Introduction

The aims of the chapter are three-fold. First, we discuss the origins and emergence of the concept of coercive control. We then present international evidence from qualitative interviews with victims and national population surveys that coercive control is a distinctive manifestation of domestic violence and abuse (DVA). Debates related to the operationalisation and measurement of this concept are discussed, including the extent to which it helps to reveal the harms associated with DVA and how these disproportionately affect women. The final section provides information about policy and legal reforms that have taken place in recent years to criminalise coercive control, drawing primarily from England and Wales. The difficulties involved in recognising and responding to such offending behaviour are discussed, with findings from recent mixed methods empirical studies offering some insights into how these may be overcome.

Conceptualising coercive control

Coercive control as a specific concept has come to prominence in public policy and practice relatively recently, yet dynamics of power and control in intimate relationships have been recognised since the earliest advocacy work with survivors of DVA in the 1970s (see for example Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Schechter, 1982). The term ‘coercive control’ in fact pre-dates the study of domestic violence. In what Stark (2007, p. 200) describes as the ‘definitive’ chapter on coercive control, Okun (1986) describes how the tactics employed by many domestic abusers — isolating the victim, distorting their subjective reality, imposing unpredictable rewards and punishments, inducing debility and exhaustion and so on — are analogous to those used on prisoners subject to ‘thought reform’ in communist China. Activists have also recognised the experience of victims of coercive and controlling DVA in the tactics listed in a ‘chart of coercion’ published by Amnesty International in 1973 and based on the works of Alfred D. Biderman who studied the experiences of prisoners of war, political prisoners, hostages and concentration camp survivors (see Jones, 1994).

To these descriptions of the basic tactics used to coerce and control, feminist advocates and scholars added the notion of power imbalances in intimate relationships caused by structural inequality between men and women. In the global north, patriarchal control of the family was
codified historically in law and capitalist modes of production afforded women part-time/low-
paid work that was compatible with their disproportionate responsibility for household work,
children and other forms of caring. Though the socio-economic position of (some) women has
improved to some extent over time, there remain gender orders and regimes that place men in
a dominant position at both macro levels of society and in specific locations like the workplace
and the family (Connell, 2009). Indeed, advocacy work with survivors of DVA in Duluth,
Minnesota that informed development of the well-known ‘power and control wheel’ suggested
‘using male privilege’ is a core element of DVA that is coercive and controlling.

Evan Stark’s 2007 book Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life is arguably
the single most significant work marking the rise to prominence of coercive control in policy
and practice around DVA. Stark sought to position coercive control as a ‘liberty crime’, defining
it as ‘a strategic course of oppressive conduct’ intended to ‘intimidate, degrade, isolate, and
control victims’ (Stark, 2012, p. 18). Stark sub-divides the tactics deployed by abusers into those
relating to coercion (physical and sexual violence; intimidation, threats and degradation) and
those relating to control (isolation; exploitation and deprivation; micro-regulation of everyday
behaviour). He suggests that while physical violence in the context of coercive control can be
severe, it is more frequently less severe but repeated, and that there are a significant minority of
cases in which there will be little or no physical violence. This position is consistent with the
Duluth model which positions (the threat of) physical and sexual violence as framing and rein-
forcing the core non-physical behaviours of coercive control. Stark (2012) also suggests coercive
control is a highly personalised form of DVA, with intimacy and proximity affording the per-
petrator the opportunity to refine abusive tactics to target a victim’s personal vulnerabilities. He
suggests further that the abusive tactics employed in coercive control operate frequently through
the lens of gender inequality, focusing on how women ‘perform gender roles they inherit by
default’ (Stark, 2012, p. 207).

Crucially, then, coercive control presents an alternative to what Stark (2012, p. 200) calls the
‘violent incident model’. The theory recognises victim-survivors’ experiences of their abuse as
continuous and multi-faceted, as opposed to a series of discrete or time-bound acts of physical
assault or psychological aggression. Kirkwood (1993, p. 58) described a ‘web’ of abuse where
‘the components are interwoven in such a way that they comprise a whole which has properties
beyond merely the sum of those individual components’. Similarly, Pitman (2017) presented a
model called ‘the trap’ which involves multiple and overlaying strands of abuse. Coercive control
recognises that abuse can be a course of conduct, traversing time and space, rather than a time-
bound incident or series of incidents of abusive acts. It recognises the range of abusive tactics
and behaviours experienced by victims, and acknowledges that, for some, the harm associated
with multiple non-physical abusive behaviours is more severe than the harm inflicted by discrete
physical assaults (see the next section). It is a theory borne out of advocacy and support work
with female victim-survivors and thus reflects their lived experiences of DVA.

**Evidencing coercive control**

1 **Prevalence and measurement**

It is widely accepted that data from criminal justice sources undercounts significantly the preva-
ience and incidence of DVA. Many victims choose not to report their abuse to the police (see
Office for National Statistics, 2018), and feminist scholars have questioned the ability of trad-
tional crime codes to represent thoroughly the breadth of the abuse suffered by many victims
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There have also been issues historically around the quality of police record-keeping in relation to DVA (see Myhill & Johnson, 2016).

Measurement of the prevalence of domestic violence has been hotly contested since the first sample surveys were introduced in the 1970s (see Walby & Myhill, 2001; Myhill, 2015, 2017). These debates around the measurement of DVA have rested largely on the issue of whether headline prevalence estimates from population surveys obscure the gendered nature of abuse reflected in data from specialist support services and criminal justice and other agencies. In more general terms, however, there is little consensus on the best way to measure DVA, or on whether it is possible to measure a highly personalised, multi-faceted form of DVA like coercive control in the context of a (cross-sectional) population survey. Some surveys dedicated to measuring DVA have adapted the Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, 1979; Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996) to add additional questions relating to coercive and controlling behaviour (see Walby & Myhill, 2001), but there has been little consistency in approaches.

Numerous attempts have been made to operationalise the concept of coercive control in more comprehensive ways. Qualitative interviews and advocacy work with survivors has informed measurement scales such as the Women’s Experiences of Battering Scale (Smith, Earp, & DeVellis, 1995), the Mediators Assessment of Safety Issues and Concerns (Pokeman et al., 2014), the Checklist of Controlling Behaviors (Lehmann, Simmons, & Pillai, 2012) and the Coercive Control UK scale (Sharp-Jeffs, Kelly, & Klein, 2018). Dutton, Goodman and Schmidt (2006) report on a large-scale attempt to produce a theoretical model of coercive control and comprehensive measurement framework, which involved a literature review and input from a panel of subject experts. That measurement framework stretched to more than 100 indictors and, according to Hamberger, Larsen and Lehrner (2017), while some elements of the framework have been developed into (briefer) published measures, others have not.

Despite the extensive work that has taken place internationally, there remains no agreed definition of coercive control for the purpose of measurement, nor any single instrument that has been fielded consistently in population surveys. In a review of the literature, Hamberger et al. (2017, p. 3) suggest three ‘major facets’ have emerged in relation to the construct of coercive control: intentionality and motivation to obtain control, perception of the behaviour as negative by the victim and the ability of the perpetrator to make a credible threat. They caution, though, that existing measurement constructs have tended to focus on ‘behaviors or tactics purported to gain control’, and only indirectly or infrequently on intentionality or negative perception (Hamberger et al., 2017). In conclusion, a key problem for the measurement of coercive control in national population surveys is representing the concept in a robust and comprehensive way within the space confines of the survey. Many of the existing measurement scales have multiple items that are not practical to field in many surveys, yet reducing these to a briefer set of core indicators risks identifying cases as coercive control that may not reach what practitioners would regard as a ‘clinical’ level (i.e. that which produces demonstrable deleterious effects necessitating intervention).

2 Gender and intersectionality

Perhaps the most contentious aspect of measurement of DVA has been the issue of ‘gender symmetry’. While some general population surveys report prevalence estimates that are similar for men and women (see Straus, 2011), agency samples tend to show women are far more frequently the victims of DVA. In a landmark paper, Michael Johnson (1995) suggested the explanation was that population surveys measured ‘situational’ violence, while agency samples
featured victims of coercive control (‘intimate terrorism’, in Johnson’s terminology). Johnson argued situational violence – acts of physical violence or verbal aggression that may be one-off or infrequent and have little or no impact on the recipient in terms of physical or psychological harm – is more gender-symmetrical at the level of basic prevalence, while coercive control is highly gendered. He also suggested that victims of coercive control would likely be prevented from participating in population surveys.

More recently, researchers (including Johnson, see Johnson, Leone, & Xu, 2014) have recognised that victims of coercive control may be found in general population samples and have attempted to identify and compare these cases with those of situational violence. Myhill (2015) used two indicators from the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) to reflect the ongoing and denigrating nature of coercive control: the respondent reported ‘suffering abuse that involved frightening threats’ and ‘repeated belittling that made them feel worthless’. He found that respondents who reported suffering this type of abuse were overwhelmingly women. Ansara and Hindin (2010) used latent class analysis on data from the Canadian General Social Survey and found that a wider range of abuse types were present for women. Notably, they found a class particular to female victims characterised by extremely high levels of controlling behaviour and verbal abuse, but no physical violence.

Though the distinction between situational violence and coercive control is fairly widely accepted (Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2010), an important exception is the recent work of Sylvia Walby and colleagues. Walby and Towers (2018) are critical of the concept of coercive control and propose a model of ‘Domestic Violent Crime’ to reveal the gendered nature of DVA. Walby and Towers (2018) suggest capturing the frequency of acts of DVA within existing crime codes is the most consistent and theoretically coherent way to demonstrate gender difference in prevalence. Critics of this approach (see Myhill & Kelly, 2019; Donovan & Barnes, 2019) argue that while measuring frequency of acts of abuse reveals the gendered nature of DVA to some degree it obscures it in other respects, principally through excluding salient elements of non-physical coercion and counting as victims those primary perpetrators who experience resistive violence. Donovan and Barnes (2019) also highlight the ‘cisnormative’ nature of the Domestic Violent Crime model, arguing that its neglect of sexuality overlooks important dynamics concerning lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender people’s victimisation. It has been suggested that coercive control can be a helpful lens through which to explore dynamics of power and control and ‘intersectionality’ in LGBT intimate relationships (see Stark & Hester, 2019). Following their review of the literature on measurement, Hamberger et al. (2017, p. 2) concluded that:

without understanding of overall context of violence in relationships, including the pattern of control and violence (as opposed to a single behavior viewed in isolation), it is very difficult, if not impossible, to isolate sex differences or similarities in [DVA].

So while the theory of coercive control does not exclude the possibility of male victims and female perpetrators, the best available evidence suggests coercive control is gendered. Stark provides a useful summary of this position:

When women deploy coercive control in heterosexual relationships, or men or women use it in same sex relationships, it is rooted in forms of privilege other than sex-based inequality . . . including social class, income, age, race, or homophobia. Since each of these characteristics may converge with systemic inequalities, they can reinforce an abuser’s power in much the same way as sex-based privilege. However, since the vast
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The empirical evidence indicating that coercive control is more harmful to victims than other forms of DVA continues to grow. Proponents of coercive control suggest that the theory better accounts for and explains the harm experienced by some victim-survivors. Though the physical and emotional harm inflicted by physical assaults can be severe, the complex range of psychological and behavioural disorders seen frequently in survivors of coercive control reflects ‘the cumulative result of all previous abuse’ (Stark, 2017, p. 19, emphasis in original). Narrative accounts suggest that victims perceive non-physical forms of coercion to be more harmful than discrete physical assaults (see for example Kirkwood, 1993; Williamson, 2010), and that victims who experience only non-violent coercion display the same levels of fear and use the same coping and help-seeking strategies as those who suffer both physical violence and non-violent coercion (Crossman, Hardesty, & Raffaelli, 2016; Pitman, 2017).

Though it is difficult to capture complex harms in the context of surveys, Myhill’s (2015) re-analysis of CSEW data found that victims – predominantly women – who suffered abuse that involved ongoing denigration and frightening threats were more likely to suffer physical and emotional injury as a result of the abuse, and were more likely to engage with external agencies. Scott et al. (2015) reported similar findings in relation to mental health in another nationally representative sample in England and Wales. Findings from the Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey, which involved in-depth interviews with 7,400 adults, suggested those who had experienced ‘extensive’ physical and sexual violence in the context of coercive control were five times more likely than those with little experience of violence to have a common mental disorder (such as depression or anxiety), and 15 times more likely to have multiple common disorders. Post-traumatic stress disorders and eating disorders were also associated with these experiences of coercive and controlling violence.

The ultimate harm suffered by some victims of DVA is that they are killed by a current or former intimate partner, or other family member. Though prevalence estimates of DVA have been contested by some in relation to gender, domestic homicide is undeniably gendered. In England and Wales, there were a total of 400 domestic homicides recorded by the police between April 2014 and March 2017. The majority of victims were women killed by men who were their partners or ex-partners (Office for National Statistics, 2018). There is a growing evidence-base positioning coercive control as the most prominent precursor to domestic homicide, for cases involving intimate partners (Campbell et al., 2003; Dobash & Dobash, 2015; Home Office, 2013; Sharp-Jeffs & Kelly, 2016; Johnson, Eriksson, Mazerolle, & Wortley, 2019; Monckton Smith, 2019). This evidence has been drawn both from interviews with perpetrators, and multi-agency case reviews.

Coercive control can also have a devastating impact on those close to or connected with the primary victim, especially children. Using in-depth interviews with mothers and children, Katz (2016) found father’s controlling behaviour isolated and disempowered children which could hamper their development and lead to emotional and behavioural problems, while Jouriles and McDonald (2015) found evidence of children exposed to coercive control externalising and internalising problems, after accounting for the frequency of physical violence and psychological

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majority of intimate relationships involve racially homogeneous, same cohort heterosexual partnerships, sexual inequality is the primary context for coercive control and the source of the vast majority of cases police will encounter.

(Stark, 2012, p. 206)
Amanda Robinson and Andy Myhill

abuse. In addition, Callaghan, Alexander, Sixsmith and Fellin (2018) suggest children affected by coercive control experience constrained use of space and exhibit constrained self-expression as a way of managing abuse, in much the same way as mothers. The impact of coercive control on children can continue after the end of a relationship, if child contact is used by the perpetrator as a means of continuing the abuse (see Mackay, 2017).

Responding to coercive control

1 Legal and policy context

As has been discussed, the scholarship on coercive control has evolved substantially over the years. Although not lacking contention and debate, this has clearly informed recent reform efforts designed to improve the response of agencies to those experiencing DVA as either victims or perpetrators. Most notably, the cross-governmental policy definition of DVA in England and Wales was expanded in 2012 in two important ways: (1) extending from legal adults aged 18 and over to also include those aged 16–17 years old, and (2) including coercive and controlling behaviour as a named feature. The official term was changed to ‘domestic violence and abuse’, in recognition of its broadened scope and to highlight the importance of non-physical and often chronic forms of abuse. The current definition is: ‘any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive, threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are, or have been, intimate partners or family members regardless of gender or sexuality’ (Home Office, 2013). Thus, this definition covers a wide range of different types of violence and behaviours, including intimate partner violence, elder abuse, sibling abuse and adolescent-to-parent violence, as well as so-called ‘crimes of honour’, a category that can also include female genital mutilation and forced marriage. As will be discussed later, this broad definition poses many challenges to the various practitioners that are expected to apply it in their everyday practice. However, the definition is also considered to have raised awareness of the need to support vulnerable victims and tackle other crime types, helping practitioners to ‘join the dots’ (HMIC, 2014).

Building on this policy reform, new laws have been implemented to criminalise coercive control. In England and Wales this took place with the passage of Section 76 of the Serious Crime Act 2015: Controlling or coercive behaviour in an intimate or family relationship (Home Office, 2015). Ireland and Scotland followed suit shortly thereafter by introducing similar offences (Section 39 of the Domestic Violence Act 2018 (IR) and Section 1 of the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018, respectively). Such legal reforms are intended to align the law more closely with the ‘lived reality’ of DVA, and criminalise behaviour which culminates in a substantial adverse effect on victims, thereby allowing for the possibility that perpetrators will be held to account for actions for which they were previously considered ‘untouchable’. As one officer put it, ‘We have got a piece of law that now lets us deal with some of the most nasty people that you could come across’ (Wiener, 2017, p. 502). Examples of perpetrator behaviour from the statutory guidance in England and Wales include: isolating a person from their friends and family; depriving them of their basic needs; monitoring their time; taking control over aspects of their everyday life, such as where they can go, who they can see, what to wear and when they can sleep; repeatedly putting them down such as telling them they are worthless; enforcing rules and activity which humiliate, degrade or dehumanise the victim; and threatening to hurt or kill (Home Office, 2015).

Such laws have the potential to improve the way that criminal justice agencies deal with DVA. For example, as is explored in more detail in the next section, it is likely that a focus on
Coercive control could assist police in better understanding the degree and nature of the risk to which victims are exposed, allowing them to make more informed decisions about risk assessment. This, in turn, has implications for how agencies attempt to manage risk in terms of actions taken to safeguard victims and respond to perpetrators. Recognising the harmful impacts of coercive control also helps police and other practitioners better understand, and therefore address, the challenges facing victims who are attempting to engage with the criminal justice process (e.g. by providing statements to police, attending court, etc.).

Recent changes to the legal and policy context surrounding DVA are widely viewed as progressive, especially when compared to what was in place in living memory. However, there are still aspects of these reforms that have been subject to convincing critique. For example, Bishop and Bettinson (2018) question the extent to which both members of the public and criminal justice practitioners will be able to recognise these behaviours as criminal, since they are also consistent with normative expectations of male and female behaviour. Further concerns include the possibility that the new legislation will increase the potential for ‘legal systems abuse’ and/or women being criminalised as a result of counter allegations or attempting to restrict an abuser’s access to children (Burman & Brooks-Hay, 2018), and that it will increase difficulties around which charges to lay and distract from pursuing established crimes of physical assault and breach of protective orders (Walklate, Fitz-Gibbon, & McCulloch, 2018).

Arguably the most important criticism of the new law in England and Wales, however, is in relation to its gender-neutral wording, which refers to ‘any incident or pattern of incidents’. As Kelly and Westmarland (2016) argue:

This is not an academic, linguistic quibble: the notion that ‘domestic violence’ can be broken down into single standalone ‘incidents’ has skewed not only knowledge, since any incident counts the same as repetition in prevalence surveys, but also which interventions are deemed appropriate, and who should be prioritised to receive support.

(Kelly & Westmarland, 2016, p. 114)

Through reference to their recent research with abusive men, they go on to make the point that an incident-based understanding of DVA represents the way perpetrators talk about their behaviours rather than how victims explain it as their ‘everyday reality’. Thus, the language of the law obscures both its features as well as its highly gendered nature. In contrast, the Scottish law is situated in a policy context that recognises domestic abuse as a product of gender inequality and requires proof of ‘a course of behaviour which is abusive’, which better reflects the reality of DVA and its impacts on women (Burman & Brooks-Hay, 2018).

2 Coercive control in the criminal justice system

The extent to which these high-level reforms have resulted in change ‘on the ground’ has recently become the focus of empirical scrutiny. According to Stark (2012) and others, coercive control is the form of abuse most likely to be reported to the police. Indeed, a recent analysis of data from one English police force found controlling and coercive behaviour to be the dominant case profile (Myhill & Hohl, 2019). A total of 17,616 offences of controlling or coercive behaviour were recorded by the police in England and Wales in the year ending March 2019 (ONS, 2019), a number which a recent overview by Brennan (2020) shows has doubled every year since the new law was passed in England and Wales (see Figure 25.1). Yet the number of crimes of coercive control recorded prima facie still represent a very small percentage of the number of incidents reported to the police overall. Research by Barlow, Johnson, Walklate and
Humphreys (2020) suggested officers continued to record traditional crimes such as assault even when coercive control was evident (and should have taken precedence). Many cases of coercive control are also likely remaining recorded as non-crime incidents.

As with all officially recorded crime data, it is difficult to definitively determine whether changes in the crime rate represent true changes in prevalence rather than changes in the willingness to report (by members of the public and practitioners) and/or to record (by police) such behaviour as a criminal offence. Public awareness may have increased due to media attention following the passage of the new law, as well as popular dramatisation (e.g. the storyline in the BBC Radio 4 programme *The Archers*).² HMIC inspections on crime integrity may have also played a role in changing police behaviour. Overall, it seems reasonable to suggest that yearly increases in the rate of coercive control offences are due to the implementation of a series of macro-level policy and legal reforms during the past decade, which have shaped the micro-level interactions between police and victims. The police, as ‘gatekeepers’ to the criminal justice system, hold the ‘key’ as to whether perpetrators are eventually held to account for their harmful behaviour and therefore whether victims are able to lead safer lives.

However, the extent to which those instances of coercive control that come to police attention translate into the desired outcomes just described is far less certain. Brennan (2020) found around half as many coercive control crimes result in arrest in comparison with DVA (25% vs 50%) and, of those criminal investigations that begin, a far higher proportion are eventually discontinued. It is striking that only 1,177 prosecutions commenced at Magistrates courts for offences of controlling or coercive behaviour in the year ending March 2019 (ONS, 2019), and only 308 resulted in a conviction.

McGorrery and McMahon (2019) analysed media reports of 107 individuals convicted under the new law in England and Wales. Limitations of the data source aside, the findings are useful for highlighting the gendered nature of the prosecutions (all but one involved a male perpetrator...
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and a female victim) as well as the overlap between non-physical coercion and violence (with 82
perpetrating physical or sexual violence against the victim, resulting in an additional 47 offences
charged). Other reported features of these crimes reflect the multi-faceted nature of coercive
control, which included the use of tactics such as intimidation and threats, isolation, regulation
and surveillance of the victim’s daily activities. Consistent with national criminal justice data
(ONS, 2019), this study found that offenders pleading guilty and receiving custodial sentences
were the most common criminal justice outcomes, positively interpreted to mean that the
system, once engaged, is effective in holding offenders to account for their actions. However,
as previously discussed, the number of cases coming to police attention and then proceeding
through prosecution and ultimately sentencing represents a tiny fraction of the overall volume.

It is unfortunate, but not entirely surprising, that the long-standing and seemingly intracta-
tible problem of attrition through the criminal justice system for offences associated with DVA
(see Hester, 2006; Robinson & Cook, 2006) is even more pernicious for the specific offence
of coercive control. Some likely explanations for this can be found at the level of the individual
practitioners involved (e.g. their knowledge, skills, understanding, etc.) as well as the organisa-
tional contexts in which they operate (e.g. the provision of suitable training, appropriate tools
and policy guidance, etc.). These challenges to effective agency responses, and some ways they
can be addressed, are discussed in the following sections.

3 Challenges for effective agency responses to coercive control

A substantial body of scholarship has documented a lack of understanding on the part of police
and other criminal justice professionals about DVA in general, which has often translated into
responses towards victims characterised as lacking empathy, respect and professionalism (see
Robinson, 2018). The historical root of these problems is frequently attributed to the negative
impact of the police occupational culture on the policing of DVA, and in particular how this
has shaped officers’ interactions with victims (Bourlet, 1990; Edwards, 1989; Hanmer, Griff-
iths, & Jerwood, 1989). A negative mind-set towards DVA and those experiencing it can stem
from police frustration with being repeatedly called to what they perceive to be ‘minor issues’
at the same address. Offences such as harassment, malicious communications and criminal dam-
age make up a significant proportion of ‘domestics’ coming to the attention of police, which
can lead to unwarranted trivialisation of DVA as ‘rubbish’ work by police officers under pres-
sure to respond quickly and effectively to a large volume of incidents on a busy shift (Myhill
& Johnson, 2016). As recounted by one officer, there have been ‘women dying’ from the police
not doing their job properly due to a lack of understanding of the dynamics of DVA leading
them, on occasion, to prejudge incidents as likely to be ‘sh*t on sh*t’ or ‘horse sh*t’ (Robin-
son, Myhill, Wire, Roberts, & Tilley, 2016). These more negative attitudes may represent the
‘received wisdom’ gained from experience and handed down from officer to officer, which is
one explanation for why they appear in early studies (e.g. Hoyle, 1998) as well as recent research
(e.g. Myhill, 2019).

Previous research has highlighted the challenges associated with correctly interpreting and
applying the broad national definition of DVA (Myhill & Johnson, 2016). Officers are required
both to interpret whether the people involved satisfy the definition in relation to their age and
relationship to each other, and whether the behaviour involved is in any sense abusive. This
research highlighted officers’ lack of understanding of coercive control as potentially a significant
obstacle to recognising abuse, which is further stymied by victims who are liable to minimise
the abuse they have suffered and perpetrators who manipulate their account of the circum-
stances of the specific incident (Kelly et al., 1999; Stark, 2007). Coercive controlling behaviour
can go ‘under the radar’ (Robinson, Pinchevsky, & Guthrie, 2016) as it constitutes a pattern of often subtle behaviours, which is inherently more difficult to recognise than a physical assault. The dog bowl example in Wiener’s (2017) study neatly illuminates how seemingly innocuous behaviours must be understood within the context of the specific relationship before they can be identified as tactics of coercive control, and therefore worthy of police investigatory resources under the new laws previously mentioned. The dog bowl is from where the victim was made to eat her meals; the punishment for her not doing so was to be raped by her partner. The officer’s ‘professional curiosity’ about the reason for having a dog bowl (when there was no dog at the premises) created the opportunity for this information to be disclosed by the victim. Such examples clearly challenge the ‘black and white thinking’ police have come to rely upon when dealing with incidents involving physical DVA and signal the need to overcome this ‘mindshift challenge’ in order to effectively identify and respond to coercive control (Wiener, 2017).

A range of negative implications follows from police (in)ability to recognise coercive and controlling patterns of abusive behaviour when responding to calls for assistance. Most notably, it can result in a failure to apply the relevant policies and protocols designed to govern how they respond to victims. The review of the national risk model for DVA in England and Wales carried out by Robinson, Myhill et al. (2016) demonstrated that whether and how police take ‘positive action’ during these calls, such as completing a risk assessment with the victim, depended in large part on their working knowledge of coercive control. For example, it was apparent that some frontline officers had adopted the de facto policy of not completing a risk assessment for ‘verbal only’ incidents (those that did not appear to involve physical violence or criminal offences). The analysis of case file data reinforced the finding that not all eligible incidents were put through the risk assessment process. In particular, non-crime incidents were significantly less likely to have an assessment completed, and even when one was completed, they were significantly less likely to be graded as high risk. This research revealed how DVA that manifests as a ‘low-level’ incident can be improperly exempted from the relevant police procedures because frontline officers do not recognise this behaviour as a possible expression of coercive control.

Furthermore, problems stemming from the under-appreciation of risk markers for coercive control were not only apparent at the frontline but also when initial assessments were reviewed by specialists in central units. Here as well, police tended to view risk factors associated with physical violence as particularly important to their evaluation of risk: injury at the current incident, threats to kill, attempts to strangle/choke, and use of weapons. Conversely, risk factors potentially indicative of coercive control (e.g. jealous and controlling behaviour, conflict over child contact, victim isolated from family/friends, perpetrator has threatened suicide, etc.) were seen as less important for understanding the risk faced by the victim. Robinson, Myhill and Wire (2018) showed how the extent to which coercive control is identified relies to some degree upon whether other (violent) offending is part of the case profile. When practitioners are assessing risk in cases devoid of other high risk markers to ‘prime’ them to identify coercive control, it can be missed, and the level of risk therefore underestimated (see also Barlow et al., 2020).

In most UK police forces, the risk level dictates the type and degree of intervention and safety planning with victims. As risk level increases, so too does the investment of police time and resources. But if risk levels are based on partial information and/or the de-prioritisation of important information then the safeguarding and protection afforded to victims will be less than it ought to be. Thus, these are not just measurement errors or defects in bureaucratic paperwork, but can and do have real consequences for the victims who are (incorrectly) considered by police to be suitable for a standard rather than an enhanced response. Activities such
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as attempting to make follow-up contact with the victim, providing referrals to partner agencies (e.g. specialist domestic abuse services), and undertaking safety planning interventions are preserved for higher risk cases. Most forces in the UK concentrate their resources on high-risk victims, for example by participating in the MARAC process (see Robinson, 2006). Problems previously described at both the initial and secondary stages of risk assessment raise concerns as to whether the correct cases are always referred to MARAC. Victims identified as suitable for a standard response have been identified in a number of domestic homicide reviews where coercive control was found to be present (Brennan, Burton, Gormally, & O’Leary, 2016; Home Office, 2013; Sharp-Jeffs & Kelly, 2016), revealing the tragic consequences that can stem from errors in risk-related decision-making.

4 Improving practitioner responses to coercive control

Recent research reveals that the recognition of coercive control improves when practitioners are better trained, use tools designed with explicit reference to coercive control and the harm caused by abuse which may or may not be physical, and are ‘primed’ to identify and effectively respond through the use of novel methods and interventions (e.g. from assessing known offender cohorts) that help to embed and centralise a concern with coercive control into their daily practice.

Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Service, the body tasked with assessing independently the effectiveness of police forces in England and Wales, suggested officers require a framework of systematic training, supervision and performance review in order to improve their ability to ‘identify dangerous patterns of behaviour’, especially where there is little physical violence but significant ‘psychological intimidation and control’ (HMIC, 2014, p. 9). Partly in response, the College of Policing, in collaboration with the domestic abuse charity SafeLives, designed and tested a one-day training input for first responders titled ‘Domestic Abuse Matters’. The classroom-based training features coercive control prominently, with an emphasis on enhancing the skill of officers to recognise and respond effectively, thereby helping to improve the police response to DVA ‘across the piece’. The training involves a mixture of videos, PowerPoint presentations and group discussions. Specific sessions include the debriefing of video footage from an actual domestic abuse incident, the types of controlling behaviours and tactics used by perpetrators, the challenges associated with leaving an abusive partner, and how perpetrators behave when the police are called. An early evaluation showed a small positive impact on officers’ knowledge of coercive control and attitudes to DVA (Brennan & Myhill, 2017). Recent analysis has shown a significant increase in arrests for coercive control in forces that adopted DA Matters, compared with those who have not (Brennan, Myhill, Tagliaferri, & Tapley, in press). Although the DA Matters training is not compulsory, it has been implemented by around half of police forces in England and Wales, as well as by Police Scotland.

A sound understanding of the gendered dynamics of DVA and coercive control, reinforced through the use of properly designed risk assessment tools, is one of the principles underpinning a recently prepared evidence-based guide circulated to police in all EU member states (EIGE, 2019). The national review of police risk assessment described earlier (Robinson, Myhill et al., 2016) produced convincing evidence of the need for a revised risk assessment to help frontline practitioners to identify, document and respond more effectively to coercive control. A revised tool was developed by the College of Policing, in consultation with key stakeholders, to explicitly prompt officers to gather information about a range and frequency of coercive and controlling behaviours and the extent to which these are evidence of a pattern of abuse. Evaluation of its use in three police forces indicated promising results. Specifically, victims disclosed coercive
behaviour at greater rates and officers recorded proportionately more crimes of coercive control, suggesting the new tool was better at bringing subtle and often hidden forms of abuse into the spotlight of relevant agencies (Wire & Myhill, 2018). The potential of bespoke tools that ‘nudge’ practitioners towards better decision-making is clear from research on new initiatives to tackle perpetrators. Prompting practitioners to evaluate the harmful consequences of both psychological and/or physical abuse, and explicitly asking them to consider whether coercive control is a feature of the case, was shown to facilitate practitioners making more informed judgements about the risk posed by perpetrators and how this can be most effectively managed by police and partner agencies (Robinson & Clancy, 2020). In conclusion, promising interventions with perpetrators have made coercive control a prominent organising feature in order to effectively reduce their harmful offending behaviour (Hester et al., 2019; Kelly & Westmarland, 2015).

Conclusion

Coercive control has become prominent in policy and practice, in the UK at least. However, there remains little consensus on how to measure, or even define, the concept, which poses problems for criminal justice practitioners tasked with operationalising it. As such, scholars have warned of potential unintended consequences of ‘coercive control creep’ (Walkate & Fitz-Gibbon, 2019). Yet concerns about the potential criminalisation of women have not been realised, and convictions for controlling and coercive behaviour have risen year-on-year in England and Wales serving justice to abusers who previously would have received little or no punishment. A criminal justice response delivered through the lens of coercive control better reflects the lived experiences of victim-survivors, and there is emerging evidence that training may equip practitioners with the knowledge and understanding necessary to recognise controlling and coercive behaviour and the devastating impact it can have on those exposed to it.

Critical findings

• Coercive control is a distinctive manifestation of domestic violence and abuse, which includes tactics deployed by abusers relating to coercion (physical and sexual violence; intimidation, threats and degradation) and those relating to control (isolation; exploitation and deprivation; micro-regulation of everyday behaviour). It has been characterised as a liberty crime and a violation of human rights.
• Research indicates this form of abuse is highly gendered, with men disproportionately perpetrating coercive and controlling behaviour against women.
• Coercive control is particularly harmful in and of itself as well as being correlated with more serious physical and sexual violence, including homicide.
• Operationalising the concept of coercive control into professional practice requires knowledge, skills and understanding on the part of those working in criminal justice and partner agencies. This is necessary to effectively respond to both the victims and the perpetrators of coercive control.

Implications for policy, practice and research

• In recognition of the wealth of scholarship highlighting the multi-faceted nature of DVA, including both physical and non-physical forms of abuse, policy definitions of DVA have
been expanded to include coercive control and new legislation in several countries has been passed to criminalise this type of behaviour. These reforms are often gender-neutral although coercive control itself is highly gendered.

- Understanding the significance of coercive control is critical for effective responses by criminal justice and partner agencies. Failure to identify and respond to coercive control results in inaccurate risk assessments, insufficient safeguarding and perpetrators not held to account for the full range of their harmful behaviours.
- The practice of police and other practitioners can be improved through bespoke training programmes designed to increase their knowledge and understanding of coercive control. Supervision and performance monitoring are necessary to reinforce these skills.
- Tools should be used which explicitly prompt practitioners to evaluate patterns (rather than incidents) of abusive behaviour and the extent to which coercive and controlling tactics are evident. This information should be shared and acted upon within multi-agency interventions designed to respond to all forms of DVA, especially coercive control.
- Emerging evidence which points to positive results from the use of specially designed tools and interventions needs to be bolstered by replication studies carried out in other settings and jurisdictions, as well as with more diverse samples (e.g. those in same-sex relationships and members of ethnic minority communities).

Notes

References
Amanda Robinson and Andy Myhill


Coercive control


