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Coercive Control and Children: Understanding the Harms

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Hijacking the victim's life



- **Coercive control is like a car hijacking, but it's not a car that highjacked, it's a life**
- **Perpetrators harmfully take over and redirect their victim's life – they want the victim's life to become all about pleasing the perpetrator and doing what the perpetrator wants**

Not all domestic violence is the same



- Coercive control-based domestic violence is different from ‘situational couple violence’ (Johnson, 2008).
- Situational couple violence is violence that occurs during couple conflicts, when verbal aggression escalates into physical violence, but where the perpetrator has no broader desire to control and dominate their partner’s life (Johnson, 2008; Fontes, 2015).
- By contrast, coercive control is motivated by the perpetrator’s goal of getting control of their victim’s life and maintaining that control (Stark, 2007). All their abusive tactics, including any physical or sexual violence they inflict on their victim, are directed towards that goal (Fontes, 2015).
- Coercive control-based domestic violence is a very severe form of abuse; it’s one of the most harmful things that a human being could do to another (Herman, 1992).

Not all domestic violence is the same



- In order to tell whether somebody is experiencing coercive control, you need to examine the extent to which the perpetrator has limited the victim's freedom to express themselves, set boundaries and stand up for themselves, see their friends and family, do activities independently, have a life beyond the relationship, etc.
- A person experiencing coercive control will feel that they can't do ordinary, everyday things, because the perpetrator will subject them to very negative consequences if they do.

Understanding coercive control



- Evan Stark's (2007) book *Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life* argued that our responses to coercive control-based domestic abuse are failing because they wrongly see domestic violence as discreet incidents or episodes of physical violence, and 'virtually all domestic violence research and intervention is based on this model' (Stark, 2009, p. 293).
- This overlooks that coercive control perpetrators are using many other abusive tactics besides physical violence – including emotional abuse, monitoring and micro-regulation, isolation, and economic abuse – and perpetrators are using these tactics **continuously**.
- Victims/survivors are therefore being repeatedly or constantly abused, even if there has not been an incident of physical violence for months (or ever). This helps to explain behaviours in victims/survivors which people outside the relationship may sometimes find difficult to understand.

Understanding coercive control



All these abuses can be part of coercive control:

- verbal, emotional and psychological abuse and manipulation, including by being 'nice'
- control of time, space and movement and the micro-management of everyday life
- continual monitoring, including by stalking and cyber-stalking
- rape, sexual coerciveness and reproductive coercion
- economic abuse, including interfering with the victim's/survivor's employment, preventing them from having money, refusing to contribute to bills, and creating debt for which victims/survivors are liable
- isolation from sources of support, including family, friends and professionals
- manipulating others (including children) to upset, marginalise and disempower the victim/survivor
- using legal or institutional means to threaten, harm or discredit the victim/survivor
- physical violence and abuse, intimidation and threats of violence against the victim/survivor, their loved ones (including pets) and their property



(Macdonald et al, 2019; Sharp-Jeffs et al, 2018; Tarzia et al, 2018; Pitman, 2017; Matheson et al, 2015; Sanders, 2015; Thomas et al, 2014; Stark, 2007, 2009, 2012; Lehmann et al, 2012; Miller et al, 2010; Sharp, 2008)

Understanding coercive control



Some coercive control perpetrators use no violence at all (see Crossman et al, 2016).

- As Stark and Hester (2019, p. 91) discuss: ‘in perhaps as many as a third of all [coercive control] cases, fear, constraints on autonomy, belittlement, and other aspects of abuse create entrapment without any notable incidents of violence’.
- Similarly, Nevala’s (2017) EU wide data (from the European Union’s FRA Violence Against Women Survey 2012) found that 45% of women who reported experiencing high levels of control from their current partner were not being subjected to any violence from this partner.
- Day and Bowen (2015) suggest that these perpetrators are actually the most clever and skilful abusers, because they have mastered more covert and hard-to-identify ways of abusing.

Perpetrators



- Charming at the beginning of the relationship to gain their target's commitment.
- Can use 'nice', 'caring', 'romantic', or 'contrite' behaviours from time to time to keep the victim locked into the relationship by giving them hope. But the fact that 'things are good in the relationship at the moment' does not mean the abuse is over – it is all part of the abuse.
- Clever at excusing, minimising, justifying and denying their behaviour.
- Can present as a kind and caring person.
- Often good at recruiting allies from among their family, friendship groups, workplaces and communities (and often good at turning professionals involved with the family into their allies).



(Monk and Bowen, 2020; Downes et al, 2019; Smith and Humphreys, 2019; Meier, 2017; Towns and Adams, 2016; Bancroft et al, 2012; Harne, 2011; Williamson, 2010; Bancroft, 2002; Cavanagh et al, 2001)

Coercive control is caused by the perpetrator



- Perpetrators tend to be extremely **self-centred** and often have a highly inflated sense of **entitlement**: they often believe their needs come first and that their partner and children should make pleasing them their priority (Bancroft, 2002; Bancroft et al, 2012).
- Coercive control is not caused by a ‘turbulent relationship’ or a ‘bad dynamic’ between partners; it is caused by the perpetrator’s deeply held **belief systems, attitudes and expectations**, things that they held before the relationship began (Heise, 1998)
- The perpetrator’s tendency to coercively control doesn’t disappear when the relationship ends – it remains within the perpetrator.
- Put simply – **the problem is in the perpetrator, not in the relationship** (Monckton Smith, 2019)

'Fighting' and 'arguing'



- The terms 'fighting' and 'arguing' are misleading and inaccurate when it comes to coercive control
- With coercive control, anything that looks like a 'fight' or an 'argument' is actually about the perpetrator trying to impose coercive control on the victim, and the victim resisting this (this is a reasonable and psychologically healthy thing for the victim to do) (Stark, 2007). Resistance may take the form of shouting, screaming or using violence defensively/to fight back. This doesn't mean they aren't a real victim – if they are experiencing coercive control then they are a real victim.
- Perpetrators may seem 'angry' but this isn't because they have a problem with anger, it's because they are enraged that the victim is resisting their control. They have a problem with control, not with anger (Bancroft, 2002)
- **The abuse is done with a purpose – control:** perpetrators often use abusive behaviours (shouting, put-downs, threats, violence) to punish the victim for resisting their control. They use abuse to manipulate, belittle and frighten their victim into greater submission in future (Stark, 2007).

Taking away freedom and choice



- Westmarland and Kelly (2013), Kelly et al (2014) and Sharp-Jeffs et al (2018) highlight that coercive control takes away victims'/survivors' freedom to say and do ordinary everyday things and to meet their own needs without worry or fear
- As perpetrators microregulate their everyday behaviours, victims'/survivors' options, choices and ability to decide anything for themselves get smaller and smaller (Stark, 2007)

Restoring freedom and choice



- **Constraints on their freedom, autonomy and voice contribute to disempowerment, loss of self, and loss of confidence in victims/survivors (Matheson et al, 2015; Westmarland and Kelly, 2013)**
- **When interacting with coercive control victims/survivors, it is important for you to support them to feel respected, worthwhile, skilled and capable – to increase their sense of empowerment – this helps to counter the perpetrator’s coercive control**

My study on children and coercive control



Key questions:

- ‘How are children affected by living under the perpetrator’s regime of coercive control (a regime that may, or may not, include physical violence)?’
- ‘What does the road to recovery look like for children and mothers who have experienced coercive control?’

My study on children and coercive control



- Interviewed 15 mothers and 15 children (total: 30)
- Children's ages ranged from 10 to 14 (with the exception of one 20 year old)
- Interviewed 9 girls, 6 boys
- Perpetrators were the children's biological father or step-father
- Interviewees contacted through organisations like Women's Aid
- All interviewees were living in the community and had separated from perpetrators

Control of time and movement



Perpetrators/fathers demanded high levels of attention from mothers at the expense of children and stopped mothers and children spending time together:

- ‘[My daughter] Leah used to want me to sit and brush her hair – that wasn’t allowed because he’d be jealous. He’d say things like: “You’ve spent enough attention on her, what about my attention?”’ (Marie, mother)
- ‘When Mum was giving me attention he’d tell her to go over to him so she’d have to leave me to play by myself.’ (Shannon, age 10)

Control of time and movement



- **Perpetrators’/fathers’ coercive control limited the amount of maternal attention children could enjoy, and reduced the opportunities for fun and affection in their homes**
- **Children described feeling sad, annoyed and angry at these situations**

Isolation from the outside world



When perpetrators/fathers controlled mothers' movements outside the home, this severely restricted children's social lives. It prevented children from engaging with wider family, peers and extra-curricular activities:

- 'They [the kids] couldn't have any friends round because he'd kick off or something. Kids' parties were another problem because he'd be accusing me of trying to 'get off' [have sexual relations] with one of the dads, so parties were out the question. We couldn't do any after school clubs because [he insisted] I had to be back by a certain time. Me and the kids weren't allowed to go round to see their grandparents.' (Isobel, mother)

Isolation from the outside world



- The multiple benefits that positive experiences with grandparents, friends or in after-school clubs can have on children's social skills, confidence and development were denied to these children by fathers/step-fathers
- Because of perpetrators'/fathers' behaviour, **many children were living in the same isolated, lonely worlds as their mothers.** This was especially the case for younger children, who were more reliant on mothers to facilitate their access to friend's houses, playgrounds, days out, etc.

Deprivation of resources and imprisonment



Extreme tactics for depriving the family of freedom, independence and resources impacted on children as well as mothers:

- **Eloise (mother): ‘He’d tell us we couldn’t touch the food in the fridge, that we weren’t allowed to eat, he’d lock us in the house a lot of the time so we couldn’t get out, he’d unplug the phone...’**
- **John (aged 20): ‘...He’d take out the power because in the hall we’ve got an old electrical box where you can take things out and that’s it – you’ve got no power...’**
- **Eloise (mother): ‘...He used to take an element out the central heating so we’d have no heating. He’d lock us in the house and go out. He’d take the modem so John couldn’t do his homework and I couldn’t do my banking on the computer. So we were prisoners in a way.’**

Deprivation of resources and imprisonment



These tactics highlight how some perpetrators/fathers directly and purposefully extend their coercive controlling abuse over their children as well as their girlfriend/wife

Constrained behaviour



Many children had very limited freedom to say and do normal, age-appropriate things at home. Children had to constrain their own natural behaviour to comply with perpetrators'/fathers' demands:

- 'When he came home from work he'd want to spend time with them and they were always *his* girls. He used to say to Zoe: 'You're my little angel.' But at the same time they couldn't shout, they couldn't make noise, they couldn't be children around him unless it was on his terms. It was alright if he wanted to play with them, but at other times it was like he wanted them to disappear.' (Lauren, mother)

Constrained behaviour



Perpetrators’/fathers’ negative moods could dominate homes to such an extent that children and mothers were prevented from laughing and having fun:

- ‘Laughing – we would have just been told to “shut up”. It was just a completely miserable experience. It was just angry and miserable and grumpy all the time. So there was just no fun in the house, no laughter.’ (Marie, mother)

Resistance to coercive control



- Both children and mothers engaged in acts of resistance to the coercive control they experienced
- Possibilities for resistance depended on the opportunities that children and mothers had under the particular regimes of coercive control that fathers/father-figures imposed
- Resistance often took the form of finding ways to maintain elements of ‘normal life’ and close mother-child relationships when possible

Resisting deprivation of resources



- Eloise (mother): ‘We did things together. When we went to the pictures or we went shopping we could just ‘let our hair down’ and do what we wanted to do. We were going to the cinema 2-3 times a week to get out of the house.’
- John (age 20): ‘When we would come back with shopping bags, sometimes we had to hide them...’
- E: ‘...because he would go mad that I’d spent money on John. We used to throw the bags over the hedge...’
- J: ‘...into the garden, so he wouldn’t see them.’

Resisting control of time and movement



- ‘Well, some days he would be out, and me and Mum would watch a movie and have some time together [which he wouldn’t let us do when he was at home]. I used to help cook tea with my mum because I enjoy cooking so we’d, like, help each other.’ (Katie, age 12)
- ‘On those days when we were alone we would snuggle up on the sofa and watch films together, and we always emotionally supported each other then.’ (Ruby, mother)

Resisting coercive control



- Mothers and children found opportunities to promote each other's well-being and reduce the negative impacts of the domestic violence – this was the case even when much of their lives were being overrun by perpetrators'/fathers' coercive control
- By defying perpetrators'/fathers' control when possible, children and mothers maintained some sense of autonomy and prevented perpetrators/fathers from gaining total control over them
- Highlighting the ways that they resisted can help mothers and children to recognise their strengths and see that they were not passive victims

Children recovering from coercive control



- Once a mother and child break free from a perpetrator and achieve safety, it is possible for them to start recovering
- What kinds of supports do child victims/survivors of coercive control need in order to recover and to go on to have healthy, abuse-free lives?
- Clearly these children need much more than interventions focused around the message that ‘violence is wrong’
- There were hints about the kinds of recovery needs such children may have in Katz’s findings

Seeing through emotional abuse/manipulation



- '[During contact visits my dad would say] "oh your mum makes me cry", he'd just paint such a bad picture of her... he blamed her and us for everything... He said he was on antidepressants because I wasn't seeing him often enough... I felt very small and bad. (Grace, aged 14)

Grace described how a counsellor had helped her to see through her father's emotionally abusive and manipulative behaviour, and that this had been an important moment in her recovery:

- 'I used to say sometimes, years ago, that I wanted to go and live with my dad... I stopped seeing him a couple of years ago... I'm a lot closer to my mum now... I've spoken to two counsellors. One gave me these exercises to help me see what Dad was doing [being emotionally manipulative], and how people around me were trying to help me. That helped my confidence; it helped me to realise that I could talk to people.' (Grace, age 14)

It's okay to make mistakes



- ‘[My son] John was painting the bathroom, he never would have done that before – [the perpetrator] wouldn’t have allowed it. And he dropped the paint, he thought I was going to go mad. So I come along and he said “you’re probably not going to ask me to paint anymore” and I said “don’t worry John, I will”. He said to me the other day “Mum will you teach me how to make pastry?” because he wants to learn.’
(Eloise, mother)
- ‘Jack has so much more confidence now. He’s like a different boy. Now he’s more willing to do things because he knows he won’t be criticised by me [like he was criticised by his dad]. He finds it much easier to relax.’ (Sybil, mother)

Feeling safe and supported at home



- ‘Now we just have a laugh... Now we can just sit together and spend time together... I’d say we’re considerate of each other, we’re sensitive to each other’s feelings and emotions and I’d say we have fun.’ (Isobel, mother)
- ‘[The house Mum and I live in now] may not be a mansion, but I love it here. It’s nice and cosy. It’s just better and it’s the best.’ (Shannon, age 10)

Freedom and positive connections



- [My daughter and I] have started going to storytelling events at the library, we've been to the hairdressers together, we've been out for a meal a couple of times which is really, really nice. (Ellie, mother)
- 'We just love life at the moment. It's brought us all closer and we're all much happier that we were then, because then we were all dull and didn't like life much, and now we're all happy. We feel we can do anything we want.' (Katie, age 12)

Book coming soon



My book will be published in Summer 2021

Emma Katz

Coercive Control in Children's and Mothers' Lives

Oxford University Press

Thank you



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Emma's publications



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Katz, E., Nikupeteri, A. and Laitinen, M. (2020) When Coercive Control Continues to Harm Children: Post-Separation Fathering, Stalking, and Domestic Violence. *Child Abuse Review*, EarlyView.

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