Interventions Alliance
Part of the Seetec Group

The Complex Pathways to Violence in the Home

Better understanding male domestic abuse perpetration

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About Interventions Alliance

Part of the employee-owned Seetec Group, Interventions Alliance bridges the gap between social care and the criminal justice system. We aim to prevent individuals from becoming trapped in a cycle of criminality by offering evidence-led solutions that focus on three core strands: prevention; rehabilitation and recovery.

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"There are all these sayings about 'can't teach an old dog new tricks' and 'leopards don't change their spots' and all that. Yes, okay, some of it is true of course, but I was a very, very proud person, and I've had to change my outlook on stuff. You can change. If you want to."

(Jon, 42, study participant)

Please note: The views reflected in the following research are not necessarily those of the Home Office.

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Acronyms and terminology

Acronyms

BBR – Building Better Relationships (a domestic abuse perpetrator programme exploring domestic abuse in heterosexual relationships, delivered by probation services in the community)

CJS – Criminal Justice System

CPS – Crown Prosecution Service

DA – Domestic Abuse

DV – Domestic Violence

HMPPS – Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service

IPV – Intimate Partner Violence

MoJ – Ministry of Justice

VAWG – Violence against women and girls

Terminology

Within this report, the terms 'narratives' and 'stories' are occasionally used interchangeably. However, typically, when we use 'stories' we are referring to singular events with a beginning, middle and an end e.g. 'this is what happened in this particular incident'. When we use 'narrative', however, it refers more to a system of stories related to a particular topic e.g. 'narratives of domestic abuse perpetration', or 'narratives of childhood and adolescence'.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) has been a focus of the Government for some time, more recently through the Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy 2016 – 2020 (HM Government, 2016). This strategy outlined its plans for national and local Government, as well as local partners and agencies involved in supporting those who experience abuse. This policy approach is thus reflected in agencies such as the MoJ, HMPPS and CPS (MoJ, 2020; CPS, 2017). These key agencies, along with statutory health and social care agencies, are charged with challenging all forms of gender-based violence at every opportunity. With reference to Wales, the Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act 2015 places a duty upon Local Authorities and Health Boards to form annual action plans and strategies for their respective areas in relation to combatting violence against women, gender-based violence and the protection of children (see: Welsh Government, 2020).

It is recognised by Government and its justice, health and social care agencies that domestic abuse (DA) disproportionately affects women and girls, with disabled individuals being particularly at risk of harm. Men and boys are recognised as also experiencing the lasting impacts of abuse, with anyone potentially becoming a victim regardless of sex or gender identity, ethnicity or cultural heritage, religion or belief, sexual orientation, or disability. Whilst it is seen that most abuse occurs within intimate relationships, the understandings of what abuse is, who it affects and where it occurs are broad, as the differing contexts, forms of manifestation and victim profiles are varied and complex. Additionally, Government agencies and those they work with have come to define DA as a child safeguarding matter, with the pernicious, damaging and lasting effects upon children who witness it being identified.

It is estimated that in the year ending March 2020, an estimated 2.3 million adults were experiencing DA. This figure is comprised of 1.6 million women and 757,000 men. This amounts to an estimated 5.5% of adults aged between 16 and 74 years. There was no significant change in the prevalence of DA compared with the year ending March 2019. From a policing perspective, some 1,288,018 DA related *incidents* were recorded in England and Wales (excluding Greater Manchester) in the year ending March 2020. When these incidents result in recorded *crimes,* amounting to 758, 941, we see a 9% increase from the previous year (ONS, 2020a).

The above picture has more recently been compounded by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, police recorded that crime data flagged as DA related in England and Wales had increased, as had calls to relevant charities for victims (ONS, 2020b). Indeed, Kelly describes DA during this time as an 'epidemic beneath a pandemic' (Kelly, 2021). Early indicators

demonstrate that the COVID-19 pandemic, and the lockdowns of 2020, made escape routes to safety for women more restricted (Women's Aid, 2020). Furthermore, an increased rise in cases has led to a further widening of the gap between numbers of white and minority ethnic victims (Musimbe-Rix, 2021). Additionally, due to the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns, court prosecutions have reduced drastically across the spectrum of criminal justice offences during and up to December 2020 (ONS, 2021).

In very recent developments, the new Domestic Abuse Act 2021 has been introduced. The Act includes the first statutory definition of DA, which encompasses coercive and controlling behaviour. Children are now seen as victims rather than 'witnesses' if they see or hear abuse at home. Additionally, victims now have special protective measures available to them during hearings. The Act makes illegal the disclosing of intimate images without consent and creates a new criminal offence of non-fatal strangulation. New powers for police, magistrates and other criminal justice agencies are introduced via Protection Notices, Protection Orders and polygraph testing. The Act strengthens the Domestic Violence Disclosure Scheme and places greater duties upon Local Authorities to secure accommodation for DA victims. Finally, within the Act, all agencies will have to work closely with appointed Domestic Abuse Commissioners.

Responses to the above issues have been presented by Government over recent years. From 2018 through to 2020 the Police Transformation Fund was accessed and utilised by the Government with the intention of establishing a selection of creative approaches to working with DA perpetrators. The Government subsequently established a £10million fund designed to continue the support of this work from April 2020 to March 2021. These monies have been accessed by agencies working with perpetrators of DA. As part of this, money was specifically allocated for research which sought to develop a better understanding of the perpetrators of DA, and to strengthen the evidence base for 'what works' in addressing domestically abuse behaviour. The following research is part of that research fund.

1.1 The current research project: Identifying perpetrators of domestic abuse

Identifying perpetrators of DA is challenging. Most do not come into contact with the Criminal Justice System (CJS), and many will not have had the opportunity to be referred onto perpetrator programmes (Hester et al., 2006). As such, we don't know all that much about them as a group. One of the most valuable ways we can learn about people's lives, of course, is by asking them. However, research into perpetrators of DA is limited, and often focused on what is located *outside* of that individual. In particular, their evaluations and experiences of DA programmes and services. Though there has been important research looking at perpetrators' explanations and triggers for

being domestically abusive (e.g. Kelly & Westmarland, 2016; Hester et al. 2006), there is very little looking at the broader life-course of the DA perpetrator. This is an important gap if we are to recognise the early warning signs of such behaviour, as well as identify who the active perpetrators are.

The following research project, therefore, explores the life-stories of adult males who are known to the CJS as perpetrators of DA. It considers their early lives and how they explain their various pathways towards DA, including the stressors and challenges experienced in childhood, early factors that they felt drove and triggered their DA perpetration, and other factors which sustained and escalated such behaviour. In addition, the research also explores how the men explain tackling their DA behaviour. However, the research also takes a critical position – specifically, a narrative perspective. Here, the research considers *why* such stories are told/why certain explanations are given, and to what effect. The research concludes by considering how such knowledge might benefit DA policy and practice.

1.2 Aims and research questions

The aim of this research is to better understand who perpetrators of DA are and how they came to be, and offer suggestions for how current interventions might be strengthened in light of this understanding.

The research questions are as follows:

1. How do male perpetrators of DA explain their lives, and in particular their pathways to becoming domestically abusive?
2. Why do DA perpetrators tell the stories they do?
3. How can the learning from this research be usefully applied in policy and practice?

1.3 Report chapters

Chapter 2 comprises a literature review exploring the common factors, issues and challenges in the histories of DA perpetrators. It also considers the role that interventions have had in trying to tackle DA perpetration, and the need to include the voices of perpetrators of DA in moving forward in addressing violence against women and girls.

Chapter 3 offers an account of the methodology used in this research. As well as mapping out the recruitment processes, the approaches used in this research, the methods and the ethics, a detailed collective account of participants is provided, in order to give a more thorough understanding of the men who took part in this research.

Chapter 4 identifies the core themes to emerge from this study. It explores the

common experiences in the life-histories of DA perpetrators, and maps the early warning signs and behaviours that might suggest an individual is at an increased risk of becoming domestically abusive in future.

Chapter 5 explores participants' stories from a narrative, and therefore more critical perspective. This chapter explores the *functionality* of DA narratives, in terms of the insights they might offer into why DA perpetrators tell the stories they do.

Chapter 6 considers the main learning from the analysis chapters, and puts forward the key learning points and recommendations to be taken forward from this important research.

Chapter 2: Early signs and warning flags: Mapping the lives of people with histories of domestic abuse perpetration – a review of the literature

The following chapter explores key research within the domestic abuse (DA) literature base, looking specifically at the early warning signs and behaviours that may predispose someone to become a DA perpetrator in the future. Themes explored include: childhood trauma and its impact on emotional regulation; crime and antisocial behaviour; and masculinities, stereotypical gender norms and the impact on perceptions of fatherhood. The chapter then moves on to consider the important role that life-course perspectives, and 'perpetrator voices' have in improving our understanding of this topic. The chapter concludes by stating the rationale for this research.

2.1 The impact of childhood trauma

Experiences of trauma in the life-course of DA perpetrators were present throughout the wider literature. Though trauma can result from many adverse life experiences, and can occur at all stages of development and maturity, research has suggested exposure to DA during childhood provides a positive correlation to future, intergenerational perpetration. Indeed, multiple longitudinal studies have stated that witnessing or experiencing family violence can be significant predictors of future perpetration (e.g. Costa, Kaestle, Walker, Curtis, Day, Toumbourou & Miller, 2015; Verbruggen, Blokland, Robinson & Maxwell, 2020).

However, whilst witnessing DA at a young age has been statistically linked with future offending, this is in no way self-determining. Not all children who witness DA will go on to become a perpetrator of DA, of course. The complexity of people's lives typically prevents the identification of a single causal factor, and doesn't account for individual differences amongst the population (Wagner, Jones, Tsaroucha & Cumbers, 2019). A review conducted on behalf of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) analysed 29 research studies examining whether such a causal link between childhood exposure to violence and later perpetration of intimate partner violence (IPV) could be established (Radford, Richardson Foster, Hargreaves & Devaney, 2019). The results were mixed. Whilst there was evidence of a link, the complexity of relationships, and the time from first exposure to violence in the home, prevented any certainty. One such study, conducted by Tracy, Salo and Appleton (2018), claimed that early exposure to domestic violence (DV) increased the risk of behavioural problems in later childhood, and the subsequent development of DV in adulthood. Of interest, they suggest manifestations of stress, which come in the form of school

problems, misuse of substances, and arrests for a spectrum of crimes, are often misinterpreted, which in turn prevents these children accessing the necessary support (Watt & Scrandis, 2013, p.2813).

In addition, Gadd, Corr, Fox and Butler (2013), found that perpetrators disclosed stories of disruptive childhood home lives, which permeated into other aspects of their lives. Aggression or lack of engagement at school were practical tools used to minimise trauma in educational settings. Many stated that undiagnosed learning difficulties and attention deficit disorders at school, possibly arising from their traumatic home lives, were misconstrued as forms of disobedience (p.12). To avoid the stigma and humiliation of being labelled a 'slow learner' or avoid feelings of being judged, fight or flight tactics such as confrontation or truancy were used.

The 'blurred lines' of victim and perpetrator

Importantly, the presence of trauma in childhood can complicate things when coming to understand future outcomes. Indeed, 'victim' and 'perpetrator' histories of experiencing childhood abuse often share similarities (e.g. Iratzoqui, 2018; McClure & Parmenter, 2020). Iratzoqui states that in cases where abuse is bidirectional in relationships, the line between victim and perpetrator is blurred. This is especially true when abuse histories are identified as dating back to childhood, or the dynamics of past relationships are unclear. Park and Kim (2019) suggest that the categorization of individuals as 'victims' or 'perpetrators' in violent scenarios may be unhelpful, as both roles can be assumed by the same person. It was found that perpetrators had stronger associations with victimisation experiences than perpetration. Whilst this may be dismissed as minimisation of violence, the authors suggest that past victimisation may act as a trigger for future violence perpetration.

Stress and trauma

Trauma, through experiencing violence in the childhood home, also saw links with outcomes of later adult stress. McClure and Parmenter (2020), for example, in a study exploring anxiety and stress amongst victims and perpetrators of DA, identified high trait anxiety amongst perpetrators (feelings of stress and anxiety on a day-to-day basis) in a way which wasn't so apparent amongst victims. The authors suggest, the combination of high levels of stress during adulthood and trauma deriving from childhood, lends support to the Stress Sensitization Model, in which the traumatic events of the past negatively impact on emotional resilience in the future (Watt & Scrandis, 2013). The model argues that for children who have experienced adolescent trauma, including witnessing abuse in domestic settings, this results in a limited tolerance for stress in later life.

Within the context of DV, the inability of perpetrators to cope with, and

positively express, stress may trigger reactionary aggressive impulses in the form of violence. However, similarly to previous limitations surrounding intergenerational offending theories, a definitive causal link between exposure and higher stress cannot be established. Importantly, some studies have found no statistical difference in emotional resilience between those who have and have not been exposed to trauma (McKee & Payne, 2014).

2.2 Crime and antisocial behaviour

Research has also found perpetrators display similar life trajectories. In particular, involvement in crime and antisocial behaviour. For example, research exploring the causality of DA found adversity experienced in childhood to be a factor. Voith, Topitzes and Berg (2020) suggest that children who are exposed to traumatic events in the home may "look to the street" to both escape abusive environments and find identity. In particular, if fathers are absent or abusive in the home, children may look for guidance elsewhere – potentially from violent and dangerous persons. Moreover, exposure to DA at home during childhood may also propel children into unsafe criminogenic environments, and those in which violence is prevalent (Voith et al, 2020). Indeed, Capaldi, Knoble, Shortt and Kim (2012) affirm that exposure to both family *and* neighbourhood-based violence are established risk factors for DA perpetration. In addition, Capaldi et al. (2012) suggest that exposure to trauma at a young age can result in subsequent challenges with psychosocial development, including antisocial behaviour, conduct problems, adolescent substance abuse and mental health issues. Although these factors have been identified as correlating highly with future perpetration, pathways to offending obviously do greatly vary. Kadiani, Chaundhury, Saldanha, Pande and Menon (2020), for example, suggest that emergence of alcohol and mental health problems deriving from trauma may increase the chances of violent behaviour. Alternatively, trauma may independently predispose an individual to develop different issues.

Verbruggen, Blokland, Robinson and Maxwell (2020) sought to explore the relationship between criminal conviction data and self-reported IPV and violent offending throughout a person's life. Whilst the research sought to address the research deficit of IPV during later adulthood, potential early indicators were also explored. The research supported that the early onset of antisocial behaviour and delinquency was a consistent, significant predictor of violent behaviour in later life. Furthermore, individuals with violent and chronic convictions were more likely to report IPV perpetration. The association of early antisocial behaviour with DA risk factors, and the positive correlation between entering the juvenile system and problems with violence in later life, suggest that ideally interventions and support should be applied during the early stages of development (Watt & Scrandis, 2013).

Interventions and support

Research has also looked at the role of support and interventions. For example, it has been suggested that, given depression and alcohol misuse are established factors in the lives of young people in the criminal justice system, and a correlation is recognised between alcohol and more serious forms of violence, the need for support provisions or preventative measures is clearly apparent (Kadiani et al, 2020; Verbruggen, Maxwell & Robinson, 2020). That said, others have offered a word of warning. Whilst violence and aggression at a young age may highlight the presence of trauma in life stories and/or increase risk of domestic perpetration, it should not be the prerequisite for intervention. Lee, Walters, Hall and Basile (2013) emphasised that predictors of DA within young people can also be attitudinal, which can present itself as displays of adversarial sex and gender beliefs, hostility towards women, "ineffectual" responses to confrontation, and desires for control. As such, suggestions for interventions vary depending on the stage of development of the young person. As Theobald, Farrington, Coid and Picquero (2016) state, preventative measures may be best applied at the earliest stages of development by addressing the issues associated with future violent behaviour using appropriate universal screening instruments.

2.3 Fatherhood and masculinities

The aetiology of domestic abuse perpetration has also considered the role of gender beliefs and masculinities. Indeed, the link between masculinities and DA is well established. As Schmidt et al. (2007) summarise:

> *"Batterer intervention literature indicates that batterers typically hold rigid sex role stereotypes, or traditional, stereotypic views of masculine and feminine images and roles, as well as male-female relationships. These attitudes and beliefs underlie a batterer's assumption that men have the right to control women, thus providing a rationale for the use of violence to maintain this control. All of these attitudes reduce a man's motivation toward the use of cooperative communication and other nonviolent behaviours with his partner."*
>
> (Schmidt, et al., 2007, p.99)

Schmidt et al. (2007) suggest that the use of violence, and other activities associated with dysfunctional resolution skills, allows perpetrators to enact crude masculinity, the effects of which permeate into numerous aspects of an individual's life history. Moreover, Williamson (2010) argues that systematic violence and coercion tactics demonstrate misinterpreted male entitlement – a mentality that has been conditioned by the underlying cultural embodiments of patriarchy, which allow perpetrators to rationalise their behaviour and reduce accountability.

The preservation of traditional gender roles

Though society has, of course, moved on from mid-century perspectives which place men as providers and women as homemakers, DA perpetrators have been found to be considerably more likely than others to hold on to these reductive ideas. Importantly, LeCouteur and Oxlad (2011, p.11) found that male DA perpetrators routinely attempted to blame their abused female partners, and justify use of violence, when partners deviated from the "moral order of proper gendered behaviour". Gendered assumptions regarding behaviour were also shown to vary by the gendered categorisations of relationships such as 'girlfriend', 'wife' and 'mother'. This ethos is not only likely to affect the way in which perpetrators navigate intimate partner relationships, but how they interpret their role as a father.

Notions of fatherhood

Within this wider umbrella of masculinities in DA research, there has been an emerging focus on concepts and experiences of fatherhood. One way in which this has been explored is through various motivations for child contact. To an extent, the concept of 'paternal' has been explicitly framed as 'paternalism'. Katz, Nikupeteri and Laitinen (2020), for example, have suggested that children can sometimes be used by perpetrators as a tool with which to exert control and entitlement over partners – even after the relationship has ended. The concept of 'protectiveness', often used by perpetrators, is more typically understood by academics, policy-makers and practitioners as an additional method of control.

Countering reductive ideas of gender

Though Morran (2013) observes that the coercive control of partners is a widely recognised phenomenon in the literature on domestic violence, he also suggests that more emphasis is needed on the beliefs and the perceived functionality that underpins such actions (p.310). Morran highlights the need for perpetrators to examine the impact of their masculinity and gendered sense of entitlement when responding to conflict. Specifically, how it relates to their offending behaviour. Morran also determined that participants had sought to conform to the traditional set of masculine identities in their capacity as a partner and father, conforming to scripts that emphasised: lack of engagement with emotions, presenting oneself as authoritative, and minimal empathetic reflection surrounding the impact of their actions on others. This external presentation of masculinity resultantly led to a suppression of other emotions that had developed during the perpetrators' life-course, including fear, anxiety, low self-worth and feelings of inadequacy as partners and fathers. To counteract the lack of an internal locus of control (e.g. emotional availability and empathy), perpetrators looked outwardly, by trying to control someone else (Morran, 2013).

In order to effectively begin the process of challenging these gendered perspectives, Morran suggests that men must first reach a level of personal maturity (Morran, 2011). Moreover, as fatherhood brings new responsibility, Meyer (2018) argues that fatherhood and positive relationships with children may be a useful motivational tool to support DA perpetrators towards desistance. Indeed, through interviews with DA perpetrators who had children, Meyer found that participants had both a strong sense of entitlement to their role as fathers, *and* revealed strongly held beliefs when it came to stereotypical gender roles. In seeking solutions to this, Meyer advocates for an educational approach which teaches men about the impact their offending has on their children and partners, and a corresponding holistic support approach to address the additional risk factors in perpetrators' lives.

The role of interventions

The invisibility of fathers in policy and practice has often allowed men to "avoid social responsibility for their harmful behaviour" (Meyer, 2018, p.98). As a result, there is often a disproportionate pressure on women to protect children in abusive households (Meyer, 2018; Featherstone & Peckover, 2007). Stanley and Humphreys (2017) affirm that allowing male perpetrators the opportunity to evaluate their role as a father, and contemplate the effects of their abusive actions on their children, is hugely important. By redirecting the responsibility for child protection away from DA victims, the benefits may be bilateral, in that it might minimise the scrutiny of women by state actors, reduce victim blaming and encourage men to challenge their problematic behaviours and outdated beliefs about gender roles. Ultimately, facilitating a positive and meaningful role as a father (Stanley & Humphreys, 2017). These findings have been supported by projects such as 'Fathers for Change', in which 'unhealthy' relationships between DA perpetrators and their partners subsequently jeopardised a healthy relationship with their child (Stover, 2013, p.68). In order to begin establishing a positive relationship with their children and try and prevent a multi-generational transmission of abuse, men were encouraged to re-evaluate: "*What does it mean to them to be a father? What is a father supposed to do? What have been their experiences of being fathered? What did they most want from their fathers as children?*"

Fatherhood can offer new responsibilities and give an opportunity to critically re-examine problematic beliefs and (perhaps particularly, gendered) expectations developed during a life-course. The significance of desistance interventions during the early stages of a perpetrators' transition into fatherhood is not only important in tackling the perpetrators' own DA behaviour patterns, but also for their children, who are at a substantially greater risk of witnessing that domestic abuse themselves, and for a proportion, going on to emulate that in their own intimate relationships.

This chapter so far has explored a number of early risk factors and behaviours identified within life-course literature surrounding DA perpetrators. The consistency of literature on the impact of trauma, mental health issues, early offending behaviour and rigid sex and gender roles is indicative of the need for interventions that address these issues. In the final two sections, we will consider the important role that life-course perspectives, and the privileging of 'perpetrator voices' can have in bringing additional depth and nuance to our understanding of male perpetration of DA.

2.4 The life-trajectories of domestic abuse perpetrators

As we have argued so far in this chapter, there has been a wealth of research exploring the aetiology of DA perpetration. However, though these studies have collectively offered important understanding about the factors which may increase the likelihood of future DA perpetration, there are few which consider the whole life-course of the perpetrator. Given that we know DA is a pattern developed over a life time (Kelly and Westmarland, 2016), this is an important omission. Indeed, Kelly and Westmarland (2016) argue that the reduction of DA understanding to single incidents reproduces how male perpetrators talk about violence. Understanding how domestic abuse develops, increases and is sustained throughout a person's life is an essential perspective. In this next section then, we consider an important study which has sought to explore using a more life-course perspective when it comes to young men with histories of DA.

From Boys to Men Project

In seeking to identify early predictors of future DA perpetration, the 2013 'From Boys to Men Project' is a hugely relevant study. The research took place in three stages. In Phase 1, an Attitudes towards Domestic Violence questionnaire (ADV) was distributed to 1203 pupils in Staffordshire aged 13-14 to understand perceptions and experiences of DA (Fox, Corr, Gadd & Butler, 2013). Findings showed that over half of the participants had some direct experience of DA, and that boys were statistically more likely than girls to justify the use of violence, but less likely to seek help if they were abused. This data lends support to the concept of the gendered nature and normalisation of DV, and masculine notions of strength through silence. In Phase 2, 69 participants aged 13-19 were allocated into focus groups to explore attitudes towards DA by viewing relevant audio-visual resources and discussing vignette scenarios (Corr, Gadd, Butler & Fox, 2013). Whilst physical violence in relationships was almost universally condemned, conciliatory language suggested that violence could be justified in particular circumstances. Many young men "empathise[d] implicitly with other men's insecurities", and understood desires to control women when trust was "lacking". In Phase 3, researchers conducted interviews with 30 young men aged 16-21 who had been affected by DV, of which over two thirds were identified as perpetrators, establishing their life histories through biographical interviewing

techniques. The aim of the interviews was to understand the way in which DA 'fitted' into their life stories (Gadd, Corr, Fox & Butler, 2013).

The findings of Phase 3, which we will focus specifically on, were consistent with much other research into DA perpetrators. The research revealed that participants experienced similar, significant disruptions during childhood, resulting in acute feelings of powerlessness. For some, parents and other primary care-givers, were involved in illegal exploits, experienced poor mental health, and had alcohol and substance misuse issues. Upheavals were also common, with some participants leaving their childhood homes due to housing instability, or due to being removed to live with other family members or into the care of the state. Schooling was also inconsistent, with disruptive behaviour, learning difficulties, exclusion, and poor educational attainment being common. Such factors ultimately resulted in underemployment and involvement with the criminal justice system (CJS). In addition, a lack of consistent social support was a recurring theme amongst the participants, with many expressing feelings of loneliness. The recommendations of the project highlight the importance of looking to the past when building interventions for the future. The vulnerability of perpetrators borne out of trauma and disruptive upbringings has facilitated distrust in others and self-reliance. Empathetic active listening and non-judgemental rehabilitative language were encouraged (Gadd, Fox, Corr, Butler & Bragg, 2013). The project also found that many young people had already experienced DA in some form, experiences that often informed young peoples' attitudes. The project recommended mandatory preventative education that seeks to engage young boys and encourage open conversations regarding the nature of DA.

In addition to highlighting the development of risk factors at a young age, the study adds substantially to the knowledge base when it comes to the internal barriers that inhibit men from seeking help from adult authorities. Focusing on the voices of perpetrators, the research uncovered feelings of vulnerability, rage and powerlessness, often deriving from childhood experiences that remained with them into their adulthood.

2.5 The importance of the 'perpetrator' voice

Typically, and indeed understandably, research which explores experiences of DA tends to take a victim perspective. Research into perpetrators' experiences, however, is often centred on their evaluations of, and access to, DA interventions and services. There is significantly less research considering their personal histories of abuse and violence, and specifically ones centring their voices. Morran (2011) directly advocates for the importance of the voice of the perpetrator when it comes to DA research. As he comments,

> *"…in order to engage with and begin to motivate a man it is necessary*

> *to acknowledge his individual circumstances, his life history and his perception of why he is abusive. In short it is necessary to hear his voice. It may well be that this voice is one which is difficult to listen to, but where this is simply drowned out, and the man presented with a template which 'brands' or labels him simply as a 'perpetrator', then his resistance to engagement is heightened from the outset."*
>
> (Morran, 2011, p.29*)*

As Morran attests, only by giving perpetrators a voice can we identify these early risk factors in a person's life history that may predispose someone to commit abuse in a domestic setting (Morran, 2011). Perpetrators' voices may also highlight problematic attitudes regarding gender which underpin their abuse, and uncover how these views are created and sustained (LeCouteur & Oxlad, 2011). The knowledge accumulated from this approach can be used to build appropriate interventions that account for the consistent risk factors identified in perpetrators' lives. Alternatively, perpetrators may be involved more directly in intervention design. As shown by Morrison et al. (2018), primary research looking into the perspectives of those who had 'been there' can draw on their experiences to identify risk factors at a young age which require support (Morrison, et al., 2018).

Stanley, Fell, Miller, Thomson and Watson (2009), in research commissioned by NHS Hull, sought to very directly centre the voices of male perpetrators in a study seeking to form a reliable evidence base for developing a local social marketing initiative on DV. Amongst other stakeholder perspectives, the researchers explored the views and experiences of 84 men, aged 17 to 72, who were either known to be, or were at risk of becoming, perpetrators of DV. A key finding was that participants struggle to conceptualise DA as a spectrum. They were also resistant to any definition which suggested that only men perpetrated DV. Factors identified as contributing to DA included men's low self-esteem, difficulties in expressing feelings, stress and images of masculinity. It was also suggested that women could play a part in provoking violence. Disclosing problems and asking for help was understood as non-masculine, and contributed to anticipated stigma, shame and embarrassment. In addition, fear of the consequences of disclosure also acted as a disincentive to seeking help. Finally, reasons for desisting were varied, but the effects of DV on children was a highly motivating factor, along with the threat of losing their partner. The study concluded that men's understandings, attitudes and motivation in relation to DV were highly complex yet consistent, and as such formed a reliable evidence base for the initiative.

The contention of giving voice to perpetrators

Despite the valuable role such studies have in better articulating men's conceptions of their violence towards women, the inclusion of DA

perpetrator voices may generate resistance due to the stigma attached to the offence and the perception of inherent untrustworthiness of the individual (Kelly & Westmarland, 2016). Kelly and Westmarland, however, contest the assumption that conducting research that centres men's accounts in some way allows men to 'get away with it'. Instead, they argue, it fills a gap in research. We can listen to the stories of male perpetrators about their offending trajectories, without getting caught up with doubts about the truth of those accounts, and importantly, without disregarding the stories of women. As the authors comment,

> *"While the process of listening to women was, and continues to be, a powerful approach, it has increasing limitations, especially given the growing alternative body of work on men and masculinity, which takes men's accounts and lives seriously" (Kelly & Westmarland, 2016,* p.117*)*.

Centring male, perpetrator experiences does not invalidate the experiences of female victims of DA. Rather, we might argue, it adds to the wider understanding DA as a lived experience.

2.6 Seeking a broader range of perspectives: The rationale for this research

As we have argued, the voices of perpetrators are essential if we are to understand more about them as a group. However, as we have also argued, such research is sparse, especially when it comes to looking at lived experience. The 'From Boys to Men Project', of course, offers hugely valuable insights into the life-stories of young male DA perpetrators, and subsequently their reasons for becoming domestically abusive. However, what it does not offer (being out the scope of the research) is what these formative experiences look like for adult DA perpetrators – i.e. those 22 and over. This is an important perspective if we are to understand how these early warning signs of DA go on to become sustained, and more dangerous, behaviour patterns over a life-time. Moreover, the research takes a principally descriptive approach, setting out the lives of the young men, and their experiences of DA, through the subjective lens of the participant. Whilst this is, of course, hugely important – people must, after all, have agency in telling the stories of their own lives – stories of DA perpetration carry stigma and shame in the way that other stories do not. There are therefore certain risks in telling them. As such, it is essential we attend not just to the content of stories, but to *why* they are being told and *how* they are being told. In this way, we might achieve even greater insights into the lives of DA perpetrators.

2.7 Conclusion

This literature review has arguably added a human element to our understanding of DA perpetrators, looking past the stigma of the perpetrator label, to reveal the histories and voices of the people behind the offence. The literature has identified consistent risk factors that are frequently in perpetrator narratives including; presence of trauma, mental health issues, disruptive upbringings and behavioural and attitudinal problems. Whilst the prevalence of these issues in the life histories of perpetrators can be identified in quantitative studies, by giving perpetrators a voice, it can enrich our understanding by highlighting the impact of these events on the individual. By centring men's accounts and voices in our own research, we seek not to invalidate the voices of women, nor reduce accountability for the participants' actions. We do however, seek to address a gap in DA literature by identifying the internalised emotions and attitudes that might prevent help seeking measures, and contribute to later DA perpetration, and how these feelings and behaviours might be sustained over the life-course.

The next chapter will address the methodology utilised in our current study, how the data was analysed and the consistent personal characteristics of our participants.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Recruitment

Participants were recruited from three probation services run by Kent, Surrey and Sussex Community Rehabilitation Company (Kent, Surrey & Sussex; Devon, Dorset & Cornwall; Bristol, Gloucestershire, Somerset & Wiltshire). Ten participants were recruited successfully. Staff were contacted via an all-staff email to introduce the aims of the study and ask them to refer anyone from their caseload that fit the brief (i.e. service users with convictions for domestic abuse (DA), and preferably enrolled on the Building Better Relationships programme – BBR). Responsible Officers, Senior Probation Officers and programmes staff were also contacted directly by the research team to accelerate referrals. Suitable candidates were asked by their supervising officer for their permission to be contacted directly by the research team, to arrange a convenient time and date for an interview to be conducted.

3.2 Methods

The following research comprises a qualitative study, using rich, in-depth narrative style interviews as a means to explore this important topic. A semi-structured approach was used, with the topic guide (Appendix D), designed to elicit fulsome life stories, whilst allowing participants the space to talk about issues they saw as key moments in their lives. DA perpetration history (and within that, perceived triggers, stressors and routes towards desistance) was obviously key, but these subjects were embedded within the wider context of the participants' whole life narratives.

3.3 Data collection

Interviews were conducted in February and March 2021. These were conducted by two researchers (one a freelancer recruited to support the project, the other a member of the KSS CRC Research Unit). Interviews were conducted remotely via telephone, audio recorded and transcribed. The shortest was 46 minutes, and the longest 1 hour 25 minutes. On average, most lasted around an hour. Interviews collected data on participants' backgrounds, past and present relationships (including family, friends and romantic partners), experiences of DA, the impact of the pandemic and how they see their futures. Following the interview, participants were posted a £20 Love2Shop voucher as a thank-you for their time. They were also sent a hard copy of the participant information sheet (Appendix A), a consent form (Appendix C), and from an ethical point of view, a list of support and help organisations.

3.4 Analysis

The analysis was conducted in two ways: thematically, and using a narrative method. For the thematic analysis, transcripts were explored from the subjective perspective of the participants, following the stories they told about their lives, their relationships, and of course their domestically abusive behaviour. Initially, all members of the research team read through the transcripts and identified preliminary themes as a group. These themes were then reviewed and core themes agreed on for further coding. The research team worked collaboratively to share ideas and ensure the quality of the data analysis.

For the narrative analysis, a critical perspective was drawn on using a functional narrative approach – an approach which interrogates the purposes of a given storytelling moment (Sahlstein Parcell & Baker, 2018). For example, questions might be asked such as 'what does this story *achieve* in its telling?' and 'what is the significance of *how* the story is told?' This chapter also draws on elements of narrative criminology (Presser & Sandberg, 2015), in exploring how the narratives suggest future action. Specifically, in how certain identities are claimed and how desistance is enacted.

Ensuring quality data analysis

To ensure quality and rigour of analysis, an expert in narrative methodologies in criminological research was consulted with. Professor Sveinung Sandberg, from the University of Oslo, provided expert steer through two consultation days – one in April and one in May. The first day involved an online meeting where the first draft of analysis was discussed, and advice given for moving forward. The second day involved comments given after the second and final draft of the analysis.

3.5 About the participants

Although personal characteristics were not specifically collected during the research, inevitably basic details about participants' lives and experiences emerged from the interviews. These are grouped into categories below.

General demographics

The participants were all men who were currently in, or had previously been in, heterosexual relationships. Ages ranged from early twenties to early fifties (five in their twenties, one in their thirties, three in their forties and one in their fifties). Information on ethnicity and religion did not come to light during interviews. Six participants were not in work at the time of the interview, with some having experienced job losses or problems due to the pandemic. Two had previous or current caring responsibilities – one for a parent, and one for

a partner. Participants currently resided in Britain, specifically Surrey, Sussex, Devon, Dorset and Bristol. Most grew up in Britain, with one spending their former years in South Asia/Middle East and one participant living abroad for a short time in their late teens.

Childhood and family

Half of the participants experienced their parents separating when they were between the ages of eight and thirteen. Two of these break ups involved infidelity from one of the parents. Five participants detailed seeing their parents (or guardians) argue regularly, with two stating physical violence was involved.

Two of the participants were only children, with the rest having between one and four siblings. One person was adopted (though only found this out in their teens). Four reported good relationships with their mothers, and a further three said relationships with parents (again, usually mothers) had improved in recent years. Four said that they grew up with a stay at home mum and a father who worked (usually working away for extended periods), whilst two said that their mothers were the bread winners of the family. Five of the men had alternative male/father figures in their lives (such as brothers, uncles, step-fathers or grandfathers). Two participants had limited or no contact with their families any more, and one's parents had both now passed away.

Two participants experienced violence from a parent, and two also reported parental drug and/or alcohol problems. Two participants had social services involved with their families when they were young, one being removed from their mother's care to that of their father's. Four participants said that they moved around a lot when they were younger, two involved moving to other countries, and one mentioned living in refuges to escape an abusive father. A couple mentioned being homeless for a time, usually following being 'kicked out' of the family home.

School life

The majority of participants mentioned some kind of trouble with schooling. This included exclusions (sometimes several), attendance at Pupil Referral Units, and attendance at boarding school. Getting in trouble at school and truancy were common themes in most cases.

Substance misuse issues

The majority of participants said they had previous problems with alcohol, drugs, or both. Those with drug problems tended to cite cannabis as their most used drug. Most of the participants had started heavily drinking or misusing substances when they were in their early teens. However, nearly all of them also said that they had stopped drinking and/or drug taking, with

one participant being in a residential recovery centre.

Mental health

Most participants had experienced some form of mental ill health, including depression (sometimes to the point of suicidal thinking), anxiety, personality disorders, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, eating disorders and insomnia. The majority spoke about experiencing severe stress both previously and currently, resulting from various life events and dispositions. One had suffered a head injury which lead to memory problems as well as related emotional issues.

Friendships and relationships

Several reported having very small groups of friends, often due to recently cutting ties with previous acquaintances in an attempt to better their lives. Five men had previously been a long-term relationship, but weren't any more, with five currently in a relationship. Six spoke of issues with relationships in the past, ranging from being cheated on to being physically and violently attacked by partners. Six of the men had a young child/young children, the majority of whom were under the age of 7. Two of the participants had current or previous involvement with social services regarding their child(ren).

Violence and domestic abuse history

Five described various antisocial behaviour and fighting episodes in their past, ranging from scraps at school to alcohol fuelled outbursts in their early twenties. Three had previous or current restraining orders against them from partners, and two had previously been in prison. Reasons for DA convictions varied (and were not always explicitly disclosed), but ranged from coercion, harassment, physical violence and in the case of one of the participants, manslaughter. Of note, four described their offending as 'one time' incidents. Six were either currently on or had previously attended the BBR programme. Another was registered for a different (non-probation) DA perpetrator course.

3.6 Ethics

This research was carried out in line with the KSS CRC Research Unit Code of Ethics.

Ethics in recruitment

Participation was voluntary and interviewees were reminded that participation was not mandatory nor related to their Order. Participants were given a £20 Love2Shop voucher as thank-you for their time. They were informed of this reward prior to the interview taking place. The historical controversy around giving rewards to participation in research should be

mentioned here, as it could be seen as an incentive and therefore potentially coercive. Also, given the nature of the research and the participants' offending, it may have been viewed as rewarding these behaviours. However, the research team deemed it an appropriate token of gratitude for the time and energy contributed by the participant to the research, especially due to the possibility of considering potentially distressing themes.

Ethics in data collection

Participants were given an opportunity to read the participant information sheet (Appendix A) ahead of the interview, along with the participant invitation letter (Appendix B). Researchers also read the information sheet and consent form (Appendix C) out to participants before the interview commenced, with participants being asked to confirm verbally, on tape, that they were happy to proceed. Hard copies of these forms were then posted to participants (along with their voucher) to their chosen address within a week of the interview taking place. After the interview had completed, all participants were told again of their right to withdraw their information within 24 hours of the interview, and how to go about this. They were also sent a list of organisations offering help and support in respect of the difficult and sensitive topics explored throughout the interview.

Confidentiality, anonymity and data storage

Participants were assured anonymity, and their identity, personal and unique information has been anonymised within this report. As such, pseudonyms have been used in this report to protect their identities (brief details below). Interviews were transcribed by an established and secure transcription company, and stored in a secure online environment. All data collected from participants was handled confidentially and securely throughout the project.

Pseudonyms, age and relationship status

Jon – 42, married and living with his wife and children
Alex – 26, single
Tariq – 42, married but currently living apart from his wife and children
Simon – 36, in a relationship, living apart
Travis – 25, single
Mike – 53, married, living with his wife and acting as her full-time carer
Liam – 28, in a relationship, living together in partner's family home
Aaron – 26, single
Cian – 22, single
Gary – 41, single

Chapter 4: Pathways to domestic abuse – the lives of domestic abuse perpetrators

This chapter identifies the core themes to emerge from this study. These themes are inextricably interwoven as they speak of individuals trying to understand and make sense of the significant events in their lives, and where relevant, how they relate to their domestically abusive behaviour. The chapter begins with a word of warning about attributing singular, or even combinatory, factors as causal reasons for domestic abuse (DA), before going on to present the participants' key life events, in particular their early lives, as a way of better understanding the common experiences of men who have histories of DA perpetration. The chapter concludes by exploring accounts of how, in moving on with their lives, the participants sought to tackle their DA behaviour patterns.

4.1 Contestable causality and the purpose of this chapter

It is hard to map the exact reasons why people commit crimes. As we know from decades of criminological research, there are many (combinatory) factors, both social and psychological, that play their part. Though some crimes might have easier, albeit reductive, explanations (e.g. theft, fraud and drug dealing bringing financial rewards), it is significantly harder to pinpoint why someone goes on to be domestically abusive. And perhaps the main reason for this is, unlike many other crimes which can (and do) occur in isolation, DA is more a pattern of behaviour (Kelly & Westmarland, 2016). And, moreover, one that is often developed over a lifetime.

The following chapter, therefore, does not seek to make causal links. Rather, its aim is to describe the lives and experiences of a group of ten different men who perpetrate or have perpetrated DA, using their own words and presented through their own lens of reason. In doing this, the chapter finds commonalities in experiences, especially experiences in the men's younger lives, and considers how various social and psychological factors are explained as shaping their beliefs, development and subsequently behaviour.

4.2 Childhood, home life and family

This first section considers the early lives of the participants. It explores their home lives, their school life, and also the unique experiences which shaped their formative development. Though (most) participants did not link these events and experiences directly to their later DA behaviour, their inclusion is important in understanding the commonalities within the group.

4.2.1 Parental separation, divorce and family disruption

Echoing the findings in the 'From Boys to Men Project' (Gadd, Corr, Fox & Butler, 2013), for most of our study participants, their childhoods involved some form of family disruption, usually through parental separation. Relationship breakdown frequently saw the father being the one to leave the family home – most often when participants were between eight and twelve years old. Only Tariq and Mike talked of their parents still being together through their childhood, though in both cases their fathers worked abroad and were therefore rarely present in the family home. The impact of family break-ups saw many of the participants entering an upsetting, confusing and destabilising period of their lives. Liam, for example, talked of the huge impact it had on his life following his father and mother's acrimonious break up, and his father subsequently disappearing from his life. As he explains, "*My dad cheated on my mum and left her after a 20-year marriage. So, yes, it all, kind of, started spiralling down from there*". And as Jon says of his experiences of parental break-up, "*At a very young age my world was torn apart. It was very different afterwards.*" Indeed, it was typical to see participants reflecting back on feeling too young to understand most of what was going on, and having little to no control over what they did understand. This feeling of helplessness is captured strongly in Alex's narrative as he repeatedly tells us, "*Obviously, what can you do as a kid?*".

Such change and disruption in the home inevitably saw subsequent instability in the participants' living situation, with several finding themselves temporarily homeless. Aaron's story was particularly key here, as he explains how the family breakdown saw him go on to lead somewhat of an itinerant lifestyle.

> *"I didn't have any stability, there was nothing that I could really get myself stuck into, I was always on the move. So, I don't think I did very well for me when I was growing up."*

Furthermore, this experience of constantly changing accommodation, including staying in refuges, saw Aaron's subsequent challenges in creating lasting relationships and becoming part of wider social groups. As he goes on to explain,

> *"I don't know, I just didn't really have a lot of love around when was a child. Most places I lived in were all poverty driven, so there was not a lot of money around, my schooling wasn't very well, so I never really kind of had great relationships with people that would be striving or moving forward in life or had a working-class family or anything like that. I never kind of valued the normal."*

This instability was also reflected on by Liam. In describing the impact of his parents' break-up, and his mother finding a new partner, he says,

> *"For me, I feel like I was turning into an adult at 18 and then mum was, kind of like, 'I'm moving in with my boyfriend, fend for yourself or go to your dad's".*

There was a sense from Liam, and others too, that family breakdowns saw the need for an expedited passage to adulthood – a suddenness to which participants were forced into making difficult and life altering decisions that they were often simply not prepared for.

4.2.2 School life

Again, similar to the 'From Boys to Men' Project (Gadd et al., 2013), the early lives of the participants also had some striking similarities when it came to experiences at school. Though a few felt the social side was positive for them, describing popularity and peer acceptance, especially for the "sporty" types (e.g. Jon and Alex), for most, the school experience placed them as something of an outsider. Gary, for example, was "expelled" multiple times, failed to finish his schooling, and described himself as the "naughty kid" in the classroom. Cian talked of his experiences with dyslexia; with no diagnosis, and teachers appearing to show very limited knowledge his condition, it was left unacknowledged and undealt with. As a consequence, Cian described losing interest in schooling as he drifted to the margins of the classroom.

However, although participants sought to reject school, there was also a sense that they, in turn, had felt rejected. Indeed, though Gary claims not to be "*phased*" by his school exclusions, and that it "*didn't bother*" him, he also reflects on his teenage self as having "*promise*" and, rather than being unable to do the work in school, he was perhaps "*bored*". And Cian too, though he states that he "*didn't care*" about school, he goes on to tell us,

> *"I wasn't really doing my work and they weren't really that bothered about me to be honest, but then when I eventually got kicked out, I got put into a school where it was more focussed on you individually. So, it was a lot better, and yes, I got more done, and yes, I just think it was the best thing for me, to be honest… just less people in the class. There were, like, three teachers in the class and then there were about eight of us, or less if the students didn't decide to turn up. So, yes, it was more focussed on you. It was just a lot better for me."*

It appeared that the more 1-2-1 support offered by the Pupil Referral Unit gave him the support needed to eventually do quite well academically – something he describes as being very grateful for and happy about.

Such alienating experiences at school were also apparent for Mike. However, in Mike's case, this was linked directly with his later DA behaviour patterns. Mike describes the unhelpful way in which teachers and school officials dealt with him following his accounts of being bullied. As he explains,

"I think it may stem back to a time where I was bullied, and I was always being told what to do constantly. I had that feeling, although [my partner] may not have been nagging me… I think she's having a go at me, and unfortunately, I've lashed out at her, and sometimes I've lashed out at her too physically".

Mike later also adds, *"I think being told to do something is, it's controlling, in a way, in my mind"*. For Mike, the powerlessness he felt in being bullied at school translated into feelings of anger whenever he felt he was being attacked. Though he acknowledges that these feelings may not have reflected reality, his instinct, nonetheless, was to *"lash out"*.

4.2.3 Traumatic events in adolescence

What also stood out were the many common experiences that participants had when it came to trauma in their early-life. These were often explained through substantially life-changing events that seemed to occur during the participants' adolescence. Cian experienced several of these. His first occurs in the story of his father's stroke. He describes his family and childhood prior to this time as happy and fun-filled, yet his father's sudden illness saw Cian's life dramatically change. His father was significantly altered after the stroke, no longer there to provide the father role that Cian wanted and needed. As he recounts of that time,

"…it felt like we'd lost someone because he wasn't there to tell us off and be a dad to us pretty much, and my mum pretty much became, like, a single parent".

Moreover, his relationship with his mother then deteriorated, and he began to act out, becoming involved in crime and antisocial behaviour. Of note, he also charts it as a time in which his childhood became lost to him.

"I'd go and see him up at hospital, and this was during the six weeks holiday that we get during school, and I was just up at the hospital 24- well, not 24/7, but all the time, and my mum turned around to me. She was like, "[Cian], go and see your friends. Be a kid," do you know what I mean, because I was just always up the hospital with my dad. I didn't want to do anything else."

In another example, Cian talks of an incident in which his friend killed someone with a punch. Again, this very much seemed to shift the direction of Cian's life. As he laments, *"it just, yes, changed me, in a way"*.

Mike too had similar such trauma. Firstly, it occurs in a story in which he talks of finding out he was adopted. This was a hugely significant event for Mike, and led to much talk about identity and genealogy. Mike directly links this to his subsequent development of resentment and mistrust of others, and (of note)

anger issues towards his partner. As he explains,

> *"It wasn't until I was about fifteen, sixteen that I actually found that I was adopted, and then I found out my sister, she was adopted as well, and I suppose that's where a lot of my resentments come from, not only towards my parents, or other people, but I suppose in a way it's rubbed off on me, and I take it out on [my partner], as well."*

Mike also talked of suffering a brain injury in his mid-teen years – something he links to his adult cognitive function issues. The incident was significant for Mike as not only was it a time where he felt very afraid, he also describes his feelings of frustration at the medical institution for making light of it.

> *"Oh, yes, that's it, they called it the incredible shrinking brain, and I thought, "Hang on a minute, that's not very funny. That's not very funny." I didn't get angry with them or anything, I said, "Please do not call it that."*

And again, this experience is something which Mike links to his later DA behaviour.

> *"Yes, I would say so, yes. I'm not the same person as I was before I had the accident. I get very frustrated when I can't remember things, and unfortunately, I tend to take it out on [my partner], which is the wrong thing to do."*

Trauma through illness and accident was also experienced by Alex. Alex described having a lengthy history of medical problems, but isolates one particular medical issue as a turning point for him. He chooses not to talk directly about what it was, yet does explain its impact – "*Everything went black*", and later, "*I didn't know who I was anymore*". He continues,

> *"…for a child at that age, to be told what I was told, I'd rather not go into it because it was a dark time of my life. For a child to be told what I was told at that time ruined me. I didn't see a future ahead of me."*

Like Cian, and indeed others with similar stories not described here, there was a sense that at that point, Alex's childhood was suspended, even lost.

4.3 The antecedents of domestic abuse: mapping early warning signs

This section explores the more specific factors which our group attached as explanations, either implied or stated explicitly, for their DA perpetration. Though, as discussed in section 4.1 such factors cannot be directly causally linked – there are multiple reasons why anyone might commit such a crime,

and these are principally rooted in the psychosocial – these were common experiences amongst our participants, and are therefore important factors to attend to in seeking to understand what the early warning signs might be for young men when it comes to later DA perpetration.

4.3.1 Abuse and violence in the family home

Experiencing abuse and violence in their childhood homes seemed to be a significant factor in seeing later aggression and violence amongst the participants – a factor supported in the wider literature (e.g. Verbruggen, Blokland, Robinson & Maxwell, 2020) – e.g. the intergenerational transmission of DA. For many, it seemed that learned behaviour during childhood saw them reproduce it in other ways in later life. Simon, for example, describes seeing his parents, *"fighting, punching, slapping, throwing furniture".* Whilst reflecting on its impact on his own behaviour, he poignantly notes *"you've always got it in your head*". This was also the case for Travis, who spoke at length of the abuse and violence he and his siblings suffered at the hands of their mother, and that it subsequently saw him repeating such behaviour in school. As he very directly claims, *"I think, you know, a lot of my behaviours are learned behaviours".* Aaron too describes similar effects of experiencing violence in the home. In talking of his father's violence towards his mother, he tells us,

> *"It didn't make me very great with relationships or very great with people. I've always had a different understanding of things than other people did".*

This impact of childhood abuse and violence was particularly significant in Jon's narrative. Jon's step-father's presence is felt throughout all aspects of Jon's life – in their shared love of sports; their common positive outlook on life; their problems coordinating care for Jon's mother as she became ill with Alzheimer's; and in his step-father's own illnesses. Most significantly when it comes to the more specific topic of DA, Jon talked of his step-father's unpredictably, aggression and occasional violence towards him. Though Jon often makes effort to neutralise it *"I was probably winding him up/back-chatting"*, he also acknowledges what a huge influence his step-father had on him. As he says,

> *"At no point at all am I ever going to make excuses for my actions and stuff. But, you know… he was such an influential figure – in everything I did."*

This influence is even more directly acknowledged later in his narrative, when Jon talks of the tension that his relationship with his step-father brought to his relationship with his partner.

> *"[She] clashed with him quite a bit as well in terms of the way he*

treated me. That caused some tension. I suppose it caused tension because to me there was the Jekyll and Hyde relationship. He was still my hero… But you know, looking back on it now speaking to you, and obviously I've had a lot of reflection time anyway, it wasn't right. It overstepped the mark on way too many occasions… That must have all come from my relationship with him. I've always wanted to win the outcome of an argument, and probably from his point of view he went too far, which is what I ended up doing".

Jon's acknowledgement of his step-father "*going too far*", a "*Jekyll and Hyde*" character, in the context of stories of his step-father being aggressive towards him, throwing things at him, and damaging his things (once deliberately punching a dent into the bonnet of his car), are quite directly linked to his own abusive behaviour. As he explains, "*this is what I ended up doing*".

Of particular note was how, for Jon, the breakdown of the family was seen as worse than staying in the abusive situation. As he says,

> *"It made me quite scared, I think….the fear… of the family breaking up because of potentially arguments that he and I would have over absolutely nothing that escalated out of control.… Coming from something where I'd already lost a family before, the thought of then another breakup, another upheaval was quite petrifying."*

Despite the existence of violence and abuse, in Jon's telling, the most threatening outcome was that his family might once again become separated.

4.3.2 The pathways of stress, substance misuse and anger

Reflecting entirely the wider literature (e.g. Capaldi et al., 2012; Kadiani et al., 2020), the so-called toxic trio – mental ill health, substance misuse and domestic violence (DV) were inextricably linked for the participants. Usually starting in mid-late teenage years, participants spoke of problems of their early childhood translating into later substance misuse habits, and subsequently into anger and violence. One of the most prevalent ways in which this process was presented was through narratives of stress. Indeed, Aaron's assertion that he was, "…*stressed quite a lot when I was younger*" reflected a common feeling amongst the participants.

Feelings of stress seemed somewhat incremental. Though participants spoke of its occurrence in their younger years, usually a result of difficulties in other areas of their life (e.g. home and school life), stress seemed to grow with them. It became a persistent problem. This supports previous findings which suggested resiliency to stress was impacted when stressors emerged at a young age (Watt & Scrandis, 2013). There was a sense that, for many, the

stresses of life they experienced in their teenage years became profound problems in their adult years. Indeed, as the responsibilities grew, so did feelings of being overwhelmed and unable to cope.

> *"…at the time I had a lot of stress on my head, financial and a new born baby, the first time that I had become a dad and all the stress of a new house and work, everything that I wasn't really coping with and then all of the things that I was coping with outside of all of that, I didn't really cope with everything very well" (Aaron)*

> *"I couldn't go to work because of my mental health. I then was getting stressed myself because I couldn't then support my family properly. Then it was just a constant viscous cycle…" (Travis)*

This intensification of stress was also a strong feature of Jon's narrative. As his family came to rely on him more and more, his stress levels grew to the point he no longer felt in control. As he explains of both his mother and his step-father's illnesses,

> *"The stress was just intense. Our lives, as with our families, it was just non-existent. [My partner] and I have been together years and years and years by this point, and been through quite a stressful life ourselves, because we are both working professionals so we apply a lot of pressure on ourselves with our jobs and everything like that. We have got a son as well, and we did a lot of property developing and stuff like that. We put this huge pressure on ourselves, and suddenly I was just taken out of my life, and my life became my mum and my stepdad."*

A common way in which the participants described dealing with stress, and indeed other mental health issues, was through drinking, and for some, through taking substances. Aaron, for example, describes drinking and drug misuse becoming a huge feature of his life. In explaining their influence, he claims not to have known how to deal with life without them. They became a mechanism to deal with all his problems, learning he subsequently took on into adulthood.

> *"…just to block everything out. I was always stressed quite a lot when I was younger. I was in quite a lot of stress with my mum, I just started taking drink and drugs from a young age just to get away from it. At weekends I used to try and escape from myself and my problems at the time…. and as I got older it just became so much of a routine that I couldn't see a way out of it".*

This reliance on substances as a way to navigate mental health issues was also clear in Alex's narrative. As he explains,

> *"That's when the battle sort of began because it was 16, 17 that my*

mental health started. That's when obviously I was trying to battle the mental health… it, just in the end, the battle proved too strong and I ended up falling off the wagon, so to speak. Constantly partying. Just doing things that I shouldn't be doing. I was getting into trouble. I was getting into fights. It just went from bad to worse really."

In the final part of the equation, mental health problems and substance misuse then led to anger and then violence. Though not every participant placed substances as the incendiary factor, most did. Indeed, in every story other than Tariq's, there was a reference to some combination of these factors. For example:

> *"Yes, I was on drink and drugs at the time, and I'd say I was quite violent, I was quite abusive around the house and whatnot. We ended up splitting up, I was arrested for assault and yes, things just didn't work out very well to be honest. I was on a lot of drink and drugs at the time, I didn't know where my head was, so I didn't know what I was doing with myself let alone a family."(Aaron)*

> *"That's what I guess I do when I'm drunk, is let out my anger" (Liam)*

> *"Like I said I'd had these anger outbursts and things like that, and she just couldn't really understand it. They obviously tried taking me to mental health people and things like that but they just, no one really understood it I guess" (Travis)*

> *"I'm [my partner's] full-time carer, so I'm looking after her most of the time. That's probably what would stem behind most of my anger issues..." (Mike)*

> *"I took out a lot of stress at my mum, because I feel like you take out your anger and your stress on loved ones, and that's what I was doing at the time. I was just taking my stress out on the person I loved most, which was obviously my mum, which wasn't good" (Cian)*

> *"I think I probably had built up a lot of anger issues. I definitely think I had built up anger issues and sometimes I'd probably give it to somebody even if it wasn't their fault" (Simon)*

Ultimately, in not finding successful ways of dealing with stress in adolescence, and for some, choosing routes of alcohol and substance misuse as a solution to this, participants found themselves unable to access healthy ways of dealing with their adult problems. As such, their loved ones (not just partners, but mothers too) seemed to take the brunt.

4.3.3 Volatility in romantic relationships

Unsurprisingly, participants all spoke of problematic, combative and volatile relationships. These involved not only relationships of the present, but formed a solid history trailing back to first relationships in early adolescence. Participants spoke of continual "petty" arguments with partners, fights, sniping behaviours, with the inevitable acrimony following (temporary and permanent) break ups – especially amongst the younger participants. For the older participants in the group, this sometimes saw such behaviours follow into their adult relationships. Jon, for example, described his partner and himself as *"pretty vocal",* and that in adulthood they *"still treated each other like teenagers… name calling and stuff like that"*. These relationships were also said to have great highs and great lows. Gary, for example, reflects a vacillating relationship, swinging between contentment and division.

> *"When it was good it was really good. We had real fun. But when it was going wrong it would massively go wrong. We wouldn't have a little argument or anything"*

This vacillation was also seen in constant break-ups. As Aaron explains of his girlfriend in his teenage years, *"we got together and then split-up, then got back together, it was all kind of a mess at the time"*.

Volatility within the relationships in some cases also saw self-harming behaviour. One of the most extreme examples was in Gary's relationship. As he explains,

> *"I've been there when she's cut her wrists, and she's got a knife. We've been arguing or whatever, I'm just ignoring her and she's like, "I'll fucking kill myself." I says, "Go on then," and the next thing I know, she's taken up the sharpest chef's knife that I've got and cut her wrist with it. That's not a healthy relationship, is it?"*

And of course, volatility almost always saw transition into violence, with some participants seeking to explain their behaviour through a lens of implied provocation (a point we will return in to in chapter 5).

> *"We'd talk about it. She'd say to me, "I promise I won't act like that again. But what you have done is wrong." I'm like, "Yes, I'm fully aware that what I've done is wrong. I apologise for the way I acted." But I'd say to her, "You are pushing me. When I get to that point you push me and push me and push me until I get to that…" (Travis)*

Provocation was also expressed through accounts of girlfriends being manipulative and abusive themselves. For example, participants spoke of their partners lying to them, being jealous, 'cheating' on them, and threatening to withhold or curtail access to their children. This in turn often

fuelled trust issues and paranoia. Of note, such accounts were particularly common amongst participants talking of relationships in their teenage years, where it seemed relationships were more transient and considerably less stable.

4.3.4 Beliefs about fatherhood and the 'role of men'

Though perhaps a more psychological/theoretical factor, the ways in which the participants explained masculinity, fatherhood and the 'role of men' is an important dimension, and earns its place amongst these more sociological factors. Indeed, such beliefs were key when it came to unpacking the participants' subsequent relationship with authoritarianism, and their wider sense of self.

As explored in chapter 1, masculinity and fatherhood are often integral to how men navigate identity and relationships. Both factors can manifest as a 'need' to control others, emerging from a perceived sense of entitlement (Meyer, 2018; Schmidt et al., 2007). The identified ideals of masculinity included authoritativeness and emotional unavailability (Morran, 2013). Within our study, participants often exemplified what they saw as being examples of how men should be, or in how notions of manhood had been thrust upon them by others. Liam, for example, described his own challenges of growing up in a household where stereotypical masculinity was privileged. Of his brothers he says, "*…they just used to tell me to man-up and stuff like that. So, then I suppose I tried not to ever show my emotions*". Simon too talked of getting his steer on being a man from his father. As he says here,

> *"My dad used to have the motto, "If you go around bullying people then you're going to get a good hiding, but also if you let people walk all over you, I'll give you a good hiding." My dad doesn't like bullies, he doesn't like people that like take the piss out of people. He's prim and proper but also he doesn't like it when you let people walk all over you, you know what I mean. He tried to teach us how to be a man, be nice to people but if someone comes to you and starts trying to take the piss out of you then deal with it."*

In addition, fathers themselves were often identified for their lack of emotionality. As Jon says of his dad, he was "*different in terms of his emotions. He is not really that cuddly*", and Liam of his, "*He's not open at all… I've never even heard him say, "I love you"…*". Fathers were generally placed as pragmatic, no nonsense, and truth-tellers – bastions of knowledge and common sense thinking. Importantly, the participants also seemed to get many of their life lessons from their fathers. This was particularly the case with Simon, who (as we see in the example above) often quoted his father's lessons on being a man. Problematically, such life lessons were often from men who themselves had complex relationships with violence and aggression.

The participants also revealed prescriptive beliefs about gender roles when talking about their lives and their families. Mums were more likely to be at home, and were understood to be the ones to raise the children. Mums were also often seen to be the faithful rocks supporting their son's emotional development, even into adulthood. Dads, and male relatives, on the other hand, were cast in the role of protectors and providers. Though many dads were absent, of course, the ones that were there, or who had been around at some point, were usually found to be away from the family home on vital work duties. Their role as providers allowed them immunity from reproach for not being around, given that they were demonstrably bringing in the money. As Simon & Tariq note, both of whom lived in such households, "*you can't have a nice life unless you have money*" (Simon), and "*…every month the money was coming, so, not an issue*" (Tariq).

Most significantly though, carefully delineated gender roles saw fathers as the clear authority figure. As Tariq explains of his father being told of misbehaviour when he got home,

> "*…my father used to call me in a separate room, not in front of the other kids, like my brother and sister, after having our dinner he used to call me in a drawing room or study area, and then he used to ask me politely that why I am, "I heard that -" whatever the thing is. And then he used to tell me that this is not the proper way*".

This narrative was also encapsulated in Simon's stories of his father, as he says,

> "*When my dad came in it was, well I suppose depending on my day it was either, "You wait until your dad gets home" if I'd been naughty, or my dad wanted to do fun stuff with me.*"

This was also in Cian's narrative too. Here we return to his comments following his dad's stroke, "*It felt like we'd lost someone because he wasn't there to tell us off and be a dad to us*". Like with Simon and Tariq, for Cian, being a dad meant being the one to bring order and discipline to a household.

Most notably, there was a sense of displacement in the men's narratives where such gender roles were not clear. With many having grown up in quite traditional households, some appeared to struggle in trying to navigate a place for themselves in a changing world. This feeling was expressed entirely by Tariq.

> "*Obviously a father role is a bit different in our culture, I don't know, but over all, it's not only about the cultures, it's about all around the world the father is normally the one who goes out and earns money for the family. Nowadays, there's a different system. In Pakistan, both the couple are working and all this stuff, but those times which I'm talking about, the late '80s or early '90s or early '80s, that time mostly the*

ladies used to sit at home and their job is like a housewife. And the man of the house used to go out and take all the hardship and earn the money for the family, try to give a better life to their family. So, I compare my childhood with my kids the way they are living right now, it's a totally different situation. Now the kids are very sharp. I shouldn't be using the word sharp. They are very fast nowadays."

Though he begins by presenting his views through a cultural lens, Tariq ends up talking about more universal differences when it comes to understanding gender – 'things are no longer how they were in the 80s and 90s'. For Tariq, who came from a family with such clear gender delineations, there is a sense that in this more modern world, as a man, he's just a little bit lost.

4.3.5 The role of maturity

Finally, and of particular interest, was how participants aligned their domestically abusive behaviour patterns as a developmental matter. Specifically, that it was, in some ways, a product of their youth and immaturity. This was most commonly observable amongst the younger participants, who were more likely than older participants to give examples of how they changed going into adulthood. Liam, in explaining his new outlook, tells of the changes in him since *"coming out into adulthood"*. His reformed attitudes to being domestically abusive saw him *"finding his feet"* with adult ways of thinking and doing. The role of (im)maturity when it came to DA was even more apparent in Cian's account. He placed much of his violence as a thing of the past. As he says of his younger relationship, "*I just couldn't control myself. I couldn't control my actions back then*", and later, "*back then, it was just, kind of… yes, I felt control over her*". Of the behaviours that led to the violence, he tells us "*…it was just stupid. I was young*". Indeed, on reflecting back on the abuse both he and his partner brought to one another, Cian suggests that, had they met now things would likely be very different.

> *"I think if we met later on in life, we wouldn't have done those things, but because we were young, we were stupid. We weren't thinking. We didn't really know the consequences. We didn't know what it was like to lose someone, I guess".*

4.4 The COVID-19 pandemic

Given that the focus of this research was looking at identifying perpetrators of DA, and the early warning signs of DA perpetration, the pandemic was not necessarily an area of great focus. However, given the huge impact it has had on the world, and specifically its impact on DA occurrence, its inclusion is important. Indeed, In the early days of the pandemic, particularly during the first lockdown in the UK in March-July of 2020, DA websites and support lines saw a surge of activity as victims desperately sought help and support in

dealing with living with dangerous and abusive partners (Musimbe-Rix, 2020a; Musimbe-Rix, 2020b). Moreover, police reports saw a steep increase in reported incidents of DA (ONS, 2020b), with many victims citing the combined pressure of forced confinement, job instability, and a lack of access to 'safe' places and spaces as reasons for their increased vulnerability (Warburton & Raniolo, 2020). However, amongst our participants, the experiences of the pandemic and its related lockdowns seemed to bring rather different experiences.

4.4.1 The impact of the pandemic and its subsequent lockdowns

Though the downside of the pandemic saw interruption in work and employment, fears of transmitting COVID-19 to elderly parents, and challenges of holding down relationships from a distance (e.g. where partners were not living together), the pandemic, and its associated lockdowns, also held positives for the participants. Aaron, for example, found space and time to focus on his personal rehabilitative needs without distractions from unwelcome relationships within his local area. Cian, now being in another town in supported accommodation, spoke of having the space and time to focus solely upon himself, and keep away from previous negative influences. Taking this a step further, Jon spoke of the opportunity offered by the pandemic to rebuild relationships with those closest to him, namely his partner and children. To a significant extent he encapsulates the experiences of others when he speaks of developing relationships and family time.

> *"Covid saved me and saved my family, because the world being on stop meant that it slowed, you know, everything slowed right down and allowed me to sort myself out and build relationships again. Because the speed that the world travels at I think that if it had been normal living then we wouldn't have got back together because things just progress with pace… it meant we had got a chance to spend a lot more quality time together as individuals… and have created a much stronger bond"*

Though it is important to keep in mind that many of our participants were separated from partners through much of the pandemic, and indeed their perspectives are not aligned to a victim's one (i.e. they were not less safe in their home because of the lockdowns), it was interesting to see a view of the pandemic, and its relationship to DA perpetration, in terms of what it offered in distance and time to reflect.

However, for one of the participants, Mike, the pandemic offered a different experience. Being a full-time carer for his partner, Mike was unable to get distance and time for himself. As he said of his current experience during the third UK lockdown, *"We're always together 24 hours a day, 7 days a week"*. Though he was *"sometimes"* able to go out for a walk, he always felt the

weight of responsibility. As he says, "*because I'm [her] full carer, I don't have much time to myself at the moment*". Given Mike's continued position that the frustration he experienced as a carer often led to his "*lashing out*" at his partner, the pandemic resulted in a particularly high-pressure situation.

4.5 Changing abusive ways – the routes towards domestic abuse desistance

In talking of where they felt their DA behaviour came from, how such behaviour was triggered and sustained, and where relevant, how it escalated, naturally, participants also talked of how they tried to tackle and move away from such behaviour. Indeed, stories of desistance (as will be discussed more in chapter 5) were common, and examples of how the participants were trying to change their ways, or where change had already occurred, ran throughout. For the participants, change came in many forms.

4.5.1 Applying newly learned skills

One of the most common ways in which participants mapped change, was through giving examples of where they were now applying newly learnt skills and techniques to high-pressure situations. Such approaches saw participants talk of 'breathing', 'counting to 10', 'going for a walk', and trying not to react or over-react in certain situations. They also spoke of simply trying to talk out their problems instead of arguing or resorting to violence. For example:

> *"Trying my hardest not to upset [her] in any way, shape, or form by antagonising her. That's something that I don't like, if it does happen, which is very rare these days, I just say, "Look, [J], look, I'm not willing to argue with you. I'm not going to start arguing with you."(Mike)*

> *"I can completely talk about my feelings now, especially it probably helps [my partner] in our relationship… I suppose I used to deal with things drunk… that was how I used to cope with my problems. Whereas now, I've just learnt to talk about it, you know? If, say, you are having an argument, I like to just remove myself from the situation to be honest, and just take five or however long, you know what I mean? Have a breather and just keep out of it." (Liam)*

Within this wider theme of skills learnt, there were also comments which suggested participants to now be, with reflection and hindsight, in a more enlightened place. Both Cian and Gary gave many examples of this new found understanding when it came to maintaining healthy and lasting relationships. And equally, both gave self-warnings for not making the same mistakes again.

"If anything like that ever happened again, I'm not getting involved. Well, look what happened last time? I'm not prepared to go through anything like that again" (Cian)

"I know what's good and bad in a relationship. That's what I'm trying to say now, and I'm not going to settle for anything less than good, pretty much. I know how to be in a relationship. I know how to act now." (Cian)

"I look at everybody with a different view now, a different fucking – a different way. We're all precious and we need to look out for each other. And fucking violence is not the way. If you are violent towards your partner or your partner is violent towards you, you need to get the fuck out. Simple as that." (Gary)

Of significance, these stories of changed ways and attitudes were particularly prevalent amongst the participants who had perpetrated the most serious offences. Again, Cian, who had, amongst other acts, strangled his partner, and also Gary, whose violence ultimately led to his partner's death. As he himself observes of walking away from a recent altercation,

"Do you know what? I've got to let this go. This is not worth it, and I walk away. And it hurt to walk away from something that I knew I could deal with. But I just, I made the right choice. Fucking, it doesn't matter, you know, if someone is calling you names or whatever, it doesn't really matter. If you resort to violence. Look how fragile people are."

For Gary, his temper and violence in a single moment saw immeasurable tragedy and loss, and ultimately became the most motivating factor in his need for change.

4.5.2 The role of DA perpetrator programmes

Such skills and techniques, were, for many, attributed very directly to the interventions and programmes which formed part of their probation rehabilitation package. Participants spoke directly of the important role that BBR and other Cognitive Behavioural Therapy based programmes (such as the 'Thinking Skills Programme' (TSP) and University of Bristol's 'Reprovide') played in their learning and development. For some, these interventions allowed them to connect with difficult feelings and emotions in a way they hadn't easily been able to before. For example:

"Obviously, the further along I've got, the more I'm learning, the more I'm taking in. Especially with the BBR as well, you know. All the tools and everything that they've given me to be able to handle many various situations, which, touch wood, I haven't had to use any at the moment. They've been very helpful." (Alex)

"I tend to be more argumentative, sometimes more aggressive, but lately I have been, with talking to people like [A] and [L] who are dealing with me on the BBR course, being able to get my feelings out, when talking to them, and they're giving me pointers and exercises that I can do to try and help my behaviour." (Mike)

Of note, there was also a strong indication that the interventions had helped them understand parts of themselves that they previously not been able to. As Alex comments,

"I always thank them because I feel that their work especially has also helped me to be able to understand certain things. Whereas before I may not have."

For others, the journey was still ongoing, but BBR in particular was placed as part of their hopeful future – a means with which to help them make lasting and meaningful change.

"*…by going on the BBR course, like I am now, it's hopefully going to show me where I'm going wrong, how I can improve myself, and generally how we can have a better life" (Mike)*

However, though most were wholly positive, Gary was more sceptical of what such interventions might have capacity to do. As he explains,

"But when you're actually condensing it into an hour or two hours or three hours of someone asking you about this and asking you about that, then it's hard. When you get out of that room, you're more than likely still going to be thinking all the thoughts. There is no decompression."

Though Gary went on to say such programmes still had value, "*it's better than not [doing] anything",* they were placed as limited in what they could offer given the finite amounts of time that they were available for in an individual's life.

4.5.3 Change comes from within

What seemed most clear for participants, however, was that despite the positive role that interventions and programmes had in helping tackle their DA behaviour patterns, ultimately the most successful routes to change came from a person's personal motivation to do so. For most of the group, this stemmed from simply wanting to be "a better person". For others, change was a motivator for reuniting with lost partners and families. For some, it was through heartbreak of what had been lost. And again, we return to Gary for the final word.

"So, yes, [walking away] is something that I learned. Maybe some of it comes from the TSP but to be honest, I think it came from the devastation that fucking I left behind, and the hole in my soul and being… I think that's what's changed me, to be honest."

4.6 Conclusion

Here then we catch a glimpse into the complex internal and external worlds of those who have perpetrated domestically abusive acts. We witness the lived experiences of individuals who themselves struggle to comprehend their lives at certain stages, whilst simultaneously attempting to build meaningful and sustainable futures. Through explorations in to the lives of ten men who are in many ways, quite different men, each at different stages of their lives, we have seen commonalities in their early childhood and adolescence experiences, how those commonalities have suggested an increased risk for DA perpetration, and how they have sought to tackle and reduce such behaviour in their current lives. Though again, we must be cautious in making claims that any particular factor, or combination of factors, makes for a future perpetrator, (or on the reverse side of this, makes for someone who is no longer at risk of perpetration), it is interesting that these men shared so many similar ways of thinking and doing – especially, in their younger lives.

The next chapter now considers the role of power. Instead of looking for examples where we might find evidence of risk of future perpetration, our attention is turned to *why* such examples might be given, or indeed, why such stories might have been told.

Chapter 5: The functionality of domestic abuse narratives

In the previous analysis chapter, we explored the participants' common life experiences, especially childhood and adolescent experiences, and where relevant, explored how they linked those experiences to their domestic abuse (DA) behaviour. These stories were considered from the subjective lens of the participant, and presented as 'factual', in that this is how participants introduced them. In this second analysis chapter, however, we explore participants' stories from a narrative, and therefore more critical perspective. Here we are concerned with the *functionality* of DA narratives.

5.1 Why is a narrative view important in understanding domestic abuse perpetration?

The Criminal Justice System (CJS), as a network of institutions and services, is collectively committed to the establishment of truth. As such, criminal justice professionals are highly attuned to 'sniffing out' fabricated or false stories, and are routinely encouraged to follow their instincts when it comes to accounts of crime and desistance. In probation terms, this might be understood as part of the wider process of exercising 'professional curiosity'. The system is, of course, *also* concerned with rehabilitation – a process which has personal accountability, growth, and a desire to change, at its heart. Both of these concerns – seeking the truth and promoting rehabilitated individuals – involve elements of story-telling. For example, the convicted 'offender' must tell stories of regret, remorse and change in order to be considered rehabilitated. However, when the focus is so much on looking for truth and accountability, is it possible other, *equally* important things might be missed? Indeed, in the telling of crime stories, might we find out even more about a person by also looking at what the purpose is of telling those stories, why they are told in certain ways, and finally, how those stories might suggest future action (i.e. the investment to sustain criminality or effect desistance)? Moreover, might this have particular importance when it comes to exploring crime stories which are perhaps more difficult to tell. In this case, stories of DA.

5.1.1 The stigma and shame of domestic abuse perpetration

DA is a crime that carries a great deal of stigma and shame. As such, telling stories of the perpetration of DA is a tricky undertaking; how can this be done without compromising, or losing entirely, one's essential goodness? Explanations of criminal behaviour in general often see a tendency towards drawing on justifications and mitigations for behaviour – what we might more crudely explain as excuses. However, it would be reductive to suggest that this is simply and always just to remove that person from the line of fire. Say, for example, to avoid a criminal conviction or evade a bad character

review. Narratives, and the construction of narrative identity, can provide depth, complexity and nuance about a person. They can also offer an opportunity to counter existing, and perhaps reductive, scripts about what does and doesn't make a certain 'type' of person. Indeed, in the world of criminal justice, where a conviction for DA places an individual firmly in the role of 'perpetrator', the telling of stories can offer a more complex, multifaceted and three-dimensional view of an individual. It could perhaps even offer additional insights into understanding an individual's motivations to persist and desist with that behaviour. The following chapter, therefore, revisits some of the thematic content explored in chapter 4, and considers what the functionality might be for telling those certain stories, and for telling them in a certain way.

5.2 Taking accountability and the risk of victim-blame narratives

As covered in the previous analysis chapter, participant narratives explored a range of difficult issues such as trauma, loss, neglect, isolation and abuse. Participants spoke of bullying and academic struggles in school; their long-term illnesses; being full-time carers; losing loved ones; and having debilitating substance dependencies, to name a few. We also saw visceral stories of abuse, neglect and violence in childhood. Though sometimes simply part of wider expositions about the participants' lives, a good number of these stories appeared to have been chosen in order to offer some form of causal explanation for their later DA behaviour. Or, at least, to suggest how the risk of perpetration increased *because* of these issues. However, the narratives did more than offer possible explanations for behaviour, they also operated to show the narrator as more than the sum of their actions, i.e. 'not just a perpetrator'. Whether this was the intention of the speaker or not, nonetheless, these rich stories produced nuanced, complex and often sympathetic protagonists. However, there were also stories where a sympathetic characterisation was considerably more challenging. In these instances, participants notably struggled to explain themselves. This was particularly the case when it came to stories of reciprocal partner violence.

Victim-blaming, where the victim of a crime or wrong-doing is held (partially or completely) at fault for their own harm, is widely understood as taboo. This is perhaps especially true within crime rehabilitation spaces, where personal accountability is often the goal. Amongst our participants, the internalisation of these societal understandings made for significant challenges when it came to certain narratives. In particular, stories which suggested a link between being of *victim* of DA and being a *perpetrator* of it. For some, making the link was achieved through implication. For example, as explored in chapter 4, Simon's statement that "*you've always got it in your head*" when considering the impact of witnessing violence between his mother and father, or Jon's suggestion of the influence his step-father had on him, "*…he*

was such an influential figure – in everything I did". For others, however, a safer route was through bringing in the views of those around them. Travis, for example, appeared reluctant to label his ex-partner in any way. He instead legitimises his account by drawing on the testimony of friends. As a result, he frees himself of the threat of any pushback given as, in the end, it is their words and not his.

> *"Travis: Then people, all my mates, this is why they didn't like her because they'd witness her act like that towards me, and then pull the victim card. I'm not saying it's a victim, I shouldn't say it like that, but that's the way it all-*
>
> *Interviewer: The way it felt.*
>
> *Travis: That is how they had phrased it to me."*

This legitimisation by others is taken further in Simon's narrative where, not only do friends and family place the ex-partner as abusive, so does the system itself. As he comments,

> *"(The DA charges) actually went to court and they laughed it off and said to her, "You're trying to get him put in jail," but they said, "You're the perpetrator".*

Though we might be cautious about claims that the system *"laughed off"* accusations of domestic violence, the inclusion of this dialogue is important. It functions to cast shadow over Simon's partner's truthfulness, and ultimately invokes a more sympathetic understanding his own abusive behaviour.

However, it is useful to look again at Simon's account in exploring this matter further. Later in Simon's narrative he concedes that he was rightly in court for his violence towards his partner. However, the focus shifts to something else. Rather than it being about her as a perpetrator/aggressor, Simon's narrative becomes one about articulating the dichotomy he finds himself in, coming up against a system as man, who is both a victim and a perpetrator of violence.

> *"I'll tell you one thing I do think, I mean they overlooked it in court and I think they overlook it massively, is women hitting guys. I'm telling you, I'm not just trying to be a guy who's in denial because I tell you what, I'm probably the only person out there who will stand up and say, "Yes, I did hit her, yes, I did do this."… I've never tried passing the buck… The way that the system works is they always go by well, if she calls the police first we're going to arrest him."*

And here seems to be the central issue. Though Simon claims his own part in the violence, and here we might pay particular attention to his language in

recognising the tendency for perpetrators to deny harms committed, his narrative is one of the imperfections of a reductive system that predominantly only sees men, and in particular larger men, as aggressors, and women as victims. In his telling, though they both were violent towards each other, a man will always be seen as the problem because the system is set up that way.

5.3 Rejecting bad identities

Narratives also operated to distance participants from negative or 'bad' identity positions. As explored in the introduction to this chapter, convictions for DA carry significant societal shame and stigma. Male violence against women and girls (VAWG) typically sees perpetrators portrayed as bullies, cowards and generally not nice people. These were labels participants were keen not to take on. Indeed, the fear of being seen this way is perfectly articulated by Tariq when he exclaims to his interviewer, "*I don't know what kind of picture of the type of people you talk to, but I am a family-oriented guy*". For the participants, the need to defend themselves by fending off negative perceptions, or explaining them away, was an absolute priority.

Rejecting negative identities was often done through participants contrasting themselves with (more) problematic others. For example, Simon, in explaining his rejection of drinking culture (despite having previously had problems with alcohol himself) comments,

> *"…some people drink quite a lot, they home drink, they go to the pub every day, [they] have a very big social life with drink. I don't actually. I'm not a big drinker at all. It's not my thing… I'd rather go to the gym and feel better about myself, and make myself look better…"*

As another example, we see this in Jon's stories of childhood deviance where he tells us, "*In terms of my level of getting in trouble I was pretty low key to what I'd call 'the naughty kids'*". Though he doesn't claim to be a stranger to trouble in his youth, it is framed as less by comparison. This comparative positionality was also played out in common stories of 'getting caught up with the wrong crowd' when it came to explaining routes into crime and antisocial behaviour. In these examples, participants were able to explain doing 'bad' things, whilst suggesting this was outside of their natural character, or not something they would independently have sought out. As Cian claims of his childhood friendship group,

> *"That was where I was getting into trouble. Being around them was making me act a certain way."*

However, when it comes to DA, the justification that 'it wasn't as bad as what the next guy did', or 'my friends made me do it', is much harder. Narratives of DA as an outcome of peer pressure do not exist. In these cases, participants

instead placed their behaviour as the result of something else. In particular, the over-arching power of substances. In exploring this, Shadd Maruna's 2001 publication, '*Making Good: How ex-convicts reform and rebuild their lives'* is helpful. Within his research looking at the narratives of 'persisters' and 'desisters', Maruna explored stories in which alcohol and drugs possessed the power to *do* things. In protecting good and moral selves, the intoxicant was placed as 'the bad thing' and not the individual using it. Such techniques were highly prevalent in the accounts of Aaron, Liam, Alex and Simon. All used 'the demon drink' narrative as a means with which to explain the turn from 'caring', 'calm' and 'chilled' people, into 'angry', 'unpredictable' and 'violent' people. For example,

> *"I mean it's just the drink and drugs made me a very horrible, violent, nasty person…I do have a heart, I do know what I want to be doing. It's just that I feel trapped in it, it's just I need to escape from the person that I become when I'm on this stuff."(Aaron)*

As another example, in Alex's account, he builds on this narrative by constructing the drink to be something of a perpetrator itself. Not only does it change him, it makes a victim of him. Its effect sees him almost possessed.

> *"[I'm] a completely different person when I've had a drink. I'm someone that I'm not when I'm sober. It feels like it's almost as if there's someone else that comes out to play, which I've obviously explained to the people back then, which obviously helped them to determine what I was suffering with."*

To bring weight to these claims, there was also need to have them verified by others. And here again, the legitimising power of external testimony was drawn on. Returning to Aaron's narrative, his friends are the ones to point out what the drink and drugs are making him do. As he recounts of his friends' words, "*Better get off the drink and drugs because this isn't you, this isn't the [Aaron] that we know".* As with these other similar accounts, alcohol is framed as having the power to change him from who he 'really' is – i.e. a kind, caring person, with *"a heart"* – to someone capable of violence against a partner. The effect of this not only places him as a more sympathetic protagonist, it also offers him demonstrable opportunities for redemption. As he continues,

> *"I know there is more to me than the anger and the drink and the drugs, that I'm a good person that people should actually see, you know, the person that I was actually being. I know there is more than that".*

Ultimately, Aaron, like most other participants, just wanted to be seen as a good person.

5.4 Telling stories of violence against women

As explored in sections 5.2 and 5.3, telling stories of VAWG created various problems for the participants, e.g. in navigating narratives of victimhood, and in preserving goodness and morality. This was particularly the case when it came to actual accounts of harms committed. Unlike other stories told by the participants, for example, ones which explored their struggles and triumphs, stories of violence perpetrated against their partners required more complex ways of telling; specifically, ways which saw justification, mitigation and denial. Though the use of such narrative devices in the telling of stories of crime is not new, indeed Sykes and Matza's (1957) '*Techniques of Neutralisation*' is a mainstay of criminological theory, stories of *male* violence towards *female* partners required particular framing.

When it came to the participants' specific accounts of violence against their partners, the ways in which they told them appeared dependent on the main point they wanted to make, and the main story they wanted to tell. There were three ways in which this happened – the 'both to blame' narratives; the 'de-escalation' narratives; and the 'resistance and denial' narratives. Though, it was common for participants to draw on several of these in explaining themselves.

5.4.1 'Both to blame' narratives

Stories of DA framed in this way saw participants explain their violence through the lens of reciprocity – both parties had their role to play. For example, in reflecting on how things were with his partner since his conviction, Tariq comments, "*…we both solved our whatever, the issues, and the way we both acted*". Typically, in these stories, violence was explained as the outcome of volatile and toxic relationships, where both parties were equally culpable. Ultimately, a disaster waiting to happen. This is perfectly exemplified in Gary's narrative, a tragic story where a particular incident resulted in his partner's death. As he explains of their relationship,

> *"But at the end of the day, it was one of those relationships where either of you feel the need to hurt one another, and you've got to step out of that relationship. As much as you might think you love that person, or you do love that person, it's not healthy for anyone. People who love each other properly, they don't hit each other."*

5.4.2 De-escalation narratives

De-escalation narratives were ones which placed the protagonist as trying to stop things from getting worse, usually through physically restraining an 'out of control' partner. These were, by far, the most common way participants explained DA. De-escalation narratives often saw minimisations of harm, or harm caused as a necessary measure to stop further, and/or more serious,

outcomes. Terms such as ‘ushering’, ‘tapping’, ‘placing’ and ‘pushing (usually an arm)’ were commonly used, and typically with qualifiers such as ‘just’, ‘slight’ and ‘little’. In addition, explanations of actions were always in the context of external provocation. For example,

> *“So I just like, not by force pull her, I just gave her a shove, like a tap on the back that, “Come inside and I’ll close the door.” So that’s all happened.” (Tariq)*

> *“I was with a couple of friends just chilling out. A great big half a brick came flying over the fence and missed two of us by about an inch. Obviously, we’ve gone out the back to see what’s going on. It was my ex-partner stood there with two of her mates. That’s when she tried to bottle me. Obviously, what happened there is I managed to get out of the way. I’ll be honest, I had to take her to the floor. Like as I’ve gone one way, she tripped over my foot. As she went down, I managed to go down as well and stop her from getting the bottle again. Then her two friends started kicking and punching me.” (Alex)*

Another example is in Travis’ narrative, where he gives a lengthy account of his girlfriend’s problematic behaviour. This is structured through two specific stories which place her as erratic, unfaithful, untrustworthy and drug dependent. When asked about the subsequent violence, Travis denies it, explaining his actions as defensive and a means to end a volatile situation. As he says, “*I’d never beat her up or anything like that... But I’ve obviously just pushed her off me*”. And as a final example, we see it in Simon’s account. He tells us, “*I don’t know why I did it but that’s why I’m on BBR* [Building Better Relationships] *course for trying to hold back*”. Here, though Simon accepts that he was violent, the explanation is through the lens of restraint. The implication being, it could have been a lot worse had he not exercised considerable self-control.

5.4.3 Resistance and denial narratives

These final type of stories tended to occur where the participants did not seem to understand their charges of DA, and/or where they felt their actions didn’t warrant the DA label. In these instances, accounts of violence were often explained away in the context of not being entirely clear what officially constituted DA. For example,

> *“I remember texting her and ringing her, honestly, probably, like, 100 times and saying, “Can I get my stuff back, please? Do you know what I mean, it’s Christmas. Is it okay to get my stuff back?” She was going to be leaving the country in January. So, anyway, she called the police and then that’s when I got arrested for the first time. It was for harassment without violence for the texts, but was just because I was asking for my stuff back. I mean, I didn’t see that as a crime.” (Liam)*

Indeed, the very label of 'domestic' appeared to be confusing.

> *"[M] was a relationship, but [E] wasn't, the other [woman] wasn't a relationship. So, me personally, I don't understand how it's domestic-related, but yes, it is what it is" (Liam)*

Simon also appears unclear about the DA label, and in making sense of it, recites back fragmented memories, possibly of what he has been told by criminal justice professionals, or others involved in his case. The result is a rather confused definition.

> *"There wasn't anything bad, like, she hadn't give me a black eye or I punched her in the face. Even though, domestic violence is domestic violence, I know that. Even pulling your hands out your pockets is not on."*

This lack of understanding was also present in Travis' narrative. In explaining how he avoided episodes of violence with his partner, he describes "*smashing up*" the house, or "*punching the wall*". Though these examples are well established in DA literature base, it is significant that Travis does not identify them as such.

Perhaps the best example though is found in Tariq's narrative. In explaining an incident which saw police, and subsequently court involvement, he refers to it first as 'a mistake', and latterly as a 'misunderstanding' – a term he goes on to use three times in his narrative. Of particular importance is how he actively resists state definitions of abuse. In his explanation, it is was a private matter, "*something between me and my missus*". Indeed, it is down to the authorities to provide the damning definitions.

> *"That's what the police and the judge said that even touching like touching a finger is an assault. Even my wife said to them in the court that I didn't beat her. It didn't [become] physical, but the court said no, touching is an assault."*

Of note, Tariq also invokes cultural understandings of DA in his sense-making. As he explains:

> *"And it's not like in Pakistan. Like one fight happened, okay, fine, and after two hours everything is normal. No. Here things are different."*

In defending his position, the British criminal justice response is placed as outside of his particular frame of reference.

5.4.4 Justifying violence: The preservation of masculinity

As a final point on this topic, it is also important to consider the role which masculinity has in telling stories of VAWG. As has been addressed earlier in this chapter, VAWG carries certain negative labels. In particular, those which place male perpetrators as cowards and bullies. Problematically, these are understood as inherently 'unmanly' traits. Indeed, as the participants themselves go to great lengths to explain, the role of men is to 'protect', 'provide', 'support' and 'look after' others, especially vulnerable others. As such, the telling of stories of violence perpetrated against female partners becomes rather difficult, not least in what it threatens to take from traditional notions of masculinity. As Gary laments in explaining his own violence towards his partner,

> *"I'm a grown man, she's just a lady, you know. It's wrong, and I know it is, but that's what happened".*

And Cian too shares similar frustrations of masculinity.

> *"It got me nowhere, being the person that I was, and I hate it. It's so cowardly, the way I acted as well, I see it as. It's just not manly."*

In tackling this, various approaches were used to frame stories in ways which instead preserved masculinity, *or* went some way towards it. It is helpful to return to one of Travis' stories of violence here, as in documenting it all, he makes clear where he draws the line.

> *"Just arguments. There is no… I'd never beat her up or anything like that. I've never once punched her. She has actually slapped me and hit me and attacked me loads of times, countless amounts of times because she's been pissed off with me. But I've obviously just pushed her off me, "get off me" or, "get out of my flat", I always had that rule."*

Travis underlines this position by contrasting violence perpetrated against his partner with what he would have done had she been a man. As he later comments,

> *"Even all the times I was so angry and I felt like, "If you were a bloke right now I would be going to prison because I would have fucking beat the shit out of you." That was always going through my head. I never once did that."*

Masculinity is thus preserved in Travis' restraint in not having done worse.

5.5 Desistance narratives and the rehabilitated identity

In this final section, the functionality of narratives in how they enable desistence is explored. Specifically, how participants used narratives to claim rehabilitated selves, and the implications of not being able to do so.

Likely reflecting their experiences with probation, and by extension their rehabilitation journey, narratives of desistance were commonplace. This was especially so given that most were engaged in the DA programme, Building Better Relationships (BBR) – an intervention which requires individuals to reflect on, challenge and change problematic thinking and behaviour. As a consequence, participants willingly offered up stories which placed them as reflective, reformed and ready to make significant changes in their life. Typical narratives comprised finding employment, giving back to the community, and most commonly, leaving problematic/criminogenic friends or situations behind them. There were also a wealth of substance desistance/addiction recovery narratives, i.e. tales of 'kicking the habit'. And finally, there were narratives of having "matured" out such behaviour. In these stories, as explored in the previous chapter, violence was explained as the product of youthful impulsivity, lack of self-control, and poor decision-making. Incidentally, factors which are firmly embedded in institutional understandings of youth offending (e.g. Ellis Devitt, 2020).

Most common however, and perhaps to be expected given the context, were narratives which demonstrated a commitment to changing problematic behaviour, e.g. thinking before acting; asking for, and giving, space; and talking through difficult subjects, i.e. the often cited *"I don't bottle things up anymore"*. Significantly, such narratives also tended to emphasise the positive role of the system in aiding their rehabilitation – a point we will return to later in this chapter. For example,

> *"I have improved myself after having conversations and discussions with the probation officer, and, well, with discussions and things, I have improved a lot, I'm a totally different person now." (Tariq)*
>
> *"It was a long, dark path that I was on. Thankfully, now I can say, obviously with the help of my mental health, my probation team, BBR team, with the help of everyone (and obviously the consistent support of my family), I now, I can see that I've come out the other end." (Alex)*

However, though these examples give an idea of the typology of the desistance narratives, they do little to tell us why they might be being told in the first place. Given that every one of our participants told desistance stories, and often provided multiple examples of desistance focussed behaviour, it is important to consider what the motivation for that might be.

Telling stories of desistance achieved several things for the participants. Firstly,

they helped to repair damaged self-esteem. For example, addiction recovery/substance desistance narratives helped to both neutralise wrong-doing (in that participants were able to reinforce the role substances had on their behaviour) *and* provide opportunities to claim new, positive identities – ones which privileged their strength of character in giving up 'the demon drink'. Secondly, they offered the chance for redemption, through participants being able to use their experiences to help others. For example, in Jon's account of what motivated him to take part in this very research, he comments, *"I just want my experience to help… it is important that people believe that people can change"*. Thirdly, these narratives enabled the participants to show their intentions for future action. Here, from a specifically narrative criminology perspective, participants used these narratives to act out desistance in their very telling. Aaron provides us with an excellent example of this, when he talks of the people who are now in his life compared with who he used to spend time with.

> *"…they're just people that are generally supportive, people that understand my situation. These are the ones, the good ones, the ones that aren't involved in crime and drugs and stuff like that, people that I keep close to me. I see that would probably progress, I'll probably be friends with them for the rest of my life."*

In this excerpt, we very directly see Aaron's intentions for desistance. By rejecting friends attached to his old ways of life, and choosing instead a social circle of people "*that aren't involved in crime and drugs*", and moreover, a group he sees being friends with *"for the rest of [his] life"*, Aaron makes clear what his onward path now looks like.

5.5.1 The power of the state in legitimising rehabilitated bodies

However, desistance narratives weren't just about reclaiming goodness and promoting pro-social selves, they also seemingly functioned to protect from future negative outcomes. In order for an individual to claim a rehabilitated identity, it needs to be recognised by powerful others. In the case of those with criminal convictions, this recognition needs to come from the state. As explored earlier in this chapter, the label of 'rehabilitated' requires an individual, amongst other things, to show accountability for their actions, personal growth, and a willingness to change. One of the more prominent ways in which this was demonstrated, was in stories which highlighted participants' compliance in the process. This was highly evident in Tariq's narrative. For example, in his accounts of his behaviour in court,

> *"She came, I came, we were sitting in the same sitting area but we were not talking to each other because the court order was not to talk. She was sitting in front of me, but we both followed the law, court order."*

And in his behaviour with probation:

> *"But anyhow, I'm back with my family for the last one year now, and I'm still attending the probation, whatever the court has told me to do, to watch the video course or all the meetings with the probation officer, and up to now I haven't missed a single one."*

We even see it in how he explains following protocol, even when his wife does not.

> *"…because the order was she is not allowed to contact me, I am not allowed to contact her… she had so many times that she wanted to talk to me, and I said no. I didn't even reply to her most of the time, I contacted my sister and I told her, "Please tell her not to contact me. It's not that I don't want to be in touch with her. It is what the court ordered. I don't want to break any order"."*

This demonstration of compliance was also in Simon's narrative, as he explains of the current court order governing both him and his partner, "*we're both on a programme at the minute and we're both doing everything asked by everyone*". It was in Alex's too – even though he doesn't feel at fault for the violence, Alex still indicates his willingness to undertake the BBR requirement. As he states, "*The more I can learn, the better*". And finally, in perhaps the most revealing example, we see it in Simon's direct request to the researcher that she communicate his positive participation to his Probation Officer. The need to be seen to be being helpful and compliant felt almost urgent.

> *"Let her know that I've done it and I participated in it, that'll be good because I like probation to know that I'm trying to- you know what I mean, even though it's probably not really going to help my case itself, even though it's nothing to do with it, I'd rather let them know that I've done because I'm always at probation on time. I'm always there half an hour early. I'm always there just trying to get things sorted, you know what I mean. I'm doing the BBR course as well. I'm just sorting it out really in terms of getting back to normal life really. If you could just let her know that I've done it, that'll be cool."*

What is of interest in these examples, is *why* these stories of compliance seemed to be so important. Or why examples were so often given. And here, there is need to pay particular attention to the over-arching power of the CJS.

5.5.2 The power to withhold and delegitimise rehabilitated selves

Recent research has underlined the role that powerful others have in shaping rehabilitated identities. Ellis Devitt (2020), in a doctoral study exploring the life-

stories of young adult men in the CJS, contends that the CJS holds particular power in affording and denying rehabilitated identities. In addition, Rutter (2021) and Nugent and Schinkel (2016) talk of the problems of identity when it comes to relational desistance – a concept where in desistance is achieved within the concepts of relationships. These studies all speak of the power institutions, and indeed the wider society, have in affording and denying rehabilitated bodies.

For our participants, the need to be seen and labelled as rehabilitated was essential such that not only were they able to move on with their lives, but that they didn't stand to make a further loss. Though our participants worked hard to show their compliance, and 'register' their satisfaction with the systems that held them, there was equally evidence of their dissatisfaction. This was more often than not levelled at the perceived inaccuracies about their behaviour and violence upheld by criminal justice bodies. For example,

> *"when I went to court as well half the stuff they came out with was complete bullshit, but some of it was true… When I was speaking to my solicitor he was turning around and saying, "Well, they have got evidence to say that you have done this or done that." But they only had evidence for the tail end of it, some of the things. I was like, "Well I haven't done all that. That isn't all true. They have said that I strangled her and shut her out, which is complete bollocks."" (Travis)*

> *"When [she] died, somebody said to me the other day – it was my probation worker, actually – it was a violent outburst... but, it wasn't like there was a big fight. It was a single jab." (Gary)*

Though we might assume most of us aren't all that happy about people holding views of us that we consider to be false, for our participants, this carried a much greater threat. Specifically, that they might lose their loved ones because of that. This is was implied heavily in Tariq's account, where we see continued claims that *now* all is good, all is fine. This despite claiming several times over he had done nothing wrong to begin with.

> *"Yes, that's basically, whatever happened, in simple words I have forgotten it. That bad has come into my life, and we are living happily now. We were away on holidays last month with my whole family. We went back home, had a great time, and yes, that's all."*

Tariq seems keen to draw a line under it all. It is done now. Things are now fine. The statement feels as much a directive as much as it is a piece of information.

Though similar elements of this were throughout the participants' narratives, it is felt most acutely in Simon's story. In responding to the researcher's query about whether his future now sees himself setting down once again with his

partner, he reveals,

> *"Yes, that's what I want and do you know what, I didn't say anything to my probation officer about it, because there's so much speculation out there about guys that are being controlling, trying to force them into decisions they don't want to make."*

Indeed, what the participants seemed to want most was to move on with their lives, and in most cases, this meant reuniting with their partner. As such, narratives acknowledging the power of the state in making the right choices for them, and those documenting their own growth and willingness to change, were fundamental in making this happen. As Simon finishes with,

> *"And if my probation officer, if the social worker, if they're all happy after I've done all this course then there's nothing to say we can't get back together. We can do everything through the correct channels which is what I'm hoping to do, which is what I want to do."*

By telling desistance narratives which placed them as compliant, remorseful, and willing to change, (and as such, deserving of the label of 'rehabilitated') the participants saw themselves able to take back the lives which for many, had felt lost to them.

5.6 Conclusion

Why and how people tell the stories they do are inextricably linked with a person's sense of identity. We tell the stories about ourselves that we want people to hear. And we protect against threats to our sense of self by framing stories in ways which place us in a favourable light. This is true for everyone. And so, we should not find this surprising to see this played out amongst a group of men who have very real reasons to need to preserve their morality and sense of worth. But what can we learn from this?

As is clearly observable in this second analysis chapter, the participants in this study were reflexive. They were willing to talk about their DA patterns and particular episodes of violence, and they were (mostly) willing to admit guilt. Though we saw many ways in which they sought to control the narrative to their own advantage or frame accounts of abuse and violence in ways which justified or mitigated, rather than interpret this as a tactic to avoid accountability, we might more usefully understand these as attempts to move on. Indeed, we see particular evidence of this in the ways in which their narratives suggest future action – specifically, how they enact desistance as they tell their stories of change.

As the introduction to this chapter argued, the value of taking a narrative approach in exploring stories of DA is in alleviating the burden of seeking truth. For criminal justice practitioners, tasked with seeking authentic

accounts of harms caused, and subsequently authentic accounts of desistance, considering the story itself as the commodity can be a highly effective tool. Reviewing not just the *content* of the participants' stories, but also the *how* and *why*s of their telling, has provided many additional insights into what their particular investments are in being seen in this way or that. And perhaps most significantly, we have been provided with an even clearer understating of their motivations for lasting and meaningful change.

In the final chapter, we summarise the key learning from this research, and consider the ways it might usefully be applied to policy and practice.

Chapter 6: Summary, recommendations and conclusion

The following chapter revisits the aims of this research and the three main research questions, proceeding on to answer these questions through summarising the main findings from the previous two analysis chapters. It then moves on to consider how this important learning might be usefully applied to policy and practice. The chapter concludes with a general point about how this all fits into the wider literature base, and some thoughts on taking this important topic further in future.

6.1 Revisiting the aims of this research

The aim of this research has been to better understand who perpetrators of domestic abuse (DA) are and how they came to be, and to offer suggestions for how current interventions might be strengthened in light of this understanding.

The research questions (RQs) were as follows:

1. How do male perpetrators of DA explain their lives, and in particular their pathways to becoming domestically abusive?
2. Why do DA perpetrators tell the stories they do?
3. How can the learning from this research be usefully applied in policy and practice?

Section 6.2 addresses RQ1, section 6.3 addresses RQ2, and section 6.4 addresses RQ3.

6.2 RQ1 – How do male perpetrators of domestic abuse explain their lives, and in particular their pathways to becoming domestically abusive?

In answering our first research question, we explored the lives and experiences of a group of ten men, of different ages and at different stages of their life, who are known by the Criminal Justice system (CJS) as perpetrators of DA. We presented their stories using their own words, and through their own lens of reason. Avoiding making contestable, direct causal links (see p.28 for more information on this), we looked at the commonalities in their lives, especially their younger lives, and considered the various social and psychological factors they drew on in explaining their pathways towards DA perpetration.

6.2.1 Commonalities of childhood and adolescence

Parental separation and the break-down of the family unit – Parental separation, and the loss of the father from the family home, was a common experience. The impact saw affected participants entering a confusing and destabilising period of their lives where, as children, they felt they had little to no control over what was happening. Such experiences saw expedited transitions to adulthood, with participants forced to make difficult life decisions that they were often not prepared for.

School-life – School experiences also saw striking similarities. Though a few felt the social side was positive for them, especially for the 'sporty' types, for most, the school experience placed them as an outsider, with academic, behavioural and developmental issues being all too common. For one of the participants, bad experiences at school linked directly to later DA perpetration. Feeling nagged, and told what to do, recalled memories of the powerlessness and vulnerability of being bullied, and were subsequently explained as later triggers for lashing out.

Traumatic events – Early life experiences also saw commonalities when it came to trauma, which were often explained through one-off, life-changing events that seemed to occur during the participants' adolescence. Examples included finding a parent after a stroke, finding a parent after a suicide attempt, finding out they were adopted, witnessing someone being killed, and various life-changing medical issues. All placed participants on the margins of society as they struggled to make sense of these damaging formative experiences.

6.2.2 Early warning signs and behaviours

Abuse and violence in the family home – Exposure to abuse and violence at home often saw participants reproduce it later in other ways e.g. being aggressive and violent at school, getting into fights, and of course, being abusive and violent in their relationships. Of particular note was how, for one participant, the breakdown of the family was seen as worse than staying in the abusive situation. Indeed, the most threatening outcome was that his family might once again become separated.

Stress, substance misuse, anger and violence – Participants spoke of mental health problems in their early childhood, which often led to substance misuse issues, and inevitably then onto violence. This was most commonly expressed through narratives of teenage stress. It seemed that, in not finding successful ways of dealing with stress in adolescence, and for some, choosing alcohol and substance misuse as a solution to this, participants found themselves unable to access healthy ways of dealing with their adult problems. As such, their loved ones (not just partners, but mothers too) seemed to take the brunt.

Volatility in romantic relationships – Participants all spoke of problematic, combative and volatile relationships, giving examples of petty arguments, fights, sniping, and acrimony following (temporary and permanent) break ups – especially amongst the younger participants. These involved not only relationships of the present, but formed a solid history trailing back to first relationships in early adolescence. Volatility almost always saw transition into violence, with some participants seeking to explain their behaviour through a lens of implied provocation. Of note, such accounts were particularly common amongst participants talking of their teenage years, where it seemed relationships were more transient and considerably less stable.

Beliefs about fatherhood, and the 'role of men' – Outdated and reductive views of men, and highly gendered beliefs of the role of men and women in heterosexual relationships, ran throughout the participants life-stories. Fathers, (and indeed, father figures), were identified as pragmatic, no nonsense, and truth-tellers – bastions of knowledge and common sense thinking. The participants often got their life lessons from fathers, though problematically, these were often men who themselves had complex relationships with violence and aggression. Prescriptive beliefs about gender roles saw mums as 'home-makers' and dads as 'providers' – the latter often securing immunity from reproach for not being around, given that they were seen to be bringing in the money. Significantly, fathers were also understood to be the principle authority figure. It seemed that being a dad, and by extension being a man, meant being the one to bring order and discipline to a household. There was also a sense of identity displacement in the men's narratives. With many having grown up in quite traditional households, some appeared to struggle in trying to navigate a place for themselves in a changing world.

The role of maturity – Participants aligned their domestically abusive behaviour patterns as a developmental matter. Specifically, that it was, in some ways, a product of their youth and immaturity. This was most commonly observable amongst the younger participants, who were more likely than older participants to give examples of how they changed going into adulthood.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the need for space – Though explored as a substantive topic in the wider report, the impact of COVID-19 is perhaps usefully placed in the warning signs section, in what it revealed about additional risk factors for perpetration. Indeed, for most of the participants, the pandemic and its associated lockdowns offered them the space and time to focus on their developmental and rehabilitation needs. In addition, having time out allowed for more opportunities to rebuild damaged relationships. For one of the participants, however, the pandemic brought a very different experience. Being a full-time carer for his partner, he was unable to get distance or time for himself. As a result, the pandemic became another significant risk factor for his DA perpetration.

6.2.3 *Changing abusive ways – the routes towards DA desistance*

The application of new skills – Change was demonstrated through examples of applying newly learnt skills to high-pressure situations e.g. 'breathing', 'counting to ten', 'going for a walk', and simply talking out their problems. Participants also spoke of being in a more enlightened place when it came to maintaining healthy and lasting relationships. Of significance, stories of change and enlightenment were most prevalent amongst those who had perpetrated the most serious offences e.g. strangulation and manslaughter.

The role of DA perpetrator programmes – These skills and techniques were often attributed to the positive role of DA interventions. Although one participant felt such programmes were limited in what they could offer given the finite amounts of time that was available, for most, DA programmes formed part of a hopeful future – a means with which to help them make lasting and meaningful change.

Change comes from within – What seemed most clear however, was that the change ultimately came from a person's personal motivation to do so. This was described through wanting to be "a better person", wanting to reunite with a partner, and significantly, through the heartbreak of what had been lost forever. In the case of the latter, the life of a partner.

6.3 RQ2 – Why do DA perpetrators tell the stories they do?

In answering our second research question, we took a more critical look at the life-stories of the ten men in our study. We considered *why* and *how* they told the stories they did. The rationale being, what more might we learn about this group? In particular, their sense of identity, their motivations to desist from (or even, to persist in) future DA perpetration, and the relationships they have with systems of power – specifically, ones that are in the position to issue labels of 'risky' and 'rehabilitated' (and the implications that come with that).

6.3.1 *Taking accountability and the risk of victim-blame narratives*

Talking about certain aspects of their life history presented problems for the participants. This was particularly the case when it came to their experiences of being *victims* of abuse and violence (typically, from parents and partners), and how that linked to their *perpetration* of abuse and violence. In tackling this, some used more subtle methods, e.g. suggesting or implying a causal link was there, whilst not directly justifying one with the other. Others, however, relied on those around them to provide 'proof' of their experiences. This was particularly the case when it came to abuse and violence from a partner. Here, participants legitimised their account by drawing on the testimony of

others, i.e. explaining events through the 'impartial' eyes of friends, or through the 'authoritative' eyes of criminal justice professionals (police and the courts). In these stories, others were able to see them as *both* victims and perpetrators. Of particular interest was how, for one participant, talking about his own experiences of this topic revealed another core narrative – specifically, the difficulty of coming up against a system as man who is both a victim *and* a perpetrator of violence. Though he fully claimed his own violence, his narrative was one of the imperfections of a reductive system that predominantly only sees men, and in particular larger men, as aggressors, and women as victims. In his reasoning, though abuse and violence may be reciprocal, a man will always be seen as the problem because the system is set up that way.

6.3.2 Rejecting bad identities

Narratives also operated to distance participants from negative or 'bad' identity positions – this was particular important for the participants given all were acutely aware of the shame and stigma of being labelled as 'a domestic abuse perpetrator'. To do this, participants sought to reject other negative identities to preserve some sense of goodness. For some, this was achieved through participants contrasting themselves with (more) problematic others, i.e. troublesome friends, crime-prone peers – essentially, those who influenced their behaviour for the worse. However, when it comes to DA, the justification that 'it wasn't as bad as what the next guy did', or 'my friends made me do it', is much harder. Narratives of DA as an outcome of peer pressure do not exist. In these cases, participants instead placed their behaviour as the result of something else – in most cases, the over-arching power of substance addiction. In protecting good and moral selves, the intoxicant was placed as 'the bad thing' and not the individual using it. In telling stories of giving up the drink then, participants were able to show their 'real' selves – specifically, the good person they really were inside.

6.3.3 Telling stories of violence against women

Talking about specific acts of abuse and violence created various problems for the participants, in that stories of men causing hurt and harm to women are rarely received well. As such, the participants explained their violence in particular ways, which typically involved justification, mitigation and denial. We termed these the 'both to blame' narratives; the 'de-escalation' narratives; and the 'resistance and denial' narratives. Though, it was common for participants to draw on several of these in explaining themselves.

'Both to blame' narratives – Stories framed in this way saw participants explain their violence through the lens of reciprocity – both parties had their role to play. Typically, in these accounts, violence was explained as the outcome of volatile and toxic relationships, where both parties were equally

culpable. Ultimately, a disaster waiting to happen.

De-escalation narratives – These were ones which placed the protagonist as trying to stop things from getting worse, usually through physically restraining an 'out of control' partner. These were, by far, the most common way participants explained DA. De-escalation narratives often saw minimisations of harm, or harm caused as a necessary measure to stop further, and/or more serious, outcomes. Terms such as 'ushering', 'tapping', 'placing' and 'pushing (usually an arm)' were commonly used, and typically with qualifiers such as 'just', 'slight' and 'little'. In addition, explanations of actions were always in the context of external provocation.

Resistance and denial narratives – This final type of stories tended to occur where the participants did not seem to understand their charges of DA, and/or where they felt their actions didn't warrant the DA label. In these instances, accounts of violence were often explained away in the context of not being entirely clear what officially constituted DA. One participant invoked a cultural reading of his actions. In defending his position, the British criminal justice response was placed as outside of his particular frame of reference.

Justifying violence: The preservation of masculinity – DA carries certain negative labels. In particular, those which place male perpetrators as cowards and bullies – inherently 'unmanly' traits. In tackling this, two approaches were used to frame stories in ways which instead sought to preserve masculinity. The first was in how participants 'drew the line'. Though violence was acknowledged, it was in acts which were proportional to the situation (and, as implied, their partners' gender). They were just trying to stop the violence. Secondly, such examples were often situated with additional exposition which suggested, had their partners been men, the situation would have been very different. Masculinity was thus preserved in their restraint in not having done worse.

6.3.4 Desistance narratives and the rehabilitated identity

Likely reflecting their experiences with probation, and by extension their rehabilitation journey, narratives of desistance were commonplace. Participants offered stories which placed them as reflective, reformed and ready for change. Typical narratives comprised finding employment, giving back to the community, leaving criminogenic friends or situations behind them, substance desistance/addiction recovery, maturing out of DA, and most commonly, changing problematic thinking and behaviour. Telling such stories of desistance helped achieve a number of welcome outcomes e.g. repairing damaged self-esteem, providing opportunities for redemption (through participants being able to use their experiences to help others), and enabling participants to show their desistance focussed future plans.

However, desistance narratives also functioned to protect. Participants indicated their awareness of the CJS' power to give and withhold certain identities – specifically, ones which placed them as rehabilitated and ones which placed them as still posing a risk. For the participants, all of whom wanted to move on with their lives, and most of whom wanted to reunite with a partner, these labels became barriers and facilitators to achieving that. As such, and often despite other issues and complaints they had, they tended to promote their compliance and positivity, both towards the systems that held them *and* towards the processes and tools used to rehabilitate them. There was a sense from some that showing anything other than this may end badly for them. Indeed, that one participant told of deliberately *not* telling his probation officer of his hopes to reunite again with his partner, lest he be considered controlling, is revealing.

6.4 RQ3 – How can the learning from this research be usefully applied in policy and practice?

This research has offered a detailed and fulsome account of the early signs and behaviours that may indicate that an individual (specifically, a man in a heterosexual relationship) is at an increased risk of becoming domestically abusive later on in their lives. It has also considered *how* and *why* certain narratives might be drawn on by perpetrators when exploring the topic of DA. In this final section, we consider how this knowledge might be useful for both policy and practice. As such, we offer the following learning points and recommendations.

6.4.1 Points for policy and DA prevention programme development

1. *More attention needs to be paid to the damaging effects of aggression and violence in the family home, acrimonious parental separation, and the related disappearance of dads* – As this research has shown, childhood trauma due to these factors was found in almost all the men's narratives, and for many was linked directly to their own violent patterns of behaviour. Though, of course, parental separation does not see most children go on to become abusive and violent, in turn, most children of parental separation and divorce don't additionally experience aggression, abuse and violence in their family homes, and their dad disappearing from their lives. As such, these may be factors to be attended to when working with boys going through acrimonious family breakups.

2. *Domestic abuse perpetrator programmes might benefit from a greater focus on the role which fathers (and father figures) play in perpetrators' young lives, and also the messages they get about 'being a man' from the important men in their lives* – The participants in our study tended to grow up in households where men (usually dads) were the providers

and authority figures. Participants routinely described their admiration and respect for fathers and father figures, and moreover, their desire to be like them. This was an important finding given that fathers tended to be either largely absent from the family home, an imposing authority figure, or of most concern, abusive and violent themselves.

3. *Allow perpetrators the space to explore their experiences of being a victim of abuse and violence* – Male perpetrators of DA can also be victims of abuse, but may struggle to articulate this. The participants in this research were hugely aware of the pitfalls of victim-blaming and not being seen to take accountability for their own actions. As a consequence, they found it difficult to tell stories of their partners being abusive and violent towards them. DA programmes then, might seek to give perpetrators space to tell these stories such that they feel that their experiences are valid, and they do not end up becoming a barrier to tackling their own abuse and violence.

4. *DA programmes should consider the role that isolated traumatic events can in have in a young person's psychosocial development* – The participants in this study almost all told of hugely traumatic singular events in their lives which went on to affect their sense of self, and their sense of place in the world. It is important that programmes attend to not just sustained trauma, but also discrete episodes of trauma, as these may hold significant answers for why someone might see the world in the way that they do.

5. *More work needs to be done on stress management, especially in earlier adolescence* – The participants in this study all talked of the huge impact stress had on them, and that they simply did not know how to safely and effectively manage it. As such, stress became a life-long problem, and a subsequent risk factor for their violence.

6. *More education is needed for young men (and young women) around building and sustaining 'healthy' relationships* – The men in our study typically had erratic, fractious and volatile adolescent relationships, and these learnt behaviours became the norm as they progressed into their adult relationships. Education about relationship conflict resolution needs to come much sooner, and preferably before deeply embedded destructive patterns and habits are formed. In addition, such education needs to be delivered in safe and inclusive spaces, including all young people, and not just those deemed to be 'at risk'.

7. *It is vitally important that young people are educated about what domestic abuse comprises, what the current legal definitions are, and how it can appear in a relationship* – In our study, there were huge gaps in understanding about what constituted DA, and consequently, variance in the participants' individual commitments to changing their

ways. Indeed, those who perpetrated the most serious offences were the most likely to see the need for, and seek pathways to, change, whilst those who suggested their behaviour was not really DA, only seemed to acquiesce to change as a means to get themselves out of the system and back with their partners.

6.4.2 Points for practice and practitioners

1. *Don't let concerns that perpetrators may be justifying or excusing their domestic abuse behaviour detract from the importance of such accounts being given at all* – Telling stories of DA perpetration carries substantial shame and stigma. Justifications and mitigations are often needed such that the story, in whatever form, is able to be told at all. It might be more effective to suspend concerns about truth telling and accountability, and instead focus on the power of story-telling as a device itself for sense-making and reflection about abusive thinking and behaviour.

2. *Male to female domestic violence directly threatens masculinity, and therefore may see additional levels of defence as they seek to preserve it* – The men in this study defined themselves through their masculinity, and, as such, often struggled to tell stories of their domestically abusive behaviour for fear of being seen as unmanly (i.e. failing in their role to provide and protect for their partners). Related to the above, it is useful for practitioners to keep this in mind when working with perpetrators of DA, as stories seemingly filled with excuses might be less about avoiding accountability, and more about protecting themselves from feeling like they have failed as a man.

3. *Older perpetrators may struggle more than younger perpetrators when it comes to understanding problematic beliefs about gender roles* – Though all participants seemed to grow up in quite traditionally gendered households, for the older participants, this was also reflective of the generation they were born in to. As such, comprehending the changing roles of men felt substantially harder, and often saw them feel confused about what value they had in the family dynamic.

4. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, *perpetrators may withhold information, or be more inclined to tell 'success' stories which position themselves as reformed, changed and compliant, due to perceived risks about what might happen if they don't* – As demonstrated in this research, not being seen to be compliant and positive about systems of power carries particular risks in what it might threaten to take away – i.e. the chance of reuniting with partners and families. Given this, it is important that practitioners working directly with DA perpetrators understand this, and encourage perpetrators to talk about these issues without fear of repercussions.

6.5 Conclusion

The findings described in this research add usefully to the wider literature base around both the early signs and behaviours when it comes to DA perpetrators, and the lived experiences of DA perpetrators. Though this topic has historically privileged the views of victims, and understandably so, this research has successfully argued for why it is equally important to attend to the views of perpetrators. Indeed, to better understand and tackle DA perpetration, we must commit to understanding what it is that precedes this – specifically, what the early lives look like for those who go on to develop DA behaviour patterns, and how problematic and dangerous thinking and behaviour can develop over a life-course.

In taking this learning forward, there are a few additional areas future research might consider when it comes to exploring this important topic. Firstly, the findings described in this report are from the perspective of men who perpetrate violence against women. It would be valuable to see how this operates in reverse e.g. how do similar events and life experiences affect the psychosocial development of women who are domestically abusive? Secondly, it would be useful to consider how these findings hold for perpetrators from different cultural backgrounds. As one of our participants noted, how things are in the UK, when it comes to DA, is not how it is elsewhere. This is particularly important when it comes to unpacking the wide spectrum of behaviours that currently make up what we currently understand to be DA patterns.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Project Information Sheet

Appendix B: Participants Invitation Letter

Appendix C: Consent Form

Appendix D: Topic Guide

Appendix A: Project Information Sheet

Who are we and what is this all about?

We are researchers from the Kent, Surrey and Sussex Community Rehabilitation company (KSS CRC). This is us (http://**********). We do research on a range of issues, mostly around helping probation practice to be as good as it can. Our latest project is looking at issues around domestic abuse.

Why have I been given this sheet?

Because we are looking for participants for this project! We want to hear from people who have histories of domestic abuse in their important relationships. We hope to find out about how different events in a person's life might lead people to act in certain ways.

Much domestic abuse research focuses on the viewpoint of those who have experienced it as a victim. We want to understand the experiences of people who, for whatever reason, have been on the other side of the coin.

Our research approach is 100% safe, open and welcoming. We are not here to judge, or try and change anyone's behavior, or 'solve' problems. We just want to hear about <u>your</u> lives in <u>your</u> words.

Do I have to take part?

Not at all. Taking part in the research is entirely voluntary, so it's all up to you!

What will taking part involve?

Taking part will involve having a conversation with one of our project researchers. The conversations will be about your life-stories, and how you see the world. These conversations will last about 1-1.5 hours, depending on how much you have to say. We will record conversations so we can accurately remember what you say.

But… Covid? How do we do this safely?

To ensure everyone's safety, we will have these conversations remotely i.e. by telephone or video call. You can tell David or Sarah what method works best for you when they contact you to arrange a time to speak.

What will I get out of this?

This will be a unique experience. You will be free to explain your life in any way you choose, allowing for uninterrupted thinking and reflection. Taking part will also raise the voices of those who are often last to be heard when it comes to exploring experiences of domestic abuse.

Thank you vouchers

Your contribution and time is important. We are therefore offering all participants a £20 Love2shop voucher as a thank you for taking part.

Will my interview be kept confidential?

Yes! We will make sure that any identifiable details are hidden or changed. Also, any personal details we have for you will be stored securely for the length of the project (August 2021). After that point all personal details will be erased. We are happy to keep your contact details on record if you are interested in reading the final report. The written accounts of our conversations (the 'interview transcripts') will be kept for 10 years after the study is complete. This is now the legal time frame for any research. You have a right to access these at any point.

What will happen if I don't want to be involved anymore?

You can withdraw from the research at any point leading up to the recorded conversations. After these are complete, we will be writing them all up into a report so it will be difficult to remove you then. If you are worried though after taking part, please contact us within 24 hours and we can remove your information from the study if you would rather.

What if there is a problem?

If you are worried about any part of the research project, please email the Research and Policy Unit at research@*****. We are always happy to answer questions.

What will happen to the results of the research project?

All the interviews will be written up in a report. This will be finished by July 2021. If you are interested in receiving a copy, let us know at the time of interview.

Ok, I'm interested, what next?

The next step is to tell your probation officer you are interested in taking part, and they can pass on your number to us. OR, you can just drop us a text/email directly. Our contact details are below.

David Coley – 07XXX XXX XXX
Sarah Lewis – 07XXX XXX XXX
Kerry Ellis Devitt - 07XXX XXX XXX

Email: research@*****

Thank-you for taking the time to read this information sheet. We really hope to hear from you.

Appendix B: Participant Invitation Letter

February 15, 2021

Hello,

We are inviting you to take part in some important new research exploring the difficult topic of domestic abuse. We are looking for participants to help us think about the reasons why certain events in a person's life might lead them to act in certain ways. The specific details are on the accompanying information sheet. Take a look and see what you think.

Taking part is completely voluntary and strictly confidential. It should be an interesting and unique experience, and a chance for your voice to be heard. We are offering a £20 Love2Shop voucher as a thank you for your time (which should be around 1-1.5 hours).

Please read the project information sheet through. If this is something you would like to be part of, get in touch. We would love to hear from you.

Best wishes,

David Coley and Kerry Ellis Devitt

The Research and Policy Unit
Kent, Surrey and Sussex, Community Rehabilitation Company

Website: ****
Email: research@****
Tel: David Coley – 07XXX XXX XXX
Tel: Kerry Ellis Devitt – 07XXX XXX XXX

Appendix C: Consent form

Please find below the ethical checks agreed to at the start of the conversation with your researcher. This is a copy for your records.

1. I have seen the information sheet telling me about this research and/or have had a researcher talk through the information sheet with me.

2. I understand that this conversation will be confidential, and that any unique or identifiable information about me will be removed.

3. I am aware I can stop the conversation at any time, and/or not answer any questions I am uncomfortable or unsure about.

4. I understand that I have 24 hours to change my mind about my information being used in this research.

5. I understand that the information I give will be used in a report. This anonymized report will be used by other people to better understand people's experiences when it comes to this important topic.

6. I understand and give permission for transcripts of this conversation (a written record of what has been said) to be looked at by the Research & Policy Unit in order for the report to be written.

7. I understand that these anonymized transcripts will be kept for up to 10 years in accordance with data security regulations, and that I can access my own information at any point by contacting KSS CRC Research and Policy Unit.

8. I agree to this conversation being taped using a digital voice recorder (this is just so we can get an accurate record of what you have said)

Name: ……………………………………………………………………………………………

Date of interview with your researcher: …………………………………………………………

Thank you again for your participation in this hugely important research.

Appendix D: form Topic Guide

1.0 Background

- Can you start by telling me a bit about yourself – your life as it is now?

  (Some topic prompts)
    - Tell me how you spend your days?
    - What are you interested in? What gets your attention? (E.g. music, sport, video games, other hobbies etc.)
    - Tell me about your earliest memory?
    - Tell me about school?
    - Tell me about a time when you remember being really happy. What happened? Why was it happy for you?

2.0 Probing relationships

<u>In the early years</u>

- Can you tell me about the people in your life growing up?
    - Who were your important people?
    - Are they still in your life now?

<u>Your current life</u>

- Can you tell me about the people in your life now?
- Who are your important people?
- Anyone else?
- Can you tell me about a particularly 'good' relationship in your life?
- Anyone else?
- And now can you tell me about a more 'difficult' relationship in your life?
- Anyone else?

3.0 Talking directly about domestic abuse

<u>Early memories</u>

- Can you tell me about your earliest memory when it comes to this issue? What happened? How did you feel then? How do you feel now?
- Can you tell me about another early memory involving any similar event? What happened then? How did you feel? How do you feel now?

Bringing the discussion into the present

- Can you tell me about something more recent when it comes to abuse and/or violence in the home? What happened? How did you feel then? How do you feel now?
- Do you have another example?

What triggers and sustains DA?

- Can you tell me what leads up these situations? How do they come about?
  - Can you give me an example of the lead up to a particular situation?
  - Can you give another example?

- What factors make these situations worse for you?
  - Can you tell me a particular time when a situation was made worse for you because of these factors?
  - Do you have another example?

- What factors make these situations better for you?
  - Can you tell me a time when a situation was made better for you because of these factors?
  - Can you give another example?

Impact of pandemic

- Can you tell me how the pandemic has affected your life?
- Can you talk about how it has affected your important relationships at home?
- What impact has it had on your important relationships outside of home?
- Was there a time during lockdown that things got particularly bad? What happened? How did you feel? How do you feel now?

4.0 Looking to the future

- Thinking about the issues we've been discussing, what does the future look like to you?
- Is there anything you would like to see happen in future? Can you tell me about that?