

Exploring Men with Children's Experiences of the Process of Intimate Partner Abuse from a
Female Partner

By

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Abstract

This research explored how men with children experienced the process of unilateral aggression from their female intimate partners. The current study was part of a broader research project investigating men and women's experiences of perpetration and/or victimisation of intimate partner abuse (IPA) in Aotearoa New Zealand. Semi-structured interviews with 13 fathers who reported experiencing unilateral IPA were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis. Four overarching themes about men's experiences of the process of IPA were subsequently identified. The first theme described the emotional pull experienced in the early stages of the relationship, consisting of two subthemes: 1) the honeymoon period, and 2) invested in the relationship. The second theme identified how men became stuck in their abusive relationships, containing five subthemes about: 1) the changing nature and severity of abuse 2) rationalising the aggression, 3) problem-solving, 4) the cycle of appeasement, and 5) gendered responses to aggression. The third theme described the negative impacts of the abuse, with two subthemes detailing: 1) the negative impacts on men, and 2) spillover effects on children. The fourth theme detailed men's experiences of breaking free and moving on from abuse, which consisted of four subthemes: 1) drawing a line, 2) post-separation abuse, 3) loves continuing pull, and 4) putting the pieces together. These findings add to a growing body of qualitative literature about men's experiences of IPA, highlighting the emergence and escalation of aggression, the maintenance and discontinuation of abusive relationships, and the difficulties men encounter post-separation. The importance of education about the nature of IPA and the development of policies and practices that help men overcome barriers to leaving abusive relationships are discussed. Future research is needed to examine the process of IPA for men experiencing bidirectional aggression and the recovery process for men post-separation.

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Introduction

Intimate partner aggression (IPA) is an international public health problem with far-reaching consequences for victims, their families, and wider society (Edleson, 2001; Kahui & Snively, 2014; Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi, & Lozano, 2002; Lagdon, Armour, & Stringer, 2014). In the United States (US), one in four women and one in ten men will experience IPA in their lifetime, and approximately 20 people per minute are physically abused by an intimate partner (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 2020). IPA is a particularly prevalent issue in Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ), which displays some of the highest rates of IPA in the world (Gammon, 2016). According to the New Zealand Ministry of Justice (2019), approximately one in six adults reported experiencing IPA during their lifetimes. In 2020, the number of family violence charges finalised in NZ courts had increased by 13% from the previous year (Ministry of Justice, 2021). Investigating this pervasive phenomenon, particularly in NZ contexts, is therefore necessary for informing practical and theoretical approaches that help to mitigate harms incurred by IPA.

IPA can manifest as a range of different behaviours, including physical and non-physical forms of aggression (e.g. Follingstad, 2007). There are ongoing discussions about the labels and definitions assigned to varying types of aggressive acts (Lipsky & Caetano, 2009; Outlaw, 2009). However, studies often include measurements of physical and sexual aggression (e.g. Bates & Liu, 2020a; Coker, Smith, McKeown & King, 2000; Krug et al. 2002). Another common, yet less frequently measured, form of IPA is psychological aggression (Laskey et al. 2019). Regardless of whether IPA involves physical, sexual and/or psychological aggression, there are long-term and short-term consequences for a victim's mental, physical, social and financial well-being (Krug et al. 2002; Lagdon, Armour, & Stringer, 2014). These consequences also extend beyond the individual. There is mounting evidence that children are directly and indirectly affected by their parents' experiences of

IPA, whether due to impaired parenting abilities or the negative impacts associated with children witnessing parental conflict (Edleson, 2001; Kaspiw et al. 2017; Sternberg et al. 2006; Wood & Sommers, 2011). Beyond the scope of the family, the economy also pays a price for IPA. . In 2014, the economic cost of child abuse and IPA in NZ was estimated to be between \$4.1 and \$7 billion per year – a number that was expected to increase over time (Kahui & Snively, 2014). Thus, IPA can manifest as a wide range of behaviours that have negative consequences at the individual, familial, and societal level.

Though IPA has been historically understood as an issue of men's violence against women (e.g. Dobash & Dobash, 2004), there is mounting evidence that IPA “knows no boundaries [...] it is a scourge present in every subgroup of society” (Van Niel, 2021, p. 2). An individual can experience IPA regardless of their demographic status, sexual orientation, or gender (Dixon & Graham-Kevan, 2011; Van Niel, 2021). Furthermore, IPA can be perpetrated by a current or former spouse, and occurs within couples that are/were dating, cohabiting, or married (Lipsky & Caetano, 2009; Van Niel, 2021; Moffitt, Caspi, Rutter & Silva, 2001). The broad nature of IPA is also recognised in NZ law, where the Family Violence Act (2018) acknowledges IPA as physical, sexual, or psychological aggression, involving a pattern of behaviours that may be coercive or controlling and/or cause (or potentially cause) a person cumulative harm. In light of this, the current study adopted a broad and inclusive definition of IPA that encompasses “any form of aggression and/or controlling behaviour used against a current or past intimate partner of any gender, ethnicity, culture, sexual orientation, or relationship status (married, co-habiting, dating), and across age” (Dixon & Graham-Kevan, 2020, p. 299).

IPA as a gendered issue

IPA has been historically understood as a gendered issue; a perspective that has largely dominated professional and public understandings of IPA (Dutton, 2006). Patriarchal ideology and gender inequality were viewed as direct causes of IPA, whereby men were the primary perpetrators of violence and women the primary victims (Fine, 1985). Male-to-female violence was one method of maintaining patriarchal beliefs about male dominance and female subordination within an intimate relationship (Ali & Naylor, 2013; Bell & Naugle, 2008; Dixon & Graham-Kevan, 2011; Fine, 1985). Alternatively, female-to-male violence was thought to be rare and primarily occurred in contexts of self-defence or retaliation against violent men (Ali & Naylor, 2013; Dixon & Graham-Kevan, 2011). This feminist perspective prompted significant progress in the establishment of services and legal changes to assist female survivors of IPA (Ali & Naylor, 2013). However, supporting evidence was largely grounded in data gathered from women's shelters and help-seeking agencies (Bell & Naugle, 2008; Dixon & Graham-Kevan, 2011). These institutions unsurprisingly found high rates of male-to-female violence, as men's voices were under-represented in these spaces (Ali & Naylor, 2013; Straus & Gelles, 1999). Straus and Gelles (1999) referred to this as a "clinical fallacy," whereby findings in these samples were assumed to be representative of the wider population. Further studies have since indicated that female-to-male violence exists beyond contexts of self-defence and that patriarchal beliefs are not a primary cause of IPA (Ali & Naylor, 2013; Bell & Naugle, 2008; Dixon & Graham-Kevan, 2011). However, the assertion that men are the primary perpetrators of violence remains to be a controversial topic in the IPA literature.

Studies investigating the "true" prevalence of IPA victimisation for men and women can be contradictory. When gathering data from police reports and agency samples, studies find higher rates of male-to-female violence than female-to-male violence (Dixon & Graham-Kevan, 2011). Conversely, studies that gather data from the general population tend to find

women are equally or more likely to perpetrate IPA in comparison to men (e.g. Straus, 2009). Meta-analytic reviews of studies on physical and verbal aggression have found that, in heterosexual relationships, women were more likely than men to perpetrate these forms of aggression towards their opposite-sex partner (Archer, 2000; Stockdale et al. 2013). Furthermore, a national survey in the US found men and women were similarly likely to experience physical and psychological aggression in intimate relationships (Smith et al. 2018). Based on data gathered from approximately 8,000 New Zealanders in the New Zealand Crime and Victims Survey (NZCVS), women are 2.5 times more likely than men to experience IPA in their lifetimes (Ministry of Justice, 2019). However, this data was gathered using face-to-face interviews, and men may have been reluctant to report IPA victimisation due to shame, embarrassment and/or machismo (Ministry of Social Development, 2007). Furthermore, the methodology in nationally representative surveys can influence findings of gender symmetry (or asymmetry) in physical IPA victimisation (Esquivel-Santovena & Dixon, 2012). When a survey is designed to primarily focus on IPA, the study is more methodologically sound and produces more accurate representations of IPA rates. Studies that are more methodologically sound also tend to find comparable rates of physical IPA victimisation for men and women (Esquivel-Santovena & Dixon, 2012). The NZCVS, however, explored the prevalence of IPA as part of a broader question investigating crime and victimisation in NZ (Ministry of Justice, 2019). Thus, whether there is gender symmetry in IPA victimisation for NZ populations is unclear. However, gender inclusive, rigorous, and nationally representative surveys in other countries point towards comparable rates of IPA victimisation and perpetration between men and women.

To explain findings of gender symmetry, Johnson (1995) proposed that different sampling methods were measuring distinctly different types of IPA. Using Pittsburgh data obtained from interviews with 272 women recruited via courts, women's shelters, and the

general population, Johnson (2006) proposed and found evidence for four categories of IPA that were gendered and differed in severity level. Common Couple Violence (later termed Situational Couple Violence (SCV)) described a form of infrequent relationship violence borne out of conflict, rather than a violent partner's desire for control. SCV rarely had serious consequences for an individual's well-being, and accounted for husbands' (55%) and wives' (45%) aggression at approximately equal rates. Violent Resistance (VR) described a partner being violent in response to the other partner's violence and coercive control. Wives (85%) were commonly categorised by this form of IPA than husbands (15%). Mutual Violent Resistance (MVR) described couples that were violent and controlling to each other (50% for husbands and wives). Finally, Intimate Terrorism (IT) described one partner's violent and controlling behaviour towards the other. Johnson (2006) found that 89% of husbands and 11% of wives fell into this category.

Based on his findings, Johnson (2006; 2008) argued that population-based surveys found gender symmetry in IPA victimisation because these studies were finding instances of SCV; a form of IPA that differed in its severity, frequency and nature to IT. Conversely, women recruited from clinical studies were likely to be experiencing significant harm and coercive control from their male partners, and thus these clinical samples were a more accurate reflection of IT rates. Therefore, Johnson (2008) argued that the methodology employed in IPA research influences which form of IPA is measured. Furthermore, women's experiences of IPA required greater focus from agencies and policies because they were more likely to be experiencing a more serious and harmful type of IPA (Johnson, 2008).

Johnson's (2006; 2008) assertion that men are unlikely to be experiencing IT has since been challenged by multiple studies. Nybergh and colleagues (2015) interviewed 20 men who reported experiencing IPA from an opposite-sex or same-sex partner. None of the men who had been abused by a female intimate partner met Johnson's (2008) criteria for IT,

as the men did not report feeling controlled by the physical or sexual violence they experienced. However, the men did feel controlled by and fearful of their female partner's psychological aggression (Nybergh et al. 2015). Furthermore, none of the men's experiences fit neatly into *any* of Johnson's (2008) categories (Nybergh et al. 2015). Thus, Johnson's typology could not accurately account for the men's experiences of IPA, and may not be an appropriate tool to use when exploring female-to-male IPA (Nybergh et al. 2015).

Nonetheless, further studies have found evidence of men experiencing IT in their opposite-sex relationships. A study examining current heterosexual relationships in Canada found that men were significantly more likely than women to report experiencing physical aggression, sexual aggression, and/or at least one form of controlling behaviours from their opposite-sex partners (Lysova et al. 2019). Furthermore, comparable rates of IT were found for men (35%) and women (34%). Yet, more men than women experienced severe violence in relationships that were characterised as IT (Lysova et al. 2019). Additionally, Hines and Douglas (2019) tested Johnson's (2008) typology using a population-based and help-seeking sample of male IPA victims and found the reverse of Johnson's (2008) findings: women were more likely to be perpetrators of IT than men. Their findings suggested that sampling bias possibly accounted for Johnson's (2008) original findings, as data gathered from women's agencies excluded men who were victims (Hines & Douglas, 2019). Thus, there is evidence that men not only experience aggression from opposite-sex partners, but these types of aggression can also be highly violent and controlling.

Regardless of whether there is gender symmetry in IPA victimisation, there is overwhelming evidence that men can and do experience IPA from their female partners (Archer, 2000; Stockdale et al. 2013; Smith et al. 2018). This abuse can potentially involve highly controlling and violent behaviours, as seen in relationships that are categorised by IT (Lysova et al. 2019; Hines & Douglas, 2019). Taking a gender inclusive approach to IPA

research is therefore essential for informing evidence-based policies and practices that support male victims of IPA.

The Nature of IPA for Men

To date, understandings about the nature, patterns, and long-term impacts in female-to-male IPA are limited (Sita & Dear, 2019). Nonetheless, there is consistent evidence that men experience a wide range of physically, sexually, and psychologically aggressive behaviours from their female partners (e.g. Bates, 2019; Bates & Liu, 2020b; Lysova et al. 2019; Machado et al. 2017; Migliaccio, 2002; Morgan & Wells, 2016; Tilbrook et al. 2010). The abuse can also differ in terms of frequency and severity for each individual (Lien & Lorentzen, 2019; Nybergh et al. 2015). Despite assumptions that female-to-male IPA is less frequent, less problematic, and less harmful than male-to-female IPA (Espinoza & Warner, 2016), men have reported experiencing severe forms of physical, sexual and psychological aggression (e.g. Bates & Weare, 2020; Hines & Douglas, 2016; Lysova & Dim, 2020). Men who experience severe sexual aggression from a female intimate partner are also more likely to be experiencing severe physical aggression and other types of IPA (Hines & Douglas, 2016). Combining data from two UK-based online surveys, Bates and Weare (2020) thematically analysed 41 responses from men who had experienced sexual violence in the context of IPA. Others forms of violence (such as physical and psychological) could be used in conjunction with sexual violence, and/or could occur independently of the sexual aggression yet contribute to a wider pattern of abuse within the relationship (Bates & Weare, 2020). Thus, men's experiences of IPA can vary in terms of frequency, severity and types of aggression. Different forms of aggression can be used concurrently or independently of one another, but ultimately contribute to a broader pattern of abuse and coercive control that is reminiscent of characteristics of IT (Johnson, 2008).

Another characteristic of IT involves an individual's experience of fear (Johnson, 2008). Fear is theorised to be an important factor in establishing control over a victim of IPA; however, studies that report on men's experiences of fear have produced mixed results. Prior research has found that men do not openly express fear of their female partner's physical or sexual violence (e.g. Durfee, 2011; Nybergh et al. 2015). Yet, further qualitative studies have indicated that men do express fears about various aspects of the abuse, including their partner's physical violence, concerns about their physical safety, and uncertainty about entering future relationships. The way these fears were communicated, however, were consistent with masculine traits of strength, power, and control (Brooks et al. 2020). Additionally, Sita and Dear (2019) explored four case studies of Australian men's experiences of IPA, who were suspected of experiencing IT from a female intimate partner. Participants reported experiencing multiple forms of physical, psychological and sexual aggression which undermined men's self-worth and allowed control to be established over them (Sita & Dear, 2019). Men reported being afraid of various aspects of the relationship, such as being concerned for their own well-being, the safety of their partner, the safety of their children, and of further abuse. In contrast to research on women's experiences of IPA, however, men did not report being fearful for their life (Sita & Dear, 2019). Men also struggled to recognise their experiences as IPA, and reported accompanying feelings of shame about being a victim due to implications about what this meant for their masculinity (Sita & Dear, 2019). Thus, men's experiences of IPA showed some discrepancy from women's, indicating that men's experiences need to be explored separately.

To date, few studies have explored female-to-male IPA post-separation (e.g. Bates, 2019). A study conducted with Australian parents found that mothers (29%) and fathers (21%) experienced post-separation abuse (Kaspiew et al. 2017). Once a relationship had been terminated, experiences of emotional aggression were more common than physical

aggression. Longitudinal data also indicated that experiences of physical violence tended to diminish the longer that a couple was separated, but emotional aggression remained prevalent even 5 years post-separation (Kaspiew et al. 2017). Bates (2019) explored men's experiences of post-separation aggression and coercive control by thematically analysing interviews with 13 men. Abuse persisted and escalated for some time after the men's relationships had ended. Men with children were at particular risk for ongoing violence, as organising contact arrangements maintained contact with and opportunities for abuse from their ex-partners. Physical aggression largely stopped due to a lack of physical proximity to their ex-partners. However, coercive control persisted post-separation through harassment via children, social media and email, and financial control. False allegations of abuse could also be used to control the men, sometimes resulting in police involvement or being suspended from their employment. Children were a commonly utilised medium through which ex-partners would continue to exert control over the men, either by withholding contact, manipulating the parental relationship, or directly using the child to perpetuate abuse. Subsequently, men reported mental health issues, ongoing fear of their ex-partner's aggression and difficulties entering new relationships (Bates, 2019). Thus, the end of an abusive relationship does not necessarily mean cessation of IPA, and psychological aggression may persist even when physical violence diminishes. Children, in particular, feature heavily in men's experiences of post-separation abuse, whereby they can be used to maintain contact with and control over men.

Consequences of IPA for Men

Experiencing any form of IPA can produce cumulative harm across different aspects of men's lives (Krug et al. 2002; Lagdon, Armour, & Stringer, 2014). Men that endure chronic and severe levels of aggression are more likely to experience serious impacts on their physical and emotional health (Lysova & Dim, 2020). Feelings of social isolation are not

uncommon (Bates & Liu, 2020a; Machado et al. 2017; Migliaccio, 2002; Morgan & Wells, 2016), and substance misuse is often reported as a means of coping (Machado et al. 2017; Migliaccio, 2002; Perryman & Appleton, 2016). Men can also sustain long-term physical injuries and health complications (Bates & Liu, 2020a), and develop symptoms of depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and suicidal ideation that can persist for years after the abusive relationship has ended (Bates & Liu, 2020a; Machado et al. 2017; Migliaccio, 2002; Perryman & Appleton, 2016). Psychological aggression reportedly produces the most distressing consequences for men (Machado et al. 2017; Perryman & Appleton, 2016), which has been supported by findings from quantitative studies. A longitudinal study with 103 newlyweds assessed associations between psychological and physical aggression and the development of depression and anxiety symptoms. Experiencing psychological aggression was strongly associated with depression and anxiety symptoms for men and women, independent of any physical aggression they were experiencing. Physical aggression, on the other hand, was not as strongly associated with these symptoms once psychological aggression was controlled for. Thus, in regards to the development of depression and anxiety, psychological aggression was potentially more detrimental than physical aggression (Lawrence, Yoon, Langer, & Ro, 2009). However, the couples in this study reported relatively stable and largely bidirectional experiences of psychological aggression (Lawrence et al. 2009). Therefore, findings may not be generalizable to men's experiences of unidirectional IPA.

Beyond an individual's physical and mental well-being, IPA victimisation can also negatively impact current and future relationships. Panuzio and DiLillo (2010) evaluated associations between physical, psychological and sexual aggression, and couples' marital satisfaction over three years of marriage. For both husbands and wives, higher levels of all types of IPA victimisation were significantly associated with lower marital satisfaction, even

when controlling for initial satisfaction. Psychological aggression was a particularly strong predictor of marital satisfaction (Panuzio & DiLillo, 2010), adding to prior research that this form of aggression can be particularly damaging in intimate relationships (e.g. Lawrence et al. 2009). Similarly, Hellemans and colleagues (2015) explored how any lifetime experience of IPA impacted on a person's mental, relational and sexual well-being. Higher levels of IPA victimisation had adverse effects on all three life domains for both genders. Psychological aggression was associated with poorer mental health regardless of a victim's gender, whereas physical aggression was more harmful for women than men. Lower levels of relationship satisfaction and insecure attachment styles were also correlated with psychological or physical IPA victimisation (Hellemans et al. 2015). However, as the study was not longitudinal, it cannot be determined whether insecure attachment styles predisposed victims to experiencing IPA or whether experiencing IPA facilitated the development of an insecure attachment style. Finally, for men, psychological IPA was associated with an impaired ability to communicate sexual needs and wishes to their partner. Increased levels of physical and psychological aggression were also related to decreased levels of sexual satisfaction and increased probability of sexual dysfunction (Hellemans et al. 2015). Thus, IPA victimisation can be detrimental to a person's happiness in their current relationships, and can also negatively impact future relationships.

A person's professional life can also be negatively impacted by IPA. A qualitative survey of 823 male and 1,550 female employees from various organisations were asked about any aggression they had experienced over the past 12 months from intimate partners, and also their experiences of IPA over their lifetime (Reeves & O'Leary-Kelly, 2007). Individuals who had experienced IPA during their lifetime were more likely to be absent from work than non-victims, highlighting the long-term effects that can result from IPA. On the other hand, current victims were more distracted at work than non-victims. The findings indicated that

current victims attended work but had difficulty focussing, whereas lifetime victims had issues with attendance but were engaged once they were there (Reeves & O'Leary-Kelly, 2007). Reeves and O'Leary-Kelly (2007) proposed that current victims might be using work as an escape route from home, or employment gave current victims a feeling of control over their lives that they were otherwise lacking in their relationships. Given the multitude of short-term and long-term consequences associated with past or current IPA victimisation, developing evidence-based interventions and preventions for female-to-male IPA is essential for mitigating harm. Qualitative studies are particularly useful for gaining detailed insight into men's personal experiences and perceptions of how abuse plays out with their female intimate partners.

The Escalation of IPA Experienced by Men

Quantitative studies based on community samples have broadly identified patterns of persistence and desistance in IPA. Longitudinal studies with married couples have found that the use of physical aggression in intimate relationships substantially decreases over time, but perpetration of psychological aggression remains consistent (Fritz & O'Leary, 2004; Vickerman & Margolin, 2008). However, the infrequency and low severity of aggression reported in these community samples suggested that researchers were measuring instances of SCV (Fritz & O'Leary, 2004). Qualitative studies that include men's experiences of severe female-to-male IPA have found that aggression does not decrease over time; rather, the severity and frequency of IPA reportedly escalates (Allen-Collinson, 2009; Dixon et al. 2020; Migliaccio, 2002; Morgan & Wells, 2016). In Migliaccio's (2002) narrative analysis of abused men, men described the relationship as initially experiencing a "honeymoon period" where their female partner exhibited no notable signs of aggression. Once a serious commitment had occurred (such as pregnancy or marriage), men reported that their opposite-sex partner became increasingly violent (Migliaccio, 2002). Thus, contrary to quantitative

findings from community samples (e.g. Fritz & O'Leary, 2004; Vicerkman & Margolin, 2008), different forms of aggression (including physical) escalated after marriage. Other qualitative studies have similarly found that female-to-male IPA changed, escalated, and became more pervasive over time (Allen-Collinson, 2009; Dixon et al. 2020; Morgan & Wells, 2016). Some men describe verbal aggression leading into physical aggression during arguments, whereas other men report that the escalation from verbal into physical aggression gradually occurred over the course of the relationship (Bates & Liu, 2020b). Alternatively, some men report that physical aggression preceded psychological aggression in their relationship (Dixon et al. 2020). Dixon and colleagues (2020) proposed that the escalation of IPA was part of a normalisation process that increased men's acceptance of later abuse, with women's aggression evolving in line with what men would tolerate. Thus, IPA does not always desist over time. Rather, for some men, female-to-male IPA adapts and changes in terms of the severity, frequency, and types of aggression used.

Despite the escalating aggression, men are often reluctant to defend themselves or physically retaliate against their female partners. After thematically analysing a series of online focus groups with men from Australia, Canada, the UK and the US, Dixon and colleagues (2020) found that the nature of the abuse was largely one-sided, with men reporting that their female partners controlled them through a variety of means including physical violence, surveillance, and sex. Though aggression continued to escalate over the course of the relationship, the men rarely physically defended themselves against their female partner's aggression (Dixon et al. 2020). Other qualitative studies have also reported on men's reluctance to defend themselves from their female partners, with men being more likely to resort to trying to calm their partner down (Machado et al. 2017). Reasons for this reluctance included being afraid of escalating their partner, believing that they deserved the abuse, afraid of being labelled as the abusive partner, and/or believing that it was socially

unacceptable to hit a woman (Allen-Collinson, 2009; Bates & Liu, 2020b; Lien & Lorentzen, 2019; Migliaccio, 2002). While some men have reported hitting their female partners in self-defence or restraining their partners to prevent harm to either party, such actions tended to incite negative repercussions for men (Lien & Lorentzen, 2019; Migliaccio, 2002). Abusive female partners would threaten to report the men for assault, which increased men's anxiety about being falsely accused as an abuser or arrested (Migliaccio, 2002).

Men's fears about false allegations of abuse are not unfounded. Tilbrook and colleagues (2010) found that abusive female partners could take advantage of wider societal assumptions that men are primarily abusers and women primarily victims. Thus, women would manipulate legal and administrative resources against their male partners. Instances of this form of abuse, termed legal-administrative abuse by Tilbrook and colleagues (2010), have appeared in other qualitative studies, where abusive female partners have falsely informed other parties that the abused man is the perpetrator (e.g. Machado et al. 2017; Morgan & Wells, 2016). Bates' (2019) qualitative study of men's experiences of post-separation IPA found that false allegations of abuse even occurred after the relationship had ended and could be used to separate children and fathers. Thus, even post-separation, aggression perpetrated in female-to-male IPA can continue to adapt and evolve. Female partners can manipulate gendered stereotypes of IPA in services and agencies to maintain control over various aspects of men's lives.

Men experience a variety of abusive from female partners, which often escalate over the course of the relationship and can continue after the relationship has dissolved (Bates, 2019; Bates & Liu, 2020b; Lysova et al. 2019; Machado et al. 2017; Migliaccio, 2002; Tilbrook et al. 2010). Despite this escalation, men are reluctant to defend themselves against their female partner's aggression due to fears of false allegations of being the abuser and not being believed by external parties (Machado et al. 2017; Morgan & Wells, 2016; Tilbrook et

al. 2010). While qualitative studies have explored the nature of men's abusive experiences and the subsequent consequences in detail, to date, there is a dearth of research that has explored the early stages of abusive relationships and the changing nature of abuse for men. Understanding the progression of abuse would be useful for informing further research about the normalisation of aggression during an abusive relationship and early intervention strategies.

Why Men Become Stuck

Despite the emergence and escalation of aggression in their intimate relationships, it is not uncommon for men to remain with their female partners (Migliaccio, 2002). As such, men often utilise a range of coping strategies to withstand the aggression they are experiencing. Allen-Collinson (2009) analysed five interviews and the personal diary of an abused man using a topical life history approach. The man described various strategies for managing and avoiding his wife's aggression. These included trying to anticipate when she would be aggressive, blaming himself for the aggression, and avoiding his partner to minimise opportunities for abuse to occur (Allen-Collinson, 2009). Some men also report using their jobs to escape the abuse (Lien & Lorentzen, 2019), or attempting to "solve" any problems they believed were causing the aggression – including intensely monitoring their own behaviours to avoid upsetting their partners (Dixon et al. 2020). Additionally, men in Migliaccio's (2002) study described strategies such as avoiding their partner, engaging in behaviours that would placate or appease their partner, disassociating during aggression, defending themselves, or denying that any harm was being inflicted upon them. Thus, men have reported numerous coping strategies to manage female-to-male IPA. Instead of leaving their partners, men find ways to tolerate and withstand the aggression they experiencing.

Relationships can also be maintained when men rationalise or excuse the aggression perpetrated by their female partners (Dixon et al. 2020). Migliaccio (2002) found that men justified their female partner's aggression by attributing blame to external factors, their partner's childhood experiences and/or their partner's past trauma (Migliaccio, 2002). Men were particularly likely to believe that their partner was not responsible for the aggression if they exhibited "Jekyll-Hyde" behaviours, where they could remain calm and composed in some situations but become aggressive in others (Migliaccio, 2002). Additionally, Nayback-Beebe and Yoder (2012) conducted three interviews with a man who had experienced abuse from a female partner and found that he went through a constant process of redefining his beliefs about what he thought was "acceptable" in a relationship (Nayback-Beebe & Yoder, 2012). This ongoing process of justifying and rationalising abusive behaviours prompts men to accept their partner's aggression, preventing the men from recognising the abuse for what it is and potentially maintaining the relationship (Lien & Lorentzen, 2019; Migliaccio, 2002).

While few studies have specifically explored the obstacles that deter men from leaving abusive relationships, various reasons have been reported in qualitative studies. Bates and Liu (2020b) thematically analysed answers to an online questionnaire about men's experiences of abuse from female intimate partners. As part of their findings, men described numerous reasons for being reluctant to leave their female partners. These included a strong sense of commitment to their partners, not recognising they were being abused due to a lack of injuries, and/or the abuse gradually eroding their self-esteem until they believed that they did not deserve a better partner (Bates & Liu, 2020b). Similar reasons have also been reported in other qualitative studies of men's experiences of IPA (Corbally, 2014; Lien & Lorentzen, 2019; Migliaccio, 2002), as well as partner's promising that they will change their behaviours (Migliaccio, 2002). The slow progression of the abuse and the stress of the relationship can also make it difficult for men to recognise their experiences as IPA (Lien &

Lorentzen, 2019; Morgan & Wells, 2016). Additionally, fears of parental alienation and separation from their children are commonly-reported reasons to remain with aggressive female partners (Bates & Liu, 2020b; Lien & Lorentzen, 2019; Migliaccio, 2002; Morgan & Wells, 2016). These are not unfounded concerns, as some men have described ex-partners exerting ongoing control by separating men from their children or manipulating father-child relationships, particularly after the relationship has been terminated (Bates, 2019; Bates & Liu, 2020b). Thus, there are many barriers that discourage men from leaving their abusive partners, particularly when children are involved.

In comparison to women survivors of IPV, there are limited studies exploring how overcome barriers to leaving abusive relationships (e.g. Barrios et al. 2020; Enander, 2011; Scheffer Lindgren & Renck, 2008). Of the studies that are gender inclusive, samples often include disproportionately more female participants than male (e.g. Dziewa & Glowacz, 2021; Murray, Crowe and Flasch, 2015). Murray, Crowe and Flasch (2015) distributed an online survey to men and women of various sexual orientations, to explore the external and internal “turning points” that prompted a person to terminate an abusive relationship. They found that internal factors such as recognising the persistence and escalating severity of the violence, recognising the toll that the abuse had taken on them, and changing their perspectives about their relationship, the abuse, or their partners were commonly reported reasons for adults terminating an abusive relationship (Murray et al. 2015). External factors included education about abusive relationships and recognising the applicability to their own situation, the involvement of external parties such as friends, families, or law enforcement, recognising the impact that the abuse was having on the children, or the abuser terminating the relationship (Murray et al. 2015). However, the generalisability of this study to men's experiences of IPA is unknown, as only 2.6% of the participants identified as male (Murray et al. 2015). Nonetheless, qualitative studies into men's experiences of IPA have reported

similar findings to Murray and colleagues (2015; Allen-Collinson, 2009; Nayback-Beebe & Yoder, 2012; Lien & Lorentzen, 2019) as well as additional reasons such as men feeling confident that their children would be safe with their partner (Allen-Collinson, 2009) and coming to a gradual realisation that their partners were not going to change (Migliaccio, 2002). Thus, qualitative studies indicate that a variety of external and internal influences serve as “turning points” in men’s decisions to leave an abusive relationship. However, future research would benefit from exploring men’s decision-making processes throughout the relationship to further understandings about barriers and facilitators to leaving.

Various factors appear to keep men “stuck” in abusive relationships, such as developing coping strategies to deal with IPA and learning to accept the abuse by justifying and excusing their partner’s behaviours (Bates & Liu, 2020b; Machado et al. 2016; Migliaccio, 2002; Morgan & Wells, 2016). Compared to women’s experiences of IPA, few studies have explored facilitators to men leaving abusive relationships. Future studies are needed to understand the types of obstacles that men experience when leaving abusive partners, how men overcome these barriers, and men’s progression through different stages in their decision-making process. Children, in particular, feature heavily in father’s reasons for staying as well as leaving their abusive female partners, and add an additional layer of complexity to men’s experiences of abuse (Allen & Collinson, 2009; Bates & Liu, 2020b; Dixon et al. 2020; Lien & Lorentzen, 2019; Migliaccio, 2002).

The Impact on Children and Parental Alienation

Children play a significant role in the types of controlling behaviours that fathers experience from female partners during and after the relationship. During the relationship, female partners could abuse fathers in front of their children, threaten to separate fathers from their children (Corbally, 2014), threaten to hurt the children, and/or get themselves pregnant

without the man's knowledge or consent (Bates & Liu, 2020b). Post-separation, children remained to be a medium through which to control and exercise power over the men, as women would limit men's contact with their children, manipulate and damage father-child relationships, instigate lengthy custody battles, and make false allegations of abuse that impacted fathers' ability to access their children (Bates, 2019; Corbally, 2014; Dixon et al. 2020; Morgan & Wells, 2016). In fact, some men reported that being unable to be a father was one of the most significant and long-lasting forms of IPA that they had experienced (Corbally, 2014).

Children also suffer when their fathers are abused. Men who experience severe sexual aggression are more likely to have children with a range of mental health consequences (Hines & Douglas, 2016). Among preschool children, higher levels of sexual aggression for men were correlated with affective, oppositional defiant, and pervasive development problems for their children. For school-age children, father's severity of sexual aggression victimisation from their partners was associated with all of the assessed mental health problems, including attention deficit/hyperactivity problems, affective problems, anxiety problems, conduct problems, oppositional defiant problems, and somatic problems (Hines & Douglas, 2016). This association between father's severe experiences of sexual aggression and children's mental health problems remained significant for attention deficit/hyperactivity and affective problems when controlling for factors such as child demographics, children's exposure to violence in the community, children's exposure to other forms of IPV between their parents, and fathers' reported perpetration of sexual IPA (Hines & Douglas, 2016). While the study did not assess whether these children had witnessed sexual aggression against their fathers, findings suggest that merely being in a home where fathers are experiencing sexual IPA can negatively impact on children's mental well-being. Similar to mothers who experience IPA (Kaspiew et al. 2017), these consequences may result from

impaired parenting abilities, such as being less available to the child, more hostility and irritability in their interactions with the child, and less consistent discipline (Hines & Douglas, 2016).

Separation and parental alienation also adversely affects fathers and their children (Bates & Liu, 2020b). Parental alienation is “a mental state in which a child, usually one whose parents are engaged in a high-conflict separation or divorce, allies himself strongly with one parent (the preferred parent) and rejects a relationship with the other parent (the alienated parent) without legitimate justification” (Sher, 2015, p.1). The preferred parent manipulates the child’s perception of and relationship with the alienated parent, leading the child to reject and (in severe cases) even become physically aggressive towards the alienated parent (Sher, 2015). Children that have been alienated from their parents can experience an extensive range of short-term and long-term consequences (Bentley & Matthewson, 2020; Sher, 2015). Depression, low self-esteem, post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, panic attacks, substance abuse, and educational and employment problems are just some of the negative effects that are associated with being alienated from a parent (Bentley & Matthewson, 2020; Sher, 2015). Adult participants – who had been alienated from one of their parents as a child – reported relationship problems in terms of relating to others, finding themselves in dysfunctional and abusive relationships, and struggling to maintain healthy relationships (Bentley & Matthewson, 2020). They also reported being physically and emotionally abused by the alienating parent (Bentley & Matthewson, 2020). The list of consequences of parental alienation on children are thus extensive and can have long-term impacts that persist in adulthood.

For fathers who have been alienated from their children, the effects of parental alienation are similarly distressing. Depression, suicidal ideation, alcohol/drug use, and feelings of helplessness, powerlessness, and growing despair are all reported consequences of

fathers being separated from their children (Sher, 2015). Poustie, Matthewson, and Balmer (2018) thematically analysed answers to an online survey about alienated parents' experiences of separation from their children. Targeted parents reported a range of mental health effects following parental alienation, including despair, isolation, and psychological disorders such as depression. They also expressed concerns about the short-term and long-term impacts the alienation would have on their children growing up (Poustie et al. 2018). The targeted parents considered parental alienation to be a form of family violence, not only towards them but also towards their children, with some even reporting experiencing IPA before the separation (Poustie et al. 2018). Given the host of consequences already associated with IPA victimisation for men (e.g. Bates & Liu, 2020a; Machado et al. 2017; Migliaccio, 2002; Morgan & Wells, 2016; Perryman & Appleton, 2016), being separated and alienated from their children merely adds to an already traumatic experience.

Men have also expressed concerns about the direct and indirect impacts that female-to-male IPA has on their children – particularly when children witnessed the aggression (Dixon et al. 2020). In a systematic review of research about the consequences of IPA for children, Wood and Sommers (2011) found that witnessing violence between parents increased a child's likelihood of experiencing a range of short-term and long-term problematic outcomes. Children who had witnessed IPA were more likely to resolve conflicts with violence compared to children who had not witnessed IPA, and also tended to have lower educational performance than children who had not witnessed IPA (especially for children under 12 years old). Furthermore, children exposed to IPA were more likely to be subjected to childhood maltreatment (Wood & Sommers, 2011). In the long-term, children who had witnessed IPA were at increased risk of developing alcohol-related problems in adulthood, had a higher likelihood of drug use and abuse, and were more prone to risky sexual behaviours (Wood & Sommers, 2011). Another meta-analysis found that witnessing

IPA was prospectively linked with children developing internalising, externalising, and adjustment problems – and that the likelihood of developing adjustment problems increased the longer that children were exposed to IPA (Vu et al. 2016). A study in Australia evaluated both longitudinal and qualitative data of domestic violence and its relationship with family parenting (Kaspiew et al. 2017). Inter-parental conflict, defined as verbal or physical conflict between adults that were biological, adoptive, or step-parents to a child, had a host of negative effects for children. In particular, persistent inter-parental conflict resulted in impaired socio-emotional, language and academic outcomes across all ages. Poor physical health, particularly among pre-teens, was also associated with witnessing persistent inter-parental conflict (Kaspiew et al. 2017).

In NZ, exposure to inter-parental violence is not uncommon. In 2010, children were reportedly present in approximately 50% of family violence callouts (New Zealand Police, 2010, cited by Murphy et al. 2013). In a retrospective study, 26-year-old NZ participants were asked about witnessing physical violence and threats of harm between their parents up to the age of 18 (Martin, Langley & Millichamp, 2006). 24% of the sample reported seeing or hearing actual or threatened physical violence between their parents. Within these violent families, 16% reported that the violence was only perpetrated by their mother (as opposed to 55% father-only and 28% by both parents), and 80% witnessed violence before the age of 11 (Martin et al. 2006). Participants that had witnessed aggression were also more likely than non-witnesses to be diagnosed with anxiety and depression at age 21 (Martin et al. 2006). Given the numerous and significant consequences associated with childhood exposure to IPA, the amount of NZ children witnessing aggression between their parents is concerning. However, there is a dearth of qualitative research that explores NZ fathers' and their children's experiences of IPA.

The Present Study

To date, the vast majority of IPA literature has investigated female victims in opposite-sex relationships (Laskey et al. 2019). Despite mounting evidence of gender symmetry in IPA (Archer, 2000; Smith et al. 2018; Stockdale et al. 2013) and men's experiences of severe violence and coercive control from female partners comparatively fewer studies have investigated men's experiences of IPA victimisation. Existing research, while limited, highlights the wide range of aggressive behaviours in female-to-male IPA, as well as the associated harms for men and their children. Qualitative studies have shed a light on the nature of the abuse, the rationalisations and coping strategies that facilitate acceptance of abuse, and the various obstacles that discourage men from leaving their abusive female partners. However, few qualitative studies have investigated how men experience the onset, progression, and turning points of abuse with female intimate partners. As external parties and education can influence people's decisions about leaving abusive relationships (Murray et al. 2015), understanding the process of IPA for men can inform future research, policies and practices that assist men in reducing the aggression they are experiencing.

Concerns about the well-being and separation from their children are particularly compelling factors that influence men's decisions to stay or leave abusive relationships. Fatherhood is a valued identity among men who have experienced female-perpetrated IPA (Corbally, 2014), yet the majority of studies in the IPA literature focus on fatherhood experiences for male perpetrators of abuse (e.g. Carlson & Casey, 2018; Stephens, 2020), as opposed to male survivors. Furthermore, the negative consequences of parental alienation for fathers and their children are well-documented (Bentley & Matthewson, 2020; Poustie et al. 2018; Sher, 2015). Exploring how fatherhood affects experiences of female-perpetrated abuse is important for developing evidence-based interventions that mitigate potential harm to fathers and their children.

As research into female victims currently predominates the IPA literature, there is a need to include the voices of hard-to-reach populations to further the development of future research, practice, and policy in this area (Laskey et al. 2019). The number of qualitative studies into men's experiences of abuse from a female intimate partner have been increasing, though few have explored the onset, progression and turning points of IPA during and after an abusive relationship (e.g. Bates, 2019). Furthermore, there is a dearth of research into how fatherhood impacts men's experiences of abuse from female intimate partners. Thus, relevant practice and policy implications have yet to be identified. This study aims to address this gap by investigating how men with children experience the process of abuse from a female partner.

Method

Qualitative Analysis

The present study employed a qualitative approach to analysing one-on-one interviews with men who had experienced IPA from a female partner. Qualitative research is a useful approach for exploring questions about a person's lived experience of a given phenomenon, whereby knowledge is generated from individuals' unique experiences and perspectives (Gelo, Braakmann, & Benetka, 2008; Machado et al. 2017; Sandelowski, 2004). Alternatively, quantitative research collects large quantities of data and generalises findings to a wider population (Gelo, Braakmann, & Benetka, 2008; Banister, 2017). Research in the field of forensic psychology predominantly consists of quantitative approaches that are designed to produce pragmatic outcomes, such as rehabilitation and risk reduction (Banister, 2017). However, further qualitative studies are needed to explore broader questions around the lived experiences of participants, and potentially reveal new insights that otherwise could have been overlooked in quantitative approaches (Banister, 2017; Nowell et al. 2017). As there is a limited amount of research on male IPA victimisation (Laskey et al. 2019), a qualitative approach was selected to explore and develop an understanding of men's lived experiences and perspectives of IPA.

Reflexive thematic analysis is a qualitative approach that identifies, analyses and interprets patterns of meaning (themes) across a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach is often praised for its flexibility, as well as its ability to produce rich and detailed findings that capture the complexities of individuals' lived experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al. 2017). However, studies that utilise reflexive thematic analysis can be criticised for not providing enough detail about how each stage of the analysis was conducted (Trainor & Bundon, 2020). A lack of transparency compromises the credibility and

trustworthiness of findings studies that have utilised reflexive thematic analysis (Nowell et al. 2017). As such, the present study aims to provide a detailed account about the decisions that were made at each stage of the analysis, as well as acknowledge any subjective biases that may have influenced results.

Acknowledging the Role of Qualitative Researchers

Reflexive thematic analysis is a recursive process that requires a researcher's active, reflective, and thoughtful engagement with the data during all stages of analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Findings are produced through an ongoing interaction between the contents of the data and a researcher's existing knowledge, assumptions, perspectives, values, and past experiences (Terry et al. 2017; Braun & Clarke, 2013). Thus, acknowledging a researcher's potential biases is an integral component to increasing the credibility and quality of findings in qualitative research (Dodgson, 2019; Trainor & Bundon, 2020). Although I was not involved in conducting any of the interviews analysed in this thesis - as data had been previously collected as part of a broader research project - my personal biases and subjective experiences of IPA could influence my interpretation of the data during the analysis. Thus, acknowledging my background, past experiences and knowledge about IPA is important to enhance the credibility and integrity of findings in the present study.

As a 24-year-old Pākehā female that was born and raised in Aotearoa New Zealand, I have always been aware of the existence and prevalence of IPA in my country. Having grown up with divorced parents, my upbringing was predominantly free of aggression within my primary home and observed in my secondary home for a short period of time. Subsequently, I had some understanding of the potentially bidirectional nature of IPA, but the phenomenon was not an issue that was at the forefront of my mind. Furthermore, due to the brief nature of my exposure to IPA, my understandings were largely informed by media, awareness

campaigns, and depictions of abuse in TV shows/movies. These produced assumptions about IPA predominantly involving a controlling, malicious male partner that enacted severe physical violence and established all-encompassing control over a female partner. It was not until I reached a post-graduate level of tertiary education that the complex and multi-faceted nature of IPA became apparent to me. This included learning about types of aggression beyond severe physical violence and that IPA could be experienced by any gender, age, or sexual orientation. Additionally, completing a previous qualitative research project about male university student's experiences of IPA from a female partner further informed my personal beliefs and understandings about what IPA looked like. This education created awareness about my own past experiences of IPA and facilitated disclosures about IPA from people in my personal life. Thus, throughout this analysis, I have been mindful not to over-emphasize or overlook certain aspects of participants' experiences based on their congruency (or incongruency) with my personal understandings and assumptions about what IPA looks like. This mindfulness has helped me to take active steps in minimising biases and take an inclusive approach to analysing men's experiences of the process of IPA.

Study Design

The study used a phenomenologically-oriented design to explore the experiences of men with children who lived with unidirectional abuse from a female intimate partner. Phenomenological approaches are utilised to explore phenomena from the perspectives of individuals who have personally experienced said phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Neubauer, Witkop, & Varpio, 2019), and thus, in this study, was adopted to focus on men's lived experiences and personal perceptions of their abusive relationships. A semi-structured interview schedule and open-ended questions were used to encourage men to discuss their personal experiences of IPA in their own words. These open-ended questions focused on topics such as what the abuse typically looked like, descriptions of the worst or most

memorable abusive incident, how the presence of children impacted the aggression, how men understood their experiences of aggression, and any help-seeking behaviours they engaged in.

The full interview schedule can be viewed in Appendix A.

Participants

Participants were selected from an existing data pool of 80 interviews, which had been collected prior to the present study. The sample consisted of 13 men who self-reported experiencing abuse from a female intimate partner, with whom they had at least one biological child. At least one child that they shared with this female intimate partner was living with the men during the abusive relationship.

Of these 13 men, eleven participants were recruited from non-government organisations (NGOs) that work with survivors of IPA, located across five areas in New Zealand (Otago, Canterbury, Tasman/Nelson, Wellington, and Waikato). One of the participants had self-referred himself to the study via email, and another participant was recruited through a university's student counselling service. Participation in the project was voluntary. Participants' ages ranged from being in their twenties to their sixties, and all spoke English as a first language. All except one man had ended their relationship with their abusive partner at the time of the interview. Additional participant details are provided in Table 1, names have been exchanged for pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

Table 1

Demographics and relationship characteristics of participants

Pseudonym	Age range	Relationship length	Ethnicity	# of biological children	# of children in household
William	40 – 49	Ongoing; 22 years	NZ European	1	1
David	40 – 49	14 years	Indian	2	2
Theo	50 – 59	2 years	European	1	1
Patrick	50 – 59	4 years	Māori/European	2	2
Dean	40 – 49	2 years	European	1	1
Chris	30 – 39	7 years	European	2	4
Liam	40 – 49	21 years	NZ European	3	3
Julian	20 – 29	3 years	NZ European	1	1
Alex	40 – 49	13 years	NZ European	2	2
Reuben	30 – 39	15 years	Maori European	2	2
Leo	50 – 59	10 years	British Overseas Territory	2	2
Phillip	40 – 49	14 years	NZ European	2	6
Erik	60 – 69	33 years	NZ European	4	4

Procedure

The current study was part of a broader research project investigating experiences of IPA in New Zealand. The principal investigator had interviewed 80 male and female survivors and/or perpetrators of IPA. The current study explored the interviews that were conducted with men with children who had experienced unidirectional abuse from a female intimate partner. The process of data collection is described below.

A university student counselling service and NGOs that work with survivors or perpetrators of IPA were provided with an information and consent sheet that explained the purpose and requirements of the broader research project. NGOs who consented to being involved in the project were provided with a brief information sheet to distribute to clients that were assessed as suitable candidates for the research project (i.e. any person who was interested in discussing their experiences from and/or to an intimate partner, and was in a physically and psychologically safe space to do so). Any person that expressed interest in contributing to the research project was then provided with a full information and consent sheet. The university student counselling service emailed their male client base with the brief information and consent sheet, and an invitation to complete an online screening questionnaire that provided full details of the study. Those men who indicated they were not at risk of being harmed by an abusive partner or suffer undue psychological distress by taking part were invited to an interview.

All participants were interviewed in a private room at the organisation from which they were recruited through. All participants were given the choice of a female or male interviewer. The NGO's or the university's counselling service was immediately available in the event that men felt distressed during the interview, which none of the men utilised.

Interviews lasted an average of 90 minutes and were audio recorded with permission from the participant. All men were informed that they could end the interview at any point without any negative repercussions. Interviews were semi-structured and utilised an interview schedule that consisted of broad and open-ended questions to guide discussion. At the end of the interview, all participants received a debrief sheet that provided further details about the purpose of the study, what would happen with their interview, and contact details of support services. Participants were also given a supermarket voucher as a koha for their participation. The audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim by a professional and confidential service.

A total of 80 interviews were conducted. Of these 80 interviews, twenty-five men had experienced unidirectional abuse from a female intimate partner. Two interviews were excluded from the current study, as they described abuse from multiple partners and lacked rich information about the men's experiences with each partner. One interview was excluded for confidentiality reasons, as their identity was potentially known to the author. A total of twenty-two eligible interviews remained.

Detailed case notes were made about the twenty-two interviews, which are described in detail in the following section. These case notes were used to refine the current study's research question to include men with children. Participants were selected based on their relevance to the refined research question, the richness of the information provided in the interview, and maintaining homogeneity of the dataset.

This reduced the number of applicable interviews from twenty-two to fourteen men, who each had between one to four children with a female intimate partner. Of these fourteen men, one was excluded from analysis, as he had experienced IPA from two partners and his

interview lacked rich information about the partner he had a child with. Thus, a total of thirteen participants were included in the analysis.

During the refinement process, five sub-questions were developed to help guide the thematic analysis. They were:

1. How do men with children experience the relationship prior to the abuse and what events or factors precede the first aggressive incident?
2. How do men with children describe the progression of abuse over time?
3. What factors keep men with children in their abusive relationship or encourage them to leave?
4. How did men with children make sense of or rationalise the abuse and how do they experience the impact of abuse over time?
5. How do men with children put boundaries in place to limit the abuse and how do they experience the relationship afterwards?

Data Analysis

Braun and Clarke's (2006) documented approach to reflexive thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns across the 13 interviews. Three decisions guided the interpretation of the dataset:

1. An *inductive approach* meant that the development of the themes was driven by the data and focussed on men's personal accounts of IPA. This approach was used so that findings represented men's experiences as they were told by the men, rather than viewing those experiences through the lens of a predetermined theory.
2. Themes were identified at a *semantic level*, whereby themes were developed based on what men had explicitly said during the interviews. This was opposed to identifying

themes at a latent level, where themes are developed by looking for underlying concepts and assumptions within the data.

3. A *realist/essentialist paradigm* was adopted to support the exploration of the men's personal experiences and perceptions of IPA, by assuming that the information provided in the interviews reflected men's perceptions of reality in a straightforward manner.

Nowell and colleagues (2017) also published suggestions on how to conduct a robust thematic analysis, which were implemented at each of the six stages and are noted below:

1. Familiarisation with the data. A period of prolonged engagement with the contents of the data was undertaken, which occurred in three phases. The first phase involved a research team of five post-graduate students being assigned 4-5 cases from a pool of 24 interviews. Each researcher listened to the corresponding audio recordings of these assigned cases, and summarised key information about the nature of the abuse for each interviewee. Assigned cases were not necessarily relevant to the present study's research questions (e.g. interviews with female survivors of IPA and men who experienced reciprocal IPA). This exposure to different types of IPA experiences increased researchers' awareness of the heterogenous nature of IPA. Summaries of these 24 interviews were compiled into a shared Excel spreadsheet, which contained demographic information and interview summaries for all 80 interviews in the broader research project.

The second phase of familiarisation involved ongoing engagement with the twenty-three cases that were relevant to the current study's initial research question. Audio recordings of each of the twenty-three interviews were listened to, with subsequent case notes being compiled into an Excel spreadsheet. These detailed case notes focused on the nature of the unilateral aggression, the nature of men's victimisation, rich data on men's experience of

using aggression, rich data on men's victimisation experience, rich data on men's experiences of disclosure, and rich data on men's help-seeking experiences. Transcripts of the twenty-three interviews were then read to supplement any additional information that was overlooked while listening to the audio recordings. Based on these case notes, the present study's sample of 23 men was further refined to maintain heterogeneity of the sample. As previously described in the procedure, thirteen men with children were subsequently selected for analysis.

The third phase focused on the thirteen cases that were selected for analysis. Each of the transcripts were checked against the original audio recordings for accuracy, with any edits being saved into a separate folder from the original transcripts. Checked transcripts were then re-read to create individual summaries about each participant's experiences of IPA, which were used to generate sub-questions that would guide the next stage of the analysis. The main research question and initial sub-questions were refined through discussions with the principal investigator and members of the research team. The thirteen transcripts were subsequently read again with the refined sub-questions in mind, to ensure that participants' experiences covered information that would be relevant to each of these sub-questions. As suggested by Nowell and colleagues (2017), an audit trail was used throughout this process, with any changes to case notes, sub-questions and transcripts being recorded and stored as separate documents.

2. *Generation of initial codes.* Each of the thirteen checked interview transcripts were copied into separate Word documents for coding. These documents contained a table with two columns: the right column consisting of the full interview transcript, and the left column providing space to note down any thoughts, comments, or ideas about why a specific section of the transcript had been assigned a particular code. Guided by the sub-questions developed in the previous phase, common ideas that appeared across the dataset were identified as initial

codes. The “comment” function on Word was used to highlight sections of the transcript and assign an initial code. An example of this table with corresponding comments and data extracts can be found in Appendix B, with assigned codes being highlighted in bold above the associated comment. A reflexive journal was also maintained in a separate Word document. The journal contained reflexive thoughts that acknowledged any biases or assumptions that were influencing interpretations of the data (and how these biases were counteracted), as well as justifications about decisions that were made throughout the analysis. All thirteen transcripts were systematically coded from start to finish. A copy of the main research question and accompanying sub-questions was always kept in sight, to limit deviation from the main focus of the research project.

During the initial coding process, peer debriefing occurred with a qualitative research team that included two investigators of the broader research project and four post-graduate students working with the same data. Approximately ten-page samples of de-identified interviews were exchanged and separately coded, then discussed as a group and stored on a shared server. These debriefings were used to compare and corroborate findings and facilitate reflection about the different perspectives that individuals would bring when coding the same interview.

After coding each interview, all thirteen interviews were re-coded. This was done for two reasons: 1) to maintain consistency of codes across the dataset, as interviews that were analysed later in the coding process may have new or altered codes that were not included in earlier interviews; and 2) the initial coding process had facilitated a more nuanced and deeper understanding of all thirteen men's experiences, and thus re-examining all interviews was necessary in case of any new insights. All transcripts were re-coded in the same order as the initial coding procedure. An audit trail of code generation was also utilised. A separate document was created each time an interview was re-coded.

Codes and their related data extracts from all thirteen interviews were then integrated into a single document. This new document contained a table with three columns. The first column contained the name of the code, the second contained the data extracts that were captured by that code, and the third column contained any associated comments that explained why certain data extracts were associated with certain codes. An example of this table can be viewed in Appendix C. During the process of transferring initial codes into a table of compiled codes, the contents of the data extracts and associated comments were evaluated to determine whether they were capturing similar or distinct ideas across the interviews. Data extracts that captured distinct ideas, but had been coded similarly, were subsequently re-coded into existing or new codes. Similarly, separate codes that were capturing similar ideas had their data extracts integrated and the codes were re-named.

3. Searching for themes. After compiling and revising codes across all thirteen interviews, another Word document was created. This document contained a three-columned table that provided the code name, a description of the code, and one or two corresponding data extracts that illustrated that code. An example of this table can be found in Appendix D. Ongoing consultation with another member of the research team assisted with refining these codes. This document was then given to the principal investigator who provided feedback and advice on further code refinement. Based on this feedback, codes were integrated or separated based on the similarity or distinctness of ideas that were captured, with code names and descriptions being updated as necessary. As suggested by Nowell and colleagues (2017), each revision was saved as a separate document to continue developing an audit trail, and detailed notes were made to explain the development and integration (or separation) of different codes in a reflexive journal.

4. Reviewing themes. To facilitate the integration of refined codes into preliminary themes, the document containing the revised table of codes was printed out, cut up, and then

grouped based on the code description and corresponding data extracts. Each code was evaluated one at a time and compared to codes that were already on the table. Codes that appeared to be capturing similar and interrelated ideas were grouped together or placed nearby if the codes were similar but not directly linked to one another. Dissimilar codes were placed away from the other codes. Throughout this process, codes were constantly shifted and re-categorised to ensure that grouped codes accurately and coherently reflected the men's experiences of unilateral aggression. This process was later repeated with the principal investigator to incorporate an alternative perspective on the layout and groupings of these preliminary themes. By the end, four themes and thirteen subthemes had been identified.

Following this process, preliminary themes were compared against the original transcripts and coded extracts to ensure that themes were meaningful and reflective of the accounts within the dataset. Transcripts of all thirteen interviews were re-read and any necessary changes to the descriptions or placement of preliminary themes were made.

5. Defining and naming themes. Once confident that the preliminary themes were reflective of the men's accounts of IPA, a new Word document was created that outlined the themes, their corresponding subthemes, and the refined codes that were captured by each subtheme. A narrative explanation for each theme and relevant subthemes was developed, which illustrated how codes were interconnected and coherently described men's experiences of the process of IPA. Themes and subthemes were then given meaningful labels that clearly and effectively communicated their contents and overall message. This process prompted further reflection and some minor adjustments of code placement within and across subthemes. As with previous stages, any revisions were recorded and separately documented (Nowell et al. 2017).

A series of quotations that succinctly and clearly illustrated each code were added to enhance the thematic narrative. These quotations were selected from existing documents that contained revised codes and their corresponding data extracts, as well as during another reading of all 13 interview transcripts. This was done to ensure that themes and subthemes were an accurate and meaningful reflection of interviewees' experiences.

6. Producing a report. The final phase involved the production of a written report that identified and described each theme and associated subthemes. To support the themes and subthemes that were generated throughout the process of this analysis, suitable quotes from the previous stage were selected that illustrated and effectively communicated findings about men's experiences of the process of unidirectional abuse from a female intimate partner. Ongoing consultation with the principal investigator prompted minor adjustments to code placement, selected quotations, and the names of subthemes. In addition, the report aimed to provide sufficient detail about each stage of the analysis and justify the theoretical, methodological and analytical choices that were made throughout the present study (Nowell et al. 2017).

Results

Four overarching themes were identified in the interviews using thematic analysis. The themes consisted of 1) The emotional pull, 2) Stuck, 3) Negative impacts of abuse, and 4) Breaking free. Each theme and the corresponding subthemes have been summarised in Table 2 and are described in-depth in the sections below. While supporting quotes are an accurate and direct reflection of what participants said during the interview, they have been edited to remove partial utterances of words and filler words (such as “um” and “er”) for clarity.

Table 2

Summary of themes and subthemes

Theme	Subthemes	Supporting Quotes
The Emotional Pull	Honeymoon Period	<p>“It was really nice, and I was really supporting her with her nursing at the time. So, she was focusing on that, and yeah. Yeah, it was, she was, she was lovely. And I genuinely, genuinely fell in love with her at that time.”</p> <p>- Chris</p>
	Invested in the Relationship	<p>“I was fully committed to the relationship, you know, I guess eh, I really was, you know. And especially after we had a child, you know, I tried to keep it together.”</p> <p>- Leo</p>
Stuck	Changing Nature and Severity of Abuse	<p>“It’s a little bit like the story of the frog in the... in the... in the water that slowly boils. I didn’t really realise what was going on. It happened so slowly and it built up momentum very... very, very slowly.”</p> <p>- Erik</p>

	Excuses	<p>“It’s a loss of... yeah, I don’t know what her frustration or what it was. I think it was a combination between frustration, study, insecurities, lots of things.”</p> <p>- Liam</p>
	Problem-Solving	<p>“That’s how I am, it’s just... I fix things and, yeah, unfortunately I couldn’t fix this, and it was just, it’s getting beyond my sort of ability to be able to sort of talk my way out of it and show her what I... what she meant to me.”</p> <p>- Reuben</p>
	Cycle of Appeasement	<p>“It just gave her a lot more control I think. [...] I didn’t do anything about it and I just more and more just gave in to whatever she wanted, you know, just to keep the peace.”</p> <p>- Phillip</p>
	Gendered Responding to Aggression	<p>“Because I’m a man, and I’ve always been told not to hit a woman, I don’t hit women. So, I don’t retaliate in a physical form. Maybe I do it in a, like, “Stop it!” or, “Fuck off!” Like, just let her, just that’s not cool. ‘Cause I can’t... I won’t physically touch her, like, hit her.”</p> <p>- Reuben</p>
Negative Impacts of Abuse	Negative Impacts on Men	<p>“Well, I had a slipped disc in my neck and I hadn’t slept for three weeks. I’d been off work and I thought, like this is just impossible. This is... this nut is never gonna be cracked. My life is crap. I can’t get any help. It’s all my fault. My health is shot and so I decided to kill myself and I started making a plan on how to kill myself ‘cause it was just too... it was too horrible.”</p> <p>- Erik</p>
	Spillover Effects on Children	<p>“It was just really upsetting to me, because I could, you know, I’d look at the kids and go... and they were, because</p>

		<p>they were so little at that stage, it... it just was really hurtful to me. You know, I could see how it was affecting them and just thinking, 'Oh, you know, this is, just isn't gonna work.'"</p> <p>- Alex</p>
Breaking Free	Drawing a Line	<p>"I was essentially forced out of the house, because it probably... that kind of situation, that tension, that abuse, violence would probably it would have taken its toll. I mean, it did take its toll anyway on me, yeah. So, it... for my own sake and for my daughter's sake, I had to leave."</p> <p>- Dean</p>
	Post-Separation Abuse	<p>"It was continuing. And then it just started to be sort of in my mind, I was like, 'Well, no, actually, you're trying to control the, you know, me, through the kids, and trying to...' and that's what it felt like. So, in the end, when she went for supervised contact, I was like, 'How dare you?' Like, that's just, that's bullshit."</p> <p>- Reuben</p>
	Loves Continuing Pull	<p>"I was still so tied up emotionally, you know. Physically you're separated of course, but emotionally that separation often takes a long time."</p> <p>- Patrick</p>
	Putting the Pieces Together	<p>"I was, oh, just thoroughly confused and, you know, my mum said, 'Don't try to understand it, you'll never be able to figure it out.' And in a way I think that's true, but I did research about, you know, the psychological emotional abuse thing, and, you know, kind of being terrorised psychologically a bit, is what was really going on."</p> <p>- Alex</p>

1. The Emotional Pull

This theme describes the establishment and persistence of the emotional pull that men felt towards their partner during the relationship. The men described how the earlier stages were enjoyable and positive, which helped them to develop a strong bond with their partner. Although some red flags were evident they were easily overlooked due to these positive aspects. By the time aggression became noticeable, men were already invested in the relationship due to emotional attachments to their partner and their children. Two subthemes were identified that captured these patterns, namely *honeymoon period* and *invested in the relationship*.

1.1 Honeymoon Period

Abusive relationships often began positively, with men reporting that they connected with their partner through shared hobbies and activities, having similar values and beliefs, and meaningful events such as the birth of their children. Few (if any) noticeable signs of aggression occurred during these early stages.

“But, you know, generally, in term-- well, compared to the rest of it, you know, it was much better, the earlier part. There wasn't any of this sort of aggression and carry-on. [...] It was much better at the... wasn't so deadly serious.” - Alex

Upon reflection, however, men recognised that these positive beginnings also contained “red flags” about the aggression that was to come. Some of the men were warned about her family's reputation for violence, whereas others noticed unusual behaviours that they dismissed or overlooked.

“I guess, mm, I did sort of see a vulnerability quite early on and didn't sort of like, you know, put too much emphasis on that. And then there was little incidents I guess maybe where I thought that's rather strange behaviour, but never really thinking that things could get as bad as they could.” - Dean

Once men had made a significant commitment to their abusive partner, men reported that their partner's aggression began to escalate, and subsequently became more apparent to the men. These commitments came in various forms, such as marriage, pregnancy, moving in together, or buying a house together.

"When we bought a house together, a bigger house for the kids, is... and, and we financially tied ourselves together, is where it... it... it genuinely heated up to a whole new level." - Dean

1.2 Invested in the Relationship

By the time men took note of their partner's aggression, they were already significantly invested in the relationship. Romantic attachment and love for their partner reportedly encouraged men to stay in the face of emerging and escalating aggression. Chris described how his feelings for his partner blinded him to the abuse:

"So in love with her, that she couldn't do any wrong. I just can't stress that enough. And I look back — she couldn't do any wrong in my eyes. And I keep trying to grab to that even now, just trying to grab to that time." - Chris

Men also felt that they should be committed to their partner and children. Men held their own beliefs about what successful relationships, families, and being a good/father husband should look like. Men wanted to make things work and stand by their female partners, especially when a child was involved.

"I was fully committed to the relationship, you know, I guess eh, I really was, you know. And especially after we had a child, you know, I tried to keep it together." - Leo

All of the men discussed their children being a particularly compelling reason to stay in their abusive relationships. Men believed that they were doing what was best for their children by staying with their partners, wanted to be around to protect their children from their partner's abuse, or they were afraid of their partner separating them from their children if they did choose to leave.

“I think at the same time we had a little child, a little girl, there’s no way I was gonna leave her side, and especially leave her with... without anyone in the house to kind of be a buffer for some of that stuff, so.” - Patrick

“The whole thing of, you know, keep trying to make it work or stay together for the kids, because for... you know, almost the whole time that we had the kids it was pretty crappy and, just thinking, ‘Well, why am I in this?’ And then it’s like, ‘Well you’ve gotta do it for the kids.’” - Alex

2. Stuck

This theme identified a range of sub-themes that kept men in the relationship and served to maintain and prolong the abuse. Five subthemes are presented and described: 1) the changing nature and severity of the abuse, 2) the excuses men used to justify their partner’s aggression, 3) the problem-solving tactics men engaged in to “fix” the relationship, 4) the cycle of appeasement, and 5) men’s gendered responses to aggression.

2.1 The Changing Nature and Severity of Abuse

Men experienced various types of physical, psychological and sexual aggression from their female intimate partners. Men described physical aggression directed towards them or their property, which included being threatened with weapons and punched in the head. During a particularly heated incident, Theo described how his partner sliced through a photo of him and his daughter using a knife:

“And then she threw a cup at me and that... the same thing, you know. And then she grabbed... she had this, block-mounted photo of me and baby together and then she got this big kitchen knife and she says, “This is what I think of you,” and she just went [noise] like this on the photo...” - Theo

Direct and indirect psychological aggression commonly featured in men’s accounts of abuse. Female intimate partners would engage in a variety of behaviours, including belittling, guilt-tripping, gaslighting, controlling his relationships and movements, threatening to harm

herself, sabotaging his personal and professional reputation, controlling his finances, and being physically and/or psychologically aggressive towards his friends and family. David recounted how his partner spreading lies about him caused his in-laws to become aggressive towards him and his family:

“But she would go and complain about me, that I was somebody else and I was the person abusing her. [...] They believed her and they would just go into a full verbal on me as well and then on my parents. Then they started approaching my brother-in-law and my sister and my other relatives in [Country].” - David

Some of the men also experienced sexual aggression in their relationships. Being coerced into sex and having their sexual activities controlled were two ways that men experienced sexual aggression from their female intimate partners.

“And, and the jealousy was odd, like, she’s like, “You have to have sex with me every day. You are not allowed to masturbate. You are not allowed to do that. You have to... I don’t care if you fuck me 10 times a day, or you’ve gotta... You’ve got to have sex with me.” [...] that’s something that came about quite quickly.” - Chris

The various types of aggressive behaviours experienced by men did not emerge all at once, but gradually changed and escalated over the course of the relationship. Some of the men reported that the psychological aggression appeared before the physical aggression, whereas other men reported the opposite pattern. As the relationship progressed, however, all of the men reported that the abuse increased in frequency and level of severity.

“So, my situation was all about control basically. [...] It got physical later. [laughs] [...] Yeah, later on. But that’s how it sort of, yeah, started.” - Phillip

“But she would get more and more angry and she would start hitting me each time and it became worse and worse. [...] the slaps became harder and... [...] More frequent...” - David

The changing nature and gradual escalation of the abuse encouraged further tolerance of aggression over time. Men reported that they tolerated more severe forms of aggression as

the relationship progressed, eventually leading them to accept behaviours that they would have otherwise objected to.

"I think because you start to put up with shit literally, excuse my French, but you start to tolerate more and more and more and more. [...] I know I did, tolerate more and more even though her behaviour, she might have said something incredibly rude or been disrespectful, I just go, oh, well that's just [Partner] doing what [Partner] does, you know. [...] you sort of go through the process of acceptance of something that is not acceptable." - Liam

Knowing when to object to their partner's escalating aggression was further complicated by men being unaware that what was happening to them could be described as "abuse." Their situations did not fit their definitions of IPA or their understandings of what abusive relationships typically looked like.

"I don't know, abuse... the word 'abuse' to me meant something else. Like, it just meant something a lot more than what I was actually receiving from her." - Reuben

"I had no idea about the phrase 'emotional abuse'. I'd heard of domestic abuse... [...] ...but I just thought it was raging arguments involving beer bottles and... [...] ...people really trying to kill each other." - Chris

2.2 Excuses

Most of the men recognised that their partner's behaviour was unacceptable or inappropriate almost as soon as the aggression appeared. However, men described that they struggled to look at the relationship from an objective standpoint due to their commitment to the relationship and the impact of the abuse. Subsequently, men continued with the relationship despite acknowledging that their partner's behaviours were "wrong." Alex explained that his judgement was clouded during the relationship and that, despite knowing that the way his partner acting was not okay, he would find ways to dismiss the aggression:

"I think in some ways it's easier to pretend that it's not happening as well, even if you have that gut feeling that it's not okay. Yeah. I think it's quite easy to, dismiss that gut feeling. You

know, your thinking head has got all this rationale going on. It sort of pushes down the gut feeling, which is quite strong, about things being okay or not, with this whole other agenda that's going on over the top, yeah." - Alex

A combination of different justifications and "excuses" emerged to explain away the aggression that men were experiencing from their female partners. These justifications rarely existed in isolation from one another; rather, a multitude of reasons would be conjointly used to explain the aggression. Internal factors such as their partner's mental health, their partner's childhood experiences or past trauma, hormonal changes, and/or the aggression simply being "who she was" were some of the reasons men used to dismiss the abuse.

"So, I'm trying to justify it, you know, it's like crazy. [laughs] Like, she's-- it's okay, she... you know, she's got mental health problems, she's got depression, she's got this. She's completely justified, you know. It's okay, we'll give her a free pass." - Theo

External influences were also believed to contribute to the aggression, including being overwhelmed by stress, their partner being manipulated by her family members, and/or men blaming themselves for the aggression.

"I don't think she realised she had a stress problem or problem managing her own stress and that was exacerbated by her own foolishness of listening to her mother and sister tell stories about me which just weren't true." - Liam

Another way that men rationalised the aggression was describing their partners as possessing two distinct personalities. Men reported that their partner would become a "different person" when they were aggressive.

"She would go into like a mental rage. Um, suddenly... [...] ...she would flick. [...] It was just like Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde thing, you know, it'll just switch and I would: Is this the person I know or is this not the person I know?" - David

Despite their best efforts to rationalise the abuse, trying to make sense of their partner's behaviours left men feeling as if they were living in a crazy and confusing world.

"So, she'd say something that was totally nonsensical and, I guess, you know, the big lesson I learned of that of course, I feel crazy because I'm trying to make sense out of nonsense, you know, and I get pulled into the drama of trying to, make sense out of something like that." - Patrick

2.3 Problem-Solving

In addition to making excuses and justifying their partner's behaviours, the aggression and abuse was maintained by men looking for ways to "fix" the relationship. Many of the men adopted an action-oriented attitude to the aggression, expressing their determination to solve any problems that arose and wanting to make the relationship work.

"I don't really tend to speculate on her reasons for doing anything eh, you know, just try and resolve the situation." - Leo

Whilst trying to resolve issues in their relationships, men reported using a range of coping strategies to withstand the aggression in the meantime. Some of the men reported blocking out the aggression, repressing memories of the abuse, distracting themselves with their careers, and/or turning to alcohol use as a means of coping.

"Yeah, no, I just blocked it out. Even [53.06] if my mum asked if everything was all right or anything, she didn't know, I didn't tell her anything. Just blocked it out." - Phillip

One tactic used by men to resolve the abuse was confronting their partners. Men reported attempting to talk to their female partners about potential issues that were causing the aggression and/or told their partners that the aggression was not acceptable. However, this strategy was largely unsuccessful at "solving" the abuse. Men described how their partners refused to communicate about the aggression, would not be accountable for their own abusive behaviours, or the conversations did not produce any lasting change.

"I've told her so many times now, "You've got to stop, you know, you gotta deal with this," and she wouldn't. "It's everybody else's problem and not my problem," and it's... and I'm like, "Well actually it is your problem and you need to deal with it."" - Liam

Some of the men subsequently turned to their partner's family for advice. However, their partner's family members were generally dismissive and unsupportive of the men's situations.

"So, because she wouldn't communicate it with me, I went to her family for support. [...] So, I keep going to her dad, her mum, or her brothers, and like, "Guys, I need some help here." You know, "Have you seen this before?" And they were exactly the same. They were like... they were like, "No, [Chris], it's all good. You know, we're all whanau here, we'll just keep it in the house." Quote. I always got the same comment: it's in-house." - Chris

Reaching out to counselling services was another problem-solving method utilised by the men. However, some of the men found that their partners were resistant to the idea of counselling and refused to participate. Others reported that, when their partner did attend, she would accuse the men of being abusive and/or would not allow her aggression to be discussed during the sessions.

"We were accessing some couples support, but whenever I would try to broach the subject of [Partner]'s screaming and zero to rage stuff, she would call an end to the... to the couples work. So, and she would say that I had... I had failed to focus on the point that it takes two to tango and, so she would only want to approach this... approach these issues if we didn't talk directly about her contribution to the stuff." - Patrick

Across the interviews, a commonly discussed reason for staying in the relationship was that the men were hopeful that their partner would, eventually, change. The men believed that the relationship was capable of being fixed and their partner's aggression would cease. The men believed that the aggression could potentially resolve itself over time, that a change in circumstances would stop their partner's aggression, or that their partner seeking help for issues they believed contributed to the aggression (such as mental health) would bring an end to the abuse.

"If something happened it would be just be kind of like trying to brush it off and then go onto, you know, the next day and, yeah, and just you kind of like hoping perhaps that things

wouldn't, you know, be the same and perhaps having, [sighs] you know, perhaps thinking that... well that's basically horrible thing that's happened, it won't happen again, you know. But it did." - Dean

2.4 Cycle of Appeasement

In order to prevent aggressive incidents from occurring, men often resorted to appeasing their abusive female partners, which had limited success. For most of the men, aggressive incidents were preceded by a state of rising tension, where they could see their partners "building up" to something. As part of this build-up, men reported that their partners became notably irritable and short-tempered, and appeared to be looking for excuses to become angry with the men.

"I think she was... like every time we've had an incident she's always like just picking at something, trying to get a reaction from... and the less I react the more she sort of picks and... it's almost like she wants to... she wants to blow, you know." - Theo

However, one of the men reported that there was no build-up or period of heightened tension before aggression occurred. He described his abusive female partner as unexpectedly "lashing out":

"You must hear me with this - there was never a build-up. [...] There was never, ever egg-shelling. It was like, happy families, we were jogging together, blah, blah, blah, bang." - Chris

Regardless, all of the men became attuned to warning signs that aggression was imminent, though some of them found these exact indicators difficult to articulate. Phillip described how his partner's general demeanour and attitude towards him would change:

"Just her whole appearance and the way she was towards you, yeah, was very didn't give a shit about you basically. She put a block up and just was doing her own sort of thing where you have to read her mind and follow her actions. [...] Just... I don't know how to explain it." - Phillip

As a result, most of the men reported going through periods of “walking on eggshells.” They felt anxious and on-edge about doing the right thing, and would monitor their behaviours to avoid upsetting their female intimate partners.

“I’ll be so anxious about... [...] ...doing the right thing. Paranoid... [...] ...paranoid about doing the right thing. Jeepers, shit, have I... have I put the milk back in the fridge? Oh fuck! And I’ll jump up, put some back in the fridge ‘cause I left the milk out. Thank God she’s not gonna tell me off for that, you know, and try to look busy.” - William

Some of the men also reported being afraid of their partner’s physical and/or psychological aggression. Some, such as Theo, described their fears about their partner’s aggression escalating further and wondering “what’s next?” Others, like Phillip, were afraid of the consequences they would face if they “slipped up.”

“I mean, my biggest worry was that one day she would, you know, probably stab me. That’s... that was my biggest fear. And I guess the last incident we had, I mean, that was definitely a real, you know, real issue.” - Theo

“Pretty much all the time, yeah. Not always afraid of your life... for your life or anything like that but just always afraid of what you’re gonna... you know, what’s gonna be the outcome of something you’re gonna say.” - Phillip

Due to these feelings of anxiety and fear, men modified their behaviours in an attempt to appease their partner and prevent further aggression. However, while appeasing female partners was an effective short-term strategy for preventing the next abusive incident, in the long-term men were only delaying the inevitable. No matter how hard men tried to keep their partners happy, their partners would find a reason to become aggressive. This appeared to motivate men to try harder again, eventually trapping them in a cycle.

“I might leave a jam jar one out, the first time for weeks and weeks and weeks, months and months and months, ages. “You’ve left that out [43.58] again!” despite the fact for so many years I’ve worked incredibly hard to always put things back.” - William

Overall, men reported feeling helpless about preventing their partner's aggression from occurring.

"I just often found myself just at my wits end, just want... so, really off balance I think, and it became... I just didn't know what I could do or could not do to avoid all the meltdowns." - Patrick

2.5 Gendered Responding to Aggression

Over the course of the relationship, men gradually learned the "safest" and most appropriate ways to respond to their partners during an aggressive incident. Men reported that they initially experienced feelings of shock and disbelief when their partners were aggressive towards them and were unsure what the best response would be.

"I probably went into freeze mode. It's like, my goodness, what's... I didn't have the tools to deal with that at the time." - William

A common strategy used by the men to de-escalate aggression was to remove themselves from the situation. This included walking away from their partners, locking themselves in another room, or making themselves difficult to contact (such as leaving their phone in their car). While withdrawing was an effective strategy for some men, others found that their partner would prevent the men from distancing themselves and/or the aggression would escalate.

"I just felt that, you know... that here was pressure cooker situation and that we kind of... the one thing that could have done, because I couldn't calm her down, the one thing that I could have done to ease that would be just to basically get out the house and I wasn't even able to do that." - Dean

Men were reluctant to use physical retaliation. Their reasons included being afraid of the harm that they would inflict due to their strength and size and believing that violence against women was taboo.

“There’s like a moral code, you just don’t... and it’s like what my dad drilled into me, you know, no matter what, you don’t hit a woman, you know; you don’t hit your dog, you don’t... there’s moral codes. [...] And I just felt like these invisible handcuffs - what do I do? Like, do I just ride it out until she finishes?” - Chris

Though men were unwilling to strike their partners, some of the men reported physically restraining them when their partner’s physical aggression threatened themselves or their children.

“But there was another time where she was... she was so aggressive I had to basically grab her to... so that she didn’t harm me or our child who was very young at that time and she struggled and she bit me.” - Dean

Some of the men verbally retaliated when their partners became aggressive – often by shouting back at them or calling them “crazy.” Only two men reported eventual physical retaliation, which only came about after experiencing prolonged abuse. Accounts of physical retaliation were often interwoven with men’s feelings of shame about their actions, with some men describing their own physical retaliation as the “worst” part of the aggression they experienced.

“Where she gives an extreme elbow... [...] ...maybe four or five [laugh] ... [...] and this... that behaviour would happen quite a lot for me then to react. [...] What I mean is many, many months of it. [...] So, that’s the worst...” - William

Most of the men reported not retaliating to their partners – either physically or verbally – because they believed that it was a pointless endeavour. For those that did retaliate, they echoed these sentiments, claiming that shouting back only escalated the aggression and did not resolve arguments.

Phillip: Or just, you know, retaliating was the worst thing to do. [...] So, you know, like if you said something or she put you down and said something. So it was easier to just not say anything. [...]

Interviewer: Did you learn over time not to retaliate?

Phillip: Yeah.

- Phillip

Ultimately, men had limited effective options when it came to de-escalating their partners, and these responses were often constrained by gender norms about acceptable uses of violence. Dean described the many different tactics he used over time and how there was “very little” that he could do to resolve conflicts with his partner:

“It’s a very difficult situation because you don’t really wanna say anything at times but that would actually make it worse ‘cause she wanted you to say something [36.30] [laughs], and I found that in any kind of sort of tense situation there was very little that could be done. Initially I probably, mistakenly, would become really defensive myself, and then [sighs] I went to the other extreme or the other-- the end of the circle I guess maybe, and, was... became very, very passive, which didn’t work out either, and then I began to learn some assertiveness skills [...] and I felt that... I applied these assertiveness skills extremely well but in fact that actually would not be of any assistance at all because if... it was taken as me just being... just having a go at her.” - Dean

“I can’t see anything that I could do to stop her. I mean, she was just, yeah, I just... there was nothing I could do.” - Theo

3. The Negative Impacts of Abuse

This theme identifies the myriad of negative impacts that the abuse had on the men and their children. The two subthemes describe the negative impacts that the aggression had on the men, and how the abuse had spillover effects onto the children who witnessed conflict.

3.1 The Negative Impacts on Men

Men experienced a wide range of harms from their female partner’s aggression across multiple life domains. Some of the men reported immediate and long-term impacts on their physical health, such as being injured by their partner, starvation and associated weight loss, and/or having their physical health deteriorate over time due to the stress of the relationship.

Phillip shared his experience of being hospitalised for serious heart complications, which his partner had limited empathy for.

"I went into AF from all the stress and everything and, yeah, that was pretty bad and that just got worse too. She just didn't care. Yeah, pretty much just wanted me back home to carry on. [...] Then it got worse and worse and worse. And anyway, I went to the hospital, yeah, and it was bad and they kept me in and... in the cardiac department, what's it called? Coronary Care or whatever for four days. And, yeah, and I was pretty buggered and I'm... my heart, yeah, it is pretty buggered." - Phillip

The men also reported that the abuse seriously impacted their mental health over the course of the relationship. Many of the men spoke of the mental toll that the abuse had taken on them, often describing the relationship as "stressful" and "exhausting." Accounts of depression and anxiety were not uncommon amongst the men, as well as experiencing diminished self-esteem over time and suicidal ideation. Erik described how the abuse exacerbated existing insecurities and gradually ate away at his self-confidence.

"I say it's corrosive. It was very slowly eating away and eating away at my... at my self-esteem. I guess it's sort of like having the flu, and when you've got the flu it sort of goes to your weak part. [...] And as I was growing up as a kid I was a very skinny kid and a little bit sort of picked on at school that, "You're the skinny kid and you're not good at rugby," and that sort of thing, so it brought all that out for me and it sort of went, oh, you're too skinny. You're not... you're not a desirable person to have as a loving partner. You're inadequate. You're not good enough. If only you were a proper sized man then women would like you, your wife would like you. So, you start telling yourself those stories. You start agreeing with what people tell you, so." - Erik

Some of the men discussed how the abusive relationship led them to violating their own morals and personal beliefs, and the shame they still carried because of that. Of these men, most of them were upset that they had physically retaliated against their partner, especially given their dislike of violence. Patrick, however, discussed how the abuse

discouraged him from intervening when his partner was psychologically aggressive to her own parents.

“So, I didn’t object at all to [Partner]’s treatment of her mother and that whole situation which is really quite appalling of course, but I just... I just couldn’t even go there... [...] I turned a blind eye to that which, you know, now doesn’t sit well with me at all and... and just rubs against every sense I have around tikanga and how you treat your seniors, you know. [...] So, that was another aspect that I guess that I was affected by in the dynamic of that relationship was that I had to... [...] ... or I chose to not listen or not follow through with tikanga, that I would otherwise have objected to.” - Patrick

Men were also financially and/or professionally impacted by the aggression. Some men reported spending large amounts of money to keep their partners happy or talked about being unable to pursue their professional ambitions. Phillip discussed closing down his business due to the physical aggression he had sustained from his partner.

“So, I had a van that was smashed up and my foot was broken and I had a business and I couldn’t do any of my work so I was handing it on to other people and I ended up losing a lot of customers and... with the damage to my van and stuff. So I ended up folding it up, closing it down, and she was very happy about that. [laughs]” - Phillip

Some of the men discussed how their female partners intentionally isolated them from their friends and family. Abusive female partners would vocalise their disapproval of anyone close to the men, or would attempt to create barriers, such as keeping the men busy with other priorities. However, not all of the men believed that their partners were solely to blame for the isolation they experience. Some men explained that the isolation could also be a result of dedicating themselves to their family and their careers.

“It’s never quite as simple as any one thing, I reckon, and it’s a combination of a number of things. And just the fact that your life is so busy when you’re a young parent, and that I was so taken up with work as well. I mean, it takes all your time and your energy up. I mean, again, you need to have that for friendships, to put... to put that into it, and if that’s all used up, then, kinda hard to maintain those friendships.” - Alex

Despite experiencing a range of physical injuries and sometimes severe physical aggression, the men reported that the psychological aggression they experienced had the most harmful consequences for them and took the longest amount of time to heal from.

“A lot of women who have experienced both actually say the psychological abuse is harder to get over than the physical abuse. Physical scars heal more quickly. And I still carry effects of it. I don’t think I’m healed. I can rationalise it a lot. But I’m in no way healed from that.” - Erik

Though the aggression had a multitude of direct and indirect consequences for the men, they also reported that the abuse was not solely responsible for these harms. Men described other stresses in their lives – unrelated to the abuse – that added to their problems and compounded the effects of the abuse.

“I kind of felt worn down, because I was working six and seven days a week. I was working self-employed, doing what I do, and I was working on the house all the time, and we were building an extension - I was trying to placate her, you know, make the house a bit bigger. And we had young children, so, kind of perfect storm territory, really. You know, quite big stresses.” - Alex

3.2 Spillover Effects for Children

The aggression did not only impact on the men, but reportedly had short-term and long-term consequences for their children. Despite trying to limit what their children saw, men often reported that their children witnessed aggression and conflict that occurred between them and their partner.

“It was just really upsetting to me, because I could, you know, I’d look at the kids and go... and they were, because they were so little at that stage, it... it just was really hurtful to me. You know, I could see how it was affecting them and just thinking, ‘Oh, you know, this is, just isn’t gonna work.’” - Alex

Some of the men reported that their female intimate partners were abusive to their children, too. Children could be indirectly placed in harm’s way due to mothers not being

mindful of their actions (such as throwing objects or nearly jamming children's fingers in slammed doors), or mothers could be physically and/or verbally aggressive towards children. Some of the children also experienced neglect from their mothers. David discussed how his partner frequently disregarded their daughter's wellbeing:

"Taking the kid out for shopping, not buckling her in. [...] Leaving her in soiled nappies the whole day. [...] Her getting baby rashes and everything, you know, just...." - David

Some of the men reported that their children chose sides between their parents. Some of the children chose their mother's side, even when they had witnessed their mother be aggressive towards the men. However, other children supported the men through the abuse.

"I think they were very much taking [Partner]'s side. My daughter, [Daughter], once, I was saying to her, you know, "Your mum hasn't been very nice to me," and she said, "I won't believe that." I said, "Well, I'll get mum to come inside and, you know, she'll tell you." And she said, "I don't care what mum says, I still won't believe it."" - Erik

"And the second eldest daughter, she supported me through the whole thing and, you know, she even... because she doesn't have anything to do with her mother at the moment either, 'cause she's had a lot of mental and verbal abuse over the years from her and... but she's been a big support." - Phillip

For some of the children, witnessing aggression eventually led to them emulating similar types of aggression towards their parents and/or siblings.

"And that's the worst thing for me as a father... [...] ...is to then have those violent acts given to me. [...] ...so, for [Daughter] to do it to me." - William

"But I think that's had an impact on the... from the violence, from the act of, bullying, [Partner] trying to bully, physically bully me because, [Daughter 1] did that same thing to [Daughter 2], so [Daughter 2]'s actually been subjected to quite a lot of bullying, verbal [1.34.23], kicking, booting, hitting, bitching, just that... just the edging it on, edging it on to try and bring her down." - Liam

4. Breaking Free

This theme describes how men progressed to leaving the abusive relationship, and their subsequent experiences post-separation. Four subthemes were identified, which described the process of drawing a line, men's experiences of post-separation abuse, loves strong pull maintaining their attachments to their abusive partner, and how men put the pieces together.

4.1 Drawing a Line

For many of the men, the decision to “draw a line” with the abuse and terminate the relationship was a gradual process. Despite having a multitude of reasons to stay in the relationship, the aggression men were experiencing also began to dissolve some of these reasons over time. Some of the men reported eventually feeling more disconnected from their partner as a result of the abuse.

“She would just change quite a lot and I felt like she was... I was getting further and further away. [...] I was doing everything while she would be a separate person and I felt a drift coming on board.” - David

Although the men reported staying with their partners for the sake of their children, they also reported reaching a point where they recognised the aggression could be harmful to the children's safety and wellbeing. Men's concerns focused around the children accidentally or intentionally being harmed, and/or how witnessing the aggression would affect their children developmentally.

“That's why I couldn't see it really working out, because I just couldn't stomach having that around children, and I know for a fact how, um, insidious that is, in terms of the way it affects children, and the latest research about children in New Zealand. It's... the main point was how toxic that is, you know, people think it's better to stay together, but in fact it's quite harmful for children to be around all that sort of toxicity.” - Alex

While men did not initially realise that their partner's behaviours were abusive, recognising their partner's double standards did facilitate some recognition of the

inappropriateness of their partner's behaviours. Men identified examples of their partner not holding themselves to the same high standards; a form of hypocrisy that reinforced to the men that they were being treated unfairly.

"Yeah, I wasn't allowed my patched friends, yet she was allowed friends that — even though they weren't patched, they had [1.32.08] friends that were. By that point I realised that, you know, she had just systematically isolated me. And now I'm stuck and I don't know how to get out." - Julien

Men also recognised the inappropriateness of their partner's abuse through role reversal, realising that if they had done the same thing to their partner, that would be viewed as unacceptable and they would be condemned for it.

"I just felt that that was unacceptable and I kept telling her, I said... when she first... the first one, I said, 'Hang on, if I did that to you, you'd be the first one on the phone to that but it's okay for you to do it?' and I think that resonated in her but there was still no apology." - Liam

Education helped some of the men understand their experiences of aggression and identify that they might be experiencing abuse. Learning about different types of aggression or hearing about similar experiences from other men helped men recognise that what they were experiencing could be classified as violence or abuse.

"I just don't think I really understood it, to be honest with you. That's where a friend of mine helped me quite a lot. He showed me some stuff, some talks on the internet and psychological, sort of research about the psychological and emotional abuse kind of stuff. [...] So, I started to understand it a bit more. But, yeah, I think I kind of pretty much knew it wasn't okay, or it wasn't good, but... Yeah, really I was just living with it." - Alex

Towards the end of the relationship, some of the men recognised that the behaviours they were experiencing could be described as abusive. Though men reported that they knew the aggression was not okay earlier in the relationship, the harms associated with the relationship made the abuse more salient to the men.

"No, towards the end. So, within the last five years I would say to [Partner], "This is psychological abuse. I'm enduring psychological abuse." "Bullshit," she'd say. "Bullshit." [...] Well, yeah, it absolutely was psychological abuse, emotional abuse, whatever way... whatever way you wanna call it, um, and very harmful." - Erik

As the abuse persisted over time, men also began to lose hope that their partners would cease being aggressive towards them. Dean described how the realisation that the abuse was unlikely to desist encouraged him to leave the relationship:

"I had made a vow that I wouldn't go back until there was at least some recognition that we were having major, major issues and that she needed to change. And I didn't get that at all. [...] I couldn't... we couldn't keep going on like this. It wasn't getting through." - Dean

Due to the persistent nature of the abuse, men reported becoming increasingly fed up with the aggression and that the relationship eventually became untenable. All of the men reported separating from their partners, at least once, to end the aggression. Some of the men reported going through multiple break-ups before deciding to permanently terminate the relationship.

"We worked on reconciling but I came back and I... and I just found myself working even more, working harder to try and please her and in her head it was I've done all the wrong, you've gotta do it right. And it's like me, it's going, hang on, you actually need to start contributing, because this is how we were the last time." - Liam

For some of the men, the idea of terminating the relationship had been on their minds for quite some time before they decided to go through with it.

"I drew the line this year, [Year], I was in the kitchen cooking tea... [...] I was cooking tea and [Partner] ran across the room and punched me very hard on the arm. [...] [sigh] and it was... that was quite... that was it. [...] And I've been having thoughts about this is it for quite a long time." - William

Although most of the men broke up with their partners due to the abuse, their (now former) female partners continued to be aggressive towards them post-separation. Men

reported that the nature of the abuse changed following their break-up and/or the severity of the aggression further escalated.

“It just really escalated. And so she went on a... on quite a campaign to isolate me. So, I found quite a few friends just kind of turn their backs and, it became very isolating, so it was another level of... so, the abuse didn't stop after the relationship [laughs] stopped. It actually ramped up, for quite a while afterwards.” - Patrick

In response to this ongoing aggression, men used different types of barriers to limit their partner's aggression. Some men enforced healthier boundaries with their now ex-partner and refused to give in to her demands. However, this strategy was ineffective at preventing their ex-partner's aggression.

“I said, “Well, no, I'm not going to give you any more money, because I've given you money and you haven't given me the receipts as you said you would, you know, to be fair and show me that you were spending it on what you said the requirements were for and stuff.” [...] And so, then this kept going on and on [...] I could see what... it was just escalating.” - Alex

Turning to legal services was another avenue that men used to limit post-separation aggression. Men would apply for parenting orders to ensure access to their children, apply for protection orders, or would file complaints with Police about their ex-partner.

“And eventually, after one situation where she lashed out at me, I lost it with her. It's like, “No, you're just not taking this on board.” So, I filed a letter with the police, [Police Station], who wanted to press charges and follow through with it.” - Liam

Another boundary utilised by some of the men was to limit their interactions with their abusive ex-partner. Men reported that they would only talk to their abusive ex-partners out of necessity or civility.

“I haven't spoken to her since my daughter's funeral and, um, that wasn't great, you know. It was like she blamed me for that which was just not fair and untrue, you know, completely untrue. [...] I haven't spoken to her since. I've made no effort to speak to her. I don't really want to, you know.” - Leo

4.2 Post-Separation Abuse

Ongoing post-separation abuse was commonplace for the men who had separated from their abusive female partners. Parental alienation, in particular, featured heavily in men's accounts of post-separation abuse. This included women manipulating their children against their fathers, as well as attempting to separate father/child relationships by not keeping to informal arrangements. Men felt that their children were a medium for their ex-partners to continue exerting control over their lives.

"I had planned to go away to [Town] for I think about three or four days. This was over the summer holidays. And [Partner] was basically insistent that she come with us and when I made it clear that, you know, she wasn't going [laughs] to come to [Town] with us, then she basically prevented me from having my daughter for that whole time." - Dean

"I had been giving her amounts of money. Often, you know, she'd demand it, or it... It often has been using the children as kind of like a bargaining tool. "Give. Give me this amount of money, or else you're not going to be able to see the children or have them for the weekend," type of thing." - Alex

In some cases, abusive ex-partners found new romantic partners that were also aggressive towards the men. Chris discussed how his abusive ex-partner and her new girlfriend would abuse not only him, but also his children.

"You know, when they told me about that, the "[Partner's Girlfriend] — one, two, three, four, and [Partner's Girlfriend] wouldn't stop, and even mummy said, 'Stop'." And [Partner's Girlfriend] wasn't stopping, you know. [Son] is just stopped urinating on me, for shit's sake." - Chris

Men subsequently continued to be concerned for the safety and wellbeing of their children post-separation, including being fearful about how the parental alienation and their partner's ongoing aggression would affect their children developmentally. Some of the men were also worried about their children being influenced by their abusive ex-partners and exhibiting similar traits to her.

“The kids have taken on traits of her now and they’ve become same in some—some regards which I think is really bad in terms of their own personal development and their own personal journey because they’re becoming very insular on themselves rather than others.” - Liam

Men also found that legal-administrative abuse became more prominent post-separation. Men’s abusive ex-partners would manipulate the biases in various professional services and agencies to facilitate separating men from their children. Some of the women would even falsely accuse men of being the abusive partner. These false accusations often described similar aggressive behaviours that the women had been exhibiting towards the men.

“She went to Women’s Refuge and said she was in this abusive relationship. It’s like, the whole thing was projected onto me. So, everything she did to me, she wrote up this statement, and it was like, this family court thing. And I was just gobsmacked. [...] Everything she’s said about the behaviour, the erraticness, the elevation, was exactly what she was.” - Chris

Some of the men reported that professional services, including Police and counsellors, treated them unfairly and favoured their female partners over them. They found that this added to the abuse, as the services could reinforce the aggression that they were already experiencing.

“She’d obviously chewed their ear and told me I was no... told the police that I was no good, and that I wasn’t stepping up, living up to, you know, any sort of, decent father kind of material. And so, the duty sergeant gave me a bit of a yabbering to.” - Alex

4.3 Loves Continuing Pull

Despite the ongoing aggression, some of the men still reported feeling attached and sympathetic towards their abusive ex-partners. Men continued to praise their partners and make excuses for their aggressive tendencies; complimenting their intelligence, their professional abilities, and/or their role as a mother.

"She's not a bad person. She's not some sort of evil monster that was trying to do... she was trying to be a good wife if you... if you'll excuse the expression, and I was trying to be a good husband, but something was messing it up, you know, and she didn't know what was messing." - Erik

Some of the men also reported feelings of loyalty and commitment to their partner, which made it difficult for them to report her to legal services.

"I filed a complaint at the police. They wanted to prosecute and I went if I prosecute she has no chance of getting income, she won't get a job, she won't get registration and my kids miss out. So, I can put up and shut up or I can go and prosecute. Hindsight I should have prosecuted because it might have made a big difference to her." - Liam

Even when men did pursue legal action against their partners, they sometimes found that their partners ignored and disregarded the legal boundaries that had been put in place. Men felt especially disheartened when they discovered that the Police could not do much to enforce parenting and safety orders.

"I mean, I actually felt worse to be honest. I mean, if the police can't do anything at all, you know, they can't... they can't sort of try impose a parenting order, you know. [...] I guess the first time I did call them with the... I did hope that they might actually be able to do something, you know, be able to sort of like, you know, try to get a changeover so that I could have my daughter for that weekend. So it was kind of demoralising when that didn't happen." - Dean

Despite ongoing attachment and loyalty to their partners, overall the majority of the men expressed that they were reluctant to rekindle their relationship with their partner. The continued aggression they were experiencing and the mental toll the abuse had taken on them were common reasons for men to be reluctant to give their partners another chance.

"I think she's probably got a lot of unresolved issues going on in the background that she needs to sort out and this is why I've decided not to, you know, resume our [laughs] relationship at the moment because I feel that these issues need to be addressed, you know,

otherwise we're just going back to the same old where it's all my fault and she's justified." - Theo

4.4 Putting the Pieces Together

Following the abusive relationship, many of the men struggled to make sense out of the aggression they had experienced. Some of the men expressed ongoing confusion about what was real and fake in their relationship and felt as if they had been deceived.

"I swear, it's like she lied to me our entire relationship. Like, I look back now, this is why it's so hard, I look back, and for seven years, I don't think I ever knew this soul at all. And to have that feeling, to be so wrong - in a job that I do, and a spiritualness that I feel like I hold - it's just... that's what it... I... it does my head in. [...] I can't process it, 'cause I don't know what I'm dealing with." - Chris

Due to this ongoing confusion, some of the men sought out answers to explain their partner's aggression after the relationship. Seeking out formal and informal education about abuse, visiting clairvoyants, and talking to professional counsellors were some of the ways that men tried to gain further insight and understanding into the abusive relationship.

"I don't have the answer. I've been to some, some spiritual people to try and give me some answers of what's going, you know? 'Cause I, like I say, I don't know her. I've been living a lie for seven years. I don't know. [...] I went to a clairvoyant, she's like, "Just all I see, [Chris], is a warrior instinct, just a reaction." Just a reaction." - Chris

Despite the confusion, leaving the relationship did help men to reflect on and better understand their experiences. Looking back helped men to identify key moments where they believed they should have behaved differently or identified problem behaviours.

"I shouldn't have gotten involved with her, you know. She was dealing with the loss of her brother and it was a bad move, you know, and if I'd known then what I know now I would not have done it, you know. But what can I do?" - Liam

"I think I was just so tangled up in the whole situation, that it was only really. .. I was only really able to start to look at it afterwards. [...] Just so intricately tangled up in the web of it all that it's only afterwards that it... you can unravel it." - Alex

Men also reported ongoing feelings of self-blame for the abuse, feeling that they were responsible for the aggression and should have done more to prevent it occurring. Men could regret their inaction (such as not reporting incidents to the Police), not responding to the aggression differently, or not leaving the relationship sooner.

"And, yeah, she jumped on my foot and broke my foot and then, yeah, I went to the hospital, all that sort of stuff. The police came. I said nothing. I sort of just covered it up. I should have said something. I should have done something about it then." - Phillip

For some men, their attempts to understand their experiences were further impeded by difficulties labelling their experiences as "abuse." The labels "abuse" and "violence" meant something different to them.

"I still find it hard sort of talking about that, sort of saying that it's violence — even the psychological stuff. [...] It's still ingrained in me, the word violence is physical, it's just — or sexual. [...] I still... you know, but, like, psychological violence, when people say that, it's like, well, hang on, how's psychological stuff violent? Like, how is the word... you know, I think about the word, the literal meaning of it. And it just doesn't..." - Reuben

Despite finding it difficult to make sense of the abuse, many of the men found meaning in the relationship by discussing the personal growth that had followed. The men reported that they learned valuable life lessons from the abuse, which improved their self-awareness and helped them to grow as a person.

"It was quite a journey for me I think to just to really come to accept that there were things of course that I can't control [laughs] and... and I think in some way it was... it was brilliant training [laughs] that life gave me, to... for me to take back something inside of me that I had given out, you know, to other people to determine, you know, the value of my... of my intentions or, you know, what I can... what I can do." - Patrick

Discussion

The present study explored how thirteen men with children experienced the process of IPA. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013), whereby patterns of meaning were identified across the interviews to understand men's lived experiences of IPA and how the abuse plays out over time. By doing so, the project aims to provide a voice to an at-risk population that has been largely neglected in research and practice (Dixon & Graham-Kevan, 2011; Laskey et al. 2019). Four themes were identified that captured common patterns across each individual's experience of IPA. These themes were *The emotional pull*, *Stuck*, *Negative impacts of abuse*, and *Breaking free*.

Summary of Findings

The emotional pull consisted of two subthemes, which described how positive beginnings facilitated men becoming emotionally invested in their relationships. The early stages of a relationship are theorised to be the easiest period to leave an abusive partner, as control has not yet been established over the victim (Ciurra, 2018). However, the present study's findings suggest that recognising the *need* to leave an abusive partner during the early stages was difficult for the men. Largely positive beginnings that were free of aggression created a genuine attachment between men and their partners, which subsequently led to them overlooking any "odd" or "inappropriate" behaviours. Similar to Migliaccio's (2002) findings, it was only once men had made a significant commitment – thus incentivising men to stay with their partner – that a female partner's aggression became apparent. This study expands upon these findings by also identifying that lower-level aggression was occurring before these commitments. Thus, there is an opportunity before commitments occur for men to recognise "red flags" for future aggression.

By the time the aggression had become noticeable in the relationship, men were already emotionally invested in their female partners and their children. Previous qualitative studies have found that men persist in abusive relationships due to a strong sense of commitment to partners and their family, fears of being separated from their children, and concerns for their children's well-being (Bates & Liu, 2020b; Corbally, 2014; Lien & Lorentzen, 2019; Migliaccio, 2002; Morgan & Wells, 2016). Similarly, men in the present study reported that they were committed to making the relationship work for the sake of their partner and their children. In a qualitative systematic review of research into women's experiences of love in abusive relationships, women experienced a similar honeymoon period with their male partners where they became romantically attached to their male partners (Pocock, Jackson, & Bradbury-Jones, 2020). Alongside feelings of fear and being hopeful that their partner would change, this romantic attachment was one reason that women reportedly stayed in the abusive relationship – particularly as women felt committed to the relationship, their partner, and their children (Pocock et al. 2020). Likewise, men's beliefs about what it meant to be a “good” husband and father contributed to them tolerating the abuse and staying in the relationship. The emotional bond that the men had built with their female partners during the honeymoon period and the men's commitment to their children meant they were reluctant to leave the relationship.

In addition to being invested in their partners and their children, a series of other factors delayed the men leaving the relationship. *Stuck* outlined the many different factors that prolonged and maintained the abusive relationship, which were divided into five subthemes named *the changing nature and severity of abuse*, *excuses*, *problem-solving*, *the cycle of appeasement*, and *gendered responses to aggression*. Overall, the findings from this section fit broadly with Walker's (2017) theory about learned helplessness in battered women, where unsuccessful attempts to control the violence would create self-blame,

passivity and a reduced ability to consider leaving the relationship if the aggression continued. The unpredictable and persistent nature of the aggression created this learned helplessness, leading women to believe that they could not control the abuse and should instead find ways to cope with aggression. Similarly, men went through a process of finding ways to deal with and prevent the aggression, which delayed their decisions to leave.

Following a significant commitment between men and their partners, a variety of physical, sexual and psychological aggression emerged in the relationship following a significant commitment between men and their partners, which has been previously identified across numerous studies (Bates, 2019; Bates & Liu, 2020b; Machado et al. 2017; Migliaccio, 2002; Morgan & Wells, 2016; Tilbrook et al. 2010). Similar to previous qualitative studies, these varied forms of aggression did not begin at the same time, but gradually emerged and changed over the course of the abusive relationship (Allen-Collinson, 2009; Dixon et al. 2020; Morgan & Wells, 2016). However, the current study did not find that abuse always followed the same progression from verbal into physical aggression that was outlined in Bates & Liu's (2020b) study. Some of the men, such as Chris, reported that the physical aggression occurred well before any psychological aggression became apparent, and that this physical violence could occur suddenly and in the absence of any "egg-shelling" period. Nonetheless, all of the men reported that aggression escalated over time. This gradual escalation of violence facilitated men tolerating more and more severe forms of abuse, mirroring findings from past studies and the process of normalisation that was described by Dixon and colleagues (2020; Lien & Lorentzen, 2019; Morgan & Wells, 2016). Not realising that their female partner's behaviours could be classed as "abusive" further hindered men's ability to recognise the aggression for what it was and set appropriate boundaries (Bates & Liu, 2020b; Lien & Lorentzen, 2019; Migliaccio, 2002; Sita & Dear, 2019). An inability to recognise their experiences as IPA coupled with the gradual normalisation of aggression led

to some men reaching a point where the violence had become so entrenched and severe, they were unsure how the aggression had even managed to reach such a point.

Similar to previous studies, men provided a plethora of excuses and justifications for their partner's aggression. Though men did not immediately recognise their partner's behaviours as "abuse," they knew their partner's aggression was inappropriate. However, men's emotional investment in their partner facilitated them attempting to understand or explain the aggression. These rationalisations ranged from internal factors affecting their partner (such as mental health issues, hormonal changes, past trauma and their childhood experiences) to external influences on their partner (such as men blaming themselves for their partner's abuse, stressful events, and people outside the relationship manipulating their partners) (Dixon et al. 2020; Migliaccio, 2002). "Jekyll-Hyde" behaviours were also reported, which are believed to make acceptance of the abuse easier (Migliaccio, 2002). Justifying abuse facilitates men overlooking the aggression and impedes their ability to exit the relationship, subsequently leading them to "accept" the abuse that they are experiencing.

Excusing aggression can also encourage the belief that there is a cause for the aggression that is capable of being "fixed," as outlined in the subtheme of *problem-solving*. Men reported using a wide variety of coping strategies to withstand the abuse, including alcohol use, throwing themselves into their work, and disassociating, all of which have been found in previous studies (Allen-Collinson, 2009; Lien & Lorentzen, 2019; Migliaccio, 2002). Dixon and colleagues (2020) also described how feelings of self-blame led to men "solving" aggression by managing and monitoring their own behaviours. The current study builds upon these findings by exploring a variety of other ways that men would problem solve the aggression, such as trying to communicate with their partners about the aggression, seeking advice from their partner's family, and/or encouraging their partners to seek help from professional services. By addressing perceived causes of abuse, men were hopeful that

their partner was capable of changing and that the aggression would cease, as found in past studies (Bates & Liu, 2020b; Lien & Lorentzen, 2019; Migliaccio, 2002). In most cases, these strategies were unsuccessful at stopping the aggression, and could even facilitate further aggression against the men. Men's attempts at problem-solving were thus largely unsuccessful and the aggression continued.

Another commonly reported method of preventing aggression was appeasement (Dixon et al. 2020; Migliaccio, 2002). Our current study expanded on prior findings by exploring how appeasement facilitated men becoming further entrenched in the abuse, increasing their stress levels as they tried to anticipate their partner's aggression and intensely monitored their own behaviours (Allen-Collinson, 2009; Dixon et al. 2020; Migliaccio, 2002). Similar to studies conducted with women, men subsequently became attuned to signs of aggression and experienced egg-shelling periods where they were unable to anticipate *when* or *what* would happen, but knew that *something* would happen (Abrahams & Humphreys, 2007). Due to the limited effectiveness of this appeasement, men became trapped in a cycle of doing their best to keep their partner happy, their partner inevitably finding another reason to "blow up," and then working even harder to appease their partner and prevent further aggression. This created a vicious cycle that led to feelings of helplessness for many of the men. The fear and anxiety experienced by men as they tried to prevent aggression also contradicts findings that men do not experience fear in their abusive relationships (Nybergh et al. 2016), and mirrors prior studies that indicate men are afraid of many aspects of IPA – but do not express fear for their life (Brooks et al. 2020; Sita & Dear, 2019).

Men often reported not knowing what the "best" response was during an aggressive incident. They felt that their options were limited, particularly due to gendered norms that condemned men's use of violence against women. A pattern of demand-withdraw tactics was

reported to be the “safest” option for men but was not always successful at ending an aggressive episode. Physically defending themselves was not a viable option for many of the men, either, due to fears of inflicting harm and social taboos about hitting women (Allen-Collinson, 2009; Bates & Liu,; Dixon et al. 2020; Lien & Lorentzen, 2019; Migliaccio, 2002). However, some men did eventually strike back or restrain their partners (Lien & Lorentzen, 2019; Migliaccio, 2002), though our study found such responses only occurred after prolonged exposure to aggression and were accompanied with persistent feelings of shame. As most men did not retaliate, this meant that the nature of the abuse was largely one-sided; contradictory to assertions that men are unlikely to experience a pattern of violence and control from their female partners, and that female aggression largely occurs in the context of VR (Johnson, 2008; Ali & Naylor, 2013). Men found that there was very little that they could do in these scenarios and subsequently felt defenceless during aggression; with some men reporting that they could do nothing but “accept” the abuse and wait until it was over.

Negative impacts of abuse detailed the many negative consequences that the abuse had for men and their children, which was separated into two subthemes: *negative impacts on men* and *spillover effects on children*. The numerous negative impacts of abuse are well-documented in existing research, with men in this study commonly reporting that they had experienced long-term physical injuries and health complications, symptoms of depression and suicidal ideation, erosion of men's self-esteem, and social isolation (Bates & Liu; 2020a; Krug et al. 2002; Lagdon et al. 2014; Machado et al. 2017; Migliaccio, 2002; Perryman & Appleton, 2016). However, some of the men reported that the abuse was not the sole reason for their experiences of social isolation. Being too busy with work and family commitments reportedly made it difficult for fathers to maintain their relationships with others. Parenthood can reduce the amount of time that a person has for other activities, which can create feelings

of social isolation (Levesque, Bisson, Charton, & Fernet, 2020). Similarly, some men reported that it was the cumulative effect of the abuse and unrelated stressors in their lives that significantly impacted on their well-being. Thus, when developing relevant practices and policies for male survivors of IPA, it is important to keep in mind the wider context that the abuse is taking place in; particularly for fathers who have competing commitments and generally may find maintaining their social relationships more difficult once they have children.

While the current study did not include the perspectives of men's children, most of the men believed that their children had been directly or indirectly impacted by the abuse. As found in past studies, men could be abused in front of their children, despite their best efforts to limit what the children witnessed (Corbally, 2014; Dixon et al. 2020). As a result, the men in this study found that their children tended to choose a side between their parents. Given the varied impacts of witnessing IPA on children that has been documented in prior studies (e.g. Edleson, 2001; Sternberg et al. 2006; Wood & Sommers, 2011), being aware of children in abusive households is important, particularly as the longer a child is exposed to IPA the more likely they are to develop adjustment problems (Vu et al. 2016). Thus, early intervention is essential for children in households where IPA is occurring.

In some cases, a female intimate partner was also abusive towards men's children, whereby women could be neglectful, physically violent, and/or psychologically aggressive. Prior studies have found significant overlap between IPA in households and different forms of child maltreatment (Edleson, 1999; Dixon, Hamilton-Giachritsis, Browne, & Ostapuk, 2007; Hartley, 2004; McGuigan & Pratt, 2001; Osofsky, 2003). Being raised in a physically violent home can also increase the likelihood of later IPA perpetration for male children and IPA victimisation for female children (Smith-Marek et al. 2015), though some studies contest that men are not more likely to perpetrate IPA if they witness female-to-male violence in

their family of origin (Eriksson & Mazerolle, 2015). Though assessing long-term impacts of witnessing IPA was outside the scope of the current study, some of the men did report that their children began emulating similar types of aggression to one or both of their parents, and sometimes their siblings, too. Prior research has suggested that witnessing IPA in childhood may increase a person's likelihood of exhibiting other forms of aggression, such as bullying, and IPV perpetration in adulthood (e.g. Voisin & Hong, 2012; Kimber, Adham, McTavish & MacMillan, 2018), with some theoretical frameworks believing that children can "learn" aggression from their parents (Mihalic & Elliott, 1997; Frieze, Newhill & Fusco, 2020). The cumulative effect of witnessing IPA and experiencing maltreatment also produces a greater likelihood of children experiencing internalising and externalising problems, depending on the child's age (Brown, Rhoades, Marti, & Lewis, 2021; Sternberg et al. 2006). As such, this study draws further attention to the importance of services assessing for child maltreatment in reported cases of IPA. Furthermore, the study highlights the need to acknowledge that some women may be mistreating their child not because they are victims of IPA, but instead the perpetrators.

The final theme, ***Breaking free***, identified four subthemes labelled *drawing a line*, *post-separation abuse*, *loves strong pull*, and *putting the pieces together*. This theme described the factors that led up to men breaking up with their partners, and how the aggression played out afterwards as men endeavoured to move forwards with their lives. The findings broadly fit into past studies about women's experiences of leaving an abusive partner, whereby the process was often nonlinear and complicated by conflicting emotions about their abuser and the effects of the abuse (Childress, Panchanadeswaran, & Joshi, 2021; Abrahams & Humphreys, 2007; Scheffer Lindgren & Renck, 2008). This study expands upon these findings by outlining similarities and differences to men's experiences of leaving abusive female partners.

Leaving an abusive partner can be a long and dynamic process (Abrahams & Humphreys, 2007; Childress et al. 2021; Scheffer Lindgren & Renck, 2008). Men reported becoming increasingly fed-up with aggression over time, particularly as their partner's showed no signs of desisting from the abuse. For the men in the present study, "drawing a line" with the abuse and leaving their female partners was a gradual decision that men could spend a prolonged amount of time deliberating on. As found in previous studies (e.g. Hellemans et al. 2015; Panuzio & DiLillo, 2010), men became gradually disconnected and dissatisfied with their relationship due to the abuse. The persistence and escalating severity of the violence, recognising the harmful impacts of the abuse on men and their children, and becoming educated about abusive relationships were all reported "turning points" that have been identified in previous studies. Despite only 2.6% of Murray and colleagues' (2015) participants identifying as male, our study added to previous qualitative findings that these turning points also commonly feature in men's accounts of abuse (Allen-Collinson, 2009; Lien & Lorentzen, 2019; Nayback-Beebe & Yoder, 2012). Furthermore, gradually recognising that their partner was not going to change facilitated men leaving the relationship, as reported in Migliaccio's (2002) study and research with women (Abrahams & Humphreys, 2007; Childress et al. 2021). However, the study adds to previous findings by identifying that ending the relationship was not enough to end the abuse that men were experiencing. Men continued to search for ways to establish boundaries with their partners post-separation to limit the persisting abuse, particularly as they had ongoing contact with their partners due to their shared child(ren).

Accounts of post-separation abuse commonly featured children being a medium through which female ex-partners would continue to control the men (Bates, 2019; Bates & Liu, 2020b; Corbally, 2014; Dixon et al. 2020; Morgan & Wells, 2016). Limiting men's contact with their children, manipulating and damaging father-child relationships, and

instigating lengthy custody battles were all examples of the parental alienation that men were experiencing post-separation. Women could also facilitate this alienation through legal-admin abuse (Tilbrook et al. 2010), with services often being sympathetic towards the mother and her false allegations of the men being the abusive party. Women making false accusations of abuse against the men has also been documented in past studies (Machado et al. 2017; Morgan & Wells, 2016) and highlights the importance of a fair and inclusive response in the legal system and help-seeking agencies. Existing research has documented the perpetuation of harm and secondary abuse that men experience when formal services are biased and unsupportive of them (Douglas, Hines, & McCarthy, 2012; Machado et al. 2020; Walker et al. 2019). Given the importance of fatherhood to abused men (Corbally, 2014) and the effects that alienation can have on children (Bentley & Matthewson, 2020; Poustie et al. 2018) it is important that these biases in the system are addressed for the benefits of both men and their children.

Studies on women's decisions to leave abusive partners have documented that leaving is not a straightforward nor linear process, sometimes with multiple instances of terminating and reconciling the relationship (Childress et al. 2021; Khaw & Hardesty, 2007). This was similarly found in the experiences of men in this study, whereby ongoing feelings of self-blame and attachment to their ex-partners could tether men to the relationship. The emotional attachment that was established earlier in the relationship persisted at later stages, even once men had left the relationship. Despite this, at the time of the interviews, most of the men expressed that they were reluctant to rekindle the relationship unless they had some indication that the relationship would be different the next time around. This belief and desire for female partners' capacity for change appeared throughout men's accounts of abuse, and was an important factor in men's decisions about staying, leaving, or re-entering the abusive relationship. However, theories on women's decisions to leave abusive relationships highlight

the complex nature of this process, with a variety of individual, familial, and sociocultural factors shaping their decisions (Barrios et al. 2020; Heim et al. 2018). Thus, decisions about leaving – and staying out of – an abusive relationship appear to be a complex process that warrants further exploration in research.

Once out of their abusive relationships, men committed a notable amount of time to “making sense” of their experiences of IPA. Some of the men continued to struggle with labelling their partner as “abusive,” and sought answers about why the abuse had happened. For women recovering from abusive relationships, accessing information about how their experiences could be defined as violence and abuse was perceived to be helpful for moving on (Childress et al. 2021; Flasch, Murray, & Crowe, 2017). The present study expands these findings to acknowledge that making sense of abusive experiences was also important to the men, who expressed ongoing confusion about the *how* and the *why* of the abusive relationship. Prior studies have highlighted the importance of promoting knowledge about female-to-male violence and using appropriate language to help men gain autonomy and agency, thus breaking the pattern of abuse and aiding men’s recovery (Dixon & Graham-Kevan, 2020; Dixon et al. 2020; McCarrick et al. 2016; Walker et al. 2019). Thus, providing education about the gender inclusivity and the nature of IPA may be beneficial for men to understand their experiences of abuse and aid their recovery process.

Furthermore, men often talked about the lessons they had learned from the relationship and the personal growth they had experienced. A review of studies into women’s psychological growth following abusive relationships found that positive changes in self-perception (such as increased self-awareness and self-confidence) was one positive outcome experienced after IPA (Ulloa et al. 2015). Improving personal agency, self-reliance and self-esteem was also a particularly important part of women’s recovery process in the aftermath of IPA, (Anderson, Renner, & Danis, 2012; Childress et al. 2021; Flasch et al. 2017). What

benefits men during the recovery process has not been as explored to the same extent as women. However, focusing on educating men about the nature of IPA, improving personal agency, and using appropriate language appear to be important avenues for future research to explore.

Recommendations for policy and practice

The present study, along with broader literature, has described the emergence and maintenance of IPA over the course of men's abusive relationships, as well as men's experiences of moving forwards post-separation. Given the significant harms associated with IPA and the self-perpetuating cycles that men can become entrapped in, it is important that relevant policies and services are available to address the needs of these men and their children. Findings in the present study highlighted several points on how policies and practices could be informed and implemented.

First, the importance of early prevention has been identified. Men reported how abuse gradually unfolded over the course of the relationship, overlooking early "red flags" of aggression and subsequently becoming "stuck" with their abusive partners for a variety of reasons. Thus, men may benefit from educational programmes and awareness campaigns about IPA. Dating violence programmes are a commonly studied tool to educate young people about healthy relationships and IPA. One meta-analysis looked at 23 dating violence prevention studies delivered to middle and high school students, and found that intervention programmes significantly increased knowledge and decreased approval of dating violence (De La Rue et al. 2017). However, there are concerns about whether changes in knowledge and attitudes result in actual behaviour changes, as these programmes did not reduce incidence rates of dating violence (De La Rue et al. 2017). Furthermore, the extent to which these programmes address men's experiences of IPA and whether attitude changes persist in

adulthood is unclear. However, the importance of outreach programmes presenting a complete picture of IPA – as opposed to a narrow representation that portrays this phenomenon as primarily involving male-to-female violence – has been emphasised in prior research (Espinoza & Warner, 2016).

In terms of intervention, broader awareness campaigns and education about the nature of IPA may be beneficial. A multitude of factors were identified as keeping men “stuck” in the abusive relationship, serving to prolong their exposure to the abuse. Some of the men reported that knowledge that combated their reasons for staying – such as being aware of the harm that could be inflicted on their children – facilitated some of the men’s decisions for leaving. Thus, relevant services, such as healthcare and midwifery, would be in an advantageous position to distribute information to expecting parents about the negative impacts that IPA has on children and relevant information about help-seeking agencies. Greater service accessibility, training and education pertaining to victimisation of males, and dedicated sources for male victims are a previously identified need in IPA services (Espinoza & Warner, 2016).

Many of the men in the present study also spoke about knowing that their partner’s aggression was not “okay.” However, they were initially unaware that the behaviours could be classified as abusive, as men’s situations did not fit their understandings of what IPA looked like. Media campaigns are one avenue that may be beneficial for changing norms around IPA. Prior research has identified several components of media campaigns that facilitate increased awareness and changing norms around responses to IPA (Donovan & Vlais, 2005). While these campaigns were targeted at male perpetrators and female victims of IPA, the development of similar campaigns around men’s experiences of victimisation may be helpful. Additionally, distributing resources that detail the various forms of abuse may combat men’s preconceived notions about what IPA looks like. However, it should be noted

that some of the men reported ongoing difficulties labelling their experiences as violence or abuse even after being educated about IPA. Thus, service providers may need to be mindful about the language they use when advertising their services to men. As prior research has identified similar experiences of abuse help men (and women) recognise the applicability to their own situations, providing concrete examples of behaviours and avoiding labels such as “abuse” and “violence” may facilitate uptake of services from men experiencing IPA.

Finally, experiences of post-separation abuse, particularly legal-admin abuse against the men, highlights the need for services to be more open and gender inclusive to men's experiences of IPA. Improving education and awareness in sectors where men may seek support from – such as legal services – is important so that men who are victimised do not experience secondary abuse from these organisations and agencies. Existing research with women discuss the importance of social support and formal help-seeking support from agencies as being crucial to assisting women (Anderson et al. 2012; Childress et al. 2021; Flasch et al. 2017), and prior studies into men's experiences have documented the importance of help-seeking agencies being responsive and gender inclusive in order to not re-traumatise men that have already been through a difficult experience (Douglas, Hines, & McCarthy, 2012; Lysova et al. 2020; Machado et al. 2016; McCarrick et al. 2016). Given the range of negative impacts already associated with IPA, agencies should be appropriately equipped and educated to mitigate further harm to this population of men.

Limitations and future research

While qualitative studies are a useful approach to exploring and detailing people's lived experiences of a given phenomenon, the process of thematic analysis comes with its own limitations. As acknowledged in the methodology of the present study, the author held their own stereotypes and ideas about IPA that were informed by public perceptions, personal

experiences, and prior education. Although efforts were made to accurately reflect men's personal perceptions and experiences of the process of IPA, it cannot be assumed that implicit beliefs and biases did not influence identified themes and overall findings.

Furthermore, findings from the present study do not necessarily generalise to wider populations. Men who participated in the research were self-selecting and predominantly recruited through help-seeking agencies. Straus and Gelles (1999) have previously pointed out that findings from help-seeking agencies cannot be assumed to be representative of the wider population. Thus, interviewees may have differed from men who declined to participate in an interview or had not approached these agencies. For example, the study does not include the perspectives of men who did not seek help for the IPA – either because they did not feel the abuse was severe enough, did not know where to go, or did not recognise their experiences as abusive. Additionally, all interviewees elected to stay with their female partners for at least a year after experiencing “red flags.” Thus, experiences may differ for men who choose to leave earlier in the relationship. Further studies, therefore, should expand to more general populations to capture the experiences of men outside of these help-seeking samples, potentially through methods such as qualitative online surveys that can reach a wider population (e.g. Walker et al. 2019). Finally, interviews were specifically selected to investigate experiences of unidirectional abuse. The generalisability of the present study's findings to bidirectional abuse is therefore unknown and future research is needed to explore men's experiences in the context of this common form of IPA (Bates, Straus, & Winstok, 2016).

Although the present study identified factors that influenced men's decisions to stay or leave abusive relationships, this was done in the broader scope of the process of abuse. Thus, the present study does not necessarily capture the intricacies and complexities that guided men's decision-making processes. Furthermore, men's recovery process (particularly

in the face of ongoing abuse from their abusive ex-partners) has not been largely explored in the literature. It would be useful to explore other factors that facilitate men's recovery in the aftermath of IPA, besides from education and sense-making of their experiences. As such, further research could be dedicated to questions around the facilitators and barriers for men leaving an abusive relationship, as well as what factors benefit the recovery process and discourage men from re-entering the relationship.

Conclusion

By exploring the lived experiences of thirteen men who lived with children at the time of the abuse, this study demonstrated that men can experience severe aggressive and coercive behaviours that escalate and evolve over time. These experiences of aggression can subsequently have a host of negative impacts on men and their children. In speaking about their experiences, men identified a host of internal and interpersonal factors that maintained the relationship over time, essentially prolonging their exposure to the abuse. Of particular concern is how men get locked into cycles in the abusive relationship, from which further research needs to explore men's decision-making process about staying, leaving and re-entering abusive relationships. Additionally, these findings highlight the difficulties men experience after the relationship, particularly in the form of post-separation abuse and trying to make sense of their experiences afterwards. Thus, the present study adds to a growing body of qualitative literature about men's experiences of IPA; particularly in regards to the emergence, progression and maintenance of abuse during and after the abusive relationship. Greater education and awareness about IPA is an essential component for encouraging early recognition of abuse and facilitate leaving abusive relationships. This growing understanding will need to be incorporated into the development of more gender inclusive approaches to policy, practice, and resources to mitigate harms that abusive relationships can cause men.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Full interview schedule

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Participant Demographic details

Interview #.....

Interview Pseudonym used.....

- Age

- Gender

- Sexuality

- Ethnicity

- Occupation

- Education level achieved

For Māori participants:

Where do you come from?

Do you know your hapu? If so, please say ...

Do you know your iwi? If so, please say ...

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR PEOPLE WHO ARE RECRUITED FOR THEIR VICTIMISATION FROM AN INTIMATE PARTNER

(open ended questions and non-stigmatising language is used to gain the participant's experience rather than researcher led answers – prompts (rounded bullets) may be used where necessary to cover some key material).

Example Introduction

- I am really interested in talking to you today so that I can learn about your experiences with your partner, as I understand it, that you have experienced some aggression in the relationship in the past. Is that correct? Are you happy to talk to me about this?
- So I would like to start by getting to understand a little bit about your relationship with a partner from whom you have experienced some kind of harm. Some people have experiences like this with more than one partner. Is there a particular partner you would you be willing to discuss with me?
- Without telling me their real name, can you tell me a little bit about them?
 - o Partner gender/age/sexuality/ethnicity/occupation/education
- Can you describe what that relationship with this person was like to me?
 - o How long were you with your partner? Are you still together?
 - o What were/are your living arrangement with them?
 - o What was good about it / anything not so good about it?
 - o What did you do together? What did you do separately?
 - o Do you have children together? Step children?
 - What was your relationship like with them?
 - What was your partner's relationship like with them?
- When there was aggression in the relationship, what kinds of things would your partner do to you?

- (prompt about physical aggression, controlling behaviours, sexual coercion and aggression, psychological abuse, weapons, injury)

Exploring a typical event

- I know you have said you have experienced some issues around aggression with your partner. I want you to think about a typical event that would happen
- Can you think of one of these instances and talk me through what this would look like? What happened and what led to this happening?
 - Can you think about the moments when there was aggression between you and your partner? What did they do? What did you do? (prompt about physical aggression, controlling behaviours, sexual coercion and aggression, psychological abuse, weapons, injury)
 - What was happening during the incident?
 - What would happen in the week leading up to this behaviour – does anything stand out as important to you?
 - What about the hour or half hour before?
 - What about immediately before the behaviour took place?
 - How or why did it come to an end?
 - What happened directly after the incident took place?
 - How often would this kind of thing happen?

Children

- Where any children present at the time of the incidents? If so how do you think this event appeared to them?
 - What may they have heard and/or seen?

- Were they caught up in any aggression?
 - Where there any consequences for the child(ren)
- How did this affect you and partner?

Explanation

- Why do you think this kind of event happened?

Understanding their own experiences over time

- When these things first happened, how did you feel about them?
 - Did you think it was ok – or not ok?
 - What did you call them?
 - for example, did you label them abuse or did you refer it in some other way?
 - Did you justify it in any way? If so, how?
- How do you feel about it now?
 - Do you think it was ok – or not ok?
 - What do you call those behaviours now?
 - How did you get to the point of understanding this behaviour as abusive?
 - How would you explain it to someone now?

Most serious and memorable event

- I want you to think about an incident that took place that really sticks in your mind as the worst or more serious event

- What happened?
 - What did your partner do? What did you do? (prompt about physical aggression, controlling behaviours, sexual coercion and aggression, psychological abuse, weapons, injury)
 - What was happening during the incident?
 - How were you getting on with your partner around the time of your index offence?
 - The week before / the day before / the day the incident happened?
 - What happened in the week leading up to this event – does anything stand out as important to you?
 - Did anything happen at work/at home/with friends etc?
 - Can you talk me through what happened that day?
 - What about the hour before and half hour before?
 - What about immediately before the behaviour took place?
 - How or why did it come to an end?
 - What happened directly after the incident took place?
 - How often did this kind of thing happen?

Children

- Where any children present at the time of the incidents? If so how do you think this event appeared to them?
 - What may they have heard and/or seen?
 - Were they caught up in any aggression?
 - Where there any consequences for the child(ren)
 - How did this affect you and partner?

Explanation

- Why do you think this event happened?

Helpseeking

- Did you tell any of your friends or family or work colleagues about what was going on with you and your partner? Can you tell me about that
 - who and why, what prompted you to tell them, what reaction did you get
 - or why not?
- Did you ever seek any kind of professional help or assistance? For example, calling the police, a domestic violence hotline or agency, or a mental health worker? Can you tell me about that
 - who and why, what prompted you to tell them, what reaction did you get
 - or why not)?
- What might have encouraged you to confide in a friend or family member earlier?
- What might have encouraged you to call, contact, or approach a professional service earlier?

Appendix B: Initial code generation

Comments	Transcript
<p>Overlooking warning signs</p> <p>Ignored early red flags in the relationship; didn't realise that it would become abusive.</p>	<p>[Extract 1]</p> <p>A: Um, it was generally volatile. Um, yeah, when, er... it... I probably... thinking back I probably saw signs that it wouldn't be, um, a long-term thing [laughs] to say the least, and... but, um, sometimes you don't sort of like think these three things through and you don't realise how thing... bad things will be.</p>
<p>Unsuccessful disclosure</p> <p>Reaching out to partner's family when he couldn't resolve aggression himself. Unwilling to get involved; seen as a private problem.</p>	<p>[Extract 2]</p> <p>A: I don't know, 'cause I had a point, but, um, the thing - so, because she wouldn't communicate it with me, I went to her family for support. So, so that's round then, so, if there's any... So, I keep going to her dad, her mum, or her brothers, and like, "Guys, I need some help here." You know, "Have you seen this before?" And they were exactly the same. They were like... they were like, "No, [Name], it's all good. You know, we're all whānau here, we'll just keep it in the house." Quote. I always got the same comment: it's in-house.</p>

Appendix C: Table of compiled codes

CODE	DATA EXTRACTS
Overlooked early warning signs	<p>“To start off with it was actually a fairly healthy relationship, probably the first one I’d had in a long time. Um, sure I could tell she had a few issues, because of what her past was like, but who doesn’t? Who doesn’t have a past that comes with baggage? I figured over time we’d work on that together.”</p> <p>- P55, pg. 2</p> <p>“I probably... thinking back I probably saw signs that it wouldn’t be, um, a long-term thing [laughs] to say the least, and... but, um, sometimes you don’t sort of like think these three things through and you don’t realise how thing... bad things will be.”</p> <p>- P21, pg. 2</p>
Positive beginnings	<p>“It’s the f--first... first person I’d truly connected with in my life, female-wise. First one I was... I was so loyal, you know, just... I--I would nev--... yeah. First time I was really connected - well, I thought I had.”</p> <p>- P45, pg. 48</p> <p>“We had a baby girl. [...] Um, and we celebrated and everything. People normally frown when you have a girl but I was happy. So... [...] I was happy as everything. Um, yeah, and, um, so, things went well. [...] Everything, yeah, it was really good.”</p> <p>- P8, pg. 11</p>

Appendix D: Table of refined codes and descriptions

Code Name	Description	Supporting Quotes/Data Extracts
Significant event	The aggression noticeably escalated/became more severe after a significant commitment had occurred in their relationship, such as becoming pregnant, moving in together, or purchasing a house together.	<p>“Um, but yes, just as soon as she became pregnant it was, er, “Fuck off, go sleep in the other room, you’re just like every other man who wants to take something from me.” And it was... it just became really gnarly.”</p> <p>- P17, pg. 3</p>
Overlooked early warning signs	Men reported a series of aggressive, inappropriate, or “odd” behaviours during the early stages of their relationship that were later recognised as red flags for future aggression.	<p>“I probably... thinking back I probably saw signs that it wouldn’t be, um, a long-term thing [laughs] to say the least, and... but, um, sometimes you don’t sort of like think these three things through and you don’t realise how thing... bad things will be.”</p> <p>- P21, pg. 2</p>