Coercive Control of Women as Mothers via Strategic Mother-Child Separation

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Abstract:

This study extends existing research into abusive men's use of children as part of their strategies to undermine mothering roles, target women as mothers, damage mother-child relationships and cause mother-child separations. It is the first British study into strategic mother-child separation to be conducted with mothers who were actually separated from their children. The purpose of the study was to illuminate the tactics used in this type of coercive control, to assist women and practitioners address this problem using recent UK coercive control legislation. Qualitative accounts of six women who described having their children turned against them by abusive ex-partners (who were also the children's fathers) were examined. Thematic analysis identified eight themes as perpetrator tactics of strategic separation: 1) Lying to and manipulating children; 2) Sabotaging children's contact with their mothers; 3) Weaponising children; 4) Conditioning children through reward and punishment; 5) Exploiting women's vulnerability, particularly as mothers; 6) Threatening mothers with taking their children from them; 7) Actively employing mother-blaming by exploiting mother-blaming institutions and practices; and 8) Denigrating mothers and elevating themselves in order to supplant mothers as children's primary caregivers and attachment figures. Because service responses fail to address this aspect of men's violence against women and children, the paper is positioned to inform policy, practice and service provision. Limitations are outlined and areas for further research highlighted.

Key words: Coercive control; domestic violence and abuse; violence against women and children; gendered abuse; abusive men/fathers.

Word count: 6960

Key Messages:

- Abusive men's strategic interference in the mother-child relationship is achieved through: the direct and indirect use and abuse of children, undermining mothers via mother-blaming; exploiting professionals, and capitalising on patriarchal institutions and mother-blaming theories, systems and practices,
- Recognising this form of abuse as a criminal offence could be addressed using the recent UK coercive control legislation

Introduction

Abusive men who use coercive control with women and children can actively interfere in the mother-child relationship, abuse women as mothers, use and abuse children to harm their mothers, undermine women's mothering roles, and engineer mother-child separations. This article identifies the mechanisms of this aspect of coercive control associated with motherhood and stresses the vital roles that professionals play in the 'success' or 'failure' of strategies targeting mother-child relationships.

In 2013, the government of England and Wales acknowledged the complexity of domestic violence and abuse (DVA) by including controlling and coercive behaviours within a new cross-government definition. Controlling behaviour is defined as:

> "..a range of acts designed to make a person subordinate and/or dependent by isolating them from sources of support, exploiting their resources and capacities for personal gain, depriving them of the means needed for independence, resistance and escape and regulating their everyday behaviour (House of Commons 2013, p.3).

Coercive behaviours are identified as:

> '... an act or a pattern of acts of assault, threats, humiliation and intimidation or other abuse that is used to harm, punish, or frighten their victim." (ibid., 2013, p.3).

Following this definition, Section 76 of the Serious Crime Act (England and Wales; Gov.UK 2015) created a new offence of controlling or coercive behaviour in an intimate or

family relationship. Current Crown Prosecution DVA guidelines relating to coercive control specifically draw attention to the problem of the family courts as an arena for ongoing abuse: "through threats to harm children; threats to have children taken into care through coercion/exploitation of family court proceedings" (Crown Prosecution Service 2017). These changes reflect a growing awarenessof how DVA features coercive control and how this can play out in legal proceedings, particularly when abusive men "actively use the family courts to continue a campaign of coercive control of their victims" (Ghose 2017). Referring to men's violence against women and children here, Ghose, Chief Executive of Women's Aid, was speaking from a position of knowledge built from decades of research that shows how, when targeting women as mothers, violent and abusive men use the family court system and contact/visitation as an arena for on-going harassment, retaliation and intimidation during separation from a violent partner and post-separation (e.g. Bancroft 2002; Bancroft and Silverman 2002; Bemiller 2008; Chesler 1991, 2011; Elizabeth, Gavey and Tolmie 2012; Hayes 2015; Lapierre and Côté 2016; Lischick 2009; McCloskey 2001; Miller and Smolter 2011; Neustein and Lesher 2005; Pence and Paymar 1986; Przekop 2011; Radford and Hester 2015; Slote et al. 2005; Stark 2002, 2007, 2015; Thiara and Humphreys 2017).

Researchers have used a variety of terms to describe coercive control of women involving children. Stark's (2002) *child abuse as tangential spouse abuse* explains how the abuser treats the child as an extension of the mother and as a way to hurt or control her; McCloskey's (2001) *strategic model* illustrates how men's abuse of children is often instrumental and motivated by a desire to punish women for leaving violent relationships, and as revenge when women meet new partners; and Morris's (1999) *maternal alienation* describes the alienation of mothers and children from each other as a form of gendered abuse aimed at mothers. Despite academic and practitioner understanding of this aspect of men's violence against women and children, it remains an important area for research because it is

not specifically recognised as gendered abuse in policy, practice and service provision.. Furthermore, the separation of women's and children's services in England and Wales prevents recognition that mothers and children can be joint victims of fathers/perpetrators, and instead positions women victims as joint abusers of children for failing to protect children from being exposed to men's violence (Bancroft 2002, Bancroft and Silverman 2002, Humphreys 2011, Radford and Hester 2006, Stark 2007).

Hester's '3-Planets-Model' (2011) provides a useful theory to understand tensions between different professionals' discourses and practices within three arenas (planets) in which mothers may be positioned: 1) victim/perpetrator arenas, i.e., criminal courts; 2) child protection and safeguarding settings and; 3) child contact arenas, i.e., private and public family law. Hester's theory recognises the need to align the three domains through a collaborative, multi-agency approach aimed at increasing the safety of women and children. Relevant to this theory, is Katz's (2015) research into how mothers and children support one another in DVA contexts, which highlights both the gendered nature of abuse of women as mothers and the need to recognise the problem by supporting mothers and children *jointly*. Similarly, Thiara and Humphrey's (2015, 2017) work on 'absent present' fathers is an important consideration of the ways in which perpetrators' abuse and violence continues to impact on the relationship between mothers and children, even beyond the end of the violent relationship (between perpetrator and victim/survivor). In effect, the violence continues beyond the relationship when mothers and children experience 'symptoms of abuse', e.g., depression, trauma and self-harm (Humphreys and Thiara 2003). Humphreys et al. (2018) further assert that fathers who use violence are actually more present than absent in the lives of women and children and that systems do not address the problem of abusive men/fathers who continue to have (or are conferred) significant parenting roles following separation.

A vast body of research illustrates how fathers/perpetrators abuse women as mothers, particularly by interfering in the mother-child relationship, at all stages of a relationship, including during pregnancy,. Tactics include: threatening to harm, or remove children from their mothers; reporting women to social services and making false allegations about their parenting to gain custody of them; disrupting attachments and/or trying to turn children against their mothers (Bancroft 2002; Bancroft and Silverman 2002; Beeble, Bybee and Sullivan 2007; Elizabeth, Gavey and Tolmie 2012; Hayes 2015; McCloskey 2001; Meier 2009; Pence and Paymar 1986; Radford and Hester 2006; Stark 2007, 2015). Australian researcher, Morris (1999, 2009, 2010) described these tactics, collectively, as maternal alienation – a gendered form of coercive control of women and children. The term, maternal alienation, is problematic because it is associated with the American concept of parental alienation (Gardner 1987), which is deeply challenging for women and children victims/survivors in a family court setting, because perpetrators can use it to claim allegations of DVA and child sexual abuse are a means of victimising the father/perpetrator (Meier 2009). For these reasons, the language of 'alienation' is generally avoided by feminist researchers/practitioners/organisations altogether (see Women's Aid 2014). Although maternal alienation is a problematic term, Morris's research is important in recognising the problem as a form of gendered violence aimed at women as mothers, which targets the mother-child relationship, and the author's (1999) study focussed on the ways in which professionals could support women experiencing the problem.

Although, perpetrators/fathers' strategies to target the mother-child relationship have been highlighted in DVA research, few studies have been conducted with mothers separated from their children in order understand the problem from women's perspectives. In fact, only Morris's (1999) research was found to draw on mothers' accounts in this respect. No studies of the problem have been conducted with mothers separated from their children in the UK.

This is an important omission in light of the recent British coercive control legislation because there now exists an opportunity to address the problem using the law and new British research has the potential to influence policy, practice and service responses. Additionally, every country has different family court processes and so, the coercive control of mothers via strategic mother-child separation situated in the UK deserves a British study. Also, studies generally discuss abusers' *attempts* to separate mothers and children - focussing on cases where such attempts failed. No studies have been conducted that identify the strategies used in successful separations of mothers from their children. To address these gaps, an exploratory qualitative study was undertaken, which sought to identify how perpetrators/fathers achieve intentional mother-child separation. The research question asked: What are the tactics coercive controllers in the UK utilise that succeed in separating abused mothers from their children?

Method

Design

A qualitative design suited the aim of understanding the nuance of participants'' experiences and thought processes, thus the study used in-depth, semi-structured interviews.

Participants

Six participants were recruited through an advertisement in a newsletter of a UK charity, MATCH Mothers (Mothers Apart from Their CHildren), which provides peer support for women who live apart from their children. The advertisement sought mothers who identified themselves as having been separated from their children by their abuser following a DVA relationship. All six participants were white British aged between 35 and 55 years old, with a mean age of 46 years. The women had experienced varying degrees of

estrangement. This study uses pseudonyms for the participants and their children as shown in Table 1, which illustrates the particulars of the separations described by the women.

Table 1 here: Details of the participants and their children

Procedure

Coventry University Research Ethics Committee approved this study.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted and audio-recorded in the women's homes. The interview scheduled included the following discussion points: participants' relationships with ex-partners and children prior to, during and following separation; experiences of DVA; and help/support. The lead author transcribed the recordings verbatim resulting in a 70,600 word corpus.

Process of analysis

The data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase process of thematic analysis: familiarisation of the data, which began informally during the interviews but formally in their transcription; reading and re-reading data in an active way; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and producing the report. A combined inductive and deductive approach was used: themes were searched for in a data-driven, 'bottom-up' way based on what was in the data and, then, in a more 'top-down' fashion where the data were used to explore the processes relating to the key characters involved in abusers'/fathers' strategies, i.e. mothers, children, family members, and professionals.

Analysis and Discussion

Eight themes were identified from the thematic analysis as perpetrator tactics of strategic separation: 1) Lying to and manipulating children; 2) Sabotaging children's contact with their mothers; 3) Weaponising children; 4) Conditioning children through reward and punishment; 5) Exploiting women's vulnerability, particularly as mothers; 6) Threatening mothers with taking their children from them; 7) Actively employing mother-blaming by exploiting mother-blaming institutions and practices; and 8) Denigrating mothers and elevating themselves in order to supplant mothers as children's primary caregivers and attachment figures.

These tactics involving abusive men's/fathers' direct and indirect use of children are interconnected and, sometimes, overlap, such as when perpetrators lie to and manipulate children in order to undermine and denigrate their mothers. This reflects the fact that fathers abuse women and their children as a unit and through one another (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 here: Strategies to harm women as mothers also harm their children and vice versa

1) Lying to and manipulating children

Participants described abusers confiding in children, 'parentifying them' (forcing caring roles on children, e.g., fathers positioning themselves as the mothers' victims in order to elicit sympathy and care), coercing them into keep secrets, and using them to glean information about their mothers post-separation as a means of undermining mothering roles to separate them both physically and psychologically from their children. The women reported perpetrators/fathers manipulating their children into believing that their mothers had destroyed their families through bad characters and parenting abilities. Ann reported that her

ex-partner's girlfriend had described the father's character assassination of Ann, which damaged her relationship with one son but not the other:

> "The girlfriend has told me that Alan and his father would sit there annihilating me. But Alex just gets up and walks out of the room. Well, that was about 2 years ago. For Alan, I'm this monster that split the family up, that's caused all of this upheaval." (Ann 526-531)

Lil reported that her ex painted a picture of her being mentally unstable to her son and that these claims were presumed to be true by the courts even though they were completely unfounded:

> "The things he says are offensive – telling people like the lawyer that it's my fault and that I am ill… and they told my son too – they fed that to my son – they just think that I'm going to jump from a bridge or something like that… They use the word ill mostly but once my son was supposed to be really worried about me –even though he had no contact with me even – because he supposedly knew I was going to commit suicide – which is news to me." (Lil 10-14)

Participants' descriptions of coercive and controlling tactics used to influence children's behaviour suggested that perpetrators/fathers did not have to explicitly tell their children not to see their mothers, but that they only needed to influence them through lies/manipulation. Children were described as being used as pawns in the perpetrators'/fathers' strategies to continue control, abuse, isolate and intimidate. All the women described how manipulation took the form of influencing children to reject their mothers by breaking off contact or ceasing visitation. Hen for example, said that her children had told her that their father had said they must choose between their parents, that they quoted him repeatedly stating, "This is your home and this is where all your stuff is – this is where you're staying" (Hen 521-529). Forcing children to choose between parents was reported by the women in this study as a very effective manipulative strategy to interfere with contact. The lies and manipulations were recognised in retrospect by the women as a

grooming process that began long before they realised how fathers/perpetrators were coming between them and their children.

In their review of literature relating to sexual grooming of children, Craven, Brown and Gilchrist (2007) identify that this term encompasses: self-grooming, grooming the environment and significant others, and grooming the child. Commonly thought of as solely the latter, the authors' identification of the need to groom others in children's environment is an important consideration following Morris (1999) who considered grooming to be a significant factor in both in sexual and DVA contexts. Furthermore, Morris identified how, during the process of grooming, abusive men lie to and manipulate children in order to harm their mothers, e.g., "Insults and put-downs are used in secret in men's dealings with children to 'get back' at women" (ibid., p.73).

Conditioning children to turn against mothers by telling them lies about her, and manipulating them to demonstrate hostility and rejection through their attitudes and behaviours, forces children into self-sabotaging behaviour that deprives them of maternal love, support and protection. Thus, children become 'collateral damage' in abusive men's battles for power, further hurting their mothers who become distressed as they see witness their children also being harmed by their abusers. The participants in this study talked about not knowing what to do for their best and that professionals could interpret any move they made with suspicion. Decisions were often made in extremely fearful conditions, resonant with Buchanan, Power and Verity's article on the fear-based lived experiences of mothers in DVA relationships.

2) Sabotaging children's contact with their mothers

Sabotaging contact consisted of isolating children and their mothers from one another through a variety of tactics, including: lying to prevent visitation; preventing mothers from

parenting; coercing children into rejecting and avoiding their mothers; preventing children from communicating with their mothers; excluding mothers from new family units post-separation; excluding mothers' family members from children's lives post-separation; changing children's schools and instructing staff at the new school not to contact mothers, even in an emergency.

Dee, for example, described her ex-partner sabotaging her visitation after he won residency:

> "He would say, "Come round at 5 o'clock on Friday." And I'd go round at 5 o'clock on Friday and they wouldn't be there. And then, he'd phone me up on the Sunday and say, "Why didn't you come and collect them?" (Dee 292-299)

Hen described her ex-partner sabotaging the contact she had maintained with her children when she was still the resident mother, immediately following separation. The four children would stay with their father on a regular basis but he did not return her three sons to her following a holiday that he took them on (the father then went on to win residency of her three sons whilst she maintained residency of their daughter):

> "They went on holiday with their dad to Scotland. It was a holiday that I'd booked and originally we'd planned to do together. They went off and when they came back they wouldn't have anything to do with me – after only one week away! So, that was it." (Hen 109-116).

Two other participants described scenarios in which children were not returned after holidays. Lil said that her ex-partner tried to make contact time unpleasant. "The texts would come and it wouldn't be relaxed after that" (Lil 444).

Participants spoke of being excluded from every aspect of their children's lives. Often starting innocuously in small ways relating to everyday activities, it happened progressively until contact was phased out completely. Denying contact made it easier for abusers to maintain their position. Hen describes how, even though her sons were aged 11, 13 and 14

years when she left her ex-husband, her daughter told her that he had taken any photo that included her out of the family albums and that he told people he brought the children up himself. "I've been completely airbrushed out of the scene," she said (Hen 90-95).

Although isolation is a feature of the literature about DVA (e.g. Brownridge 2006, Radford and Hester 2006; Domestic Abuse Intervention Project (DAIP) 2013), it does not focus on victims' isolation from their children.

3) Weaponising children

In line with Stark's (2015) findings, participants described abusers using their children as 'weapons' to hurt them. Lil said that her ex-partner was using her son as a terrorist might use a bomb, that Lyle is "ammunition strapped against [his father]. As a result,

> "If I try to get near Lyle, the whole thing will blow up. His message is that "you can't do this because we'll [ex-partner and his new partner] react". In a way it makes you scared. If he's using Lyle as a pawn – it's like a hostage situation. It's like I feel I can't - there's nothing I can do. I am totally powerless." (Lil 424-428)

Participants felt that they were disadvantaged in contact and residency disputes because they acted in the best interests of the children whilst their ex-partners acted in their own self-interests and focussed on attacking strategies. Ann, for example, recounted how her ex-partner waged a war against her once she had consulted a solicitor for a divorce: "I'm going to destroy you! I'm going to ruin you [financially]! I'm going to take the children with me!" (Ann 179-182). And, Lil and her son had been made homeless by her ex-partner (the boy's father): "Within 6 months he'd evicted us and made us homeless" (Lil 34). In Mel's case, she reported not only being impoverished by her divorce: "we had no money and lots of stress" (Mel 357), but that her ex-partner weaponsied her unborn child during pregnancy:

> "He said, "If you ever fucking leave me I'll get it" (pointing at her belly) - so that was planted before I'd even given birth that if I left him I'd be living on my own and leaving her with him" (Mel 349).

While others have described such weaponisation of children by abusive men in order to harm women as mothers (Bancroft 2002; Bancroft and Silverman 2002; Stark 2002, 2007, 2015) (particularly at the point of separation and post-separation), they have not noted that children may be weaponised as early as pregnancy.

4) Conditioning children through reward and punishment

Participants described a process of conditioning of their children whereby they were punished if they wanted her, e.g., if they said they missed her or wanted to see her, but rewarded if they went against her, e.g., said they didn't want to see her or expressed dislike of her . Half of the women described how their children were exposed to their father's humiliation of them (the mothers) and encouraged to join in with their father's making fun of them, as these examples from Caz illusrate:

> "Her dad used to stand outside my door mocking me – and that was common – and then banging on the door – telling me to get out – and that nobody wanted me – with the girls there… and we'd often have a BBQ on a Sunday and he always used to get a piece of steak – and grill it and everything – it was his thing – and the last time we did it he cut the scrag end off it and threw it on a plate in front of me like I was a dog – the girls laughed – they thought it was hysterical" (Caz 162-177).

One common tactic was for fathers to become angry and hostile at the children's mention of the mother, so that they learned there would be a bad or frightening atmosphere if they talked about her, in this way *she* became *unmentionable.* Another, that five participants referenced was compelling their children to call them by her first name instead of 'mum'. As Bandura (1991) notes this is a tactic of objectification and creating emotional distancing (Bandura 1991). Such tactics serve to dehumanise victims, a mechanism of moral disengagement (Bandura, 1991) in which emotional distancing achieved through the re-

naming of a human target of abuse, facilitates the abuse. Hen, who left her husband and came back a few times recalls:

> "It was like a light switch. When he thought that I was back in the house, on his terms and under his control again – all hunky-dory – it was: Isn't your mum great? Come and do this with your mum, come and do that with your mum. And then, when he realised it wasn't going to be just as he wanted it, there was a row and it was like, that effing bitch, you know?" (Hen 575-589).

Their father's control of the environment through this metaphorical switching the lights on and off, made Hen's children feel afraid to visit her once she moved out. Participants described how children who joined in with the denigration of their mother were rewarded, with both love and approval, or with gifts. Buying pets for children was a notable tactic, with three of the women in this study reporting that their ex-partners bought children a puppy around the time that contact with their mothers ceased.

5) Exploiting women's vulnerability, particularly as mothers

Participants described ex-partners targeting their maternal identities, on which their self-esteem and fulfilment was based. Becoming mothers had, therefore, created new vulnerabilities to abuse. They talked of how their ex-partners frightened them into submission during pregnancy and motherhood, and that they were left feeling oppressed, isolated, intimidated and frightened – sometimes into staying with their abusers and sometimes being convinced to leave their children with their fathers when they were utterly defeated.

Dee described her ex-partner up in their daughter's bedroom crying to her:

> "He'd be up in Dana's room every night…crying to her. He'd be lying next to her crying – mummy doesn't love us, mummy doesn't want us. And I remember hearing it when I went to toilet and I went into her room and I said – I heard that! And he just turned to H and he whispered, Sshhhh! It's mummy!" (Dee 516-519

And, she also described:

> "When I was half-asleep he would whisper in my ear, "You're a piece of shit, why don't you just go? The kids hate you, none of us want you!" (Dee 235-243)

The women described ongoing abuse throughout the abusive relationship that continued, post-separation, through the psychological and emotional torment of being denied contact with their children. Post-separation, three of the participants were grieving the recent 'loss' of their children when they attended family courts to fight for contact. The women reported being exhausted and emotionally debilitated by a bombardment of strategies targeting their vulnerabilities as women and mothers. Dee spoke of "terrible pain – this terrible, terrible heartache" (Dee 573-579). And Lil expresses the anguish of losing, not only her son but also losing her identity and sense of self:

> "My role as a mother – all of who I am – is totally thrown that out to the point that ultimately – that my confidence wasn't too great to start with – but I think my confidence has gone. (Lil 941-944)

6*) Threatening mothers with not seeing their children or taking their children from them*

Participants consistently reported that their ex-partners: a) threatened to turn their children against them or take their children from them as a means of entrapment, i.e., the threats were made to prevent help-seeking, exposing the abuse, or leaving, and b) began to execute such tactics if they transgressed these rules, and deliberately turned their children against them in order hurt them and punish them when they eventually left. The following excerpt from Hen is a good example, especially when we consider how she moved out of the marital home to provide more freedom from her husband's control and authoritarianism over her four children:

> "He had Canadian citizenship from working there and he would threaten to move there and take the kids there. That threat had always been there – right from when Hetty was a baby - right from the start that threat was always thrown at me – there was always that fear that he would take the kids away from me" (Hen 339-347).

Mel described her ex-partner has having, “this nasty dark side that if I threatened to leave then I would regret it” (Mel 413). She said that the breaking point was when “he made it very clear that if we ever split up then Milly [their daughter] would stay with him and I could just go and do whatever I wanted but it would be without her”.

Similarly, Ann described how threatening her relationship with their two sons was her ex-partners main method of controlling her: “He said many, many, many times that he would take the boys from me – that him *and* his family would” (Ann 114).

7) Actively employing mother-blaming by exploiting mother-blaming institutions and practices

Participants consistently described how their ex-partner’s manipulation of professionals and exploitation of institutions (e.g., the family courts, the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS), social services, schools and the police services) was instrumental in separating them from their children. The women described with dismay of how easy it seemed to be for their ex-partners to use professionals and services to their advantage and that they didn’t think their abusers could have achieved mother-child separation without professionals/organisations supporting them (albeit unwittingly). The perception of the legal system as patriarchal and gender-biased was clear among the women as they described how their abusers made a host of allegations in these environments, with none of the men being held accountable for defaming them, causing them extreme psychological/emotional distress, undermining them as parents, or separating them from their children. As described earlier with Lil when discussing lying and manipulating children, Mel also said that her ex-partner made many allegations about her mental health. Additionally, Mel gave this example of how her ex used their daughter in a false claim about her mothering fitness during legal proceedings:

> "In the court case there was an accusation that Milly had seen me having sex with someone which was just impossible. There was absolutely no way that she even saw me in bed with someone." (Mel 462-467)

All participants reported allegations against them were taken seriously and acted upon in an official capacity which affected contact and communication with their children and significant others. Official documents repeated slander in the case of three participants, and aggressive barristers capitalised on and exaggerated these untrue allegations to deny them parental rights and persuade judges in favour of the fathers. Abusers exploited social services' obligation to investigate child protection matters, as in Lil's case:

> "So this judge relied solely on the file about what he'd said about me: that I had thrown him down the stairs, that I'd held him by his neck, that I hadn't fed him, that I'd shouted at him. These were all untrue!" (Lil 685-703)

Fathers/perpetrators were also reported to use school staff and the parents of their children's school friends to exert strategic coercive control. Both Lil and Mel said that their ex-partners claimed that they were'bad mothers', and this led to social workers visiting their children's schools. It is standard procedure to use professionals' opinions in such reports used in children's proceedings.

Mother-blaming is widely recognised in the literature as a problem for women confronting DVA, particularly in contact and residency disputes (e.g. Heward-Belle, Humphreys, Laing and Toivonen 2018; Radford and Hester 2006; Lapierre and Côté 2016; Mandel 2010; Morris 1999). Radford and Hester (2006) note this tactic as a means of controlling women; MacKinnon (1983) argued that the law aids abusive men in their efforts to deflect the responsibility of their abuse onto women and blame mothers, because "the law sees and treats women the way [abusive] men see and treat women" (1983, p.644).

Courts in England and Walesdo not recognise this form of violence against women as mothers in any formal way. Family courts are not obliged to investigate a mother's claims that her ex-partner is turning her children against her as a form of DVA. These behaviours also remain outside of the statutory definition of a coercive or controlling offence.Family court judges explicitly frame their decisions according to "the ascertainable wishes and feelings of the child concerned (considered in the light of his age and understanding)" in Section 1 (3) of the Children's Act 1989 (Parliament.UK 2006). It has been argued, however, that this concept is so vague (e.g. Wallbank 1998) that it allows exploitation of the system. For example, when coercive controllers condition children to refuse contact with their mothers, the ascertainable wishes and feelings of the child may in fact be those of their fathers (e.g., when children have unwittingly become the mouthpieces for their fathers).

8) Denigrating mothers and elevating themselves to supplant mothers as children's primary caregivers and attachment figures

Participants talked consistently of being criticised, belittled, abused, 'bad-mouthed', condemned and blamed and their ex-partners repositioning of them as unfit/bad mothers in order to undermine them as parents whilst concurrently presenting themselves (fathers/perpetrators) as the better parent. Hen said that her ex-husband told her children, *'*"Well she's left you. What sort of mother would walk out on her children?" There was all that talk of "She's a bad mother!"" (Hen 235)

Professionals had helped ex-partners to elevate their own status to that of heroes, benefactors, and primary caregivers. This was described by the women as an easy task for their ex-partners, which suggests that myths about 'bad mothers' are so ingrained in our culture that they advantage perpetrators'/fathers' strategic coercive control of women as mothers. Four participants reported that ex-partners moved children to different schools, the

better to manipulate education professionals. For example, Mel, who described mental health problems resulting from the domestic abuse, described this tactic whereby her ex-partner told a different narrative in which: Mel was' mad', he was to be pitied for having to put up with her, and he was to be admired for taking over the childcare:

> "He moved her school while I was in hospital so removed my support network – all the other mums I knew. So I was the mad one going up to the school gates, with people whispering, "She's been in hospital!" They were all sympathetic to her dad. "What a hero! Isn't he wonderful?"" (Mel 27-30)

It is noteworthy that, when I interviewed Mel, she had just returned from a joint appointment with her daughter to see a psychiatrist who was appointed by the family courts as part of a care plan when Mel's daughter was returned to her care. Mel told me how angry she was and how upset her daughter was that the psychiatrist had 'told them off' for being "too verbose" (because, Mel explained, they were in the stage of telling their story about what happened to them and how distressed they were as a consequence). Again, such dismissal emphasises the ease with which women and children are sometimes dismissed when professionals choose to mother-blame instead (here, the child is an extension of the mother). Women talked of how their ex-partners would exploit this vulnerability by drawing attention to their mental health as they were often fearful, anxious and depressed at the thought of losing their children, and men compared favourably. This tactic not only had an impact on professionals; it also elevated their status with their children or let them play their mothers' victims, which further distressed both children and their mothers. Dee reported how her children have idolised their father on social media since his death, whilst continuing to refuse contact with her:

> "They think I'm partly to blame for his death because once I left him – he never had a job – he never had a girlfriend – and he drank himself to death. So, he's dead now but he's there on a pedestal. He's now a legend! (Dee 577-578) .

Morris (1999) observed the confusion and difficulty that children experience as they redefine their relationships with their mothers under the influence of abuse, which requires them to, "privilege the meanings constructed by the male voice over their own, even when this gravely conflicts with their own experiences" (1999, p.73). A father who is using the strategy of self-elevation to destroy a mother-child relationship "constructs himself as a hero and presents himself as a victim of the mother, which subordinates children's experiences of him as violent, inconsistent and punitive" (Morris 2010, p.224).

Attachments made in such hostile environments, where children are essentially entrapped and dominated by their fathers, are likely to be a response to trauma and fear (e.g., Radford & Hester 2006: 134). Previous research has drawn parallels between a child's traumatic attachment with a violent parent and the 'Stockholm Syndrome': the psychological phenomenon where captives declare loyalty to their captors (e.g. Herman 2001). Drawing on Bowlby's (1982) studies of how infant animals attached themselves more strongly to punishing than rewarding surrogates, Radford and Hester draw attention to how "a child's apparent closeness to the violent parent may be an indicator that the child's relationship has been forged through fear, rather than a sign of a secure attachment based upon affection and security" (2006: 134). The intense emotional trauma likely to be involved in the breaking and re-making of attachments in hostile atmospheres, such as those described by participants in this study, indicates that perpetrators/fathers' elevation of themselves is a cynical tactic in which positive constructions contradict flagrant abuse. Nevertheless, the women's accounts in this study indicate that these are enduring constructions that allow for the re-writing of history and for fathers to supplant mothers as their children's primary attachment figures.

General discussion and conclusion

This is the first study to specifically focus on detailing coercive controllers' strategies used to interfere in the mother-child relationship and engineer a mother-child separation. From a thematic analysis of the narratives of six women, eight themes were identified as perpetrator tactics of strategic separation: 1) Lying to and manipulating children; 2) Sabotaging children's contact with their mothers; 3) Weaponising children; 4) Conditioning children through reward and punishment; 5) Exploiting women's vulnerability, particularly as mothers; 6) Threatening mothers with taking their children from them; 7) Actively employing mother-blaming by exploiting mother-blaming institutions and practices; and 8) Denigrating mothers and elevating themselves in order to supplant mothers as children's primary caregivers and attachment figures. Although some of the themes identified in this study illustrate perpetrator tactics already familiar in the DVA literature, past research has not recognised the above as a clear set of tactics involving strategic mother-child separation, and previous knowledge had, largely, been gathered from studies with mothers who had not actually experienced separation from their child(ren). Fathers'/perpetrators' use and abuse of children in strategies to undermine mothering roles and target women as mothers by intentionally causing mother-child separations is a serious but overlooked problem.

Given the vast body of literature on which this study builds, it begs the question: how does this form of abuse remained unaddressed by services? This paper argues that it is because although perpetrators'/fathers' assaults on the mother-child relationship are part of a range of tactics involved in men's violence against women and children, this form of gendered abuse remains nameless to women, to service providers and to policymakers. Consequently, until it is formally recognised, it will remain undetected and unaddressed. Naming it as coercive control is fundamental to addressing it as those currently experiencing it *have* no name for it and so it remains unknown. As Kelly states: "what is not named is invisible and, in a social sense, is non-existent" (1988, p.114). All the women in the present

study resoundingly stated that they had received no help, support or understanding other than that found at MATCH Mothers, and that, instead, professionals and family alike had held them accountable for the consequence of the abuse they suffered. The women talked of wanting to expose the strategies of coercive controllers who target mother-child relationships and the importance of publicising the problem and understanding it as a part of DVA so that other women do not have to suffer the shame that they have experienced in living apart from their children.

Further research is needed upon which to base interventions. Given the small sample, and the fact that all the participants were heterosexual white British women, future research would be useful to determine the nature and prevalence of the problem using larger samples and in a wider cultural context.

The current study provides a springboard for further research that would determine the needs of women and children who have experienced mother-child separation via coercive control to educate service providers, improve services responses and coercive control training, and influence policy making. Such research would provide the impetus for the development of practice and systems responses to address the needs of targeted women and children so that professionals do not unwittingly collude with the perpetrator and engage in mother-blaming.

Implications for policymakers, service providers and practitioners

The study fndings highlight the need to improve responses to mothers who are at risk of, or are experiencing, mother-child separation via strategic coercive control, which could be addressed using the law, and through practitioner responses improved by specialised coercive

control training. However, in order for the law to capture these behaviours, controlling or coercive beahviour would need to be redefined to include the indirect abuse of a person (B) by another person (A) through the manipulation of a third party (C; including a child younger than age 16) in such a way that causes B serious alarm or distress. The recent Practice Direction 12J relating to child arrangement and contact orders in the context of alleged or admitted domestic abuse and harm, highlights the need for courts to fully consider the potential of harm to children in these cases through a fact finding hearing. However, this is predicated either on an admission of domestic abuse, or evidence being made available, either from CAFCASS or other agencies, that provides 'a sufficient factual basis' on which to proceed. Given the poor recognition of the tactics identified in this study, it is likely that these changes may have little effect on cases involving mother-child separation via strategic coercive control. Services are well-positioned to assist women threatened with, or experiencing, mother-child interference by a partner/ex-partner, to use coercive control legislation to prevent the use of intentional mother-child separation as a form of abuse and control. It is important to be aware of how adept abusers are at manipulating practitioners, especially when mother-blaming systems are amenable to the father/perpetrator's perspective. Lapierre (2010) noted how "strategies used by men are often 'successful' because they take place within the institution of motherhood, which poses women as responsible for their children and imposes upon them a particular set of expectations", and that "to some extent, abusive men seem to understand how the institution of motherhood operates and can be used against women" (2010:1447).

Services could do more to prevent the isolation of mothers and children from one another through social supports, establishing access to resources, and reinforcing women's capacity for mothering through supporting the mother-child relationship as a unit (Katz 2015). Services need to respond to coercive controllers' threats to interfere in the mother-

child relationship or to an engineered mother-child separation by recognising this behaviour as criminal and holding him accountable. Practitioners might support women in this endeavour by helping them to collect evidence of their abusers' threats/attempts to interfere in the mother-child relationship. This study advocates that services recognise strategies aimed at mothers, mothering roles and mother-child relationships through educating workers to have awareness and to know how to respond.

Raising awareness of coercive controllers' strategies to sabotage mother-child relationships to victims/survivors is an important step in preventing the problem early enough and before it becomes too entrenched. This can happen when women do not recognise this type of abuse in time and children have already been 'turned against their mothers'. The mothers in this study clearly reported threats of intentional mother-child separation but did not have the language to describe their experiences or realise that it was a form of DVA. This ignorance arose, largely, out of their belief in the concept of Parental Alienation Syndrome (not a useful concept as explained in this paper), which they sought help for but did not find. If the coercive control of mothers via strategic mother-child separation was named as such and awareness of the problem raised then women would be more likely to know where to get help from and that professionals could help them address it. It is important that services help mothers understand the ways in which perpetrators might try and coerce and control them by manipulating their children, family members and professionals, and support them to challenge this behaviour using the law.

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Table

Table 1. Details of the participants and their children (pseudonyms used)

Mother	Children	Child Age at parents' separation	Child Age at time of study	Duration of mother-child separation	Contact status between mother and child	Residency with which parent?
Lil	Lyle	3	13	3 years	None	Mother gained residency following the split from her ex-partner who then wrested the child from her and supplanted her as the resident parent
Hen	Hetty	16	21	Never	Always lived with mother	Mother post-separation
	Hadrian	15	20	5 years	None	Mother gained residency following the split from her ex-partner who then wrested the child from her and supplanted her as the resident parent
	Hal	13	18	5 years	None	
	Henry	11	16	5 years	None	
Caz	Cal	21	32	Never	Regular	n/a
	Carly	19	30	Sporadic	Regular	n/a
	Caitlin	12	23	3 years	Regular	Father due to strategic mother-child separation
Mel	Milly	17 months	13	6 months	Now living with mother	Shared parental care post-separation Father gained residency when mother hospitalised Mother re-gained residency when Milly 6 years old
Ann	Alan	15	18	2 years	None	Mother
	Alex	13	16	Never	Regular	Mother gained residency following the split from her ex-partner who then wrested the child from her and supplanted her as the resident parent
Dee	Dana	9	28	19 years	Recent /sporadic	Father following strategic mother-child separation
	David	4	22	19 years	Not for last 3 years	

Figure

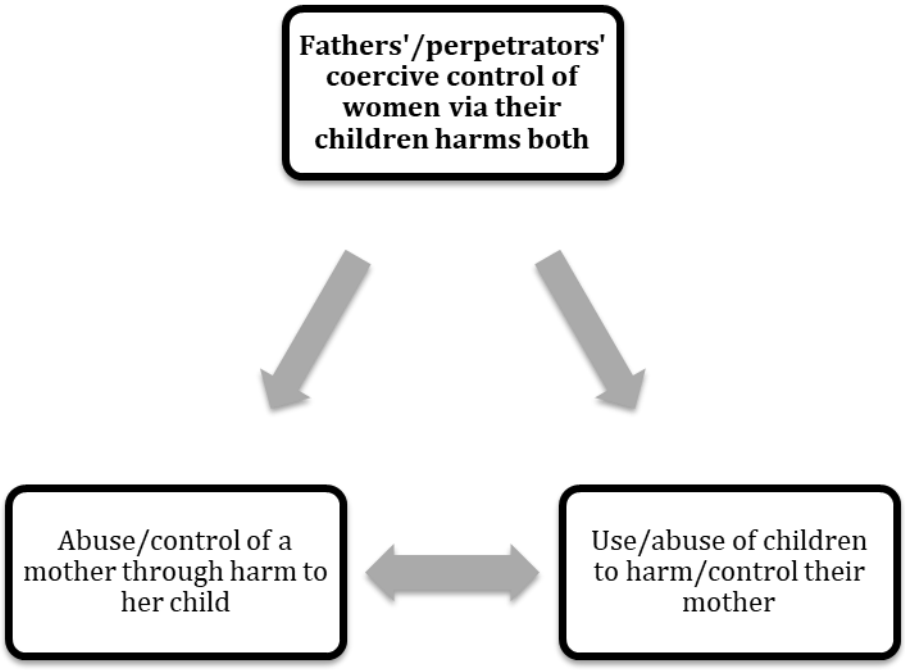

Figure 1: Strategies to harm women as mothers also harm their children and vice versa