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Male Abuse Survivors on Outreach and Public Education: Research From Australia, Canada, England, and the United States

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The field of domestic abuse has seen increasing attention to and recognition of diversity in the areas of perpetration and victimization. This article documents a qualitative study of 41 men from four English-speaking countries who were survivors of partner abuse. It focuses on men's realization of their abuse experiences and their proposed strategies for intervention to recognize the abuse earlier. The men spoke of their own lack of awareness of the actions directed toward them as constituting abuse and connected this to the importance of reaching male victims earlier through public-wide education, policies and laws that are gender neutral or gender inclusive, and services that are targeted for all, regardless of gender, gender identity, or sexual orientation.

KEYWORDS: male victims; public education; education campaigns

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INTRODUCTION

The last decade has brought significant changes to the research and practitioner arenas of partner abuse (PA). Once conceptualized as a type of victimization that only happens to women, the field increasingly conducts research on and provides services to victims regardless of gender, gender identity, and sexual orientation (Ard & Makadon, 2011; Bates, 2019; Brown & Groscup, 2009; Guadalupe-Diaz & Yglesias, 2013; Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2012; McClennen et al., 2002). This shift in perspectives and services has been rapid, which has meant that providers and decision-makers are often left responding to victims with insufficient information or research (Bates, 2019; Pyles & Kim, 2006). One such area of research warranting attention is how men come to understand the abuse that they experience and what would encourage them to seek help. This article builds on a previous article of the same study which more globally addressed how men make sense of their experiences of abuse (Dixon et al., 2022). In this article, we narrow the focus to examine men's realization of their abuse experiences and specific strategies to intervene and recognize the abuse earlier. In this article, the terms "victim" and "survivor" of PA are used interchangeably, because throughout the process of being a target of abuse, individuals are usually both victims and survivors, and these terms reflect the reality of their experiences. These terms are also consistent with the professional literature. Our investigation is carried out through a study of men in four English-speaking countries.

Men as Targets of PA

Since the initial studies of family violence in the early 1970s, research has shown that men can be and are targets of PA (Hines et al., 2016; Straus, 1999). Today, the experiences of men as victims are increasingly reported by family violence researchers (Bates et al., 2019; Esquivel-Santoveña & Dixon, 2012; Laskey et al., 2019; Lysova et al., 2019; Tsui, 2014; Walker et al., 2020). For example, research using the 2014 Canadian General Social Survey shows that of the general population, 2.9% of men were the targets of physical and/or sexual PA in their intimate relationships within the previous 5 years (Lysova et al., 2019). In addition, 10.1% of men in the general population and 35% of male victims reported being the target of abusively controlling behaviors, such as monitoring how much time one spends with family or friends, controlling one's whereabouts, or restricting access to the family's financial resources and assets. In Australia, estimates from the general population show that over the course of a lifetime, 6.1% of men report being victims of physical or sexual PA, and 16.0% report being the victim of emotional abuse from a partner (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2019). In the United States, of the general population, 31.0% of men reported lifetime prevalence rates of physical abuse from an intimate partner and 34.2% reported psychological aggression (Smith et al., 2018). In the United Kingdom, 12.9% of men from the general

population were victims of nonsexual, physical, or emotional PA from a current or former partner in the previous year (U.K. Office for National Statistics, 2020).

Men's experiences with PA show that they do sustain serious injuries. One U.S. study of 302 male help-seekers found that 35% of participants sustained a severe injury—a bruise, cut, broken bone, or need for medical treatment (Hines & Douglas, 2010). A German study of 167 male PA victims who were evaluated in a medical examination center for victims of violence found the majority (79%) of injuries were due to blunt force (Wörmann et al., 2021): scratches, bite marks, strangulation, and grip marks. A study using the Canadian General Social Science Survey estimated that approximately 63,575 men annually experience PA being beaten, choked, and surviving attacks with a gun or knife and also severe psychological violence (Lysova & Dim, 2022).

In addition to the injuries that men sustain, research on male victimization documents other negative health consequences (Choi et al., 2015, 2021; Hope et al., 2021; Khurana et al., 2022; Macedo Bernardino et al., 2016). Men who experience partner violence (PV) victimization are more likely to have mental health concerns, including depression and posttraumatic stress (Hines, 2007; Hines & Douglas, 2011b, 2015). Men who experience PV victimization and who seek help are more likely than men in the general population to experience poorer health, including asthma, high blood pressure, and sexually transmitted diseases (Hines & Douglas, 2015). These findings are consistent with research on female victims of PA. A New Zealand study found that women who experienced economic abuse were more likely to report mental health distress and to have a confirmed diagnosis of a mental health condition (Mellar et al., 2024). Further, a Danish population-based study found that both men and women who experienced PA had significantly higher health concerns and costs (Helweg-Larsen et al., 2011).

Recognition of PA

A small part of the literature on help-seeking among PA victims explores how victims first come to understand their abuse and what motivates victims to come forward. A qualitative study of 24 lesbians in violent relationships described that when the violence became intolerable to them, they felt compelled to seek help or leave their partners (Hardesty et al., 2011). Another qualitative study, 68 female victims in heterosexual relationships, found that women were motivated to leave their partners when they gained a different perspective or new insight on their partners' behaviors: acknowledging the truly damaging behaviors, reaching their own limits of tolerance, and worrying about the impact on their children (Randell et al., 2012). Others cited external reasons which prompted them to take action: involvement of child protective services, law enforcement, health care professionals, or concerned friends or family. A previous analysis of the data that is used for the current article focused, more globally, on men's experiences with abuse (Dixon

et al., 2022). In that paper, we documented the experiences of 41 men, from four different English-speaking nations, who participated in focus groups. The men described experiencing PA, feeling responsible for their abuse, "explaining away" their partners' behaviors, and receiving little support from professionals because they were men. The research concerning what motivates victims to come forward and how they could have been reached earlier is limited, especially in terms of male victims of PA. That gap is addressed in this article.

Seeking Help for Victimization

Formal sources of support for PA victims include domestic violence (DV) agencies; DV helplines; law enforcement, mental health, medical, or legal professionals; and faith leaders (Cho et al., 2017; Douglas & Hines, 2011a; Walker et al., 2020). Informal sources of support are friends, family, and online resources: websites, email lists, private social media groups, etc. (Ansara & Hindin, 2010; Barrett et al., 2020). Notably, today many people receive formal support online through services such as telehealth (Owen, 2020; Silver et al., 2020; Valentine et al., 2020).

Research shows that men are less likely than women to seek help, in all areas of life, and that men who do seek help must overcome internal and external obstacles to do so (Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Lane & Addis, 2005; Mackenzie et al., 2006; Robertson & Fitzgerald, 1992). Society expects men to be strong, protectors, and self-sufficient (Galdas et al., 2005; Levant et al., 2022; De Visser et al., 2022). Most public education concerning PV has depicted heterosexual women as being the sole targets of PA. This is evidenced by things such as the name of U.S. federal legislation intended to prevent and respond to PA: the *Violence Against Women Act*. This legislation covers people of all genders and sexual orientations, but its name implies otherwise. Similarly, names of DV agencies are often named after women. DV agencies only recently started providing services to men, and many men report problems with receiving help (Hines et al., 2007; McLeod et al., 2023; Tsui, 2014; Tsui et al., 2010). Not only does society, at large, not see men as victims, neither do many DV professionals (Douglas & Hines, 2011a; Hines & Douglas, 2011a).

One U.S. study of combined male and female PA victims showed that 90% seek formal or informal help for their victimization, although women were more than two times more likely to seek help than men. Of those who experienced physical PV and sought help, 77.1% were women and 22.9% were men (Cho et al., 2017). Among women who experienced PV, 6.1% talked to a crisis hotline operator, as compared with 1.5% of men (Leemis et al., 2022). Estimates from other countries show that 55% of male victims in Canada (Barrett et al., 2020) and 32% of male victims in Australia (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2019) sought help for PA victimization.

A large body of literature documents the various ways that individuals seek help and their experiences when doing so (Cho et al., 2017; Domenech Del Rio & Sirvent

Garcia Del Valle, 2019; Douglas & Hines, 2011a; Douglas et al., 2012; Goodson & Hayes, 2021; Kaukinen et al., 2012; Morgan et al., 2016). Sociodemographic characteristics are related to whether or not a victim seeks help. Data from the 2010 nationally representative U.S. National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey show individuals who sustained physical and social consequences as a result of the abuse, and individuals who were younger were more likely to seek help (Cho et al., 2017). Immigrants living in the United States were less likely to seek help. Men were more likely to seek help from informal sources, such as friends and family, as compared with women.

Similarly, 2009 data from the nationally representative Canadian General Social Survey showed that among female PA victims, those who feared for their lives were more likely to seek help (Barrett & St. Pierre, 2011). Men who experienced moderate or severe physical and/or sexual PA in Canada were also more likely to seek formal or informal help than male victims of less severe abuse (Lysova & Dim, 2020). Some structural factors for male victims of PA, such as being unemployed and residing with young children, were found to be barriers to contacting formal agencies for help (Lysova & Dim, 2020). Factors which influenced where U.S. men seek help include having sustained severe physical assault, having children at home or children who witnessed the PA, and having false allegations of abuse made against them (Douglas et al., 2012). Our previous analysis of men from four English-speaking nations found that while it was not the norm, when a professional, such as a law enforcement officer, did reach out to a male victim, it was helpful, eye-opening, and validating (Dixon et al., 2022). In the present article, we will examine, among these same men, what interventions might have encouraged them to seek help at an earlier time.

All of this aside, not all survivors seek help. There's a fairly substantial body of literature documenting that men are reluctant to seek help for PV victimization (Cook, 2009; Douglas & Hines, 2011a; Hogan et al., 2021; Lysova & Dim, 2020; Lysova et al., 2022; McLeod et al., 2023; Tsui, 2011; Tsui et al., 2010). A recent British study of male PA victims who did not seek help included the following: worrying that they would not be believed, they might be perceived as weak, or they might be blamed for the abuse that they experienced (Bates, 2019). Similar results were found in an Australian study of male victims of PA, including that men worried that their experiences might not be significant enough to warrant police intervention (Walker et al., 2020). Another recent study, this time Canadian, also identified both internal and external barriers for male victims' help-seeking, including being blind to the abuse, maintaining relationships, male roles, and excuses (internal barriers) and fear of seeking help and nowhere to go (external barriers; Lysova et al., 2022).

Current Article

The literature on men's experiences with being the targets of abuse from their female partners does not adequately address their experiences in terms of what encourages men to recognize their abuse and also what might motivate them to seek help at an earlier stage in their abuse. In an earlier paper (Dixon et al., 2022), we provided a broad analysis of men's experiences of abuse generally. We found that men were slow to recognize the abuse that they sustained for several reasons and that they cited education and knowledge promotion as important in helping them break the pattern of abuse. In this article, we build on these findings, explore the process of recognition over time, and understand the specific strategies that could help with early intervention from the men's perspectives. The questions we explored were the following:

1. How did the survivors come to understand that their partners were abusive?
2. How could the survivors have been reached to help them identify the abuse at an earlier time?

METHODS

The methods for this article have been described elsewhere in a detailed methods article about engaging a hard-to-reach population using technology (Douglas et al., 2021), as well as several additional articles and analyses that used this same dataset (Dixon et al., 2022; Lysova & Dim, 2020; Lysova et al., 2022). They are summarized here for purposes of brevity.

Participants and Procedures

Between October 2013 and February 2014, the first five authors of this article conducted 12 focus groups (3 in each country) with 41 men, in four English-speaking countries: Australia (n = 12), Canada (n = 9), England (n = 10), and the United States (n = 12). Table 1 outlines the demographic characteristics of the participants (Douglas et al., 2021).

We used our professional networks to recruit a convenience sample of male PA victims for the focus groups, such as DV and mental health providers in the field, DV advocates, and individuals interested in male PA victimization. Potential participants were also informed that we were interested in hearing about the experiences of men who had sustained all forms of PA: emotional, psychological, controlling behaviors, and physical as well as sexual aggression or coercion. Furthermore, our recruitment statement assured men that their identities would remain confidential throughout the focus group process. Participants had to live in one of the four countries being investigated (Australia, Canada, England, and the

TABLE 1. Demographic Information of Participants (*N* = 41)

Country/ focus group #		Name	Age (years)	Ethnicity	Occupation
United Kingdom	1	Ron	46	White Irish	Professional
		Mick	47	White British	Tradesperson
		Carl	62	White British	Professional
	2	Marcus	46	White British	Unemployed
		Richard	47	White British	Manual worker/ laborer
		Christian	49	White British	Professional
		Barry	43	British–Cypriot	Skilled agriculturist
	3	Nick	57	White British	Retired
		Robert	46	White British	Professional
		Gavin	47	White British	Tradesperson
United States	1	Jamie	55	White American	Creative arts worker
		Donald	58	White American	Unemployed
		Ron	43	White American	Unemployed
		Samuel	57	White American	Business founder
	2	Simon	49	White American	Sales worker
		Craig	51	White American	Business founder
		Daniel	55	White American	Manager
	3	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
Canada	1	Eoin	41	White Canadian	Tradesperson
		Nathan	42	White Canadian/ German	Administrator
		Philip	57	White Canadian	Tradesperson
	2	Kevin	46	White Canadian	Hospitality worker
		Mark	51	White French	Tradesperson
		Louis	35	Black Irish	Tradesperson
	3	Thomas	51	White Canadian	Administrator
		Andrew	63	White Canadian	Community worker

(*Continued*)

TABLE 1. Demographic Information of Participants (*N* = 41) (*Continued*)

Country/ focus group #		Name	Age (years)	Ethnicity	Occupation
		Bart	49	White Canadian	Professional
Australia	1	Gareth	34	White Australian	Student
		Chris	49	Persian/White Australian	Professional
		Ken	43	White Australian	Technician
		Hamish	58	White Australian	Tradesperson
	2	Trevor	55	White British	Professional
		Len	40	White German/ Irish	Manual worker/ laborer
		Damien	42	White British	Manager
		Bob	52	Greek	Professional
	3	Matthew	58	White British/ German	Professional
		Mike	28	White Australian	Tradesperson
		Jim	45	White Russian/ German	Tradesperson

Note. The names assigned here are pseudonyms for the purpose of this article. They do not reflect the names used in the focus groups.

United States), speak English, and be between the ages of 18 and 59 years. We did not include participants over the age of 59 years because in the United States, some elder abuse laws mandate the reporting of abuse toward individuals aged 60 years and over, which would have made it impossible to protect our participants' identity (Douglas et al., 2021; Office for Victims of Crime Training and Technical Assistance Center, 2012).

The men who contacted us in response to the recruitment advertisement were given a brief explanation of the study and consent statement. We also used a screening questionnaire to assess sociodemographic information and whether participation could be potentially detrimental to them. In total, 103 men contacted us to participate in the study; 74 received the screening survey. Of that number, 57 returned the survey to us to be considered for participation. Three men were

screened out due to uncertainty over their physical and psychological well-being, 10 waitlisted due to high demand in Australia and the United States, and 3 failed to attend on the day, leaving a total of 41 men who participated. See Douglas et al. (2021) for a detailed description of screening and participant selection.

This study was approved by the university boards of ethics of the participating researchers. To ensure the protection of PA victims, when interested participants contacted us, we cautioned each man to consider whether participation would put them at risk for potential harm. We took several steps to minimize their risk, including using a pseudonym, participating in a private location, and deleting their internet use history. Before the study, each member verbally consented to the terms and conditions of the study, including being audio recorded during the focus groups. We also provided the men with a list of resources that could help in the event that they needed support after the focus groups were completed.

Facilitating the Focus Groups

We used GoTo Meeting to conduct the focus groups, which facilitates online video conferencing and is powered by Citrix, a platform, software, and cloud-computing company. Each focus group had three to four participants and two facilitators. In GoTo Meeting, an individual chat feature was used to allow the facilitators to chat privately with one another. This feature also allowed participants who were feeling emotionally distressed to directly contact the facilitator with clinical experience or for the clinically trained facilitator to reach out to a participant who appeared to be distressed (Douglas et al., 2021).

This focus group study was conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic and the wide-reaching shift to online, remote, and video-based communication. Thus, in advance of the focus group sessions, we had sent the men information about the technology needs and requirements. We also included information about the length of the session, the number of questions that we would ask the men, and resources to support them after the sessions. We reviewed this information and issues about confidentiality at the start of the focus group sessions (Douglas et al., 2021).

Each focus group lasted for 90 minutes. For each focus group, one of the facilitators was a researcher whose nationality or residency matched that of the participants. To support the participants in our study, we made sure that the two practicing clinical psychologists on our team (E.M.C. and L.D.) were always one of the facilitators during the focus groups. At the end of the group, we again provided the men with a list of resources in their own countries that could provide support (Douglas et al., 2021).

Measures

We asked participants seven questions. These were developed from the existing literature on men who experience PA victimization. We include here the questions which were the focus of the current set of analyses in this article. For more about our questions, please see our previous papers (Dixon et al., 2022; Lysova & Dim, 2020; Lysova et al., 2022):

1. How do you feel about it now? What terms do you use to describe these experiences now? If you use the term *abuse*, how did you get to the point of calling your partner's behavior "abuse"?
2. We'd like to help other men be able to identify abuse earlier rather than later, so when you were in the stage before calling it abuse, what would have encouraged you to call, contact, or approach a service/program, etc.? Where should this information be located to help you find it easily?

Data Analysis

For the questions that were the focus of this article, undergraduate research assistants extracted responses from transcriptions to the two main questions and then any additional text which addressed these three areas, even if the responses were not linked to the exact questions of interest for this article. Thematic analysis was used to guide all analytical decisions (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2021). All information was organized in an Excel spreadsheet and linked to the country and the deidentified respondent. The undergraduate students reviewed and identified themes that emerged under each question. The first author (E.M.D.) reviewed and revised these themes. Once these themes emerged from the data, we then coded words and phrases within the transcripts, following more of the model of a directed content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). We continue to use the term *themes* because the categories were not predetermined before we started data analysis. Then, two undergraduate students worked independently, but in parallel, to code all of the data in an Excel spreadsheet, and then compared their codes accordingly. In other words, all data were coded by both students, and they served as a constant reliability check against one another. Their interrater reliability was 81.7%. In areas where they disagreed on coding, they discussed their reasoning for selecting a theme until a resolution was reached. If an agreement was unable to be reached, the first author, E.M.D., worked with the coding team to resolve the concern. Quotes from the participants for each theme were selected for the purpose of illustration.

RESULTS

Question 1: Coming to Understand the Partner's Behavior as Abusive

The first question selected for analysis investigated how men eventually conceptualized their experiences as abuse, and what was identified in their focus group discussions was how to help others recognize when men are the victims or targets of abusive behaviors. The analyses of the 87 responses resulted in five themes.

New Perspective. This theme (mentioned 21 times) represents men who realized that their experiences were abuse as part of a generative experience. Often, these men struggled to perceive their partners' behavior as abuse because of their own socialization regarding who can legitimately be victims or perpetrators. They realized that it was abuse after viewing their relationship from an outside perspective, such as recording interactions or writing it down or by seeing examples of abuse in the media and mentally switching the gender of the victim.

> I took photographs of them and then that's when I realized that I was suffering from domestic abuse. (Gavin, UK3)
> And when I began to look back and listen to some of my audio recordings that I took and some video footage that I installed in my home to ensure the well-being of my family, it became extremely clear to me that in one instance in particular, she would go from being an incredible pleasant person, to within a millisecond switching over to being an incredibly horrible person. (Bart, CAN3)

Education for Men. Within this theme (mentioned 39 times), there are two kinds of responses from the participants: men who realized it was abuse through education that they received and men who wished they had been better educated on what constitutes abuse. Various types of education were identified as being successful, such as programs, media, and counselors.

> [I]t hit me after being accessed by this guy in social services, and he was awesome, his name was Christian, and he put me through this course, there is a course that you can take and that is free and it was for men who had been in an abusive relationship. And it was only then that I realized that this was abuse. (Nathan, CAN1)
> Education about recognition of abuse in relationships needs to be done early. (Chris, AUS1)

Education for Law Enforcement. Responses in this theme (mentioned six times) identified a need for law enforcement professionals, such as police, attorneys, and judges, to be better trained in understanding that men can be victims of abuse. Often, when men went to the police or court, their abusive female partners would

be favored and seen as the victims instead. This did not encourage men to seek help again.

> The police officers were just sort of chatting and they said, "You know, we go out to these domestic violence problems and it's usually the woman who is causing it, and we have to sort of charge the man for it. And we can't really do much about it." (Mike, AUS3)

Education for Friends and Family. Men's responses that fell into this theme (mentioned 14 times) recognized the benefits of having friends and family who recognized the abuse regardless of gender. Friends and family were sometimes able to provide insights to the men about their abusive relationship and help them realize they were being abused and help them eventually leave the relationship. Additionally, seeing friends and family in abusive relationships helped men realize their situation and come forward.

> [It was] more my female friends that start to really hate on my girlfriend and said that they were really willing to identify her as an abuser and tell me like, "this is what you have, you have to do." So it actually was more really, more support from my female friends that seemed to be able to call what it was, a little bit easier than my male friends. (Eoin, CAN1)

Children Help Men Gain a New Perspective. In this theme (mentioned 21 times), men came forward when their children were abused or when they were abused in front of their children. Often, when men observed their children being abused, they would step in to protect them and therefore gained insights into the abusive situation. Other times, they would realize the severity of their situation when their partner would abuse them in front of their children or when their children started mimicking the abusive behaviors.

> It wasn't clear to me until I saw some physical signs on one of our boys, being pretty severely abused. (Bart, CAN3)
> I think it was once I had my children I suddenly realized that there was a hold over me that was never there before. Suddenly the children were there and that was it. (Barry, UK2)

Question 2: How to Reach Male Survivors/Victims

Question 2 examined how to create more effective ways to reach male victims. Seven themes were identified among the 116 responses.

Men Wanted and Needed Resources. This is a general theme (mentioned nine times) where men said they needed help or resources of some kind but did not know what to specify they needed.

> Quite frankly, I was unable to put my finger on it. I didn't have the tools. (Bart, CAN3)
>
> More websites. I set up my own website called Abuse to the Accused.co.uk which went viral. (Gavin, UK3)

Laws and Views of Domestic Violence Need to Change. Here, men identified (41 times) that authoritative structures at the local and national levels need to change. For example, they indicated that there needs to be better training for law enforcement and research which accurately studies victimization and perpetration regardless of gender. They indicated that men are not usually included in research on victimization or not believed by helping professionals. The men speculated that if we could develop more gender-inclusive approaches, they would feel more supported.

> It seems to me, without a doubt … society needs to … change in the view that men are perpetrators and women are victims. It would be very, very hard to know how to express yourself when you're in the middle of it, because everything around you, all the time, says that if you're a man it can't happen to you. (Mick, UK1)
>
> I mean there's plenty of stuff, you know, if you walk around any police station everything about abuse is a man standing over a woman with his fist clenched. There's nothing for the man and I actually made a complaint about the posters. (Gavin, UK3)

Advertisements. This theme (mentioned 34 times) included better advertisements to reach and spread awareness about male victims. Their recommendations included brochures, billboards, books, TV, and online websites and resources.

> Where it would've been helpful for me is if there had been the type of billboards there are for female victims of abuse. (William, USA3)
>
> All the places that have been mentioned so far but generally within local papers. Not so much national papers I guess but within local papers… (Robert, UK3)

Mental Health Professionals. Many of the men described (mentioned 14 times) mental health professionals as a resource that has helped them identify, understand, and work to overcome abuse. Books, websites, and pamphlets written by mental health professionals provided knowledge to men, which is illustrated in this theme.

> But you know when I found … the Dr. Palmatier's website, that was probably the best resource for me, because I learned so much you know, about the different personality that everything I've been struggling with over the last 17 years of my marriage, all of it occurred to me what was going on, why it was occurring. (Simon, USA2)

> And basically he cautiously asked me whether I would like to go to the adult mental health system, which I did. And I got help through there. Um, spoke to lots and lots of counselors. (Hamish, AUS1)

Friends and Family. Men wished that friends and family had been better educated to help them in the abusive relationship (mentioned six times). Additionally, the men also discussed how hurt they were when friends and family blamed and distanced themselves from the men after they ended the abusive relationship.

> "You got what you deserved"—I kid you not. Often, because I could, at times in the past especially, be an in your face sort of thing, so they would say "you got what you deserved." (Thomas, CAN3)
>
> When I started to talk to them, they started to disclose, but other than that, they would do nothing. They were aware of it. (Andrew, CAN3)

Education. Men whose responses fell into this theme (mentioned 22 times) recommended the need for general public education about male victims and recommended a more gender-neutral approach to understanding and responding to PV.

> [W]e have to educate the younger guys coming up as to what the pitfalls are perhaps waiting for them out there; because there's loads of them frankly. (Christian, UK2)
>
> And I think one of the best ways that we can actually encourage men to see the signs is if, as boys, we can encourage them to recognize the psychological abuse in the same way that they would recognize physical abuse or sexual abuse. (Gareth, AUS1)

Resources Specifically for Men. Men discussed the need for potential resources that are specific to men, such as hotlines, shelters, and outreach (mentioned 20 times). This would help men have someplace safe to go and someplace safe to talk with individuals who believed in them. Men also identified places that advertised these resources, such as the back of a sports magazine, doctor's offices, pubs, and bathrooms.

> And the other thing if there had have been something available, i.e., male victim refuges, then I think possibly things could have turned out differently… (Christian, UK2)
>
> …to have some men's shelters, somewhere you can actually physically go to. (Hamish, AUS1)

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to build on our previous work (Dixon et al., 2022) to understand how men who were in abusive relationships eventually recognized

the abuse that they experienced as something harmful and then how professionals in the field might reach men earlier who are being victimized. There is limited research in all of these areas in the field of PV but especially when the victim/survivor population is men. Thus, this study provides new information to the literature and provides an enriched perspective from victims themselves, concerning how we might more effectively engage this population. Finally, this study shows that we are able to find commonalities between men's experiences, despite them living in four different countries.

Understanding and Seeing the Abuse

The men in our study described that at first they were unable to see, understand, and conceptualize their partners' behaviors as abusive. Research on women has shown that when one is a victim of PA, it is more difficult to identify it, understand it, and explain it than when one is not a victim (Berns & Schweingruber, 2007). Other research has documented that abused women have found ways to deny the abuse (Paranjape et al., 2007) or justify their partners' abuse, or they thought they might be responsible for encouraging the abusive behaviors (Evans & Feder, 2016). This was true for the men in our study as well. In addition, the participants in this study often mentioned the lack of public support or societal-level acknowledgment that PA can happen to men. The men reported that without this knowledge infrastructure, they languished in abusive relationships, largely ignorant of and unable to identify their experiences. This is likely why other research has documented that when men tell family and friends, they often respond with disbelief and shock and that their experiences are minimized by others (Walker et al., 2020).

In terms of what encouraged the men to acknowledge the abuse, the men spoke about gaining a new perspective which came from gathering information on themselves, such as through pictures or video footage, and then viewing it afterward. In these instances, the men almost described an "ah-ha!" moment. The most common experience that the men described was being educated about their experiences. Men who sought help from a counselor or therapist were given a new way to understand their experiences. They reported having similar experiences from law enforcement or family and friends, who took the time to explain what they were seeing and labeled it as abuse.

This is consistent with the existing literature on women which has shown that only after long periods of ambivalence (Evans & Feder, 2016) do victims reach their own limits or gain a new perspective on their abusive experiences. Previous research on women has shown that it is at this time that many seek help (Hardesty et al., 2011; Randell et al., 2012). The existing research on women shows that the desire to protect children or to limit children's exposure to violence can also be a strong motivator for victims to seek help (Evans & Feder, 2016; Hardesty et al., 2011; Rhodes et al., 2010). One other study on male PA victims in Canada found

that children are a motivator for men to also seek help, even if that help is only informal in nature (Lysova & Dim, 2020). We found this to be the case as well for the men in our study. The men mentioned that once they witnessed the impact of the PA on their children, it changed their understanding of the abusive experiences. It is important to note for potential outreach and engagement that men who are living with PA are concerned about the well-being of their children.

How to Reach Men

The second section of our study is a less well-researched area of investigation concerning male victims: How can the DV field reach them? How can we help them identify their experiences as abuse much earlier, and what would encourage them to come forward? The most common element that men referenced was the notion that laws and public understanding of PA needs to change. Legislation concerning violence against women was passed in waves in the United States in the 1970s. Those laws help set the tone and understanding for how to conceptualize PA and respond to it (Schuyler, 1976). The men expressed strong beliefs that laws should be gender neutral or gender inclusive and that this is a key element of educating the public and educating victims about the harmfulness of their experiences. This has been found in previous research on male victims as well as women victims (Bates, 2020; Bates et al., 2017).

It was only during the 1970s that research documenting abuse against women was a common social problem worthy of addressing (Gelles, 1980; Lerman, 1980; Straus, 1978, 1980). Even after decades of work, there is a substantial body of literature which documents a dissatisfaction with the representation of PA, regardless of gender, in the media. Scholars have argued that men's use of violence against women is normalized, that victims are blamed for being abused, and that "newsworthy" PA is characterized as a single violent event, as opposed to an ongoing pattern of harmful behaviors (Lindsay-Brisbin et al., 2014; Lloyd & Ramon, 2017; Nettleton, 2011; Smith et al., 2019). The men in our study also expressed dissatisfaction with how PA is represented to the public. Their concerns, however, are that the representations of PA lack gender diversity, and as a result, they were slow to acknowledge and understand their own experiences of abuse and, thus, perhaps didn't take action earlier than they might have otherwise. The men in this study suggested that outreach to victims and education concerning PA should be gender neutral or gender inclusive so that victims can more readily understand their experiences and so that others can help victims understand that they are targets of abusive behaviors. Research has shown that U.S. DV agencies report low levels of outreach to underserved populations, including men (Douglas & Hines, 2011b; Hines & Douglas, 2011a).

The participants also expressed the desire for agencies that only serve men. Most DV agencies and shelters were developed to serve women and still largely

do (Hines & Douglas, 2011a). There is some evidence that this is changing, such as through media attention to men as victims, the adoption of gender-neutral vision and mission statements by some DV coalitions in the United States (Indiana Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 2019), and the opening of agencies to serve men alone or alongside women or trans individuals (Mankind Initiative, 2020; The Family Place, n.d.; Valley Oasis, 2017). In addition, there are organizations that are dedicated to men's health and/or victimization, such as the Canadian Association for Equality, the Australian Men's Health Forum, and the Australian-based "One in Three," which acknowledges that men are also victims of PA. Whether agencies can solely serve men is likely related to resources and demand, but we know from this study that men are interested in having services expanded to meet their needs and to change the messaging and legislation concerning PA so that it is gender inclusive.

Limitations

This study is not without limitations. First, the use of online methodology limits participation to men with internet and webcam access, but it would not have been possible to facilitate an international collaboration of this kind without an online platform. Second, this research was conducted pre-COVID-19, when conducting research, collecting data, delivering health services, and holding meetings using a video-based platform were more of a novelty (Douglas et al., 2021). If this research was conducted today, there might be fewer technology concerns, and participants might connect more easily/readily. Third, the men in this study were from countries where English is the dominant language and who were fluent in English themselves. This limits the kind of experiences that we collected for this study. Future international investigations are needed to understand men and women's experiences in non-Western countries, whose native language is not English and with a diversity of sexual orientations. On a related note, the men in this study were largely White or have European heritage. This limits the responses that we had from different cultures and does not adequately capture the experiences of racial minority groups. Fourth, this study represents the views of men who have realized their abuse experience. There is limited research on men who have not reached this stage (Bates, 2019). At the same time, it is only by conducting research with men who have realized their abuse that we were able to address one of the foci of this study—how to best engage with men who have not reached this stage. Fifth, the sample for this study was one of convenience. Thus, the findings cannot be generalized to all male victims of PA or to the men in their respective countries. Sixth, like the vast majority of research on PA, the statements of the participants in this study were not verified by an independent source (Barrett & St. Pierre, 2011; Campbell & Soeken, 1999; Cattaneo et al., 2007; Cho et al., 2017; Straus, 2004; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). We screened the men for suitability to

participate in our study; the men were given no incentives or compensation for their participation in a 90-minute focus group, which addressed being the target of physical abuse, emotional pain, and isolation. Thus, participants had little reason to falsify their experiences of abuse. That said, like with so much research on PA, we did only collect data on one member of the relationship. Sixth, our analyses did not include comparisons between those who were currently engaged in an abusive relationship and those who reported on a previous abusive relationship. For safety reasons, those who were actively in abusive relationships were significantly cautioned against participating. Finally, this study was carried out in 2014, which, as of the final writing of this article, is about a decade ago. The field has continued to advance since this time, especially in the wake of a world health pandemic, which shifted the experiences of many who are PA victims (Krauss et al., 2024; Mojahed et al., 2024; Moore et al., 2024; Navarrete Zur & Sesia, 2024; Tenkorang et al., 2024). Some of the men's experiences documented in this study may be less likely to occur today.

CONCLUSION

This study is one among a growing field of studies that focuses on the experiences of men who are survivors of PA. It adds to the qualitative literature in this area, which allowed us to gather rich, in-depth data from men. Our study design also provided an international context for the research questions that we explored. The results highlighted men's concerns that they do not always recognize the abuse that is directed toward them and that when they do, there are insufficient resources for them to receive help. The men connected these two phenomena and discussed that there should be expanded ways to reach men and to educate them, the general public, and those who are in positions to support them that PA does not discriminate based on gender or gender identity. The survivors in this study expressed a strong desire for a sea change in the ways that we understand, reach out to, educate, and respond to PA, so that all victims receive the support that they seek in order to reduce their risk and lead healthier lives.

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