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Internal and External Barriers to Help Seeking: Voices of Men Who Experienced Abuse in the Intimate Relationships

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores internal and external barriers to help seeking among 41 men from four English-speaking countries who self-reported victimization from a female intimate partner. Twelve online focus groups were conducted and themes were identified inductively at a semantic level. Six identified themes represented four internal (blind to the abuse, maintaining relationships, male roles, and excuses) and two external barriers to help seeking (fear of seeking help and nowhere to go). Most participants who avoided seeking help did so due to their own lack of recognition of abuse and ability to assess their risk of harm, attempts to keep the family intact, masculine stereotypes, and excuses for their partner's abuse. Some men who expressed an interest in seeking help were discouraged from it due to fear for their personal safety, a potential revictimization in the legal system, and the lack of support services available to men. This research suggests that the individuals who are abused in relationships, service providers, and the public at large could benefit from professional training about gender inclusive approaches to intimate partner abuse.

Keywords

male victims, intimate partner abuse, barriers to help seeking, international, qualitative

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Introduction

Historically, the literature on intimate partner abuse (IPA) research and practice has focused on heterosexual male-to-female victimization because this type of IPA has been most visible and thus was believed to be the most serious and frequent type of IPA (e.g., Dobash & Dobash, 2004). However, a growing body of both qualitative and quantitative international research shows that a large number of heterosexual men are victimized by their female intimate partners (e.g., Desmarais et al., 2012; Douglas & Hines, 2011; Lysova et al., 2019). Research shows that men experience a range of abusive tactics from women, including physical violence, psychological abuse, financial abuse, sexual abuse, legal and administrative abuse, parental alienation, and homicide (e.g., Berger et al., 2016; Harman et al., 2018; Hines & Douglas, 2016). For example, the U.S. National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS) found that the annual prevalence of physical victimization in the intimate relationships was 4.0% among women compared with 4.7% among men (Breiding, 2014), whereas the 2014 General Social Survey on Victimization in Canada found that the number of men who reported to have experienced physical or sexual violence in the ongoing intimate relationships significantly exceeded that of women (2.9% and 1.7%, respectively; Lysova et al., 2019). At the same time, official police statistics in the United States, Canada, and other Western industrialized countries consistently show that women are more likely than men to become victims of offenses related to intimate partner violence (e.g., sexual and physical assaults, homicides), which documents the severity of violence against women. The discrepancy between the population-based surveys and official police data may also point to men's barriers to reporting violence to the police, even if they experience severe IPA (Douglas & Hines, 2011).

Indeed, research shows that despite the documented experiences of victimization, men are less likely than women to seek help for IPA even when experiencing serious consequences (Ansara & Hindin, 2010). For example, according to the 2014 Canadian General Social Survey, 56% of female victims and only 20% of male victims sought professional help for their IPA victimization (Burczycka, 2016). Qualitative research with male victims of female aggression shows this as well (Machado et al., 2017; McCarrick et al., 2016). Understanding how victims of IPA respond to their abusive experience and the kind of help they seek is important to addressing and preventing IPA. For many survivors of IPA, the existence and availability of professional supportive institutions can contribute to healing and prevent the escalation of IPA (Douglas & Hines, 2011; Dugan et al., 1999).

The reasons for the lack of help seeking among men who were abused by their female intimate partners are not well understood due to the limited research in this area. Recent studies of male victims of IPA do not always focus on help seeking (e.g., Brooks et al., 2017; Corbally, 2015). A systematic review of qualitative and mixed-method studies of help seeking by male victims of IPA has detected 12 studies published between 2006 and 2017, with only half of these studies focusing on interviewing heterosexual men (Huntley et al., 2019). The sample size of these studies was quite small and ranged from 6 to 23 men, except for 299 men in a large mixed-method U.S. study (Hines & Douglas, 2010). Moreover, none of these studies have explicitly identified

external and internal barriers to help seeking among men who experienced IPA. External barriers relate to victims' reactions to people or systems external to both the abuser and the victim, whereas internal barriers focus on internalization of abusive behaviours of an intimate partner. The existing research tends to lump together various explanations into broad categories and, thus, lacks a nuanced understanding of barriers to help seeking among male victims of IPA. For example, one of the major barriers to help seeking identified in the systematic review study was fear of disclosure that included ambivalence related to fear, shame, and embarrassment, on the one hand, and external pressures of not being believed by potential support agents, being falsely accused of being a perpetrator, and threat of retaliation, on the other hand (Huntley et al., 2019). The literature review below attempts to classify the identified barriers to help seeking among male victims of IPA into two groups: internal and external.

Internal Barriers

Internal or intrinsic barriers focus on reactions to and internalization of abusive behaviours of an intimate partner. The existing studies of men who were abused by their female intimate partners tend to identify the internal barriers to help seeking as related to the men's internalized gender norms of masculinity (Corbally, 2015; Machado et al., 2017; Tilbrook et al., 2010). These studies have highlighted how, in line with masculinity norms, men are reluctant to label themselves as victims of female aggression and hence are unlikely to look for help. Abused men often reported feelings of vulnerability, shame, powerlessness, and fear of being seen as "weak," "not masculine," or "unmanly" (Brooks et al., 2017; Machado et al., 2017; Morgan & Wells, 2016). Men blamed themselves for the female aggression and believed that they should be capable of dealing with IPA on their own (Eckstein, 2010; Tilbrook et al., 2010).

Few studies identified barriers to help seeking related to men's commitment to their relationships and their intention to protect perpetrators of IPA, their families, and children (Hines & Douglas, 2010; Tilbrook et al., 2010). Men expressed their wish to stop the abuse but not the relationships they felt committed to. Some researchers also suggested that men who were abused by their intimate partners do not look for help due to experiencing less harm than women (Stark, 2010). That said, although men are on average less likely to experience serious physical injuries, female-perpetrated IPA has been found to be associated with considerable negative effects for the men, including cardiovascular and other physical health problems as well as psychological health problems such as depression, suicidal thoughts, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Hines & Douglas, 2015; Lysova et al., 2019).

External Barriers

External barriers relate to victims' reactions to people or systems external to both the abuser and the victim. Previous studies of help seeking among male victims of IPA focused on the anticipated negative reactions of those in positions to provide help (Dutton, 2010; Machado et al., 2017). This research has examined how IPA professionals, such as police and court agents, are influenced by traditional societal norms

and views on IPA as almost exclusively perpetrated by males against females in the defense of the patriarchy—what is known as a "gender paradigm" (Dutton, 2010). As such, male victims of female-perpetrated IPA are not often viewed by society and the professionals as "appropriate victims," which can translate to the humiliating and disrespectful treatment of male victims. For example, some men were laughed at and not believed by the criminal justice professionals, which could be considered a form of revictimization exacerbating the PTSD symptoms already present (Douglas & Hines, 2011; McCarrick et al., 2016). Thus, this cultural stigma is thought to affect self-stigma, leading to the individual having concerns about negative treatment or rejection and disapproval from others, and internalized negative beliefs about IPA as true of the self (Overstreet & Quinn, 2013). Both of these factors discourage men who are victimized by women from recognizing their experience of victimization and seeking help (McCarrick et al., 2016).

Although prior research has identified some barriers to help seeking among men who experienced IPA, this is one of the first studies to qualitatively examine both external and internal barriers to help seeking among men who experienced IPA from their female partners. Also, given that abused men represent a hard-to-reach population (Douglas et al., 2018), there is need for more qualitative studies on various samples of men to identify other potential barriers to help seeking. This study draws on both an international and a larger sample of men ($n = 41$) than most of the previous qualitative studies. In addition, the absence of a significant body of research in this area (potentially due to a "forbidden" narrative; Brooks et al., 2017) requires more studies to fill a potential knowledge gap regarding IPA from a masculine perspective.

International Outlook

Although there is an abundance of international studies exploring women's experiences of IPA victimization from men (Krug et al., 2002), there is a dearth of research exploring men's victimization from women. Without this kind of research, the field misses the opportunity to understand the global nature of men who sustain IPA and thus presents a problem to reducing the prevalence of IPA if the causes and consequences are not fully conceptualized. In this article, we address some of this gap by exploring patterns in men's reasoning for avoiding help seeking across four English-speaking and industrialized countries. As the exploratory international research endeavor into male intimate partner victimization in heterosexual relationships, this study seeks to establish the need and relevance for further development of a large-scale, international research study on this issue.

Current Study

It is evident there are many gaps in our understanding about men's reasons for not seeking help in response to experiencing abuse from their female partner. Some recent studies that focused on help seeking did not always differentiate between internal and external explanations and thus lack a nuanced understanding of barriers to help

seeking among male victims of IPA. This study set out to explore both internal and external barriers to help seeking among 41 men who experienced IPA in four English-speaking countries. Specifically, we seek to expand on the range of reasons why the men did not seek help relating to IPA from a female partner.

Method

Procedure

The first, and third through sixth authors formed an international research network to examine men's experiences with being the target of IPA from their female partners. The purpose of the study, overall, was to broadly explore their experiences of abuse, learn about their help-seeking efforts, and to investigate how they believe the field could potentially adapt to intervene with men early on in their abuse experiences. An additional goal was to examine similarities and differences in the men's experiences and voices across countries. Ethical approval was granted from four separate university human ethics committees. The study employed 12 web-based, video-enabled, focus groups from four different English-speaking countries: Australia (AUS), Canada (CAN), United Kingdom (UK), and the United States (USA). We used GoToMeeting, an online technology that affords live video conferencing and audio recording of the meetings. This was an efficient method to collect qualitative data from a hard-to-reach population across the four countries (Douglas et al., 2018). Each man was provided with a pseudonym to use during the focus groups to maintain their privacy.

Between October 2013 and February 2014, we conducted 12 focus groups (three in each country) with 41 men. Participants were recruited via an advertisement that provided key study information and was distributed via existing professional networks, websites of targeted men's organizations, or in the case of the United States, via existing email lists of past participants. It was stated that the study sought to hear from men who had sustained all forms of IPA from women. No financial compensation was offered except for the opportunity to learn more about the experiences of men in similar situations. Men were invited to email the lead researcher in each country for a full information and consent statement. Those who did were provided with a de-identifying pseudonym and instructions on how to construct an email address that did not feature their name. Men who indicated they still wanted to take part were asked to complete a screening questionnaire to identify whether participation could be detrimental to their physical/psychological well-being. Men were asked whether they had been involved in an ongoing or former abusive relationship with a female intimate partner, and, if the latter, we did not ask men to specify how long ago the relationship was. Those who indicated any current abuse were assessed on a case-by-case basis. As in the studies of female victims of IPA, male victims in the current study were not directly asked about the perpetration of violence in their relationships. The two researchers who were also registered psychologists (third and sixth authors) helped to guide decisions about screening.

Participants all spoke English, resided in the country where the focus group occurred, had an email address, and access to an online facility with a webcam. Of 103 men who inquired about the study, 74 went on to request a screening questionnaire, 57 of whom completed it. Three men were screened out due to uncertainty over their physical and psychological well-being, 10 men were waitlisted due to high demand in Australia and the United States, and three men did not show on the day of the focus group (Dixon et al., in press). This sample size reflected our initial plan to collect data from four people in each of the three focus groups per country, a total of 12 men per country for this exploratory, qualitative study. The focus groups lasted 90 min and never exceeded more than four participants and two facilitators at a time. For more details of the recruitment and screening of participants, and steps taken to ensure the confidentiality and protection of these participants, see Douglas et al., 2018.

Researcher Description and Researcher–Participant Relationship

Our international research network came together on the basis of our academic (A.L., E.M.D., and D.A.H.) and clinical practice expertise (L.D., E.M.C.). No researchers had prior relationships with the men who participated in our study.

Measures/Instrumentation

Focus groups were selected over individual interviews to ensure that we could hear the voices of a number of men across the countries, something that had not been achieved in past research. Furthermore, previous research shows that participants in focus groups elaborate more on their responses (Heary & Hennessy, 2006) providing a rich data source, which was desired for this study. We used broad, open-ended questions to allow the men to present their experiences without being led by the interviewers and to support the realist epistemological position adopted in the study design.

The focus group interviews consisted of five open-ended questions. Specifically (a) Please describe some of your most memorable experiences of abuse from your partner; (b) When these things first happened, how did you feel about them? (c) How do you feel about it now? (d) Did you tell anyone what was going on? (e) What would have encouraged you to ask for help earlier? For the purpose of this study, we analyzed responses to the fourth question to provide an in-depth focus on the barriers to men's help seeking. Other publications also address additional and distinct research questions using answers to each of these open-ended questions (e.g., Dixon et al., in press; Lysova et al., in press).

The Participants

Table 1 shows the demographics of the 41 men who participated in this study. The men ranged in age from 28 to 63 years, with an average age of 49 years. Most of the respondents were Caucasian with professional or tradesperson vocations.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed using the six steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). We used an inductive approach as we sought to understand the men's experiences and develop themes from their narratives, rather than exploring the relevance of a particular theory. Analysis was primarily carried out by the first two authors, with other authors guiding the data gathering process and confirming the themes. First, the data were familiarized and analyzed, with initial codes being noted. During the second phase of analysis, the analysts actively collaborated on developing the initial codes that reflected significant issues to the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The codes were created across data from each of the four nations. Codes that had comparable and significant substance were converged to frame a final arrangement of codes. We noted any differences between the nations and discarded the codes that did not have substantial content. Next we focused on identifying the major themes and subthemes (the third phase of analysis), which were then checked back against the data set by reviewing the transcripts and code extracts (the fourth phase). The final two phases involved giving meaningful labels to the main themes and subthemes and preparing the final report that explained and illustrated the claims with relevant example quotes. This report was shared with all coauthors who provided their comments and suggestions (Dixon et al., in press).

Results

Six themes were identified as reasons the men did not seek help for the abuse from their female partner. Four of them reflected internal barriers, namely *blind to the abuse, maintaining relationship, male roles*, and *excuses*, and two themes reflected external barriers, namely *fear of seeking help* and *nowhere to go*. Each is discussed below in detail with their subthemes and supporting quotes. Table 2 summarizes themes and subthemes identified in this study. Themes were evident across all of the focus groups in the different locations, and differences between the countries were not found.

Internal Barriers

Blind to the abuse. The analyses identified that the men's lack of help-seeking behaviour originated from their blindness to their partner's abusive behaviour. That is, they were unable to understand her behaviour as IPA because they could not recognize it as such, either because of a lack of gender inclusive knowledge about IPA or because abusive behaviour had been normalized during other parts of their lives. Analysis identified two subthemes of *what is abuse* and *normalization*.

What is abuse? This subtheme represents the lack of recognition and understanding of abusive behaviours directed at men in our study. Many men described a general lack of knowledge about female-perpetrated IPA against men (psychological abuse and/or physical violence) and refrained from labeling what happened to them as abuse.

Table 1. Participant Demographic Information ($N = 41$).

Focus group country	Pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity	Occupation
Australia ($n = 11$)				
	Gareth	34	White Australian	Student
	Chris	49	Persian/White Australian	Professional
	Ken	43	White Australian	Technician
	Hamish	58	White Australian	Tradesperson
	Trevor	55	White British	Professional
	Len	40	White German/Irish	Manual worker/laborer
	Damien	42	White British	Manager
	Bob	52	Greek	Professional
	Matthew	58	White British/German	Professional
	Mike	28	White Australian	Tradesperson
	Jim	45	White Russian/German	Tradesperson
Canada ($n = 9$)				
	Eoin	41	White Canadian	Tradesperson
	Nathan	42	White Canadian/German	Administrator
	Philip	57	White Canadian	Tradesperson
	Kevin	46	White Canadian	Hospitality worker
	Martin	51	White French	Tradesperson
	Louis	35	Black Irish	Tradesperson
	Thomas	51	White Canadian	Administrator
	Andrew	63	White Canadian	Community worker
	Bart	49	White Canadian	Professional
UK ($n = 10$)				
	Ron	46	White Irish	Professional
	Mick	47	White British	Tradesperson
	Carl	62	White British	Professional
	Marcus	46	White British	Unemployed
	Richard	47	White British	Manual worker/laborer
	Christian	49	White British	Professional
	Barry	43	British-Cypriot	Skilled agriculturist
	Nick	57	White British	Retired
	Robert	46	White British	Professional
	Gavin	47	White British	Tradesperson
US ($n = 11$)				
	Jamie	55	White American	Creative arts worker
	Donald	58	White American	Unemployed
	Ron	43	White American	Unemployed
	Samuel	57	White American	Business founder
	Simon	49	White American	Sales worker
	Craig	51	White American	Business founder
	Daniel	55	White American	Manager
	Stuart	52	White American	Technician
	Rory	53	First Nation Indigenous/ White American	Manual worker/laborer
	William	48	White American	Professional
	Todd	47	White American	Professional

Table 2. Summary of the Themes and Subthemes Identified in This Study.

Themes	Subthemes
Internal barriers to help seeking	
1. Blind to the abuse	1.1. What is abuse?
	1.2. Normalization
2. Maintaining relationships	2.1. For the sake of the children and the family unit
	2.2. Love
	2.3. Desire to fix the relationship
3. Male roles	3.1. Being a man
	3.2. Embarrassment
4. Excuses	4.1. She wouldn't do it on purpose
	4.2. Difficult past
	4.3. Mental /physical health
External barriers to help seeking	
5. Fear of seeking help	5.1. Keeping up the façade
	5.2. Legal self-preservation
	5.3. Personal self-preservation
6. Nowhere to go	6.1. Helplessness
	6.2. Lack of support
	6.3. Isolation
	6.4. Financial burden

Moreover, some of them, like Andrew below, only considered "violence" as a way to define abuse but not any other mistreatment. Trying to explain why this abuse was not recognized, some men, like Andrew (CAN), described their upbringing:

> At the time, I did not see it as abuse. I realized there was something wrong, and I guess I was having a positive view on things. I just thought we would be able to make it better and make it work. . . . But basically, I did not understand what it was; I came from a good family, I've never seen any violence in my family at all. I didn't know what it was.

Similarly, Martin (CAN) noted that he would have sought help if he knew the situation was abusive: "Did I call it abuse back then? No. Really, at the time, if I would know, I would have called the police."

Normalization. This subtheme details how experiencing abuse in the relationships was a normal part of the fabric of men's lives. Several men described abuse as being "groomed" into them since their childhoods. For Philip (CAN), abuse was never abnormal: "I was a victim of child and sexual abuse, and for abuse to continue in your life, I guess is a pretty normal thing. That's how I got there." Similarly, Louis (CAN) shared, "I've got a really shitty childhood and past and I've always managed to deal with that shit. Like when my mom died, I just went 'oh fuck', and then I just sucked it up and went to work the next day." For Simon (USA), his expectations of marriage

and how a wife could treat her husband affected his acceptance of the abuse as normal:

> I must have had a perspective of what was right and what was wrong as far as a woman is concerned. And I think that I just thought that this was just normal and this was marriage. I needed to adjust.

Maintaining relationships. Analyses identified that the men avoided seeking help for the abuse because they wanted to keep their relationships intact, to protect their children and the family unit that they had made official vows to create. The three subthemes included *for the sake of the children and the family, love*, and *desire to fix the relationships*, each describing patterns that explain why the men wanted to maintain their family and intimate relationships in the face of their partners' abuse.

For the sake of the children and the family unit. It was common for the men to describe an aversion to help seeking because they thought it would break down the family unit, leaving the children in the care of their abusive partners and therefore at risk. The majority of the men described their lack of help seeking as an attempt to protect their children. For example, Martin (CAN) thought working hard and progressing through the abuse by himself was the best option for the children: "Basically I just kept it within the family unit. I did what I thought would be best to try to solve it, to work hard; I wanted to protect the children." Chris (AUS) shared,

> I knew what was happening was abuse, but by then I had a beautiful son and I stayed in it because I couldn't possibly take the thought of leaving an innocent child who would now have no other frame of reference alone with this abusive person.

It did not seem to occur to the men that they might be able to leave with their children. This protection extended to protecting the family from professionals such as police and health care workers whom they distrusted. When discussing getting help from social services, Gavin (UK) said, "I didn't want that because I didn't want her investigating. I just didn't want that for the family. I didn't want social services involved mainly because I know what they're like. I know what Women's Aid are like."

Love. This subtheme reflects the men's beliefs in the sanctity of marriage, love of their abusive partners, and not wanting them to get into trouble. Eoin (CAN) did not want his female abuser to be arrested because "I still was so deeply in love with her, and I still wanted her to get help so badly." Rory (USA) stated that he "was trying to stay with the situation for my son and because I told this woman I loved her and I wanted to stay married to her."

For several men, their comments indicated that the idea of seeking help was synonymous with "leaving" their family and breaking marriage vows, which they described as sacred to them. For example, Nathan (CAN) decided to not leave his family: "I cannot leave this marriage, I made my vows, so I will not do it, regardless, and it can kill me but I will not leave my family." Damien's (AUS) decisions reflected

his Catholic faith: "I mean, I'm a Catholic, so if you marry someone, you marry them till you're dead."

Desire to fix the relationship. This subtheme describes the men's desire to "help" their abusers and to fix their strained relationships. For example, Ron (UK) was optimistic and focused on how he could help his abuser: "I was still thinking there was a way through this, a way round this, for the family, and to help her." Rory (USA) also had a similar optimistic view:

> And I thought this woman has been through twenty years of therapy about problems with her father when she was a kid, so if we can make it work, if I can help her, we can have a wonderful life.

The men perceived themselves as having the ability to stop the abuse if they helped their partners through their difficult past or some other issues. Therefore, men did not seek help because they believed they could fix the core of the issues themselves.

Male roles. This theme details the importance the men placed on adhering to hegemonic masculine stereotypes (what it means to be a man), and the associated embarrassment linked to not living up to this standard through being abused, especially by a woman.

Being a man. This subtheme notes the men's beliefs about help seeking as being contrary to the traditional male roles, mainly strength and resilience. Samuel (USA) noted that he and the other abuse victims overestimated their abilities to cope:

> Men have a feeling that we can cope with stuff pretty well. It's no problem because she didn't hit me that hard and I can handle it and most of the time I can duck pretty well. Sixty-two percent of the time the relationship is not that awful. Perhaps our masculine coping mechanism works against us in this respect.

Louis (CAN) explained his own form of coping mechanism as just "dealing with it": "Never needed or wanted professional help because . . . I just, I think mentally, generally speaking, I can deal with that kind of shit."

Embarrassment. Many men discussed how they experienced embarrassment and shame related to being abused, in general, but in particular by a woman. For example, Martin (CAN) discussed that men needed to be told to protect themselves by asking for help because "we're sort of ashamed. Like, how can we let a woman hit us?" Gavin (UK) described his embarrassment as, "I was ashamed because this little woman was attacking me and I couldn't control her and that's how I felt." While Ken (AUS) claimed, "I'm strong-willed and I don't take lightly to anybody telling me what to do, yet I had this woman that was able to control me."

Excuses. This theme encompassed a broad range of reasons that excused their partners' behaviour, and therefore not seeking help. The men felt sorry for her, they thought they could help her and stop the abuse. These excuses are identified in the subthemes below which showed that they thought their partners would not be abusive on purpose, that the partners had experienced challenging lives, and that their partner's mental/physical health had contributed to the behaviour.

She wouldn't do it on purpose. This subtheme captures how the men excused their partners' behaviour as a "mistake" or momentary rough patch in their life. Philip (CAN) believed his abuser whenever she apologized and failed to see the pattern of apologies as part of the abuse process:

> I never really understood the whole process of the cycle of abuse and why it's going up and down. And I always thought that we are getting along because she was so ah, the honeymoon fits right? She was so apologetic, telling you "oh no I am sorry, it wasn't like that, it will never happen again," and I always kept believing and that went on for years.

Jim (AUS) blamed the stress of exams for her abuse: "I would make excuses, like we were going through final exams here, because we met when we were undergraduates and I thought that things would clean up, clear up, after we'd gotten over the stress of the exams." The hope that the abusive behaviours would stop or that they could wait out the storm limited these men from seeking help.

Difficult past. Some men attributed their partner's difficult past as an explanation for her behaviours, which limited their seeking help for abuse. For Marcus (UK), the excuse of traumatic life experiences continued past the initial trauma:

> I made excuses for her behaviour. . . . First of all, for example, her mother died, so I excused her behaviour on bereavement; that was her way of coping with bereavement. Then children started arriving so I then excused the behaviour by postnatal depression and that sort of thing.

Childhood trauma also was a prominent excuse under this subtheme. Kevin (CAN) explained, "She was raised in a foster care family situation and subsequently adopted. And, I don't see it as abuse, I see it as a learned thing that she actually had to do."

Mental/physical health. A few men avoided seeking help as they focused on dealing with the well-being of their partners. They excused the abuse due to their partners' poor mental or physical health. These excuses encompassed "insecurity" as noted by Craig (USA):

> Yes, absolutely I justified it. Probably the first thing that I recognized was insecurity. Early on in our marriage, I didn't notice this before we got married, but shortly after got married, signs of real insecurity that then led to sort of controlling behaviours.

The excuses also addressed personality traits, as noted by Matthew (AUS): "I thought she was neurotic, like her mother, and whether it was a learned behaviour or biological or whatever, at that stage I didn't know." This subtheme also includes several mentions of hormonal abnormalities, personality disorders, and other mental health concerns.

External Barriers

Fear of seeking help. Some men avoided seeking help because they were afraid of the potential consequences of doing so. These consequences ranged from being seen as victims to losing their own freedom or assets.

Keeping up the facade. Drawing attention to their victimization was seen as an undesirable consequence for some men. For Matthew (AUS), the fear of the social stigma was worse than dealing with the abuse:

> I remember now that a part of the reason that I didn't [call for help] was the social stigma of a couple of areas there, uh, broken family, problems within the family. And probably also that I wouldn't be believed as well. So I was locked in to fear most of the time. You know, if she leaves me, what am I going to do? We've got the kids, the family, social stigma? Fear was just going around in circles.

Kevin (CAN) explained his concern with social perceptions: "No, I never really told anybody, at all. I wanted my parents to think that I had a good relationship, and my friends, well, the same thing."

Legal self-preservation. Many men avoided seeking help because they were afraid of being arrested and falsely prosecuted by the police or courts. This fear was driven by an underlying belief that IPA professionals hold gender bias about who is likely to be the victim of IPA in a heterosexual relationship. Mick (UK) was repeatedly threatened by his partner when he expressed wanting to seek help:

> She kept threatening. She said, "All I have to do is call the police and tell them that you've done this, that or the other, and you'll never see the children again, you'll lose the house, and you'll just have to pay for everything."

Thomas (CAN) said that he "learned [his] lesson the hard way" by being threatened by bogus charges if he stepped out of line with his partner. Eoin (CAN) relayed the gendered dynamic of his situation and the perceived dangers of stepping forward:

> There is a big power problem there. . . . They have this idea that, well, you know, this [abuse] only happens to women, so no one will believe you. And it was the same with my friends, when my friends saw me with a black eye, they said me "what did you do, cheat on her?" And I said, "we would never blame the women if this happened, you know?"

Personal preservation. Similar to the previous subtheme, personal preservation indicates fear the men had about a potential loss of their professional livelihood, their children or their physical safety, in the event of seeking help. Several men did not wish to expose their personal problems to their employers because they were afraid of being fired or treated differently, such as Carl (UK): "There were a mixture of things: I was in a fairly senior position at my work, and I didn't have any confidence that if I confided in anybody that it wouldn't damage my situation at work." The men also discussed the preservation of their relationship with their children. Bob (AUS) avoided seeking help because he did not want to lose his son: "You get told, 'do you realize that if this escalates, you can lose your son?' So, what do you do? . . . You stand still; you just have continual mental abuse." Considering personal safety, Chris (AUS) gave into his abuser to protect her and himself:

> Eventually she put the knife down. She said the next day that she wasn't going to kill me, she was going to kill herself. . . . That was in 2005 . . . , don't mess with this chick. If you argue, anything's possible, so I started basically giving in.

Nowhere to go. Analyses also identified that many men perceived their situation to be hopeless, that help was unavailable, that they were alone in the situation, or that they were too financially insecure to find their way out of the abusive relationship.

Helplessness. Some men accepted their abuse and felt hopeless about the situation. They did not know what to do in reaction to the abuse. Several men described the feeling of being "frozen" or "paralyzed." For example, Nathan (CAN) shared, "I was literally shut down, I couldn't think, I couldn't do anything." Seeking help seemed pointless if the abuse was perceived as interminable, as Barry (UK) described:

> You can't reason with it. You know and you can leave; but nonetheless this abuse will follow you. If you have children, you can't escape. You can't escape this abuse day-to-day. You're just living for the rest of your life with this person who's capable of being completely unfair.

Others, like Carl (UK), talked about helplessness:

> What is memorable, and unfortunately remains with me, is the feeling of helplessness when I knew just from the look in her eye that this was going to go the whole way and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

Lack of support. It was common for the men to describe the lack or absence of available support networks or services for abused men. This support was identified in terms of formal aid such as trauma centers, help lines, legal aid, or even public support. Eoin (CAN) noted that discussions relating to his abuse were highly hostile in the open public forum, and that he received an unfriendly reception when he tried to contact the woman's assault help line:

> I didn't know any services, . . . so I called the woman's assault help line, at that time, and I got a pretty unfriendly reception. I told them that I was a victim of domestic abuse and I didn't know where to call and if they could help. And they said that they didn't know how to help me. And I asked if there was anybody that I could talk to there about it, and they said, "no, no, you have to figure things out on your own." . . . I was really hurt by that.

Damien (AUS) stated that he would have sought help if he saw a viable avenue to do so:

> It just blew me away that there was just total silence, and there was a wall, and there was nowhere to go. And it's like all men instinctively know there is nowhere to go. I just think that if there was an avenue, I would've taken it.

Isolation. Some men reported that their abusers isolated them from friends and family, which made it difficult for them to reach out for help. Trevor (AUS) described, "I was gradually isolated from my family and friends. . . . I guess they were perceived to be the enemy by my wife." For others like William (USA), the isolation came overtly:

> The isolation was very deliberate on the part of my ex-wife. . . . So I talked to my mom, she [ex-wife] would get in front of me while I was on the phone, get in my face, and mock me and say you know, "You're talking to your mom, talking to your mommy?" . . . There was like a taunting effort to isolate me.

Financial burden. A few of the men described their inability or apprehension to seek help because they did not have the financial support or standing to do so. Although some potential formal support programs are not-for-profit, other forms of formal support methods can be financially strenuous. For example, lawyers or psychologists can have high costs, especially in countries like the United States that do not have universal medical support. Some participants reflected on this reality. For example, Rory (USA) discussed how he would have had to pay "US$10,000 to US$15,000" to take his abuser to court and fight for his son, whereas Eoin (CAN) could not afford to go to counselling for help so he "just never got any." For others, like Robert (UK), it was less about what he would have to pay and more about what he might lose if he left his partner: "I had just bought a house with her and I had raised £100,000 to put in this house, so I had so much riding on making this relationship work." Some participants also discussed finances as another form of abuse, where complete control left them dependent on their abusers, such as Louis (CAN): "I would need her for food, I would need her for toiletries . . . . I was completely dependent on her. She used that to control me, the finances."

Discussion

This study explored internal and external barriers to help seeking among men who experienced female-perpetrated IPA across four English-speaking countries. Six themes representing both internal and external barriers to help seeking emerged from

the data, with no unique patterns specific to each country evident among the men from the four different countries. We found a variety of intertwining reasons why men experienced troubles with seeking help for abuse. The internal barriers to help seeking included being blind to the abuse, maintaining relationships, male roles, and excuses. The external barriers included fear of seeking help and having nowhere to go.

Although past research has identified traditional masculinity roles as the internal barrier to help seeking among men who experienced female-perpetrated IPA in the prior research (e.g., Brooks et al., 2017; McCarrick et al., 2016), this study expanded on this explanation and provided insights into internal barriers that have not been previously identified in the empirical literature. Also, unlike the hypotheses by Stark (2010) that men's experiences of abuse were not significant to warrant seeking help, the clinicians in the group, of which one was always present on a focus group call, heard enough evidence of the multifactorial nature of IPA abuse and violence to warrant seeking help.

One of the main identified internal barriers to help seeking—*blind to the abuse*—reflected the lack of attention to men's experiences of IPA so that even victims themselves had trouble, at various times in their lives, identifying their experiences as abuse. This unawareness of abuse directed at men can partly be attributed to societal stigma that "boys don't cry" and men cannot get hurt by a female partner (Overstreet & Quinn, 2013; Vogel et al., 2011). It took several decades to change the public discourse to better recognize the various forms of IPA against heterosexual women as intolerable and illegal behaviour (Pierotti, 2013). However, there has been no comparable public discourse to make abuse directed at men similarly visible (Allen & Bradley, 2018). There is a clear need for similarly dedicated and ongoing public education on gender inclusive IPA.

Another prominent internal reason for avoiding help seeking related to *maintaining relationships*, which included maintaining the family unit for the sake of the children, for the love of their partners, and a perceived ability to fix their relationships without intervention from outside help that could harm the family. The men's feelings are consistent with those experienced by female victims of IPA who also often expressed love toward their partners, a desire to save relationships, and avoid harm to the children (Fugate et al., 2005; Mills, 2009). There is strong evidence to suggest that professionals need to be aware that some men may also not want to leave their partners and break the family unit, but instead, seek ways to learn how to put boundaries in place to prevent the abuse and improve the quality of family life.

One of the themes—*male roles*—has been previously identified in the research literature as a potent internal barrier to men's help seeking (Brooks et al., 2017; Corbally, 2015; Machado et al., 2017; Tilbrook et al., 2010). Typical hegemonic masculine norms with a focus on emotional control, dominance over women, and self-reliance have long been identified as an obstacle to general help seeking among men (Mansfield et al., 2003; Vogel et al., 2011) and have recently been found as relevant to help seeking among male victims of IPA. For example, qualitative studies of nine men who experienced IPA in Canada (Brooks et al., 2017) and of six male victims of IPA in the UK (McCarrick et al., 2016) identified masculine identity as an important factor in the

men denying their status as victims and refusing to seek help. Consistent with these results, we found that adherence to masculine roles, specifically a focus on self-reliance, an ability to "deal with abuse," and embarrassment associated with being hit or controlled by a woman, discouraged men from seeking help for their IPA victimization. This finding highlights the detrimental effect of hegemonic masculine norms not only on male IPV offending as often stated but also on their not seeking help as a victim of IPV. The implication of this research for practice and policy is the need to develop gender-inclusive education for the public to destigmatize male victimization and dispel myths. It is also important for professionals to use language that encourages a sense of autonomy and agency in men to seek help, avoiding labels like "victim" that others have suggested can reduce the men's capacity to heal (Brooks et al., 2017; Lysova et al., in press).

Another theme—*excuses*—outlined the internal barriers to help seeking as linked to the men excusing their partner's behaviour, including that she wouldn't do it on purpose, the abuser's difficult past, and her poor mental/physical health. Although some research suggests that these excuses may be an indication of the men's staying in control (Brooks et al., 2017), it may also reflect the men's sincere care for their female partners whom they did not see as inherently bad but rather tried to help. The existing research on female victims of IPA also finds it as a theme (Fugate et al., 2005), which suggests this internal barrier transcends gender and may reflect the universality of hope and care for one's partner. In addition, the documented interdependent nature of violent couples' characteristics and attachment between romantic partners can influence partners to maintain these relationships and potentially excuse another partner's behaviour (Sommer et al., 2017).

Our analyses also detected two external barriers to men's help seeking. One of these barriers was *fear of seeking help*. Some tried to keep up the facade and avoid stigma associated with a broken family, whereas others were seriously concerned about their personal safety and revictimization in the legal system. These findings are consistent with other studies of both male victims of IPA (Hines et al., 2007) and female victims of IPA (Scheffer Lindgren & Renck, 2008). This research highlights the opportunity for professional training of IPA providers to focus on creating a safe professional space with increased empathy toward men's experiences of abuse. It is important to create a safe space allowing men to more easily disclose their victimization.

Finally, one of the themes that explained the lack of help seeking among men in our study was *nowhere to go*. It highlighted the lack of a specialized support system and affordable services to assist the men experiencing abuse across all four countries which inherently involved feeling hopeless and who were isolated from their family and friends. Some men accepted or succumbed to abuse as they perceived the situation as helpless, which includes symptoms of feeling they "deserved" it, and hence did not seek help. This finding is consistent with a U.S. study of 28 men who experienced intimate terrorism and at the same time expressed the masculine internalization of blame (Eckstein, 2010). Social stigmatization of men as inappropriate victims can also partly contribute to men's self-blame and the resulting hopelessness, that is, feeling "frozen" or "paralyzed" and unable to change anything in the situation of abuse.

Our finding of this theme is supported by a growing body of research that suggests the response system to victims of IPA has to date focused more on the needs of heterosexual women and overlooked the needs of others who sustain IPA, including heterosexual men and members of the LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) community (Douglas & Hines, 2011; Dutton, 2010; Hamel, 2011; Tsui, 2014). It has been argued that a gender paradigm, a view that IPA is almost exclusively perpetrated by heterosexual males against heterosexual females in defense of the patriarchy, unduly permeates society and affects the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours of professionals who provide resources and formal support to victims of IPA (Dutton, 2010). This treatment of men who tried to contact help agencies for victims of abuse could also have contributed to the men's distrust of the professional help system.

Although some of the men did express an interest in getting help, it was not available to them. There is a shortage of publicly funded men's shelters in the four countries within our study (e.g., Beattie & Hutchins, 2015; Tsui, 2014). Given that male abuse victims are more likely to seek informal support before professionals (Ansara & Hindin, 2010; Douglas & Hines, 2011; Morgan et al., 2014), their lack of help seeking could be exacerbated by the gradual and overt isolation from their friends and family, as reported by the men in our study. In addition, our study found that financial strain was a serious obstacle to the men's help seeking, especially with a lack of publicly funded aid services. The policy implications include the expansion of affordable services, that are gender-inclusive, to help all victims of IPA regardless of their gender, gender-orientation, or the gender of their abuser. Special attention should be paid to vulnerable men who are isolated, depressed, and experience financial issues that preclude them from seeking help.

Although this study collected an appropriately sized, international sample of heterosexual men, using online technology (Douglas et al., 2018), future international investigations are needed to understand men and women's experiences in non-Western high-income countries whose native language is not English, and with a diversity of sexual orientations. In addition, this study represents the views of men who have realized their abuse experience and sought help. Research needs to hear the voices of men who have not reached this stage and may have different education and help-seeking needs. However, it is only by conducting research with men who have realized their abuse that researchers can work out how to best engage with men who have not reached this stage. It is also noteworthy that although the data for this study were collected in 2013–2014, the experiences and perspectives of abused men appear not to have changed much in the recent years given the continuing lack of attention and help to male victims of female-perpetrated IPA (Huntley et al., 2019).

Conclusion

The barriers to men's help seeking in cases of female-perpetrated IPA remain poorly understood and responded to. This study identified a broad range of insights and explanations provided by men in four English-speaking countries who experienced IPA. Thematic analysis identified a range of internal and external barriers that kept

them from seeking help which highlight areas of intervention that could reduce the length of time men and their children tolerate the abuse before attempting to prevent or stop it. The findings denote the importance of creating an informed and caring community of support that would greatly enhance men's ability to evaluate their situation and decide what assistance they need. This study signals the importance of educating the public that men in IPA situations also experience similar internal barriers to women in IPA situations. The universal emotional and mental concerns can minimize gendered myths and help men to seek help more readily. Men's responses identified clear areas for change in the services for victims of IPA. Formal responses to IPA must be continued to be critically examined, especially in relation to nontraditional victims of IPA such as men. The public education could also extend to professional training and service provision to ensure men are responded to and appropriately resourced with such an inclusive approach. There is a clear need for more victim-centered and specifically male-friendly policy, practice approaches, and services that not only make sure that the negative impacts on victims are reduced but also empower them. The similarity in men's barriers to help seeking in four English-speaking countries suggests that this is a serious international issue not limited to the boundaries of one nation.

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