approach to IPA and defines the problem as "any form of aggression and/or controlling behaviours used against a current or past intimate partner of any gender, ethnicity, culture, sexual orientation, or relationship status" (Dixon & Graham-Kevan, 2020, p. 299).

Focus on Violence Against Women in Research and Practice

Traditionally, IPA has been conceptualised as a gendered problem, with men being viewed as the sole perpetrator of aggression against women in intimate relationships. Gendered theory proposes that men's IPA is driven by patriarchal values and the need to

control and oppress women as a means of maintaining their social dominance (Abrar, Lovenduski & Margetts, 2000; Bell & Naugle, 2008; Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Felson, 2010). From this perspective, female perpetration exists within the context of patriarchal control and is therefore understood as self-defence or retaliatory in nature (Dixon, Archer & Graham-Kevan, 2012; Dobash & Dobash, 1979). Over the last few decades, adherence to this perspective has amassed large quantities of research depicting men as violent and aggressive individuals and women as victims, with researchers coining this an 'epidemic of violence against women' (Alhabib, Nur & Jones, 2010; Klein et al., 1997). Difficult to ignore, it prompted political, professional, and public forums to increase awareness of men's violence against women (Felson, 2010; White & Gondolf, 2000). Although there is acknowledgement that a proportion of those experiencing victimisation are men, and that bi-directional aggression exists, priority is given to men's violence against women rather than placing equal emphasis on all types of IPA. Of particular note are arguments made by Dobash & Dobash (2004) in their seminal research paper, in reference to the 'trivial' nature of bi-directional aggression:

...any and all conflict and negative encounters between couples is regrettable, policies and interventions, particularly those of criminal justice, are not developed to provide wide-scale responses to such encounters; nor are public resources spent upon them. This is not to say that conflicts, heated arguments, name-calling or a one-off push and shove are unimportant but, rather, that great care must be taken in the definition and measurement of any such behaviour before it is labelled as 'violence' and before public policies and interventions are directed at it. (Dobash & Dobash, 2004, p.344)

Gender Inclusive Explanations of IPA

The gendered theory has been criticised for its overuse of survey data collated from female agency samples such as women's shelters and Police/court records (Straus, 2007).

This methodological approach focuses exclusively on the female victimisation experience and does not consider the relationship dynamic (Dixon & Graham-Kevan, 2011; Esquivel-Santoveña & Dixon, 2012). It is argued that studies which utilise this approach over-represent male perpetrators and female victims and produce findings which underestimate the prevalence of male victimisation and female perpetration, further promoting the narrative that IPA is a gendered issue (Straus, 2007).

In contrast, the family violence perspective understands IPA as originating from a maladaptive conflict-based interaction between couples, and upholds the assumption that both men and women have equal capacity to engage in perpetration of IPA or adopt a dual victim/perpetrator role (Esquivel-Santoveña & Dixon, 2012; Felson, 2010). Instead of asserting that patriarchal and inherent societal norms cause IPA, the family violence perspective takes a multi-factorial approach, understanding that individual, interpersonal, community, and societal levels in conjunction, contribute to both IPA and other general forms of aggression (O'Leary, Smith Slep & O'Leary, 2007). Research derived from this theoretical perspective collects data from representative population samples and does not make assumptions about the likely gender of perpetrators and victims, asking all participants about both victimisation and perpetration of IPA. Such surveys find that men and women are equally as likely to perpetrate and experience victimisation across physical and psychological domains, providing a more robust and accurate picture of the true prevalence of IPA (Archer, 2000; Black et al., 2011; Fiebert, 2014; Straus, 2007). Criticism of this methodological approach by gendered researchers is twofold. Firstly, they assert that population-based samples only account for aggression occurring at the lower end of the severity spectrum and thus fail to encapsulate more severe forms of male perpetrated intimate terrorism found within agency and shelter populations. Secondly, sceptics maintain that asking simple and discrete questions around acts of perpetration and victimisation doesn't take into account the

wider context of patriarchal control under which they believe IPA takes place (Dixon & Graham-Kevan, 2011). Despite increasing awareness of the 'gender symmetrical' perspective of IPA, unrelenting critique by feminist sceptics has resulted in public and political forums disregarding empirical evidence in favour of continued adherence to the gendered perspective, a fallacy which ignores the large percentage of male victims and relationships characterised by bi-directional IPA.

Bi-directional IPA

Bi-directional IPA refers to aggression perpetrated by both partners within an intimate relationship. The aggression can consist of one, all, or a combination of physical, psychological, and sexual aggression (Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2012; Whitaker et al., 2007). The frequency, type, and severity of the violence perpetrated by each partner does not need to be equal or similar in nature, although it can be (Whitaker et al., 2007). Bi-directional aggression is not limited to one initiator and one responder/self-defender, it assumes that both partners have the capacity, and have, at some point during the relationship, initiated aggression in any of the abovementioned forms (Whitaker et al., 2007). Empirical data reveals that approximately 50% percent of all IPA is bi-directional in nature, providing juxtaposition to the argument that bi-directional aggression should not be responded to as a priority (Follingstad & Edmundson, 2010; Gray & Foshee, 1997; Straus, 2011; Whitaker et al., 2007). Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al. (2012) carried out a comprehensive review of 50 papers exploring rates of bi-directional IPA across a variety of populations. They found that 57.9% of the violence reported was bi-directional in nature and was the predominant type of IPA across a variety of populations, including general population and criminal justice samples. Within the remaining 42.1% of couples, they found that 13.8% was male-only perpetrated, and 28.3% was female-only perpetrated (Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2012). These findings, among others, continue to provide support for the initial national family

violence surveys which found that rates of female-to-male physical aggression were equal to rates of male-to-female physical aggression in the United States (Straus, 2007; 2011; Straus & Gelles, 1986). Such findings highlight that the majority of IPA is bi-directional and thus suggest that IPA is not solely driven by patriarchal societal norms. Additionally, it emphasises that men make up a significant proportion of people who experience victimisation in intimate relationships.

This experience of victimisation has a significant negative impact on men. Coker et al. (2002) found that physical and psychological abuse were associated with similar impacts for both male and female victims (Coker et al., 2002). LaRoche (2005) found that men and women reported similar rates of fear, daily life disruption, and almost equal rates of received medical care and psychological counselling following victimisation (LaRoche, 2005). Furthermore, although male victims are less likely to sustain physical injury compared to women, they are shown to exhibit significant long-term negative psychological effects including depression, increased psychological distress, post-traumatic stress disorder, and alcoholism/substance use issues (Douglas & Hines, 2011; Dutton & White, 2013; Hines & Douglas, 2009; 2010; Hines, Brown & Dunning, 2007). These findings emphasise that men make up a considerable proportion of all IPA victims and the impacts of victimisation are just as severe as impacts on women. Therefore, it is imperative that research attempts to hear the voices of men who have experienced IPA victimisation.

Bridging the Theoretical Gap

In an attempt to bridge the gap between gendered and gender-inclusive theories of IPA, Michael Johnson developed an infamous typology that highlights the distinction between *intimate terrorism* and *situational couple violence* (Johnson, 2006). These two types of IPA are believed to arise from distinct causes and have different consequences and thus it is thought they require different levels of intervention (Johnson, 2006). *Intimate terrorism*

refers to an ongoing pattern of uni-directional violence perpetrated by a single member of the intimate relationship, who utilises coercive control tactics and physical violence to frighten and control their intimate partner. Gendered theory asserts that intimate terrorism is almost exclusively perpetrated by men against women (Johnson, 2006; 2010). Intimate terrorism is purported to be the most serious and severe form of IPA which necessitates the highest level of intervention and resource allocation; and leads to more acute and chronic physical, emotional, and psychological impacts for the victim compared to other types of IPA (Campbell, 2002; Johnson, 2008; Karakurt, Smith & Whiting, 2014). Johnson asserts that intimate terrorism is the predominant type of IPA found within agency samples (including shelter, Police, and perpetrator intervention programs) due to the nature and severity of the violence perpetrated.

In contrast, *situational couple violence* is defined as bi-directional verbal arguments which escalate to physical aggression, occurring in the absence of coercive control. In contrast to intimate terrorism, which arises because one member of the couple wants to control and dominate the other, situational couple violence arises due to maladaptive interpersonal dynamics such as negative communication or anger management issues (Johnson, 2006; 2010). Situational couple violence is not thought to escalate in severity or frequency over time and is found predominantly among general representative population samples, as opposed to clinical and agency samples (Olson, 2002). Johnson argues that the defining distinction between uni-directional (one member of the couple perpetrating violence) intimate terrorism and bi-directional (both members of the couple perpetrating violence against the other) situational couple violence is the presence or absence of control. Intimate terrorists are driven and motivated by their need to exert control over their partner and the relationship. In comparison, situational couple violence is an argument bred out of situational anger and frustration, where neither partner's goal is to control the behaviours of

the other (Gulliver & Fanslow, 2015; Johnson, 2008). Distinguishing between IPA based on the presence or absence of coercive control has led to feminist researchers reducing bi-directional or 'situational couple' IPA down to low-level conflict or spats in intimate relationships which don't require large amounts of resources, intervention, or treatment because the violence is not viewed as coercive and controlling in nature (Dobash & Dobash, 2004; Johnson, 2006).

Exploring the Validity of a Gendered Focus

Johnson's work has arguably contributed to the prioritisation of IPA that fits the intimate terrorism category. To further this notion, another of his developed typological categories, *mutual violent control* (where both members of the couple are mutually exhibiting violent, controlling, and coercive behaviours towards each other) was downplayed by Johnson as being relatively rare despite other researchers identifying that mutual violent control occurs at comparative rates to intimate terrorism and leads to more serious outcomes for victims (Hines & Douglas, 2018; Johnson, 2008). Although Johnson acknowledged a form of bi-directional which was mutually controlling in nature, classifying it as 'relatively rare' reduced it to a similar standing as situational couple violence. Continued prioritisation of uni-directional intimate terrorism and ignorance of the high prevalence of other forms of IPA has reduced the focus on male victims and individuals experiencing bi-directional aggression (Esquivel-Santoveña & Dixon, 2012). Considering the high prevalence of bi-directional aggression and overlap with child maltreatment this is problematic. The sentiment echoed within the family violence literature is as follows:

...theories of family violence which assume and seek to explain male perpetration needs to be replaced by a family system theoretical framework which recognises that most partner violence involves bi-directional aggression and that it occurs in response

to multiple causes, not just male dominance in society or in the relationship. (Straus, 2015, p.91)

There are a multitude of factors which bring into doubt the validity of using a gendered focus to understand and treat IPA. Gendered explanations of IPA typically paint female IPA perpetration as a unique set of behaviours which occur in 'self-defence' or 'resistance' to severe aggressive and controlling behaviours perpetrated by men (Dobash & Dobash, 2004; Dobash et al., 1992). However, empirical data reveals little support for the use of self-defence as a primary motivation or explanation for women's IPA perpetration (Gray & Foshee, 1997; Stets & Straus, 1989). Instead, findings indicate that attempts to get through to their partner, jealousy, control, and anger are alternative drivers for women's perpetration (Dixon & Graham-Kevan, 2011; Graham-Kevan & Archer, 2005). Females are just as likely, if not more so than males to initiate and subsequently reciprocate aggression. Female initiation of IPA has been identified as a prominent risk factor for subsequent female victimisation, providing further evidence against the assertion that self-defence is the main motivator of female perpetration (Graham-Kevan & Archer, 2005). Furthermore, females have been shown to utilise physical aggression more frequently and readily than males, potentially due to there being less social and moral restraints on them using physical aggression (Capaldi, Kim & Wu Shortt, 2007; Straus, 2011; Swahn, Alemdar & Whitaker, 2010).

Furthermore, risk and predictive factors for IPA and general aggression have identified similarities, suggesting that both share common developmental pathways for men and women; further evidence against the notion that patriarchal norms are fundamental to male perpetration of IPA (Dixon & Graham-Kevan, 2011; Moffitt et al., 2001). Research looking into risk factors specific to IPA have not only found similarities across genders but also that there is not a singular risk factor responsible for IPA; the common consensus being

that risk factors for IPA are complex, multifactorial, and span individual, interpersonal, community, and social behavioural domains (Dixon & Graham-Kevan, 2011; Dutton, 2006; O'Leary, Smith Slep & O'Leary, 2007; Stith et al., 2004). This emphasises that instead of reverting to patriarchal norms to explain IPA, it is important to consider the roles that both members of the relationship play and how the interpersonal dynamic and interactions occurring between them, in combination with the environment they find themselves in may contribute towards IPA (Dixon & Graham-Kevan, 2011; Straus, 2007; White & Kowalski, 1998; Williams, Ghandour & Kub, 2008).

It is integral that all types of IPA are given equal attention to ensure that policy and practice develop effective services to prevent and minimise the impact and improve the wellbeing and future outcomes for all individuals affected by IPA, regardless of gender. The prevalence of female perpetration of IPA, a lack of evidence to suggest that female perpetration is driven solely by self-defence, and shared risk factors for men and women all add to the evidence that instead of attempting to understand IPA through a patriarchal lens, a broader, more gender inclusive approach should be taken. Adopting an approach which sees equal capacity for men and women to perpetrate IPA will not only help to improve outcomes for those experiencing uni-directional aggression but also those in bi-directionally aggressive relationships. Despite comprising approximately 50% of all IPA, bi-directional IPA is significantly under-researched. The way in which bi-directional IPA has been conceptualised and framed by researchers as a minor, conflict-based type of aggression not worthy of intervention or serious investigation may be the reason why comprehensive research in this area is lacking.

Exploring the Need for a Focus on Bi-directional IPA

Initial quantitative research has revealed that relationships characterised by bi-directional IPA are associated with multiple detrimental outcomes for both genders *and*

children and thus warrants attention. Physical violence from one partner has been identified as the strongest predictor for physical violence from the other, with similar findings for psychological forms of aggression (Gray & Foshee, 1997). Furthermore, cessation of physical aggression by one partner is shown to be dependent on whether the other partner stops using physical aggression (Gelles & Straus, 1988). Together these findings suggest that the utilisation of violence by one member of the relationship fosters and encourages the use of violence from the other, creating an environment where bi-directional aggression becomes normalised (Cuenca Montesino, Graña Gomez & Martínez Arias, 2015; Feld & Straus, 1989; Gray and Foshee, 1997; Hines & Douglas, 2018). This supports findings which show bi-directional IPA is associated with more serious aggressive incidents because both members are actively and willingly contributing to the escalation of violence (Capaldi, Kim & Wu Shortt, 2007; Hines & Douglas, 2018; Whitaker et al., 2007). This interaction results in a greater potential for injury, with Capaldi and Owen (2001) showing that in couples exhibiting bi-directional aggression the likelihood of injury was three times higher than chance (Capaldi & Owen, 2001; Straus & Gozjolko, 2014; Whitaker et al., 2007). In addition to physical injury, bi-directional IPA is associated with the highest probability of psychological harm compared to female-only or male-only perpetrated forms of IPA (Straus, 2015). Both males and females show similar negative psychological outcomes from bi-directional IPA, suggesting that the impacts are just as traumatic for males as they are for females (Straus, 2011). The aforementioned findings emphasise the importance of exploring bi-directional IPA to understand how dyadic influences and relationship processes, such as poor conflict resolution skills, negative reciprocity and situational or coercive control tactics, contribute to the initiation, escalation, and maintenance of IPA (Gray & Foshee, 1997; Howard-Bostic, 2013; Straus, 2015).

Collectively, these findings sit in contrast to the abovementioned perspective of Johnson, who reported that compared to relationships characterised by bi-directional IPA, intimate terrorism resulted in more severe negative effects for the victim including a higher likelihood of injury and more mental and psychological distress (Johnson & Leone, 2005). Instead, what we can see is that bi-directional IPA results in similar, if not more serious outcomes for victims and should no longer be conceptualised as an inevitable consequence of co-habitation and family life. It is a severe form of aggression which results in high rates of injury and long-term psychological impacts for both members of the couple and for children residing in these households (Capaldi & Owen, 2001; Straus, 2011; 2015; Whitaker et al., 2007).

As mentioned previously, IPA and child physical abuse are estimated to co-occur at around 40%, with children shown to experience more negative outcomes in homes characterised by bi-directional IPA than uni-directional IPA (Smith Slep & O'Leary, 2005). Research examining concurrent IPA and child physical abuse among a sample of 67 families referred to child maltreatment services found that 41.8% of the families presented as what researchers classed a 'reciprocal family', i.e., both parents having the potential to aggress towards each other and towards the child (Dixon et al., 2010; Dixon & Smith Slep, 2017). To further this point, Smith Slep & O'Leary (2005) revealed that within a community sample, the rates of the reciprocal pattern of IPA and child physical abuse were the highest out of all observed patterns (Smith Slep & O'Leary, 2005). The long-term negative impacts of IPA on children are not limited to those who are maltreated, but to those who are exposed to the aggression (Douglas & Hines, 2016a; McDonald & Grych, 2006). Research shows that children who are exposed to IPA have a higher risk for externalising (e.g., conduct disorder) and internalising (e.g., anxiety/depressive disorders) compared to children in the general population (Arseneault, Bowes & Shakoor, 2010; Grych et al., 2000), and it increases the risk

that they will go on to engage in similar behaviours as an adult, a pattern termed the 'intergenerational transmission of family violence' (Artz et al., 2014; Laing & Bobic, 2002). While most research in this area has focused on children of battered women in shelters, recent studies have explored the impact on children of men victimised by IPA. Douglas and Hines (2016b) found that children of men from a help-seeking sample were more likely to fall into the borderline/clinical range for affective, behavioural, and pervasive developmental problems compared to children in the general population sample (Douglas & Hines, 2016b). These findings further emphasise the importance of incorporating the wellbeing and long-term outcomes of children when looking at how to treat and provide interventions for couples in aggressive relationships.

In a review article, Bates (2016) outlined the importance of understanding the serious nature of bi-directional IPA, and how failure to consider its high prevalence within society has stunted our psychological understanding and subsequent development of policy changes and implementation of intervention programmes to combat this frequent and damaging form of IPA (Bates, 2016). Continued adherence to the gendered theory of IPA has produced ineffective interventions and help-seeking services which place the male into the 'perpetrator' role and female into the 'victim' role and treat them according to these labels, consequently ignoring the wider context and interacting individual and couple dynamics under which aggression arises from (Bates, 2016). Typecasting men into the 'perpetrator' role makes them less likely to reach out and seek help, assisting in the cycle and maintenance of abuse (Douglas & Hines, 2011; Hine, Bates & Wallace, 2020; Hines, Brown & Dunning, 2007; Machado et al., 2017). For men in bi-directionally aggressive relationships, there is an additional layer of complexity whereby in addition to being victimised by their partner, they are also perpetrating abuse. This may have added ramifications especially when evaluating whether to reach out and seek help from formal and/or informal support services. Currently

there is no research exploring the help-seeking experiences of men in bi-directionally aggressive relationships therefore the following paragraphs refer predominantly to help-seeking experiences of men experiencing uni-directional IPA.

Typically, males are socialised to be powerful, autonomous and to conceal any emotion that may portray them as weak and incompetent (Addis & Mahalik, 2003). Traits surrounding what it means to be male are incongruent with the features associated with giving and receiving help, therefore it is not surprising that men are significantly less likely than women to seek professional help for psychological and medical issues (Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Tsui, Cheung & Leung, 2012). Good, Dell and Mintz (1989) explored the relationship between male gender roles and help-seeking attitudes and found that men who upheld traditional viewpoints towards the male role were more likely to hold negative attitudes about obtaining help for psychological issues (Good, Dell & Mintz, 1989). While there is hesitancy to seek help among men in the general population, for men who have experienced IPA there are a multitude of additional barriers to overcome. One such barrier is that despite being the one experiencing the harm, men feel powerless and fearful that their female partner will manipulate the system against him if he were to seek help, specifically with regards to their children (Bagshaw et al., 2011; Huntley et al., 2019). Tilbrook, Allan, and Dear (2010) coined this legal and administrative aggression, a tactic which females employ to hook onto the common 'the female is always the victim' discourse held by legal and judicial services and use their gender advantageously to the detriment of men (Tilbrook, Allan & Dear, 2010). Cook (2009) emphasises this in detail, discussing how men believe the judicial system is stacked against them and that if they were to seek help, or their relationship was to end, their partner would assume physical custody rights and subsequently alienate, control, or block access to their children. Parental alienation is a relatively under-researched form of indirect psychological aggression, whereby one parent attempts to alienate and

destroy the relationship between the child and the other parent through use of hurtful and damaging behaviours (Harman, Kruk & Hines, 2018). For men in particular, the fear of being unable to see their children and the potential loss or destruction of their relationship stops men from seeking help, compelling them to stay in violent relationships thus maintaining their experience of abuse (Bates, 2019; Berger, Douglas & Hines, 2016; Cook, 2009; Hine, Bates & Wallace, 2020; Hines, Brown & Dunning, 2007; Hines, Douglas & Berger, 2015).

Another barrier is the lack of available services for men experiencing IPA victimisation. Many of the available services are set up to cater for female victims, making men feel isolated and as though there is nowhere to reach out and seek help (Hines, Brown & Dunning, 2007; Tilbrook, Allan & Dear, 2010; Tsui, Cheung & Leung, 2012). For services that are available, there is a lack of awareness that these services exist, making it hard for men to reach out if they don't know where or how to seek it (Huntley et al., 2019; Tsui, 2014). For men in particular, a large obstacle to seeking help is the expected responses they believe they will receive. Research on help-seeking has found that men predominantly seek help from informal groups such as friends or family, viewing experiences with formal organisations such as Police and legal services as negative and discriminatory in nature (Machado et al., 2017). The lack of trust felt towards formal help-seeking services manifests in the belief that services won't respond effectively or will typecast them into the perpetrator role without offering them the opportunity to share their story (Douglas & Hines, 2011; Hines, Brown & Dunning, 2007; Machado et al., 2017; McCarrick, Davis-McCabe & Hirst-Winthrop, 2016; Tsui, 2014). Services which take an inclusive, non-judgmental approach and provide a positive experience removes barriers to future help-seeking and promotes improved psychological wellbeing among men (McCarrick, Davis-McCabe & Hirst-Winthrop, 2016).

Furthermore, this fear of stigmatisation extends to perceptions that society uphold about IPA being a women's issue. Men feel that society would not view them as a victim and

assume they were lying to cover up their own perpetration (Douglas & Hines, 2011; McCarrick, Davis-McCabe & Hirst-Winthrop, 2016; Tsui, Cheung & Leung, 2010). They fear if they sought help, they would lose respect and acceptance from others and would be perceived as less of a man because they failed to protect themselves from a woman (Huntley et al., 2019; Tilbrook, Allan & Dear, 2010). Furthermore, men saw the concept of help-seeking as a direct threat and challenge to their masculinity, resulting in feelings of embarrassment, shame, and humiliation (Machado et al., 2017; Tilbrook, Allan & Dear, 2010; Tsui, Cheung & Leung, 2010; 2012). This pressure and desire to live up to their own perceptions of what it means to be a male and attitudes and beliefs wider societal and political forces uphold around 'true' victims of IPA lead men to conceal, minimise, or deny their victimisation. This serves as a mechanism by which the men protect themselves, however ultimately creating immense barriers to seeking help and isolating them further within society (Tsui, Cheung & Leung, 2012).

All of the aforementioned findings emphasise the difficulties men face when deciding whether or not to seek help. The lack of research on bi-directional aggression means that we have no evidence to suggest whether men in bi-directionally aggressive relationships experience similar constraints to seeking help, therefore it is imperative that research explores this.

The Present Study

Despite this area still being in its infancy, research conducted on bi-directional IPA thus far has revealed how prevalent and severe it can be. However, reluctance of researchers to investigate this phenomenon means that there is a dearth of knowledge on its aetiology, maintenance, and cessation. Men in particular, regardless of whether they are the victim or the perpetrator of IPA, are often subject to negative biases and unfair treatment within professional, social, and legal systems that view their behaviour and motivations through a

patriarchal lens. Typically, this takes the form of men being perceived as aggressive individuals who engage in violence to try and dominate their female partner, a lens which fails to support the reality that men also experience victimisation from female partners. These biases and perceptions typically discourage men from seeking help for IPA. For men in bi-directionally aggressive relationships, there is an added layer whereby they do not fit into either the 'perpetrator' or 'victim' category, which may present as an additional barrier to those which already exist for men experiencing uni-directional IPA. Men also find that their female partners use their gender to manipulate the system to gain control over access to children. The fear that men hold regarding their partner's capacity to engage in legal and administrative aggression is likely to be exacerbated for men in bi-directionally aggressive relationships, as their contribution towards the aggression may be used as further leverage. Furthermore, understanding of how the impact of IPA extends beyond the couple and onto children living in aggressive households means that it is important that we explore how IPA impacts on children when both parents are contributing to the aggression.

To date, only a small section of qualitative research has explored men's IPA victimisation experiences with no research having come from men in bi-directionally aggressive relationships. This signifies the immediate need for research to address and begin to develop an understanding of these two neglected areas of the literature. The present study will utilise a qualitative approach with the aim to explore how men who live with their children and female partner experience bi-directional aggression and help-seeking in their intimate relationships.

Methods

Research Design

Quantitative and Qualitative Research Methodologies

In the present study, a qualitative research methodology was employed to analyse one-on-one interviews of men who had experienced IPA in their relationships. Qualitative research is predominantly exploratory in nature and focuses on developing an in-depth understanding of the unique experiences and perspective of individuals, as opposed to quantitative research which collects large quantities of data from a population of interest and generalises findings across that population (Hammarberg, Kirkman & de Lacey, 2016; Machado et al., 2017; Sutton & Austin, 2015). Due to a lack of research on bi-directional aggression, specifically men's experiences of bi-directional aggression, a qualitative, exploratory approach was preferred over a quantitative, statistical-based research methodology. This enabled research to develop an in-depth understanding of how men who live with their children and female partner experience bi-directional IPA and help-seeking in their intimate relationships.

The Role of the Qualitative Researcher

As part of any qualitative research project, it is important to acknowledge the active role the researcher assumes in this process, and how their individual identity, perspective, and assumptions contribute to the creation of knowledge and research outcomes (Maxwell, 2002). The process of reflexivity should be adhered to, which occurs when the researcher examines their own position in relation to the specific research topic being explored (Berger, 2015; Dodgson, 2019). Although data utilised in the current study had been previously collected as part of a broader research project, and thus I was not actively involved in the interview component of data collection, it is still important to acknowledge how my own background and experiences may have contributed to how I interpreted the data during the analysis

phases and how that may have influenced research outcomes. Adhering to the process of reflexivity ensures that the quality and integrity of research is maintained.

Contribution of the Researcher in the Present Thesis

As a 24-year-old Pākehā female living in Aotearoa NZ, I have an understanding and awareness of the prevalence and serious nature of IPA. I grew up in a violence free, positive, and safe family environment, so without exposure to information to contradict this narrative I assumed IPA predominantly took the form of a female victim being terrorised and physically beaten by her male partner, established from watching movies and television shows, reading books, and being exposed to media promoting that discourse. It has been my tertiary education, where I was surrounded by research offering an alternate explanation to that discourse, which shifted my belief of what constitutes IPA; that it occurs to people of any age, gender, sexual orientation, and is not limited to physical aggression. Throughout this research I have been mindful of how my experience and background impacted on how I interpreted the data and took active steps to ensure that any subjective biases were minimised, and focus remained on taking an inclusive approach to analysing men's experiences of bi-directional IPA.

Study Design

This study used a phenomenologically oriented design to explore how men who lived with their children and female partner experienced bi-directional IPA and help-seeking in their intimate relationship. Utilising a phenomenologically oriented design enabled research to focus on how a specific group experiences (in the present study the group of interest is men with children) a particular phenomenon (bi-directional IPA), with the goal being to develop an insightful understanding and description of the nature of the phenomenon for that particular group (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Braun & Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis (TA) was selected as the qualitative methodology through which data would be

analysed as it offers a flexible approach to research whilst still endorsing a detailed and rich account. The present study took an inductive, semantic, and realist/essentialist approach to explore data concerning men's experiences of bi-directional IPA (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Taking an inductive approach to analysis allowed resultant themes to directly reflect the content of the data (research was driven by the collected data) and the men's lived experience of bi-directional IPA. Additionally, approaching coding and theme development semantically allowed the focus to remain on the explicit content of the men's experience. A realist/essentialist approach supported the assumption that there is an inherent reality evident within the men's experience of bi-directional IPA and that resultant themes support this reality (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017).

Participants

The sample consisted of 13 men drawn from a larger data corpus of 80 male and female participants. All interviewees were English speaking males who had self-reported bi-directional aggression (past or current in at least one intimate relationship with a female partner). 12 of the men had experienced bi-directional aggression in their most recent intimate relationship, and one had experienced bi-directional aggression in both a past relationship and in their most recent relationship. All 13 participants were recruited from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) located across five major regions in Aotearoa NZ (Hamilton, Wellington, Nelson, Christchurch, Otago) who work with survivors of IPA. Participation in the project was voluntary. All of the men included in this sample were the father of at least one child shared with their female partner who was living in the household during the bi-directionally aggressive relationship. The men in this sample were aged from 24 to 51 years ($\mu = 41.4$ years) with relationship length ranging from one and a half to 24 years ($\mu = 12.3$ years). Four of the men were still in a relationship with their female partner at the time of the interview, while the other nine men had left their relationships (their current

relationship status was not explicitly stated). Additional demographic details of participants are provided in Table 1. To ensure confidentiality and protection, participants have been deidentified and names replaced with pseudonyms.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Details

Pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity	Relationship Length (years)	Still with Female Partner (Yes/No)	Shared Children in Household
Logan	38	Māori	17	No	2
Alex	24	Māori	1.5	No	1
Ethan	28	NZ European	10	No	2
Jacob	46	NZ European	3	No	1
Michael	51	Māori/NZ European	12	No	3
Daniel	43	NZ European	24	Yes	4
Henry	46	Māori	13	No	2
Jackson	45	NZ European	20	No	1
Sebastian	45	British	14	Yes	4
Aiden*	42	Māori/NZ European	8 (ex) 13 (current)	Yes (current)	1 (ex) 2 (current)
Matt	48	NZ European	12	Yes	2
Sam	38	NZ European	14	No	5
Joseph	44	American/Asian	12	No	1

*Note: * discussed bi-directional aggression in two relationships: his current relationship and a relationship with a previous partner.*

Procedure

This study constitutes part of a broader research project that interviewed men and women to explore their experiences of IPA victimisation and/or perpetration in Aotearoa NZ. This study utilised interview data collected from men with children who disclosed living with bi-directional IPA. Details of how the data was collected during the broader research project is outlined below.

NGOs that worked with perpetrators or survivors of IPA were provided with information and consent forms explaining the purpose and requirements for the broader research project. NGO leads who consented to being involved were then provided with information sheets to distribute to individuals attending their service who they assessed as being in a safe physical and psychological space to participate in an interview about their experience of IPA. Individuals who expressed their interest in participating were subsequently provided with a consent sheet and full information pack by the NGO lead or a member of their workforce. The contact details of individuals who agreed to take part were then passed to the principal investigator who arranged a one-on-one, in person interview with them directly using their indicated preferred contact details.

The interviews were carried out in person in a safe space at the participants NGO, where counselling was available to the men post-interview if requested. Consent was visually (participants were provided with a consent form to read over prior to the beginning of the interview) and verbally reiterated prior to the interview. All men were informed that the interview was confidential and that they could withdraw consent at any stage and could ask to have data destroyed. The interviews lasted an average of 90 minutes and were audio and video recorded with permission from the participant to do so. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner, utilising an open-ended, broad questioning style to facilitate discussion. All participants were given a debrief sheet at the conclusion of the interview and received a supermarket voucher as reimbursement for expenses relating to their participation. The audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim by a professional and confidential service. Any discrepancies identified between the audio recording and the written transcript during the data familiarisation process were checked and edited in the Word document file. This ensured the written transcript accurately reflected the experiences of the

men. All interview recordings and electronic written material was stored on a secure, password protected server drive, with access restricted to research investigators only.

The inclusion criteria for case selection for this research project was based on the initial research question of *how men experience living in relationships where there is bi-directional aggression*. From the 80 interviews available in the data corpus from the broader research project, 17 met the criteria of the interviewee being male, and self-reporting at least one (past or current) bi-directionally aggressive relationship. The author subsequently listened to all 17 interviews via the audio recordings. This procedure is outlined in further detail in the Analysis section below. Carrying out this process enabled the refinement of the main research question to *how men who live with their children and female partner experience bi-directional aggression and help-seeking in their intimate relationship*. Sub-questions were also developed to explore specific areas of interest within the data:

- How does the aggression in the relationship evolve over time and how does the family dynamic feature in the progression?
- How do men with children experience emotions like fear in a bi-directionally aggressive relationship and how do they cope with these emotions?
- How do men with children make sense of having stayed in the bi-directionally aggressive relationship?
- How has disclosure or help-seeking impacted the men?
- How have the men's approach to aggression in relationships changed since disclosure or help-seeking?

Following modification of the main research question and sub-questions, the 17 interviews were evaluated against refined criteria that established whether the men had:

- lived with at least one female intimate partner (past or current) with self-reported bi-directional aggression,

- lived with at least one shared child in the household at some point throughout the aggressive relationship, and
- self-reported information about help-seeking experience.

This refined criterion led to the elimination of two men who did not have shared children with their female partner; one man who did not have any children, and one man whose child, an adult child from a past relationship, did not live in the bi-directionally aggressive household. This reduced the sample down to 15 men. An additional two men were excluded after the initial coding process. These two men met the first two criterion but upon further evaluation, did not provide rich information regarding their help-seeking experiences. The decision was thus made to exclude them from any further analyses. This produced a final dataset comprised of 13 cases.

Analysis

Analysis for this research project utilised Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps of reflexive thematic analysis. These steps were used to assist in the identification and analysis of recurring themes occurring within the dataset. A detailed description of these six steps is outlined below.

1. Familiarisation with the Data

A number of steps were taken to become familiar and engaged with the dataset and the content within it. This step was carried out within a team of five researchers, with each team member assigned four or five cases from a pool of 24 interviews (from the data corpus) to work through. The cases allocated to each team member were not required to be related to their specific research question of interest. This enabled exposure to a variety of IPA experiences and to develop critical thinking skills around the heterogenic nature of aggression in intimate relationships. For each case allocated, the audio recording was listened

to and notes were taken about the nature of the aggression in the relationship. Key points were compiled into a short paragraph summarising the aggression and included into an Excel spreadsheet which contained demographic details and interview summaries for all 80 interviews in the data corpus.

The next step in the data familiarisation process was to identify all cases within the broader research data corpus with male interviewees self-reporting bi-directional aggression in at least one intimate relationship with a past or current female partner. As mentioned in the Procedure section, a total of 17 interviews were identified. The audio recordings for the 17 interviews were listened to, with written notes taken throughout the duration of the listening process. Notes were taken to aid understanding of each participants' experience of bi-directional aggression, their feelings about the aggression, the impact of the aggression, and their experience with help-seeking. Transcripts were also referred to throughout this process to assist in development of the initial case notes. The audio recording was paused as necessary to ensure that all key points and thoughts discussed by participants could be written down. After listening to each audio recording, the written transcript which corresponded to the interview was read through to complement the audio recording and to gather additional key points. Following this process, a Word document for each participant was created, and information was added regarding participant demographics (age, ethnicity, NGO service attended, children). In addition, the following questions about the men's experience of bi-directional aggression in their intimate relationship were answered:

- Nature of bi-directional aggression in relationship
- Nature of their perpetration (all of them had to have engaged in some form of perpetration)
- Nature of their victimisation (all of them had to have experienced this)
- Rich data on experience detailing their use of aggression

- Rich data on their victimisation experience
- Rich data on their disclosure
- Rich data on their help-seeking experience

These questions were answered using a mixture of summary type answers and through extraction of relevant quotations from the written transcripts. These answers were then transferred into the Excel spreadsheet containing all information about the 80 interviews in the data corpus. After completing this process for all 17 participants, a reflective process was carried out for each participant, one which enabled the development of eight initial sub-questions focusing on areas of interest within the dataset. As outlined in the Procedure section, the main research question and initial sub-questions were further refined through a collaborative process with the principal investigator and other members of the research group, leading to the removal of two cases (as discussed in Procedure section). The remaining 15 transcripts were subsequently read and analysed again, guided by the refined research questions. No notes or annotations were taken during this process, as this step was carried out to ensure that the experiences of all 15 participants were encapsulated within the research sub-questions.

2. Generation of Initial Codes

The second phase of TA as outlined in Braun and Clarke (2006), required going through all transcripts in the dataset and systematically generating codes for information and features of the interview relevant to the main research question and sub-questions. In a continuation of the data familiarisation phase, each of the 15 interview transcripts and were copied into a new Word document to create coding transcripts. The coding transcript document was set up with three columns. The left column provided space to write down thoughts, comments, or ideas to explain why a code was labelled a specific way. The middle column contained the transcribed interview text. Instead of including a third column for code

generation, the right-hand column was formed using the 'Comments' tool in Word. This enabled a text highlight function which directly linked the relevant quotation to the corresponding code. This made it easier to trace and identify each code with its quotation in the transcript. All 15 transcripts were worked through one-by-one and coded systematically from start to finish.

Transcripts were coded using line-by-line textual analysis, with simultaneous coding of descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments. Descriptive comments coded referred directly to how the men described their experience of bi-directional aggression and their help-seeking experience. Linguistic comments coded focused on the type of language used by the men to describe their experience and their use of speech features or specific words in context of their answers. Conceptual comments coded took a deeper interpretative approach into the meaning of each of the men's answers regarding their experience of bi-directional aggression. This type of coding method was utilised as it allowed for a free-flowing approach, taking into consideration all elements of each participants' experience at once and how they uniquely expressed that experience. Throughout the initial coding process steps were taken to maintain consistency across all 15 transcripts. A copy of the main research and sub-questions were kept within eyesight at all times. This ensured that all codes created were relevant and didn't deviate from the main focus of the research project. Two sets of notes were also taken during the process. The first set of notes involved writing down codes uncovered in one particular transcript which may have been overlooked during coding of previous transcripts, identifying features of interest to be returned to during the re-coding process. The second set of notes involved writing down concerns, interesting things emerging out of the transcripts, and personal biases arising throughout analysis. This served as a self-checking process to ensure that an objective approach was taken to the coding process and to minimise the impact of subjective opinions on analysis.

After coding each interview, an evaluation was made as to whether the transcript contained data which was both rich in nature and relevant to each sub-question. As mentioned in the Procedure section, two participants were eliminated from further analysis at this point following a discussion with the principal investigator. This reduced the final dataset to 13 participants. Subsequently, all 13 transcripts were re-coded. This re-coding process served three main purposes. Firstly, it allowed for the honing of codes to develop a coherent and accurate description of each quotation. Secondly, it allowed for additional features which were overlooked in the initial coding process to be picked up on and included. Thirdly, the experience gained from the initial coding process facilitated a more informed understanding of the experiences of the 13 men, enabling a deeper re-examination of existing codes. All transcripts were re-coded in the same order as they were initially coded to maintain consistency.

3. Searching for Themes

The third phase of Braun and Clarke's (2006) TA process involved searching for themes. Codes from all 13 transcripts were collated into both an Excel spreadsheet and Word document. This process was conducted by working through each transcript and shifting each code, corresponding quotation, and relevant comments into an Excel spreadsheet.

Additionally, each code was added to a Word document so that all codes could be viewed in list form. To maintain consistency, code order in the Excel spreadsheet was matched to code order in the Word document. As codes were transferred, they were loosely clustered with similar codes. Clustering codes in this manner made it easier when attempting to locate an existing code within the spreadsheet. Organisation into loose clusters also helped with the initial stages of code refinement. Codes identified during this transfer process which drew on the same meaning as a previously transferred code but had been given a different code label were condensed down into a singular code. For example: 'violence normalised from

childhood experiences' and 'childhood experience leading to violence being seen as normal' would be condensed down into one code. This was a reflexive process, with quotations and codes regularly evaluated to ensure that all quotations accurately represented the code label given. This process reduced the number of codes from 355 down to 117.

Following this step, definitions were developed to represent how each code encapsulated the men's experience of bi-directional aggression. Once definitions were developed, codes were evaluated further, leading to refinement and restructuring of codes to ensure that the definition and supporting quotations accurately and coherently represented the codes. This information was presented in table form in a Word document. An extract of this document is provided in Appendix A. The document was given to the principal investigator who evaluated and provided feedback and advice around how best to improve the codes. This feedback led to a significant code refinement process, with most codes being re-evaluated, re-categorised, collapsed down, or split up.

The main focus of this refinement stage was to identify and consider the essence of each quotation with regards to the men's experience of bi-directional IPA and to ensure that the code label and definition captured this essence. The main Excel spreadsheet with all codes and quotations was refined and re-structured alongside the Word document. This ensured that both documents accurately reflected the current state of the codes, and that all quotations collated from the 13 transcripts were evaluated and considered during the code refinement stage, not just the selection of representative quotations in the Word document. At each stage of the refinement process, new copies of each document were saved, so that if required the previous coding information could be returned to for reference. The refinement process resulted in codes being condensed from 117 to 63 codes. The refined coding document was sent back to the principal investigator for further feedback, which led to

another round of code refinement where minor adjustments were made to the codes and definitions.

4. Reviewing Themes

The fourth phase of Braun and Clarke's (2006) TA process involved development of themes and subthemes from the codes which were refined and finalised in the previous phase of the TA process. The 63 finalised codes were printed out, cut up and initial subtheme groupings developed. This process involved going through each code, evaluating the definition and corresponding quotations, and placing it on a table. As each code was pulled out it was evaluated against the codes already on the table. If the code was similar it was either grouped together with the associated code or placed near the associated code if the ideas were linked but not directly related. If the code was different it was placed away from the other codes. This meant that codes of a similar nature were clustered around each other and assisted in the development of thematic links within and across clusters. Codes were shifted and re-categorised as the process evolved to ensure that developed clusters accurately and coherently reflected the men's experience of bi-directional aggression.

This process was repeated again with the principal investigator and another student within the research team to discuss discrepancies and reaffirm the themes and subthemes which arose from the initial grouping process. Following this process, coded data deemed relevant to each developed theme and corresponding subthemes was evaluated further. Some subthemes were quite large in their breadth, so the decision was made to break them down into multiple subthemes. Two developed subthemes were weak and only represented the experiences of one or two of the men, so were subsequently removed from the dataset. This review ensured that all data was coherent and provided an accurate and rich representation of all the men's experiences. A total of 16 subthemes and five wider theme groups were produced from this analysis.

5. Defining and Naming Themes

The fifth phase of Braun and Clarke's (2006) TA process consisted of ascribing labels and formulating written descriptions for each theme and relevant subthemes developed from the coded dataset. Labels and descriptions were refined as required throughout this process. Labels were developed to be meaningful in nature and to effectively communicate the overall message behind each theme and relevant subthemes. Comprehensive narrative explanations were developed to explain how each code connected to others within the theme grouping. Explanations for each theme were constructed and woven together in a story-like fashion to emphasise the experiences of the men in an empathic manner. This process promoted further reflection and minor shifting of code placement within and across subtheme groupings. Codes and corresponding quotations were referred back to throughout this process to ensure that the narrative explanations correctly reflected the collected data and the experiences of the men.

6. Producing the Report

The final phase of the TA process for this research project consisted of producing a report identifying and describing each theme and relevant subthemes. In addition, the report provided sufficient information regarding each stage of the research process and justification for the analytical and methodological decisions made across the duration of the research process. To support each theme and subtheme developed, representative quotations for each code were selected and included in the report to further enrich the thematic narrative. Selection of these quotations and formulation of the narrative explanation involved continuous reference to interview transcripts and coding documents to ensure that a coherent, succinct, and distinctive set of themes was produced which accurately and meaningfully summarised the experience of bi-directional aggression and help-seeking among men who live with their children and female partner.

Results

Five themes were found to characterise the men's experiences. These were: 1) The cycle of bi-directional aggression, 2) The impact of gender roles on bi-directional aggression, 3) Maintenance of the abusive relationship, 4) The multi-layered impact of abuse, and 5) The power of positive help-seeking. Table 2 provides a summary of the five themes and the subthemes within them. Themes and corresponding subthemes are outlined in detail in the following sections. Additional quotations for each subtheme are provided in Appendix B. Note that names used in the below quotations are pseudonyms, and other potential identifiers have been removed to ensure participant confidentiality.

1. The Cycle of Bi-directional Aggression

This theme describes how incidents of bi-directional aggression began and ended and evolved over time. Subthemes identify the experiences of each member of the couple, from the men's viewpoint, which made them vulnerable to entering into a volatile relationship where both struggled to adaptively cope with stressors and conflict. This provided the foundation for the emergence of bi-directional aggression which was cyclical in nature and perpetuated over time.

1.1. Unstable Relationship Foundations

This subtheme shows how both members of the couple were exposed to experiences which made them vulnerable to developing maladaptive coping and emotion regulation skills. These unstable foundations led to an inability to cope with any emerging stressors in their relationship. This meant the men and their partner resorted to aggression to resolve conflict. The most common feature discussed by the men was their exposure to, or experience of aggression and trauma during childhood, and/or their involvement in antisocial behaviour.

“I’ve been around people that stabbed people and what-not... I’ve seen enough violence. And I’ve seen the repercussions of gang members with guns. Not healthy, not nice.” – Michael

The men highlighted a similar exposure for their partners, emphasising the importance of understanding both members of the relationship in order to explain aggression.

“[Partner’s name] was, er, sexually abused when she was younger so that is gonna be... you know, she is gonna have her guard up about that kind of thing.” – Jackson

Table 2

Developed Themes and Corresponding Subthemes

Themes	Subthemes
The cycle of bi-directional aggression	1) Unstable Relationship Foundations 2) The Build Up 3) Caught up in the Challenge 4) Point of De-escalation
Impact of gender roles on bi-directional aggression	1) Gendered Norms Shape Men’s Aggression 2) Response to Incongruence in Gender Roles 3) Female Resourcefulness
Maintenance of the abusive relationship	1) Misinformed Perspective of IPA 2) Denial and Normalisation of IPA 3) Attachment to Children Kept Men Stuck 4) Barriers to Accessing Services
Multi-layered impact of abuse	1) Negative Psychological Impact on Men 2) Awareness of Impact on Partner 3) Children Caught in the Crossfire
The power of positive help-seeking	1) Facilitators to Seeking Help 2) Making Positive Changes

Some men described how witnessing violence led to normalisation of aggression for them which increased the likelihood that they would engage in violence.

“Like, I know the whole lot was abuse...but I didn’t care. I didn’t...it was just...you know. When I was a kid, yeah, that sort of shit was normal, didn’t think anything of it...but then again, I started seeing that shit on TV, those ads, ‘It’s not okay’. Well, in my life it is okay. Yeah. It is just normal.” – Ethan

Substance abuse and mental health problems were other difficulties experienced by both the men and their partners.

“There’s... oh, drinking was a constant for her. Um... I would smoke cannabis. Um, meth, or acid, or whatever else was sporadic.” – Henry

“I’m not saying she’s bipolar, but it seemed that. One minute you’re happy, one minute you’re just crashing... []...and that’s what, like same as me; with what my meds were doing to me, but she wasn’t on meds... in order to keep my kids... I had to be on medication.” – Logan

Jealously was also an issue for both members, with one partner exacerbating levels of jealousy in the other.

“...she was very like, ‘you’re mine. You’re not going anywhere,’ sort of thing... and, um... like I was too after a while. I got pretty possessive about her but that was more to do with she’d go out and cheat on you all the time so I couldn’t... trust her... so if she went to town it would be like ‘no, you don’t go and fucking dance with that guy’.” – Ethan

In combination, these underlying issues contributed to building unstable relationship foundations which subsequently increased the likelihood of conflict and aggression emerging

into the relationship. Furthermore, all of the men detailed significant stressors within the family environment which they perceived as contributing to the conflict in their relationship.

“...when we had [son’s name] he had a lot of health issues. He had acid reflux as a child... he never slept for five years and he had a lot of food allergies, so it wasn’t easy. It wasn’t easy... she became more protective of him... but that didn’t stop her from curbing her attitude towards me when she had a bad day.” – Joseph

Maladaptive coping and conflict resolution skills led to the men and their female partners resorting to aggression to manage stress. Not having adequate skills to work through stressors and effectively manage conflict contributed to the likelihood of aggression and violence occurring.

“...I didn’t know how to deal with... that at, at the time and... yeah. I, the best way to do it was to throw... throw a glass against the wall and...” – Sam

Some men described how the relationship progressed quickly, with couples making impulsive decisions to move in together, get married or become pregnant within a short space of time.

“...I probably only knew her... probably less than a month, couple of weeks, before she fell pregnant... and so that’s how the story begins. So, we didn’t know each other well at all. Absolutely not...” – Jacob

This increased the serious responsibility placed on them which, coupled with maladaptive coping skills and risk factors for aggression, increased the potential for volatility and aggression in the relationship. For some men, the aggression and volatility appeared early in the relationship.

“Yeah, so... it was real volatile, the whole relationship, to be honest.” – Henry

"If I'm being honest... you know, we've been married for 20 years and I would say for 20 years it's probably been happening." - Sebastian

For others there was a 'honeymoon' phase where the beginning of the relationship was calm with no signs of aggression, until stressors were placed upon them (such as moving to a new country or having a child) which they were unable to cope with.

"Q: And it wasn't like that in the six months you were dating, there was no sort of her shouting at you, control..."

A: No. As like I said...it was a total surprise. It was a total surprise." – Joseph

"...it was a behaviour that, um... it was part of a group of behaviours that started to show their head after, um, having the child, and not receiving treatment for the, um, post-natal depression." – Aiden

The men described having a lot of love for their female partner because they felt that they were the only person to have loved them. Some men described being blinded by love and not wanting to give up on their relationship.

"...Um, because for me, that is really... she's the first person who ever loved me and I'm the first... she is the first person that I've ever been able to talk to about anything and everything... so I didn't want to lose that..." – Sebastian

This led to a desire to continue the relationship despite high conflict and the lack of skills to cope and resolve it. The men often justified and minimised their partner's behaviour by attributing the aggression to their partner's vulnerable upbringing, or to transient factors.

"...because she, from whatever, if it's post-traumatic stress, or if its stress from abuse or whatever she internalised in her mind, she would just sort of spin out and go in a really dark place..." – Jacob

"...during the pregnancy, we thought... like I said, maybe it was the hormones, you know?... um a few times, yeah, I just thought she was stressed, you know?" – Alex

1.2. The Build Up

This subtheme describes how the men experienced the build-up to an aggressive incident. All men showed insight and awareness that the aggression was bi-directional and not one-sided in nature.

"...You don't got domestic violence with just one person; it's not one-sided, it takes two... you know? So... yeah, with what we've been through, yeah, I'm gonna admit that it takes both of us." – Alex

This awareness extended to their understanding that aggression should not be accepted or tolerated in an intimate relationship in any form.

"The shouting's not acceptable, the hitting's not acceptable... neither's the slapping... none of it is acceptable in a loving relationship... and it shouldn't be tolerated." – Sebastian

However, despite this insight the aggression continued to persist throughout their relationship. The majority of aggressive incidents arose from everyday conflicts and tension.

"...most of the arguments weren't to do with alcohol and drugs. They were to do with our living styles. Um...and...just doing things incorrectly, just, yeah..." – Henry

Some of the men discussed their experience of becoming attuned to mannerisms of their partner, such as facial movements, in the preceding moments prior to an aggressive encounter. This indicated to the men that their partner was getting angry and likely to become aggressive.

"When I come home I can see it. She's looking for a battle... Her eyes...she has this... she gives you that stink look... I walk in the door it's already my fault. She just gives you the stink

eye. I guess you call it the evil eye. So, she gives a stinko eye like she's gonna kill me and I was like, okay, well this is gonna be interesting." – Joseph

Many of the men discussed monitoring and changing their behaviour to prevent their partner from becoming aggressive or argumentative.

"Q: ...did you ever sort of change your behaviour to try and stop her criticising you or shouting at you...?"

A: Yeah, yeah. I'd try different things...[]...walking on egg shells quite a lot... []... to avoid an argument." – Matt

1.3. Caught up in the Challenge

This subtheme describes how for many of the men, when conflict arose, they experienced it as a challenge to be won. This challenge often led to the aggression escalating in nature. The men described how neither partner wanted to back down, and how they would retaliate to their female partner's aggression to try and over-power her and win the argument.

"...at the time, it... it's almost like a challenge. It was, like... I'm not backing down, she's not backing down. It just..." – Sam

Some of the men described their aggression increasing in severity in order to win the challenge.

"Q... you're changing tactic, really aren't you? Changing from verbal, shouty, insult stuff, to squaring up. Why the change of tactic, do you think?"

A: 'cause I wasn't winning!... I guess. It's like, I... that was my trump card, I guess... because I knew I could win physically." – Matt

High levels of verbal aggression often escalated into physical aggression for both members of the couple within an incident.

"...ah, she just, she just fuckin'... kept cursing me, you know, kept dissing me, shit like that. And then... nah, I had enough... she went to get up, after a lot of verbal... not yelling, just... ugly voices towards each other. She gets up and she threatens to call the cops on me and I'm like 'what the fuck? Fuck off. You're the one who punched me in the face'... and as she goes to go past me, I just pushed her on the bed... as I went to walk out, she just got up off the bed and she punched me on this side, a lot harder this time." – Alex

This escalation in severity took place within incidents for some men, whereas others described a slower increase in severity over time.

"A: ...she was becoming more... more violent... over time it sort of built up. And I warned her, you know..."

Q: so, you'd said, 'don't do that again, because you'll get it back if you do?'

A: Yeah, yeah... and then I just snapped." – Matt

1.4. Point of De-escalation

This subtheme described how the men experienced the aggressive incident de-escalating and coming to an end. How the conflict was understood as a challenge to be won was further reflected through the men describing how the aggressive incident would dwindle when one partner gave up or was defeated by the other.

"It was over fairly quick – the violence. You know, it's like... I overpowered her and she gave up." – Matt

For some men, escalation to physical aggression led to a moment of shock for the couple which seemed to de-escalate the incident.

"All I do remember is at one point I think I'd got my arm and I went like that and whether it got her there [motions to windpipe]... it might have got her there and then I think maybe that's when I... it was a slap to the face and—and I basically caught her a treat 'cause the..."

there was a sound... and she was just like, oh... she kind of did a arghh... kind of shouted but then, you know, she did go off and cry... I stared out the window... with my hands on my hips just thinking what the fuck is going on? What's happened? What is happening? Why is everything so shit?" – Jackson

Most of the men found removing themselves from the conflict, usually by leaving the property, was the most effective way of letting the situation subside.

"Walk out the door; slam it; jump in the car and go... []...spin out the driveway and-, and... sometimes I would just get as far as the letterbox; it's 500 metres up the road and just sit there and go [sound effect]. Other times, I would drive halfway to [region name] before I came home... sit beside the river and go, 'what the hell went on there'." – Sebastian

"I'd walk; I would walk away; I'd leave her with the house. I'd jump in the car and go... just go away and just get some time apart, hoping that by the time I got back, things would calm, and we could talk and you know, things would be all right..." – Alex

The men discussed trying to withdraw from the situation, but their female partner would attempt to stop them and try to continue the argument.

"...she used to have this dreadful habit, which she'd start an argument and then I'd go, 'I've got to get out of here' 'cause I could feel it boiling up... and she would stand in the door and not let me out..." – Sebastian

For some of the men, removing themselves from the conflict acted as a mechanism to stop themselves from reciprocating the aggression towards their female partner.

"Just get away... just get away, end the arguing and just get the fuck out. Yeah, I was... 'cause I was ready to just destroy the place." – Aiden

2. Impact of Gender Roles on Bi-directional Aggression

This theme outlines how the construction of gender in society shaped the men's experience of aggression. Subthemes describe 1) how gendered norms impact the nature of the men's aggression, 2) how non-adherence to traditional gender roles created frustration and conflict in the relationship, and 3) the men's gendered perspectives of women's aggression.

2.1. Gendered Norms Shape Men's Aggression

This subtheme shows how most, but not all of the men, held beliefs that physical violence towards women is not acceptable.

"A: ...I was more afraid of me 'cause I was like one time I might lose it and not--not be able to control it... Not physical with her 'cause I... we--we're grown not to hit women and I--I've never hit a woman..." – Joseph

Some of the men made a clear distinction between their acceptance of violence towards females and males.

"Yeah, I mean, at times – there's been times where I've s--, you know, I've said to [partner's name], 'I wish, you know, it wouldn't be so bad if we were homos, 'cause I'd just drag you outside and punch you fucken head in for ya. I'd just give you a hiding, and all your big words'd be fucken, they'd be nothing'." – Aiden

These gendered social norms impacted the nature and type of aggressive behaviours used by the men. Many men described engaging in similar aggressive tactics toward their partner, most often avoiding direct physical violence. The most common approach employed by the men was to engage in verbal aggression, saying things to make her feel bad about herself.

"...I just hit it on the desk like this and I said 'Fuck!' and she's like 'get fucked!' And I went 'No, you get fucked you bitch... you're nothing but a fucken mongrel mattress'... which is, real bad in soul... 'you just see, you're nothing but a fucken mongrel mattress. That's all you are'." – Alex

For some of the men, being on the receiving end of physical aggression from their partner meant standing and taking her physical blows, resisting the urge to reciprocate.

"Q: when she beat up on you... you took it and... cried. Yeah.

A: Yeah.

Q: ...did you think it... so you didn't think it was okay. Did you call it a name? Did you label it in any way? Did you understand it in any particular way?

A: No. I just waited till it was over and try not to think about it." – Ethan

The men spoke about redirecting aggression away from partner and towards her possessions or shared property, a behaviour which provided them with a 'safe' physical outlet for their anger and frustration.

"...I would yell back. Um, I would smash things. I don't know how many times I replaced that linen... linen cupboard door." – Joseph

Although the men adopted alternative tactics and behaviours to avoid using physical aggression, many of the men described instances where they did engage in physical aggression. They described holding back from employing their full force, viewing themselves as the physically superior partner and therefore having a greater capacity to physically hurt her.

"I got up and she turned to run and I punched her in the back... I held back, you know, it was only 50 percent of what I could've... because I knew I'd really hurt her if I punched her in the back full power." – Matt

2.2. Response to Incongruence in Gender Roles

This subtheme shows how traditional gender roles shaped the men's perceptions of their own and their partner's duties within their relationship, and how non-adherence to these expected gender roles led to feelings of unfairness, frustration, and conflict. For the majority of the men, they held conventional views and attitudes towards the roles of males in relationships.

"...it's a responsibility as a father. You get up, do what we have to do, go to work, make the money, come home, do what we have to do... mow the lawns, clean the toilet, 'cause that's my responsibility as a male." – Logan

For some of the men, this adherence to traditional gender roles was also reflected through their expectations of their partner's behaviour.

"...I'll treat a bitch like a bitch but if she's really nice and loving then I won't fucking touch her. I wouldn't touch someone who was a princess and treated me good..." - Ethan

For some of the men, when they perceived their partner not adhering to traditional gender roles they felt unsupported, like there was an imbalance of care in their relationship and they were getting the rough end of the relationship 'deal'.

"...I've always felt like I was treated like an employee, more like... servant more than an equal. I was never considered equal in this... in this relationship. I was considered someone to be controlled, to be used to her means and how she wanted. And she doesn't understand that. She thinks she's been... a wonderful wife, yes, in some points, she's loving, she's caring, she's a beautiful Christian woman, but when it comes down to straight partnership or treating each other decent like, no it wasn't." – Joseph

This perceived lack of support led to the men expressing their frustration towards their partner's lack of adherence to their gender role ideals, which often led to initiation of conflict.

"...I don't understand something, like um, I dunno, you've put the washing on in the morning, and then you don't hang it out, but you've been at home all day. You know, I come home and I'm like 'well how come you didn't do that? Come on'. And then that question may provoke an angry answer... 'I've been doing the fucken dishes, you fucken cunts!' And, oh, Jesus, yep, okay." – Daniel

Men's gender role expectations featured in some of the men's accounts of their own verbal aggression.

"Um, yeah, I'd just, I-I'd tell her things, like, call her names like, 'being a control freak,' or, you know, 'You just fucken hell, always gotta be the fucken boss and wear my pants' ...get all my fucken pants out of the drawers for you to fucken try on, and blah, blah, blah, and, you know, 'Just 'cause you work in a fucken office doesn't mean you come home and tell me, I'm not one of your office workers.' Sort of general sort of things like that, I'd throw at her." – Aiden

2.3. Female Resourcefulness

This subtheme describes how the men experienced their partner's behaviour as resourceful, employing aggressive tactics that overcame any strength or size differences or utilising her gender to gain the upper hand and engage in uni-directional physical aggression. The men described how their partner utilised weapons, such as knives, objects, kitchen cutlery/crockery to physically aggress as a way to level the playing field.

"...the second time she hit me was one of the times I had to go out to [town name] to try and sort one of our problems out and that's when she bit me, hit me in the head, like, eight times and tried smashing me over the head with a cup." – Alex

"You know, times like that she'd throw bricks through the car. So... she damaged a lot of cars me trying to leave, like no shit, actual three would get... smashed up, broken windows and shit... 'cause I tried to leave a few times." – Ethan

Many, but not all of the men spoke about their partner initiating physical aggression when their guard was down. This included being approached and attacked out of the blue, or when they were asleep; referencing another mechanism by which the female could gain a physical advantage.

"I went to rugby, came home, I'm off to bed, I was sleeping in the lounge anyway. And she didn't like that, so she just started attacking me, in the, in the bed." – Daniel

"I was sitting there at the computer and she just came up, smacked me right in the face... from behind... [] ... Pissed me off, and, um... 'cause I warned her. I said, 'well, you do that... hit me again, you're gonna get it back', you know..." – Matt

A lot of the men experienced their partner using legal and administrative services to their own advantage to get them into trouble, with some detailing how their partners would call the Police to have them arrested or to remove them from the property.

"... [partners name] is like, 'Dad's strangling me! Dad's strangling me! Dads strangling me! Ring the Police' so the Police came... the Police turned up and basically said, um, she's saying that you strangled her, um, you're saying that she bit you... and it was like... I found it really hard because again, this was just [partners name]'s word... and I had a white shirt on and I mean, it was a case that, there was blood on my shirt from where she'd bitten me and it was, they were just like, 'Nah'... like, it, it, doesn't really seem fair. I mean, she's obviously

drunk and I'm sober... she was... um, less, less calm than what I was, um... so um, I was given a, issued a Police Safety Order and asked, and told to leave and I was like..." – Sam

The men predominantly understood this tool of using services as a weapon against them with the main aim to restrict access to their children.

"Yeah... I got arrested, but let off; because um, she says that I kicked her, I stomped her, I dragged her down the street, by her hair...[]... and I was like, 'Nah, none of that happened', and when they asked her, "Can we see bruises?", she started getting shitty at the cops...[]... so, that's why I thought it was all a big set up so she could get the kids back into her care." – Logan

3. Maintenance of Abuse

This theme reflects experiences that describe how the bi-directional aggression was prolonged and maintained throughout the men's relationships. Subthemes capture, 1) the men's misinformed perspective about the gender inclusive nature of IPA, 2) how their partner engaged in behaviours that normalised the aggression and shifted responsibility onto the men, 3) how the men's attachment to their children kept them stuck in the relationship, and 4) the barriers men experienced in accessing services.

3.1. Misinformed Perspective of IPA

This subtheme found many of the men did not have a full or accurate understanding about the gender inclusive nature of IPA. This served to reinforce and maintain the bi-directional aggression. The men spoke about understanding physical IPA as perpetrated by men, not women, in particular.

"Q: Do you think it's okay to use violence?"

A: No... []... Women...women can go hard. But a man over a woman's like, that, to me, that shows the weakness of the man, to be honest." – Henry

Many of the men endorsed the belief that direct physical violence towards their female partner was not acceptable, however, did not view verbal and psychological forms of aggression as problematic.

“What I didn’t realise was that, that, yeah... throwing your kids or your wife against the wall or smashing them up, yep that’s violence... Calling your wife a filthy bitch is also mental violence. Slamming the door on the way out is also mental violence... Not talking...to her for weeks on end is mental violence... You know? ... I never thought about it.” – Sebastian

3.2. Denial and Normalisation of Aggression

This subtheme describes how men experienced their female partner engaging in attempts to normalise the aggression.

“...she’d say what I did but it was my reaction, not what she did. It’s what I did. “Oh, he do this.” “Oh, he do that.” ...What did you do? You know what I mean? Were you poking at me with names and... orders and... insults and--and, er, just... blaming me...” – Joseph

By normalising the aggression, she could continue to use and escalate her physical aggression with minor consequence.

“...she did say to me, she said ‘Yeah, [partner’s name] told me that she slapped you before’ and she’s actually said that... this friend of ours, she said ‘[partner’s name] you can’t do that’. And she went ‘I can... Yeah... I can do what... you know, ‘cause Jackson knows there is nothing he can do about it’.” – Jackson

For some of the men, their female partners used aggressive tactics to provoke them into physically retaliating.

"...there's been situations where she's going like this, dodging me, when I'm talking to her. And I'm going, 'What are you doing? Are you shadow boxing?' You know? She's expecting me to have a swing..." – Henry

Some of the men described how their partner attempted to provoke them into using physical aggression as personal leverage.

"And she's like, 'Go on then, go on then.' And I said, 'Yeah, see; that's all you want eh?' Because I've believed that she was winding me up, winding me up so that I could fuck up; so that she can get the kids back." – Logan

The men experienced their partner shifting the burden of responsibility onto him, refusing to take ownership of her own behaviour.

"She tried to put me through this counselling, because sh- it was just to aim at me, for my behaviour. And I said, 'What about your behaviour?' We had a big argument... She was like, pointing out like it was all my fault." – Henry

They also detailed situations when their partner denied behaving aggressively, leading the men to question themselves and feel as though they were at fault for the aggression.

"A: Um, and there was a lot of denial that it happened... you're gonna, we're gonna crash. And then bringing it up later, another time... she said it didn't happen... It didn't, it didn't happen. It didn't happen."

Q: And would she tell you that you were crazy, or...?

A: Yeah, yeah. It just didn't happen." – Jacob

3.3. Attachment to Children Kept Men Stuck

This subtheme describes the strong attachment between the men and their children. Many of the men discussed the strong bond they shared with their children, and despite the

nature of their intimate relationship they chose to stay to ensure their children grew up with a complete family.

"...when I realised that that's not what it was, she was pregnant, um, and once the baby had come I couldn't leave the baby. I couldn't... I had to look after them... I just couldn't leave."

– Ethan

The desire to keep their family together for their children's sake despite their aggressive relationship, maintained the abuse. This perseverance was in line with the dream some men articulated of having a family and the importance of being a good father.

"My dream within that dream is to be a good dad because I could never have a good dad so I was like well, if I can't have a good daddy—dad, I'm gonna be a good dad. So, that's my dream... that's all I ever wanted." – Joseph

A lot of the men felt if they walked away from their relationship and family, they would lose access to their children and consequently, the strong bond that they had developed with them.

"How do I get out of this, but still keep access to my child... there was a lot of, been a, there's been a lot of immense fear and extreme catatonic anxiety on my behalf, from possibly losing my child. ...I've been very very sick, through that over the years." – Jacob

For the men whose relationship dissolved, this legitimate fear became reality. Most of the men encountered difficulties in retaining access to their children post-separation, as it was their partner who assumed control over granting them access to their children. Some men saw this as a way for their partner to continue exerting power over them.

"...She knows how much they mean to me... I feel it's even... she'll be having a little bit of power... and now it's been a whole month and a half since I've seen them, you know what I mean?" – Michael

3.4. Barriers to Accessing Services

This subtheme describes the barriers to help-seeking that men faced throughout their aggressive relationship. For a lot of the men, there was a general lack of awareness and knowledge about services, including that they could approach and seek help from services.

"I didn't even know that this help was here... to be honest. It'd gone totally over the top of my head." – Sebastian

Many of the men saw the aggression as a private matter concerning themselves and their partner only. This made them reluctant to disclose the nature of their relationship to others or engage with help-seeking services for fear of how others would perceive them.

"I didn't see that it was anyone else's business. It's my own business, and besides that I don't really wanna be embarrassed by knowing that we can't keep our shit together and fighting and arguing. It's embarrassing." – Aiden

Men also had to deal with gendered accountability that arose from widely accepted discourses about the nature of IPA. For most of the men, they experienced their female partners and external services placing the responsibility for the aggression solely onto them, even though both members of the couple were contributing to the conflict and violence.

"...they ended up slapping me with the protection safety order because I'm a guy and this is where it starts being a cunt for a guy to get fucking help... I didn't do anything wrong at all. She was beating on me, but I got arrested when the Police turned up..." – Ethan

This unbalanced distribution of blame resulted in some of the men developing negative feelings towards services, which impacted their confidence in the ability of these services to assist and support them in future situations.

“Well, ‘cause I, I tried to once and it was, basically the Police just sort of laughed it off... []...I kinda lost my faith in them a little bit.” – Sam

For some of the men, the perception of an unhelpful support network extended beyond formal services such as the Police, and into more informal networks such as their peer groups.

“...my circle of friends is very much that typical guys, of like, when you’re together, you just take the mick out of each other and abuse each other... like if anything really serious happens in life, god forbid, because there’s no support.” – Jacob

4. Multi-layered Impact of Abuse

This theme details the wide-ranging impact that the bi-directional aggression had on the men and their relationships. Three subthemes were identified which describe how 1) the aggression had a substantial impact on the men, particularly their psychological wellbeing, 2) the men described the impact of their own aggression on their female partners, and 3) the men spoke about how the children living in the household were impacted.

4.1. Negative Psychological Impact on Men

This subtheme describes the psychological impact the abuse had on the men. While the men experienced both psychological and physical aggression, most of the men did not typically fear physical attack, rather they were more afraid of the psychological hold their partner had over them.

“...it was getting hard to breathe. I couldn’t do anything without fear or, ah, I’m gonna upset her in some way” – Aiden

For some men, this fear manifested around the ease with which their female partner could use her gender to threaten and make allegations against the men in attempt to block his access to their children.

“Oh petrified. Petrified of what she’ll say and... what she’ll hold against me... to ah... effectively make up a story to try and take access of my daughter away.” – Jacob

Most of the men acknowledged the psychological impact of aggression perpetrated against them was significantly more extensive than any type of physical aggression.

“It was more the mental abuse and the name-calling and that, hurt my—me the most. You can get over, you know, the bruises; but you can’t get over the—the words...” – Logan

“It hurt my feelings and I would tell her about it but it... my feelings didn’t register. My feelings didn’t count... []... physical doesn’t really bother me... you know, it was more emotionally. There was mostly... she knew what buttons to press already...” – Joseph

Specifically, the men appeared to be highly impacted by comments their partner would make with regards to their masculinity, worth as a father, and their ability to provide for the family.

“She used to... say things that she knew would... really, sort of, cut deep about, you know, um, how useless I am as a father and that I can’t provide, you know? You know it’s pathetic that I can’t afford to keep... you know, the family and stuff... And it’s like Jesus!” – Sam

4.2. Awareness of Impact on Partner

This subtheme found that men were highly cognisant around the impact of their own behaviour. All of the men expressed feelings of remorse and sorrow, notably with regards to how their behaviour had impacted their partner and relationship, and how their actions could have seriously injured their partner.

“But part of what I’d been doing to her for all that time had taken her there too... it’s taken me five or six years to... [] ... realise that actually where she went, part of that was because of me... and that’s why... I will do whatever it takes now for somebody to avoid... what I did to her... because it could be somebody that does it to my daughter.” – Sebastian

“...that was a new low for us. And, ah, something I never really wanted to repeat again; never wanted to do in the first place... and I think she kind of understood that. But... I hurt her, from punching her in the back. Well, she had her back to me, I had nothing else to punch. I could’ve punched her in the back of the head, and that could’ve been far worse.” – Matt

For some of the men, they acknowledged how their aggressive behaviour had caused their partner to become afraid to the point of wanting to leave the relationship.

“...she definitely didn’t like it. And when I hurt her, she felt afraid. And afterwards she still felt afraid. She felt afraid of the capacity for what...what could happen, what I could... the potential for my reach... she felt that she had no choice but to leave the country as fast as she could, to get away with the child.” – Aiden

4.3. Children Caught in Crossfire

This subtheme represents the impact the aggression had on the children who were living in the household during the abusive episodes. Most of the men detailed how their children were exposed to some form of aggression between their parents.

“The older kids used to get the younger kids down to the bedroom, away from us...” – Daniel

For some men, the abuse in the household extended beyond the bi-directional aggression, with children also experiencing aggression from one of the adults.

“She just fired up at them. Went into their room and tried to give them a hiding... but it would just end up being wrestling, ‘cause they were a lot bigger then, so they could handle it.” – Henry

The men showed an awareness of how the aggression with their partner had negatively impacted on their children.

“I believe a lot of his problems were the stresses in the house, the things that he’s witnessed; and I can remember back to when I was a kid, how it was for me; and he was exactly like me, didn’t know how to explain things... didn’t know how to be able to communicate properly about his feelings, because... he was just all over the place.” – Logan

5. The Power of Positive Help-seeking

This theme describes how the men experienced and engaged with help-seeking services. Subthemes identify how engaging with inclusive treatment programmes facilitated the development of the men’s knowledge which was integral to shifting their perspective of IPA. Additionally, the men also learnt skills which promoted positive change and showed them more effective and adaptive ways to deal with conflict and aggression.

5.1. Facilitators to Seeking Help

This subtheme describes factors that facilitated the men’s help-seeking experience. A lot of the men detailed initially reaching out to seek help and enter the treatment programmes for the benefit of someone else, such as their children or to appease their partner.

“...I actually voluntarily went into the anger management course, which was... kind of hilarious in a way, not that I couldn’t see myself being part of that or learning from it... but I was there... it was very much to appease her... to see that I was willing to work on stuff. But it was like, supporting her fantasy, that’s what it was like, it was supporting her fantasy.” – Jacob

Many of the men only disclosed their experience after some form of external intervention. For some men this external intervention came in the form of people witnessing the aggression.

"...like I spoke to him about it. Um... again, he, he had actually been up... the night... where there was the... table and chairs were all pushed around, all that sort of carry on. He had been up there the night... and had seen the way [partner's name] was, sort of, behaving to me..." – Sam

A lot of the men emphasised that engaging with a service that was objective and gender inclusive, where they felt listened to and believed helped them to open up and share their experience. This made them feel supported and for some men, it shifted their attitudes towards help-seeking services.

"A: He was really cool... really non-judgy, um, and just there to help and... it was good..."

Q: Is that the first time you'd come into contact with someone who was non-judgy and wanted to help you professionally?

A: Um, yeah. Yeah, I suppose so, yeah... he was very non-judgy, but he would ask the hard questions sometimes and would make me think..." – Jackson

Engaging with the treatment programme enabled some men to develop the confidence to confide in their friends and family.

"Q: ...you've always confided in someone?"

A: Um... probably not, no. Um... probably not until after my first course I started talking... talking it out with people." – Daniel

5.2. Making Positive Change

This subtheme describes the men's experience when engaging with perpetrator treatment programs and their educational journey to acquire new skills and tools to live an

aggression free life. All of the men had a positive experience with the programme and described how they developed adaptive ways of controlling and managing their emotions.

"...the [organisation name] service... has really helped give me the skills to recognise... when things are safe, then we're on the green light cycle, and everything's good... and then we get to the orange light, where it's, okay, there's a warning sign, so we need to start looking for off-ramps... 'cause when we're in the red light zone, that's where things are really bad... that's the constant cycle of violence, of arguing, of bickering, fighting, the name-calling, putting thing... putting down, um, property destruction, partner abuse and violence. That's not where we wanna be... when I start noticing these... elevated sensations and stuff, that's where I've gotta start exercising, right, well, how can I redirect or, you know, um, refocus myself onto something else. So, to take an off-ramp, so to speak, that I can redirect things." – Aiden

A lot of the men also experienced a shift in how they approached conflict with their partner.

"...it's really interesting but since I've been on this course... we've... hardly actually... we, we haven't... we have healthy debates...now, which, which are... not shouting. Yeah... the voice may be... raised a little bit... more than the norm...but they're not... they are debates... discussions... They're structured and firm, rather than... ah, just going off your handle and shouting." – Sebastian

Despite having a positive engagement with the programme and developing beneficial skills, some men voiced disappointment that their partner was not willing to support them to make changes and improve their relationship, highlighting the importance of understanding the aggressive dynamic in bi-directionally aggressive relationships.

“A: ...she was receptive of me to going to the course, “Yeah, you need to change Daniel, yeah, you need to...” But when come, came back with um... “Let’s do things together. Let’s stick as a team... in the end nothing worked, it was um...”

Q: So you didn’t feel very supported?

A: No.” – Daniel

Discussion

This study investigated the lived experience of bi-directional IPA and help-seeking among 13 adult men living with children and their female partner in Aotearoa NZ. Reflexive thematic analysis identified five themes which together provide insight into how the men experienced this under researched form of family violence, next, the themes are summarised and discussed within the context of the existing literature before noting the implications for policy, practice, and research.

Summary of Findings

The Cycle of Bi-directional Aggression

This theme, as discussed in the aforementioned section, described how incidents of bi-directional aggression began and ended over time. The first part of this cycle was evident for both the men and women who experienced adverse circumstances and trauma prior to the relationship, which cultivated *unstable relationship foundations*, specifically around their ability to cope and manage conflict and stressors. This underlying vulnerability was often experienced during childhood. Many of the men discussed growing up in violent households, witnessing aggression between parents, or engaging in aggression themselves. They also discussed experiences with substance and mental health issues. The vulnerabilities highlighted in the current research are echoed in previous research which identified key risk factors for IPA perpetration, including exposure to child maltreatment/abuse, prior use of aggression, youth delinquency/violence, substance, and mental health issues (Renner &

Whitney, 2012; Riggs & O'Leary, 1996; Stith et al., 2004). These findings reveal that exposure to aggression and conflict during childhood normalise such behaviours.

Consequently, the child learns maladaptive communication and conflict management skills which filter into how they deal with conflict in their adult relationships (Feldman & Ridley, 1995). Prevention efforts need to work with adults, and in particular children and youth who have been exposed to aggression, educating them around adaptive communication and conflict management skills to prevent and reduce aggressive behaviours.

The men initially spoke about having an awareness that their relationship was bi-directionally aggressive in nature, however despite this the aggression continued to persist over time, typically arising from everyday conflict and stressors in their relationship and family life. Indeed, aggressive incidents didn't occur out of the blue, but rather the men described a *build-up* phase in the couple dynamic whereby tension and stressors within the relationship rose and escalated through increasingly aggressive interactions. This is in keeping with research which suggests that IPA is "viewed as a mode of resolving or processing conflict when other modes of pursuing individual or group interests break down due to faulty conflict management processes, skills, or options" (Feldman & Ridley, 1995, p.552). This reinforces evidence presented in the aforementioned subtheme whereby not having the tools and capacity to manage conflict through positive means resulted in emerging relational issues and stressors culminating in a bi-directional verbal and/or physically aggressive incident.

Interestingly, some of the men began to understand this build-up in the couple dynamic over time, developing an ability to identify triggers for their partners anger and aggression. This prompted them to alter their own behaviour: including becoming hyperaware of their partner's movements or mood and walking on eggshells to prevent their partner from becoming aggressive. This is a finding supported by research with men and

women who are victimised in relationships, suggesting commonality in the experiences of men and women, and between bi-directional and uni-directional IPA (Bates, 2020a; Hogan, 2016; Morgan & Wells, 2016; O'Campo et al., 2002; Scotts-Bahle, 2020; Taylor, Magnussen & Admundson, 2001; Walker, 1980). This finding is particularly noteworthy as one might assume that the inherent dynamic embedded within bi-directionally aggressive relationships (both individuals are actively contributing to the aggression), is not consistent with the oppressed/oppressor nature of uni-directional IPA. However, what the current research reveals is that despite the men holding some level of power, it does not minimise and detract from the reciprocal power and capacity for harm their female partner holds over them.

It was also identified that men were *caught up in the challenge*, understanding conflict with their female partner as a challenge to be won. This dynamic often meant verbal arguments escalated into physical encounters, the severity of violence intensifying in an attempt to win the argument. This provides further support for the aforementioned concepts surrounding communication breakdown and difficulties in conflict management as a driver for bi-directional IPA. To win an argument is to be the individual who can most effectively convey their point of view. However, the absence of the tools to resolve conflict constructively meant the men and their partners resorted to utilising specific aggressive tactics in attempt to win. Due to the current lack of research on bi-directional IPA, there is no literature identifying bi-directionally aggressive encounters as challenge or contest to be won. However, research shows that bi-directional IPA has a higher likelihood of injury compared to uni-directional IPA (Capaldi & Owen, 2001; Straus & Gozjolko, 2014; Whitaker et al., 2007), which is in keeping with the idea that an aggressive couple dynamic continues until one member is overpowered. It may be conceivable that the need and want to overpower their partner and win the challenge may be one of the motivators and drivers behind the escalation

in severity of violence and consequently, the increased risk of injury for both members of the couple. Further research would be required to investigate this postulation more thoroughly.

While the current findings support claims by gendered researchers that bi-directional aggression is driven by a communication breakdown within intimate relationships, these researchers assert that bi-directional aggression does not result in severe levels of violence (Dobash & Dobash, 2004; Johnson, 2006; 2010). However, current findings provide evidence against this assertion, instead suggesting that communication breakdown and maladaptive conflict management processes promote an aggressive couple dynamic that intensifies the severity of violence and increases the likelihood of injury.

In support for aggression being seen as a challenge to be won, the *point of de-escalation* occurred when one member of the couple overpowered the other, or one withdrew themselves from the situation, with some discussing how their female partner would engage in various acts, including physical blocking or throwing objects at the car to stop them from leaving. The findings offer two interpretations. Firstly, the men may have chosen to remove themselves to reduce the chances that they would retaliate with physical aggression and breach societal chivalrous norms, which guide men to protect women (A 'Court, 2020; Felson, 2000; 2010). Secondly, withdrawing and removing oneself while the other partner continues to pursue parallels that of the demand-withdrawal pattern of intermarital conflict. The demand-withdraw pattern occurs when individual A (the 'demander') pressures individuals B (the 'withdrawer') through complaints and demands, leading individual B to become passive and withdraw from the situation. Research suggests that women typically take on the demander role and men the withdrawer role. The demand-withdraw pattern has been identified as one of the most destructive and dysfunctional couple interaction patterns, associated with marital dissatisfaction and conflict (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Heavey, Layne & Christensen, 1993; Schrodtt, Witt & Shimkowski, 2014). Going forward, this highly

established conflict pattern could be an integral component to understanding how negative interactional relationship dynamics between men and their female partners drive bi-directionally aggressive behaviour.

Impact of Gender Roles on Bi-directional Aggression

This theme, as discussed in the results section, identified how the men's understanding and construction of gender roles influenced the expression of aggression in their relationship. How *gendered norms shaped the men's aggression* was evident when the men spoke about their attitudes and beliefs around violence towards women, predominantly that it was not acceptable or tolerated, distinguishing it as a different type of violence from that perpetrated against other males. This aligns with chivalrous norms accepted by society that whilst violence against women by men is not tolerated, general violence towards other men is typical of normal masculine behaviour (Cook, 2009; Felson, 2010; Haywood & Mac an Ghaill, 2003; Migliaccio, 2002). Accepted social norms regarding appropriate masculine behaviour may contribute to behaviours men in bi-directionally aggressive relationships exhibit. A common experience for the men was to engage in other forms of aggression towards their partner, avoiding the direct act of physical aggression. This included taking their partner's physical blows and refusing to hit her back, engaging in verbal forms of aggression, or redirecting their aggression away from their partner and towards household objects. Utilising other mechanisms to aggress and thus sidestepping the use of physical aggression enables men to preserve chivalrous norms which discourage the use of physical aggression towards a female partner, allowing them to remain in line with their belief systems (Felson, 2000). When the men did physically aggress, they spoke about 'holding back' from their full physical potential, a sentiment which draws on another widely held discourse that males are physically stronger than females, have higher potential for injury and therefore hold back to avoid serious injury to their partner (Archer, 2000; Seelau & Seelau, 2005).

This theme also identified how the men *responded to an incongruence in gender roles*. The majority of the men spoke of upholding traditional views surrounding gender roles, including things such as being the main breadwinner for the family or doing the 'masculine' jobs around the home; and for their female partner the more 'feminine' jobs such as looking after the kids, or cooking and cleaning. When these traditional gender roles were not adhered to, the men often described feeling frustrated, unsupported, and as though their partner was not holding up her end of the relationship agreement. These feelings subsequently filtered into their expressed aggression. This reflects findings from the female victimisation literature which reveals that women who did not prescribe to stereotypical feminine gender roles were often victimised by their male partners (Feldman & Ridley, 1995; Salam, Alim & Noguchi, 2006). On the flip side, the male victimisation literature also indicates that females exhibit aggression towards men when they do not meet typical masculine gender roles and expectations (Connell, 1995; Hogan, 2016). In combination, this suggests that both males and females experience unsettled emotions and frustration when their partner fails to adhere to expected gender norms and expectations, ultimately resulting in an increased risk for aggression in a domestic setting. Evidence for this phenomenon occurring within bi-directionally aggressive relationships further supports the idea that this tendency is not limited to a uni-directional male-to-female aggressive dynamic, and in fact occurs across a variety of aggressive relationships. However, further research would need to explore this phenomenon with women in bi-directionally aggressive relationships to determine how they would respond to their male partner acting incongruently with gendered expectations.

Female resourcefulness was also identified in this theme whereby the men described how their partners would often engage in uni-directional physical aggression, using weapons such as kitchen crockery, knives, or household objects, frequently attacking the men when

they were asleep or occupied with a task. Literature within this field typically finds that aggression perpetrated by women is perceived as less impactful or trivial due to perceived physical inferiority, with 'physically superior' males more likely to inflict injury (Archer, 2000; Saunders, 2002; Seelau & Seelau, 2005; Sorenson & Taylor, 2005). The current findings suggest that females carry awareness of this physical imbalance, employing specific physical tactics as a mechanism to overcome strength and size differences, levelling the playing field so that they could successfully hurt and injure the men. The resourcefulness exemplified here parallels findings from other qualitative studies, which have found that male victims speak of their female partner compensating for her lack of physical strength by using weapons, physically targeting them in weak spots such as genitalia, or choosing to attack when the men were unprepared or most vulnerable (Bates, 2020b; Drijber, Reijnders & Ceelen, 2013; Flynn, 1990; Hogan, 2016; Straus & Gelles, 1986). This provides evidence against the common misconception held by the feminist literature which regard female use of physical aggression only in self-defence (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; 2004). Instead, the picture being developed is that women are highly cognisant of their actions and behaviours; deliberating, selecting, and engaging in behaviours which play to their strengths and they know will impact their male partner.

This picture is further elucidated through women's frequent use of another mechanism, legal and administrative aggression, a tactic identified among male victimisation samples where the female partner manipulates legal and administrative services to perpetrate aggression (Tilbrook, Allan & Dear, 2010). Additional research has conceptualised this as a form of aggression predominantly experienced by male victims, due to the misconceptions and incorrect societal norms held regarding true victims of IPA (Bates, 2020b; Hines, Douglas & Berger, 2015). In the current research, men frequently spoke of their partner exploiting gender and these institutionalised norms to disadvantage the men. Evidence of this

form of aggression in bi-directional IPA strengthens the notion that this is a form of abuse commonly experienced by men regardless of whether they have been victimised or assume a dual perpetrator/victim role.

Maintenance of the Abusive Relationship

This theme, discussed in the results section, identified how the aggressive relationship was maintained and prolonged. First, the *misinformed perspective of IPA* was identified, whereby men described their belief that IPA was only committed by men physically aggressing towards women. This narrow understanding of the nature of IPA internalised by the men served to maintain the bi-directional IPA, as the men did not see their partners aggression as problematic, nor did they comprehend that the psychological and emotional aggression they inflicted upon each other was IPA. This could be understood as a reflection of widespread rigid adherence to the gendered perspective of IPA and upholding of chivalrous norms (Burzawa & Burzawa, 2003; Donovan & Hester, 2010); where society dictates disapproval of aggression perpetrated by men, but aggression by women is tolerated and viewed as trivial due to the narrative of women as weak and unable to cause serious injury to men (A 'Court, 2020; Felson, 2000; 2010; Fiebert & Gonzalez, 1997). As evidenced above, adoption of these norms blinded men from recognising the true nature of their relationship, consequently prolonging and maintaining the abuse. Similar findings to those presented in the current research were demonstrated in Hogan (2016) albeit with a male uni-directional victimisation sample, with findings revealing that masculinity and adherence to societal masculine ideals were at the centre of the men's victimisation experience. Participants in this study described feelings of embarrassment and shame for not adhering to societal ideals around typical masculine roles in relationships. This presented as a barrier for the men to seek help, prolonging their experience of abuse as they feared judgment and disbelief from others regarding their victimisation status (Hogan, 2016). These findings

further substantiate the notion that adherence to chivalrous norms and the gendered narrative has constructed a narrow and niche definition of IPA resulting in significant numbers of individuals (predominantly men) becoming stuck in abusive relationships because they, along with society, do not qualify their victimisation as abuse. These sentiments are also echoed in IPA research in gay and bisexual relationships (Finneran & Stephenson, 2013; Hogan, 2016; Letellier, 1994). Identification of this pattern across different demographic groups emphasises the importance of shifting society's attitude and understanding of the nature of IPA.

Denial and normalisation of IPA was also commonly described by the men. They spoke of their female partner engaging in one-sided physical aggression, verbal threats, and provocation which they perceived as a mechanism to get them to engage and aggress against her. This seemingly served as an attempt to normalise the aggression and share blame in the relationship. This further supports the interpretation that female violence towards men is tolerated, whereby the female has to work to overcome the chivalrous norms held by the men to facilitate an aggressive relationship dynamic (A 'Court, 2020; Cavanagh, 2018; Felson, 2000). Furthermore, denying responsibility for her behaviour is also a mechanism by which the men's partner shifts blame, distorting his reality by minimising her involvement and exacerbating his so that the men take on and absorb the guilt and blame for the bi-directionally aggressive incidents. This approach is supported by norms which promote violence as an accepted male trait (A 'Court, 2020; Cavanagh, 2018; Felson, 2000). This normalisation of their partner's aggression serves to maintain the relationship and her aggressive behaviour. Thus, in bi-directionally aggressive relationships it is important to understand the interaction of the couple and how the relationship dynamic evolves over time. It is therefore important to work with both partners to reduce normalisation, and acceptance

of male *and* female aggression – in other words individuals need to understand that using aggression and tolerating their partners aggression towards them is not acceptable.

The men described how their *attachment to their children kept them stuck* and maintained the bi-directional abuse. The men often discussed the importance of the relationship with their children and the bond between them. For a lot of them, their upbringing was not a positive experience, so they spoke of trying to be a good father so that the experiences they lived through would not repeat in their children's lives. This finding supports research with both men who perpetrate IPA and are victimised in relationships, where the desire to retain a strong relationship with their children leads them to place the father-child bond at the forefront of any decision making regarding their relationship (Cook, 2009; Hines, Douglas & Berger, 2015; Litten Fox, Sayers and Bruce, 2001; Meyer, 2018; Rothman, Mandel & Silverman, 2007). In the current research, the men's attachment to their children led them to stay in the relationship despite the bi-directional aggression. The men feared that if they walked away from their relationship they would lose access to their children, with their partner taking control over access to children, restricting their ability to preserve the father-child relationship. This finding is strongly supported by the men's victimisation literature, whereby the most prominent reason provided for men for not leaving their relationship is the fear of parental alienation and their partner assuming power and control over access to their children (Bagshaw et al., 2011; Bates, 2020a; 2020b; Cook, 2009; Douglas & Hines, 2011; Hines, Douglas & Berger, 2015; Migliaccio, 2002). To complicate matters, the nature of bi-directionally aggressive relationships places men in the dual role of perpetrator and victim. Their perpetration may be used as leverage against them, including being the target of allegations of serious violence from their female partner. These allegations may affect family court or custody proceedings, resulting in men losing, or having restricted

access to their children. This adds to the fear they feel around leaving the relationship, further promoting maintenance of the abuse.

Finally, numerous *barriers to accessing services* faced by the men was another factor identified that served to maintain the bi-directional IPA. A common experience for the men was discussion of a lack of awareness that services for men existed, a finding which draws parallels with other research exploring men's experiences of IPA (Dutton & White, 2013; Tsui, 2014). In addition, the men discussed not reaching out to services for fear of how both help-seeking services, and their peers, would view them. These findings provide further support for common narratives provided by men around barriers to seeking help, specifically that help-seeking behaviours sit in direct conflict with what it means to be a man, and thus seeking help consequently leads to feelings of shame and embarrassment (Bates, 2020b). These findings indicate that help-seeking experiences of men are similar regardless of whether they have been victimised or are in a bi-directionally aggressive relationship. These similarities emphasise the importance of shifting prevailing societal norms around masculinity in order to change how men view themselves and help-seeking. Shifting this narrative may help men to leave abusive relationships earlier and prevent abusive relationships from being maintained over time.

Furthermore, the men faced gendered accountability from formal services and their female partners which acted as added barrier to accessing services. The men viewed interactions with formal services as predominantly negative in nature which exacerbated their reluctance to seek help during aggressive incidents, ergo maintaining the abusive dynamic. From formal services, notably the Police, the men were typically assumed to be the perpetrator. This gendered accountability stems from aforementioned societal norms which frame women as victims and men as aggressors. This institutionalised adherence to traditional gendered norms means that when men seek help for IPA victimisation, or in the

case of the current study's participants, attempt to highlight involvement of both themselves and their female partner in the aggression, are met with suspicion and scepticism due to the dilemma that their situation does not meet the socially accepted cognitive criteria of IPA (Dutton & White, 2013; Hine, 2019; Lien & Lorentz, 2019).

The men also found that their female partners' knowledge of the norms and beliefs upheld by formal services allowed them to portray themselves as the primary victim, implicating the men in the aggression and excusing herself. Marianne Lien & Jørgen Lorentz (2019) coined this display of gendered accountability 'gender switching', whereby accepted discourses around IPA (women are easily believed when they make claims of victimisation) make it easy for female aggressors to manipulate services, switching the scenario around and playing it off as though they are the victims of violence (Lien & Lorentz, 2019). This gendered accountability silences men, making it difficult for them to come forward with claims of abuse for fear of negative portrayal or not being believed. These findings highlight parallels between the experience of men in bi-directionally aggressive relationships with those experiencing uni-directional victimisation and emphasise the frequency with which this tactic is utilised by women. It is this type of aggression which keeps men from seeking help and results in the aggressive dynamic being maintained. The infancy of research centred on bi-directional IPA means that the complexities of this process remain unknown. Because bi-directionally aggressive relationships are characterised by both men and women engaging in perpetration *and* experiencing victimisation, there may be more nuanced factors at play which are absent among those experiencing uni-directional aggression.

Multi-layered Impact of Abuse

This theme identified in the aforementioned results described the wide-ranging negative outcomes of the bi-directional aggression that the men and those around them experienced. The *negative psychological impact on the men* was identified. While the men

experienced both psychological and physical forms of aggression, they often spoke of how the impact of psychological aggression was significantly more detrimental and fear-provoking than the physical aggression. This reflects research with both men and women which has identified that psychological and emotional forms of aggression are a stronger predictor of fear and tend to have a greater, more severe negative impact on the victim compared to direct physical acts (Follingstad et al., 1990; Marshall, 1999; Sackett & Saunders, 1999; Straight, Harper & Arias, 2003). Furthermore, current findings closely align with recent qualitative research exploring men's experience of IPA, which supported the notion that psychological aggression impacted men more and was more fear-provoking than threats and acts of physical aggression (Bates, 2020a; 2020b; Nybergh, Enander & Krantz, 2016).

The impacts also extended beyond the men. The men described their *awareness of the impact of aggression on their partner*. The majority of the men exhibited an understanding about how their aggressive behaviour impacted their female partner and how the severity of their actions had the potential to have serious effects on her, both physically and psychologically. In addition, they discussed how their *children were caught in the crossfire* of the bi-directional aggression. For most of the men, this consisted of the children being present in the household during an aggressive encounter, either directly witnessing or hearing it. For some of the men, their children were caught up in the aggression, stepping in to stop their parents from fighting, or being aggressed against by either the men or their female partner. This is a common occurrence for a significant proportion of aggressive households both internationally and in Aotearoa NZ, with research showing that children are often present in households when aggression between parents is occurring (Douglas & Hines, 2016a; McDonald & Grych, 2006; New Zealand Police, 2014).

A multitude of research has identified that children who live in aggressive households are at higher risk of experiencing abuse themselves, and often suffer long term impacts of that aggression including developing internalising (anxiety, depression) and externalising disorders (conduct or oppositional defiant disorder); (Artz et al., 2014; Edleson, 2001; Smith Slep & O'Leary, 2005; Vissing et al., 1991). Results from the current study support this finding, with the men discussing how the bi-directional aggression had a significant impact on their children, specifically their psychological and social development. The sentiments echoed by the men show similarities to those voiced in Tilbrook, Allan & Dear (2010), who spoke of how their child's capacity to communicate and express emotions were impacted by exposure to IPA, suggesting that regardless of the type of aggression occurring (uni-directional or bi-directional), children are at high risk of being negatively impacted through exposure (Tilbrook, Allan & Dear, 2010). Collectively, these findings add support for the notion that the impacts of bi-directional IPA, in a similar fashion to uni-directional IPA, extended beyond the individual themselves and onto others, leading to negative impacts which will affect them for the rest of their lives. Despite assertions by gendered researchers that bi-directional IPA does not warrant intervention due to its inherently trivial nature, the current findings provide evidence to suggest otherwise (Dobash & Dobash, 2004; Johnson, 2006; 2010). The wide-ranging negative impacts for the men, their partners, and children highlight the immediate need for services to allocate time and resources to this serious form of aggression and to ensure that attention is given to needs of both the parents and children when treating bi-directional IPA.

Power of Positive Help-seeking

The final theme discussed in the results section identified how positive help-seeking experiences facilitated the beginning of positive change in the men's lives. Development of new skills and tools which educated them on adaptive ways to deal with conflict promoted

positive change away from aggression, consequently leading to improvements in the men's everyday life. *Facilitators to seeking help* enabled the men to *make positive changes*. The men discussed a general reluctance around speaking out and disclosing their experience, with initial contact and engagement with services predominantly being for the benefit of someone else, or as a result of external intervention. This reluctance to seek help draws on the previously discussed subtheme of *barriers to accessing services* and reflect the common fear men who have experienced IPA feel with regards to reaching out and seeking help on their own. Research indicates that men often hold the belief that if they were to seek help services would discriminate against them, assume they were the perpetrator and not take the time to listen to or believe their experience (Douglas & Hines, 2011; Drijber, Reijnders & Ceelen, 2013; Hines, Brown & Dunning, 2007; Machado et al., 2017; Tsui, 2014). These findings highlight parallels between men's experiences of uni-directional and bi-directional aggression; however, this fear may be exacerbated for men in bi-directionally aggressive relationships as their reluctance to reach out is compounded by their own perpetration of aggression.

Findings indicated that it was only when the men encountered a help-seeking service which was objective, gender inclusive and understanding of their unique experience that they began to open up and share their story. The current findings reflect those presented in a systematic review exploring help-seeking by males experiencing IPA victimisation by Huntley et al., (2019), which showed that inclusive, confidential, and supportive professionals were integral to promoting a positive help-seeking experience (Huntley et al., 2019). Furthermore, McCarrick et al. (2016) showed that services which took a non-judgmental and inclusive approach made the men feel supported and facilitated engagement with further help-seeking (McCarrick, Davis-McCabe & Hirst-Winthrop, 2016). Research with females experiencing IPA victimisation reflect similar sentiments (Feder et al., 2006),

which taken together with the findings from the current research, reveal that regardless of whether the individual is male or female, or in a uni-directional or bi-directionally aggressive relationship, have similar expectations when it comes to positive help-seeking experiences. This highlights the importance of ensuring that professionals who engage with those experiencing IPA have knowledge around its complex nature – i.e. that both men and women have the capacity to engage in perpetration of, or experience victimisation; and that IPA in all forms should not be tolerated. Professionals should apply this knowledge to develop skills to ensure they take a non-judgmental and inclusive approach to treatment so that the individual in front of them, male or female, feels safe and supported. For the men in the current study, engagement with inclusive treatment services promoted development of new skills, specifically around how they approached conflict and aggression in their relationship. These findings serve to further emphasise the need to provide services and treatment programs which don't make assumptions about the behaviour of the individual based on gender, so that men in bi-directionally aggressive relationships are listened to, understood, and have the best opportunity to learn skills to help them move forward and make positive changes in their lives.

Implications for Policy and Practice

This study provides an in-depth exploration into the under-researched area of men's experiences of bi-directional aggression, highlighting the nuanced nature of IPA within Aotearoa NZ. It is therefore important that policy and practice addresses the diverse array of IPA experiences and implement wide-reaching change to ensure that all forms of IPA are adequately understood and treated equally. The following implications are focused predominantly on the need for education surrounding bi-directional IPA for men themselves, service providers within the community who engage with and treat them, and wider society.

Without cooperation and motivation to make extensive change around societal understanding of the nature of IPA we will not be able to improve outcomes for men and women.

The current study identified similarities between the experiences of men and their female partners around vulnerabilities which put them at risk for engaging in bi-directional IPA. Specifically, it was identified that development and learning of maladaptive communication and conflict management skills fostered a bi-directionally aggressive dynamic. This underlines target areas whereby risk for bi-directional IPA could be mitigated, and areas that treatment services could focus on to build resilience for individuals and the couple unit. These areas could include adopting approaches to educate couples (both men and women) around how to develop adaptive conflict management, communication, and stress regulation skills. Skill development in these areas may subsequently assist in reducing the likelihood of a couple resorting to aggression to resolve conflict in their relationship. Furthermore, this knowledge could be utilised to identify children or youth who are at risk for future engagement in aggressive behaviours and provide education around adaptive conflict management skills and resilience.

For most of the men in this study, their experiences were highly intertwined with being a father and their fears around losing their children. As discussed throughout this study, research finds that men who have experienced IPA victimisation are often subject to parental alienation, where their female partner attempts to ostracise them from their children by framing them as the perpetrator or tainting the child's perspective of them (Harman, Kruk & Hines, 2018; Sher, 2017; Tilbrook, Allan & Dear, 2010). Parental alienation can have significant long-term social, emotional, behavioural and physical consequences for targeted parents and children experiencing alienation; therefore, it is important that service providers who deal with men have knowledge to identify parental alienation and skills which enable them to effectively support those experiencing it (Harman, Leder-Elder & Biringen, 2016;

Lee-Maturana, Matthewson & Dwan, 2020; Sher, 2017). Additionally, promoting and emphasising the men's role as a father during treatment may be an integral tool for service providers to motivate and engage men. Research with men who have perpetrated IPA have shown that promoting the father-child relationship during treatment improved motivation and engagement with services, leading to better outcomes specifically around recognition of how aggression and violence negatively impacts children (Stanley, Graham-Kevan & Borthwick, 2012; Stover, 2013; Stover, Meadows & Kaufman, 2009). Services which adopt a treatment approach that prioritises the bond between the men and their children may not only enhance motivation but may in turn also reduce treatment drop-out rates for Stopping Violence Services in Aotearoa NZ.

A problematic finding identified within the current research was that despite being in a bi-directionally aggressive relationship, the reality was that the men were the only member of the couple receiving treatment. This highlights a major problem with regards to how the current system approaches and treats IPA in Aotearoa NZ. By placing men into Stopping Violence treatment programs and not the woman serves to reinforce gendered stereotypes and biases that society holds regarding IPA, inflating the equality divide, and disregarding the evidence which shows that IPA occurs to all individuals. Furthermore, this may reinforce chivalrous norms upheld that society is disapproving of violence by men, but violence by women is tolerated and not problematic (A 'Court, 2020; Cavanagh, 2018; Felson, 2000). Treatment for bi-directional IPA should strive to work with both members of the couple not the one society deems is the main perpetrator (i.e. the men). Treatment should focus on enabling both men and women to understand how their own unique experiences and features contribute to an aggressive environment; and how dyadic interactions promote the emergence of, and perpetuation of bi-directional aggression. Treatment should educate both men and women around how these features exacerbate the aggression and provide them with skills to

develop adaptive communication and conflict resolution skills so they are less likely to turn to aggression. Furthermore, both members of the couple should be educated around the true nature of IPA and that no matter the gender, no individual should perpetrate aggression towards their partner and in reverse, no individual should tolerate abuse. Treatment adopting this approach would help shift the narrative away from a gendered one and towards a more inclusive, balanced conceptualisation of IPA.

Furthering on this idea, treatment providers should endeavour to deliver education around widely held false beliefs of IPA. In the current research, the abuse was partially maintained through a lack of understanding of the gender inclusive nature of IPA, and that IPA did not solely consist of physical acts of aggression. These misinformed perspectives reinforced the abuse and kept the men from understanding the severity of their situation. Education on the true nature of IPA, i.e., that aggression is perpetrated at equal rates by women and men *and* that IPA is not limited to physical acts of aggression is integral to ensure that the cycle of aggression is broken, and men are able to identify an aggressive relationship, seek help, and/or leave the relationship.

Furthermore, the extent of this education should not be limited to circulation among Stopping Violence treatment services. It should be the duty of those in positions to enact change within political, social, and media domains to shift institutionalised discourses around IPA within their own organisation, and across the wider public. The gendered beliefs and perspectives currently held by large portions of society continue to promote the gendered narrative of IPA, making it incredibly difficult for those experiencing IPA in a form which does not fit the socially accepted criteria to reach out and seek help. Educating the wider public around the nature and seriousness of bi-directional IPA, whether this be through national ad campaigns, through school education, or through popular media forums, is integral to promoting a shift away from the oppressed/oppressor model towards one which

understands the capacity of both members of the couple to assume a dual perpetrator/victim role within an aggressive relationship. It will only be when changes of this scale are made, that all victims, particularly men living in bi-directionally aggressive relationships, will have the support and encouragement to come forward earlier.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

The experiences of men in aggressive relationships, specifically bi-directional ones, is a significantly under-researched area. Thus, taking a qualitative, exploratory approach allowed us to develop an in-depth understanding about how a small group of men experienced living in relationships. However, it is important to firstly note how the demographics of participants in the current study may have limited the power of our findings. The majority of participants in the current study were of Pakeha or Māori descent. Yet, what we know is that te ao Māori (Māori world view) differs from the Pakeha world view. Amalgamating the experiences of these two cultures may have impacted on the quality and richness of the experience of bi-directional aggression from those men who identified as Māori. Future research within an Aotearoa NZ context should take this into consideration and explore the distinct experiences of bi-directional aggression among both Māori and Pakeha men. Furthermore, this approach should be taken with other cultures (Polynesian, Asian, American, Middle Eastern) so we can develop a substantive understanding of how cultural experience shapes how men perceive and experience aggression in intimate relationships.

On a wider scale, due to the under-researched nature of bi-directional IPA we know relatively little about its true nature and prevalence particularly within Aotearoa NZ. This makes it difficult to draw conclusions about whether the experiences of these 13 men reflect those of all men living in bi-directionally aggressive relationships across the country. Future research should aim to address this through utilisation of a broader, quantitative research methodology. From the experiences of the men in the current study, we understand that

interactional dynamics occurring within the couple, including accepted gender norms, unhelpful communication strategies, and maladaptive conflict and stress management skills may contribute to the emergence of bi-directional aggression within relationships. The bi-directional aggression is pervasive and perpetuates over time, resulting in negative impacts for men, specifically around their psychological and emotional wellbeing and help-seeking behaviours. These impacts also extend to their female partner and children living in the household. This knowledge could be utilised to inform the development of future quantitative research that attempts to explore the prevalence and nature of bi-directional IPA on a wider, more comprehensive scale across Aotearoa NZ. In particular, research should consider placing focus on children and conducting research which explores their experience of living in households where they are exposed to IPA; and how exposure to IPA during childhood impacts on their physical, mental and social wellbeing as they develop into adulthood.

While a qualitative approach enabled us to identify common features for men living in bi-directionally aggressive relationships, all those who took part in these interviews were involved with NGO non-violence treatment services. The men therefore comprised a specific group of individuals who, through their experience and education, developed skills which promoted insight and awareness into their aggressive relationship. This insight may have encouraged the men to reflect upon and understand their experience differently to men living with bi-directional IPA who have not sought help or attended non-violence services. Future research should attempt to approach and conduct research with non-help-seeking populations to assist in the identification of similarities and distinctions between their experience and understanding of bi-directional IPA.

It is well known within the psychological field that individuals are often subject to a number of biases when asked to recall and report on information retrospectively. During the interviews, the men were required to recall information about experiences which had

occurred months or years in the past. These experiences would have been highly emotionally charged and the men's representation of these events may have changed or blurred in memory over time. The inherent nature and social sensitivity of IPA may have also impacted how interview questions were answered. For men especially, they may underreport their perpetration of aggression for fear of the repercussions around engaging in socially undesirable behaviour towards their intimate partner. It is important to acknowledge however, that the presence of these biases should by no means invalidate the experience of these men.

These biases limit our ability as researchers to accurately unravel and understand the nature and manifestation of bi-directional IPA in society. Two ways in which these barriers could be overcome to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the most common type of IPA without invalidating or diminishing the importance of subjective experience are as follows. Firstly, future research could adopt a longitudinal approach which tracks and collects information about the aggression at the time it occurs rather than relying on retrospective accounts. Taking a methodological approach of this kind would allow research to understand a multitude of additional features about bi-directional IPA including 1) how individuals get into these types of relationships, 2) what sort of individual characteristics and interpersonal dynamics foster bi-directional IPA, 3) how the IPA develops and evolves within the relationship over time, 4) the kinds of stressors that promote the aggression, and 5) what prompts individuals to stay in or leave bi-directionally aggressive relationships. Results from the current study highlight that cyclical conflict and challenge between the men and their female intimate partner played an integral role in the aggressive dynamic. By utilising a longitudinal approach, research could explore and develop a comprehensive understanding of the role that this conflict and challenge plays out over the course of the relationship. However, it is important to bring to attention that due to the nature of IPA it may be difficult

to conduct this type of longitudinal research whilst keeping all of those involved (the men, their partner, children and other family members) safe. Secondly, future qualitative research should attempt to explore the experiences of both individuals within the bi-directionally aggressive relationship. Analysing the experiences of both men and women alongside one another would enable uncovering of similarities and differences in how men and women experience bi-directional IPA, specifically around how exposure and gendered socialisation throughout the lifetime of men and women shapes how they understand and report their lived experience of bi-directional IPA.

Conclusion

This study adds to the expanding body of research exploring the impact of IPA on men but is one of the first to explore this impact within bi-directionally aggressive relationships. Contrary to popular opinion, this novel study highlights that bi-directional aggression is serious and carries many negative consequences for the men, women and children involved. The findings highlight the importance of conflict, poor communication, and relationship and environmental stressors in understanding the aetiology of bi-directional aggression. The over-arching issue here is the need to understand couple's relationship dynamic within the gendered social context in which they live. Rigid adherence to institutionalised discourses and perceptions about IPA, and an unrelenting emphasis on the oppressed/oppressor model will continue to incorrectly categorise men experiencing bi-directional aggression. In order to aid intervention, it is important to be aware that gendered norms impose an extra layer of complexity for men who live with bi-directional aggression. The current findings reveal how these gender norms impact on the type of aggression utilised by the men, and how they experience their female partner using these norms to aggress against them. In addition, the dual perpetrator/victim role assumed by men in bi-directionally aggressive relationships creates additional barriers to help-seeking, specifically with regards

to how these gendered social norms impact how formal and informal services perceive them, how the men perceive their own situation, and their fears around the wellbeing of their children. It is thus integral that research continues to explore and underpin the experiences of all individuals experiencing bi-directional IPA. Through further research of this kind we will be able to develop an in-depth understanding of this social problem, which in turn will enable development of appropriate and effective policy and practice which takes a gender inclusive approach to prevent and respond to all forms of IPA.

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Appendix A

Extract of Code Definition and Supporting Quotations

Code	Definition	Quotes
Not recognising psychological aggression as IPA	The men commonly discussed how they had understood that physical aggression was not okay but had not identified psychological aggression as abusive	<p><i>"Oh, she was just yelling and screaming. No violence, just yelling and screaming... I only just found out through here that yelling, and screaming is abuse... I never even knew that. That's, I was brought up like that. To me it's normal. You know..."</i> – Henry</p> <p><i>"A: Ah, yeah, no, no I didn't think it was violence, as in verbal abuse violence. Only when she physically picked something up.</i> <i>Q: Ah, so when she physically did things to you, you thought it was violence?</i> <i>A: Violence, yeah.</i> <i>Q: But the verbal stuff...?</i> <i>A: Stuff, no I just thought that was, um, every day, that she was frustrated, it was a way of expressing her frustration."</i> – Daniel</p>
Negative impact of psychological abuse	Most men identified that the mental impact of her aggression was significantly more substantial than the physical impact of her aggression.	<p><i>"It was more the mental abuse and the name-calling and that, hurt my--me the most. You can get over, you know, bruises; but you can't get over that, the--the words and..."</i> – Logan</p> <p><i>"Yeah, it did hurt me... not physically but... in my heart.".... "You know that she'd do something like that. 'cause I'd never hit... I'd never hit her, and I've never hit her."</i> – Alex</p>
Unfairness – imbalance of care	The men felt unfairly treated by their female partner. More specifically, that they felt were putting more into the relationship than she was.	<p><i>"I felt as if it was one-sided, like, being neglected. Like, how come you can't just do some simple things just to show me where you're at, you know?"</i> – Matt</p> <p><i>"Q: Right. I see. So, you felt that sh--she was letting you do more than your fair share of waiting on her basically?</i> <i>A: I just thought she wasn't committed to the marriage."</i> – Joseph</p>
Attachment to children keeping him in relationship	The men's experience of having strong attachment/bond with their children acted to keep them in the relationship	<p><i>"Yeah. And then when I realised that that's not what it was, she was pregnant, um, and once the baby had come, I couldn't leave the baby. I couldn't... I had to look after them... I make way. I just couldn't leave."</i> – Ethan</p> <p><i>"But then... for myself... I think the reason why I kept going back is because I was trying so hard to keep my family together... for my boy... because he deserves a mum and dad."</i> – Alex</p>

Appendix B

Additional Subtheme Quotations

Subtheme	Quotations
1.1. Unstable Relationship Foundations	<p><i>"Like, like another time I was with my mother downtown, about 20, 21, and these people called us "niggers" across the road. And I told them to come over, and just made them bleed... []...I just relate it back to... making me feel worthless, you know what I mean... Oh, I very didn't feel very nice either, you know what I mean, but it was just a spontaneous reaction... I just bashed them, you know what I mean." – Michael</i></p> <p><i>"She's said a number of times, "Oh, I only did that 'cause I'm just so angry at you." So there's a lot of anger, there's a lot of stuff out of anger... and there's a lot of pressure from her past life and schooling life, that is very important to put across a certain image of perfection." – Jacob</i></p> <p><i>"A: Oh, I'd feel, like, belittled a lot of the time. You know, oh, I can't go and do this with my mates, or I can't have my mates over at this time, 'cause it's going to do... And it's like, well, fucken, so what? Q: Was she quite jealous? A: Yeah, fuck yeah. 'cause I'm hanging out with my mates - that's time that's not getting spent with her." – Aiden</i></p> <p><i>"It's like that, it's like a honeymoon phase, believe that you can get on with that person, then get thrown into the home together, throw a kid in there as well, and a new job. And all the wheels start wobbling, and you can sort of put up with it, and then there's an outburst, and then, that was, that was it. And I think that really, that outburst drew on her... past hurts. " – Jacob</i></p> <p><i>"'cause I--I was just... I was seething. I was just sort of like our--our life is just being taken away from us. 'Cause it's--it's hard having a--a newborn in the house and it takes up a lot of time and--and--and we wouldn't go out very often as it was. So, I did feel, yeah, kind of like it was... everything was out of our control..." – Jackson</i></p>
1.2. The Build Up	<p><i>"...I'm not, I'm not ever gonna try and justify anything I did... against what she did. It was, um...It was definitely, um, both of us... And one of us could've, could've walked away and we didn't so..." – Sam</i></p> <p><i>"...and that was the way that she would deal with our child as well. I'd feel that she would put her into difficult situations, or dangerous situations in my mind. Um, and, a real example was, about filling the bath - not watching the child - filling the bath with boiling hot water, first of all, um, and when I challenged that, she said, "I'll do what I want, that's what I'm doing." And so there was this - she would never back down. And even if it was something like that, which is - just don't do it - she'll say, "I'm doing it." So that was where the aggression came from." – Jacob</i></p> <p><i>"Oh, because she would get aggressive, you know, and... []...Shout, give me the evil eye... and I know I'm in trouble when that comes out... ah, so, I recognised her violence escalating, and anger, and she'd get a bit puffed up..." – Matt</i></p>
1.3. Caught up in the Challenge	<p><i>"Yeah. I think it was a dec--, a--a--a show of force, more than anything. Like, 'I'm not prepared to back to anything, and, you know, worst comes to worst, I'm prepared to defend myself to the end,' you know?" – Aiden</i></p> <p><i>"A: ...every time I try and get away, it's like, "see, that's your fucken problem cunt; you like to fucken run away from things." "Nah, I just wanna get the fuck away from you". "See, why are you leaving? Why are you fucking leave me? We should be sorting this</i></p>

	<p>out..." ...But then, just keep going; and then once my [clicks fingers], and then, "Fuck you!"</p> <p>Q: So, would she want to talk about stuff?</p> <p>A: Um; yeah, but always make it my problem...</p> <p>Q: ... I think you said you were in the kitchen; she'd come in, she's slamming things around... and then she threw a cup at you... then what happened?</p> <p>A: So, I got up and just man-handled her... just got up and grabbed her by coll--, her collar... jersey... "get the fuck out of my house", led her to the door... and then she slipped over, then she punched me." – Logan</p> <p>"... a couple of times I slapped her, 'cause she just... she wouldn't... like, she'd get right in my face and she'd yell at me. And she'd use the 'you' word a lot, so I felt, I'd quite often feel blamed... very rarely felt heard, "well I feel like..." or "I'd like" ... you know, it would always be 'you' this, 'you' that. And then... I'd just, "Can you not do this. Can you just get out of my face, can you cut it out?" And a couple of times I got to the point where I lost control and I actually physically grabbed her and threw her, like, threw her out of my way." – Aiden</p>
1.4. Point of De-escalation	<p>"...when I'm standing there, going yeah, I've shut your mouth, and it... it took, literally it took, like, a minute for it to sink in, and occur to me that, 'Far out, I've just crossed that line. I just stepped over...' and I was able for a moment to see us from a third person perspective... and I realised that I'd... done to [partner's name] what I'd seen done to my mum... I was horrified... left the house... I said I was sorry. But by then the damage was done, it's too late, 'cause it was not the first time I'd thrown her to the floor... []...I was still arguing, but she was like... she just looked up at me... she was like 'oh, you're bleeding!' and just the look of shock in her face and horror, and mistrust... and then it occurred to me that 'Fuck, I might not come back from this one. Things probably won't come back'. So I left the house." – Aiden</p> <p>"Q: So what do you do if she's got a knife to you? Would you back down?</p> <p>A: Normally... yeah, I would, 'cause there's... she's not backing down and I'm not backing down, so it's come to a headway. And then we're... we just seem to back away..." – Daniel</p> <p>"It would escalate. Yeah, escalates, like, and then, you know, it'd end up either I'd walk out or... or... it's the only way to really, you know, oh, you know, settle the situation down, I suppose... Well, one of us would walk out... Or I'd go out to the shed or, you know, couple of hours." – Matt</p>
2.1. Gendered Norms Shape Men's Aggression	<p>"There had been little incidences. Um, and then... and--and I remember when I went to [country name] my two really, really good mates, I told them, you know, I... Well, that I--I... you know, I--I hit her back... 'Cause I felt really bad. It was like, you know, we... I am off that upbringing of like you just don't do that." – Jackson</p> <p>"...because I was really angry, I grabbed her phone, you know and took it out to the concrete and I broke it; I smashed it, you know?... Because I prefer... that, that's how I do it, 'cause I don't hit women, I'm gonna take it out on your possessions then, you know?" – Alex</p> <p>"You know, there was times when she'd get bruises from me holding her down...and shit like that and I wouldn't get bruises because I'm strong..." – Ethan</p>
2.2. Response to Incongruence in Gender Roles	<p>"Oh... I mean, again, I... I come from a very old-fashioned family and...and that's what I'd seen Dad and Mum do. You know, Mum was the housewife and... or mum and Dad went out and, and earned the money and, and...I just assumed that that was the right thing to do " – Sebastian</p> <p>"Yep. Yep. But, like I said many times before, I wanted more out of the relationship. I felt as if it was one-sided, like, being neglected. Like, how come you can't just do some simple things just to show me where you're at, you know?"</p>

	<p><i>Q: And what would she say to that?</i></p> <p><i>A: Ah, she wouldn't really say a lot. She'd just kind of nod and... kind of agree, and nothing would change." - Matt</i></p> <p><i>"And I come home one day and, you know, she hadn't done anything. She hadn't cooked tea. She hadn't tried to--to make my day any easier...and I was like, "Fuck man, everything I do for you," and just fucking snapped." – Ethan</i></p>
2.3. Female Resourcefulness	<p><i>"...there's been times when she's like, pulled out the machete and stuff and, you know...like a big fucken machete thingy... a knife but like a really big one... or she pulled out a softball bat or something." – Aiden</i></p> <p><i>"Oh, I got that all the time. I would wake up to being hit with metal things or books or just sexual fucked up shit... I'd wake up with a fucking knife to my throat or something while she's like trying to have sex with me or something and I'd move or... and it would cut my throat a little bit and it would freak me out" – Ethan</i></p> <p><i>"[Partners name] used to say things to me like um, oh, if she dies, I won't get access to the kids... So it was like a control thing... She tried to tell me that her family would get them and I... I didn't bait her about it but, you know what I mean, I got not only rights to children - I wouldn't have stopped them seeing their family, but I... I... "I contribute to making them [partners name]. You gotta learn that the kids have as much rights, and so do I. " – Henry</i></p>
3.1. Misinformed Perspective of IPA	<p><i>"Q: What about a woman hitting a man, do you think that's okay? Or did you think that was okay?</i></p> <p><i>A: Um, I didn't real- I didn't really think that was a problem. Other than the man hitting the woman, yeah.</i></p> <p><i>Q: Oh, so you didn't even think it was a thing?</i></p> <p><i>A: No, no, I didn't, I wouldn't have th-, not till now. Not till older." – Daniel</i></p> <p><i>"A: Ah, yeah, no, no I didn't think it was violence, as in verbal abuse violence. Only when she physically picked something up.</i></p> <p><i>Q: Ah, so when she physically did things to you, you thought it was violence?</i></p> <p><i>A: Violence, yeah.</i></p> <p><i>Q: But the verbal stuff...?</i></p> <p><i>A: Stuff, no I just thought that was, um, every day, that she was frustrated, it was a way of expressing her frustration." – Daniel</i></p>
3.2. Denial and Normalisation of IPA	<p><i>"You know; but she--she held grudges quite badly... []...And then, I just felt like; you know... And I'm like, "Oh, whatever. Woman, you've got to blame yourself too." ... I'm not saying, you know I'll take responsibility of my actions.... But she never took responsibility of hers.</i></p> <p><i>Q: Right. How did that make you feel?</i></p> <p><i>A: Fucken pissed off." – Logan</i></p> <p><i>"But... things will never be fine until she wakes up and realise that... realises and admits that she's in the wrong too. It's not just one of us." – Alex</i></p> <p><i>"And, and [partner's name] to this day, still denies that anything physical had ever happened... But... yeah... Um... Yeah, so um... again, just, it just went on and so, from that stage, it was where it started to get really, um, really unpleasant. " – Sam</i></p>
3.3. Attachment to Children Kept Men Stuck	<p><i>"But then... for myself... I think the reason why I kept going back is because I was trying so hard to keep my family together... For my boy... Because he deserves a mum and dad." – Alex</i></p> <p><i>"Um... I mean, the kids have... the kids are the only thing that's made us stay together s-for so long." – Daniel</i></p>

	<p><i>"Um, but that was the thing, it's... I--I--I don't wanna lose the connection with him and, you know, he just turned 16, his mum and dad weren't there and that's... it--it--it's--it's hard, that is hard." – Jackson</i></p> <p><i>"I was shit-scared of putting one finger wrong that...you know, I'm not gonna see the kids and... I'm gonna get, you know, arrested for breaching a Protection Order if I look at [partner's name], [partner's name] wrong or if I...I had to stay on the straight-and-narrow because, I mean, there was, there was obviously bail conditions which I didn't want to.... You know, so everything was, I was just by-the-book and..." – Sam</i></p>
3.4. Barriers to Accessing Services	<p><i>"A: And if I'd known about [service name]... but it's all hindsight, whatever, but...I--I don't know if I would have gone anyway. Um, maybe.</i> <i>Q: But you didn't know this place existed?</i> <i>A: I didn't know the place existed." – Jackson</i></p> <p><i>"When I was with friends, you know, we never really talk about our relationships... It's just like... []...Nobody, you know, ever talk about their... feelings or their partners or, really, what's going on in their lives. You know, if something major happened, then we'd talk, but yeah.... No one really, really close." – Matt</i></p> <p><i>"A: No, no. If someone would mention it, I'd say, "Oh yeah, I know how you feel." Um, other than that, no I wouldn't, I wouldn't release those details.</i> <i>Q: Why do you think you didn't release the details?</i> <i>A: Um... oh, probably wasn't proud of that. I mean... I didn't, I didn't hear anyone else's um, family lives like that, so I... it wasn't, yeah, something to skite about." – Daniel</i></p> <p><i>"I mean it's like we were both arguing. So, you know, your, her abuse would have been as much as my abuse... that went to court, but that got thrown out, right, after I had responded to it all, to say that's not the truth. But they threw that part out, that's the part I wanted to talk about, but then the judge says, well, we're not here for that. We're here for the kids... so I said, "so then, why are you treating me like I'm that person?" Because that's exactly how I've been treated these 10 months, this whole year. Is that I'm... a father who abuses his kids and rapes his, his ex-partner... that's how I've been portrayed, and that's how I've been treated" – Henry</i></p>
4.1. Negative Psychological Impact on Men	<p><i>"I was. It was like walking on eggshells. It literally was. It was like waiting for the landmine to go." – Joseph</i></p> <p><i>"Not phy-, not physically bad, you know, she'd try to lash out at me. Um, yeah, like just hit, slap, scratch, that type of thing. But in the majority it was far more mentally related, by far. And you know that's, you know, that's probably the biggest thing, of being extreme, um, over long-term, mental and financial abuse, without a doubt." – Jacob</i></p>
4.2. Awareness of Impact on Partner	<p><i>"So, I got arrested... []...that was big thinking time. What the f--, what the fuck have you done? What's happened to you? Why... what the hell, you know?... But it--it was... it--it was like this woman that I loved that we had this major we hate each other kind of fight and it's like what--what did happen to us...[]...I never would have dreamt ever of doing that kind of thing. And it's--it's... " – Jackson</i></p> <p><i>"Q: How did you feel about it afterwards?</i> <i>A: I - the most shittiest person, I'm turning into my father... Those unbearable feelings from the past... Thinking, "Fuck, I promised myself I never wanted to do this to my missus or my kids." – Logan</i></p> <p><i>"Yeah. Yeah, yeah. She definitely... behaved differently. She would... quite often, she, she'd slap me... as a, as a way of just going, "Get out of here" sort of thing, you know? Um... so, she was... yeah, no, she's definitely, I know, been scared." - Sebastian</i></p>

4.3. Children Caught in Crossfire	<p><i>"A: I think they thought, you know, 'Oh, here we go, mum and dad's fighting again.' Got a little... Got a little bit more, a little used to it, I suppose.</i></p> <p><i>Q: Didn't seem to bother them - there weren't, like, changes in their behaviour or...?</i></p> <p><i>A: Not that we noticed. They probably did though, you know, a little bit." – Matt</i></p> <p><i>"... that's how violence gets embedded into them accidentally. Not intentionally, but you gotta learn... you don't argue around children. They don't need to... that's them growing up way too early." – Michael</i></p>
5.1. Facilitators to Seeking Help	<p><i>"Q: So, it was the... it was the tone of voice with [son's name] that...made you get in touch with these guys?</i></p> <p><i>A: Yeah. So, what I did was basically that night, um, I thought about it a lot and I said I need to get over myself and I-I just warned myself that I wanted to be the best father for [son's name] ... " – Joseph</i></p> <p><i>"Q: other than the police, did you tell any friends or family members about what was going on at all?</i></p> <p><i>A: Eventually after my mum started figuring it out... No. I didn't really tell them, they kind of figured it out and it would start getting questioned and...like little interventions here and there and..." – Ethan</i></p> <p><i>"But... from, um, from the second, the second time when I met with [service facilitator] , um... ye-, yeah, I, I, I felt like she actually... []... I felt like, it was kinda the first time I felt like someone was listening to my... to my side of things, as well... That it wasn't... I'm not just the big, angry man that's... fuckin', you know, throwing his weight around and...abusing... people and stuff, so... yeah." – Sam</i></p>
5.2. Making Positive Changes	<p><i>"But for me, because I want to be here, wow! I mean, I just...Every week I come out of it... something in that, in, in the night, has touched me... And it's made me sit there and go, "Whoa" or "Wow, aren't I doing well"... You know? An-, and that, that is something now that I've learnt in myself... is, is... we all should love each oth-, ourselves. We all should do that and it, it's the most fantastic thing to do. Anger is something that we should all love and embrace... It's how we deal with it and how we act on that anger that is the bad thing. And that is what we're learning in here, is how to deal with that." – Sebastian</i></p> <p><i>"Um, yeah, cha- changing how I think, um... yeah. I still hurt inside. But I'll go... I try and put that into perspective: 'Is that gonna kill me? No. Hold on, it's only the dishes. It's three days' worth of dishes! Ooh, oh, it's not gonna kill me.' Yep. But, if I... yeah, if I can d-, oh, I'll go and start them. 'Cause, you know, it's still gonna play at my mind, so I think, 'Oh, I'll go start 'em" – Daniel</i></p> <p><i>"A: But, things are quite different now, you know. Yep, changed quite a bit, relationship's good... it's like just develop tactics to, you know, ah, stop triggers recognising triggers and we put, ah, things into place. It's just a lot of, um, self-recognition that we did here. To stop and actually take a break and just to work out why you do the things you do. 'Cause you don't really do that in life, you know." – Matt</i></p> <p><i>"Yeah, we did a f-, a f-, a family parenting course as well, you know, together. You know, but practi-, she didn't practise what we had learnt. That used to frustrate me." – Henry</i></p>