

‘How dare you call that playground banter?!’: Service provider perspectives on coercive control and young people

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Abstract

This article presents service provider perspectives on young people and coercive control. Findings illustrate that young people need help from service providers to identify coercive control whilst simultaneously, some service providers minimise young people's experiences using an adult focused frame of reference. This has the potential to deny their agency and render young people's experiences invisible. We highlight the need for education on the specific issues young people face including how that might differ from adults. Finally, we examine the paradoxical role of social media as having transformative possibilities yet in a parallel process, creating opportunities for continued abuse.

KEYWORDS

agency, coercive control, education, service providers, young people, youth relationships

INTRODUCTION

Service provider perspectives on young people and coercive control remains a neglected area of research despite the pivotal position they occupy in relation to support, protection and prevention. Drawing on interviews undertaken with 35 service providers extracted from a broader study commissioned by a Criminal Justice Board in England; this paper offers unique insights to address the gap in research whilst highlighting challenges and tensions for service provid-

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ers, identifying good practice and signalling areas for future development. In a previous paper (Brennan et al., 2019) we outlined how the pending change in the law regarding coercive control was a priority issue for service providers; this article examines a separate yet linked issue for participants with reference to young people and coercive control. Over recent years, understandings of domestic violence and abuse have been subject to definitional change and legislative updates in several countries as research and knowledge evolve in the context of broadening recognition of coercive control (Bettinson, 2020). While progressive in many respects, this has created tensions, challenges and gaps for service providers and service users in England and Wales (Barlow et al., 2020; Brennan et al., 2019; Walby & Towers, 2018). One of the aforementioned omissions lies in young people and coercive control. While there is an abundance of research examining children and young people's experiences of coercive control when this is a feature of parental/caregiver relationships (Arai et al., 2021; Callaghan et al., 2018; Katz, 2015, 2016, 2019; Women's Aid & Cosmopolitan, 2018) evidence on how young people understand and experience coercive control in partner relationships is comparatively under-researched (Barter et al., 2009; Fox et al., 2014; Lagdon et al., 2023; Women's Aid & Cosmopolitan, 2018; Wood et al., 2011).

Furthermore, drawing on perspectives foregrounding the social construction of childhood (James & Prout, 2014) locates our theoretical positioning in recognising children and young people have agency and thereby provides a frame of reference emphasising the active experience of coercive control in partner relationships. This is essential to understand service provider responses, whilst acknowledging the need for balance in seeking to offer protection from violence and abuse. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) situates children as involved, active participants in their own lives positioned within a human rights framework, while contemporary research by Callaghan et al. (2018) and Katz (2016) conceptualises children as actively *experiencing* coercive control (in a parental/caregiver context) as compared to witnessing it. This subtle yet important shift in language reflects a key change in understanding that young people have agency, thus rejecting notions of passivity, which has transferability in the context of young people in partner relationships. Yet arguably, legislative powers, policy and practice in responding to young people experiencing coercive control within partner relationships are not consistently rooted within a framework that appreciates the agency young people may have, creating risks that they will not be effectively supported and/or protected.

Service providers face considerable challenges in identifying and responding to coercive control in young people's relationships given the complexities and unique factors present in the contexts of these relationships. This paper explores these challenges. It begins by defining domestic abuse and coercive control, recognising recent legislative changes, followed by a specific review of available literature on young people and coercive control. The methodology, methods and analysis processes are then discussed. Following this, the findings provide a unique insight into service providers' views, and despite only a local sample, important lessons are suggested for domestic abuse services working with young people.

DOMESTIC ABUSE AND COERCIVE CONTROL

In England and Wales, a new legal definition of domestic abuse was introduced in s.1 of the Domestic Abuse Act (2021) alongside a raft of changes including recognising children who experience domestic abuse as victims (s.3). The definition is gender neutral and s.1 stipulates:

- (a) A and B are each aged 16 or over and are personally connected to each other and
- (b) the behaviour is abusive.

In the UK, prior to this the national government definition of domestic abuse was updated from March 2013 (UK Home Office, 2012), reflecting two key changes. Firstly, was a patterned approach to understanding domestic abuse using a wider frame of reference including a range of coercive, non-violent behaviours and, secondly, the age range was reduced to include 16–17-year-old young people. This was in recognition that young people were increasingly likely to become involved in abusive relationships, but they were less likely to identify this or understand these relationships were controlling or abusive (Barter et al., 2009; Barter et al., 2017; Lagdon et al., 2023; Wood et al., 2011). A shift in legislation to reflect coercive control is evident within the Serious Crime Act s.76 (2015) in England and Wales, the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act (2018) and the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act Northern Ireland (2021) meaning coercive control is now criminalised across the whole of the UK. These changes reflect similar international trends enshrining coercive control within a legal context in Tasmania (McMahon & McGorrery, 2016) and imminent changes in Australia. While the move towards recognising coercive control within law is considered progressive in many respects (Stark & Hester, 2019), research has highlighted challenges and tensions for service providers who were not ready for this legislative change (Brennan et al., 2019). One of the key concerns centres on operating systems that are primarily incident led as opposed to process/pattern driven, which is a key component of coercive control (Barlow et al., 2020; Barlow & Walklate, 2022; Brennan et al., 2019; Tolmie, 2018). In turn, this is linked to the invisibility of coercive control within systems that are set up to predominantly deal with physical violence and so creates challenges for the criminal justice system, police and social workers (Pitman, 2016; Stark, 2012; Wiener, 2017).

The concept of coercive control is arguably a form of domestic abuse located within the wider framework of gender inequality. Contemporary thinking about coercive control is largely attributed to Stark (2007), although reference to coercive control can be found within the feminist movement and historical debates about the nature of domestic violence and abuse (Pence & Paymar, 1993; Schechter, 1982). Coercive control can be defined as:

... an act or a pattern of acts of assault, threats, humiliation and intimidation or other abuse that is used to harm, punish, or frighten their victim (Women's Aid, 2022).

It is important to note that these are *repeated patterns* of behaviour and whilst physical or sexual violence *can* co-exist with other non-physical forms of abuse, this is not always the case (Brennan et al., 2019; Crossman et al., 2016; Stark & Hester, 2019; Wiener, 2017). Stark (2007: 5) argues that coercive control is a liberty crime located within wider gender inequality and designed to create isolation, deprivation and restriction of movement. Stark (2007: 5) further asserts that the role of gendered 'micro-regulation of everyday behaviours associated with stereotypic female roles' is critical to operationalise coercive control, expressed by Downes et al. (2019: 269) as linked to a woman's freedom via behaviours that seek to control where she goes, what she wears, eats, how she socialises, how she parents and so on. Control is, therefore, pervasive and all consuming (Williamson, 2010). Definitions of coercive control are, however, contested as Hamberger et al. (2017) suggest they lack clarity and consistency. Moreover, Barlow and Walklate (2022) argue that there are two key unresolved issues regarding coercive control; firstly, its gendered nature and, secondly, the extent to which physical violence is a component, both of which need careful consideration when working with young people. Understanding coercive control as a gendered phenomenon that is experienced by young people presents unique challenges alongside risks, and requires service providers to have the necessary knowledge and skills to recognise, assess and support young people experiencing it. There is a danger coercive control will not be

recognised, will be minimised, or young people will fall between the gaps of adult and child services (Lagdon et al., 2023) and this applies particularly to those who are vulnerable and/or disadvantaged (Wood et al., 2011). Simultaneously, legislation potentially contributes to a silencing of coercive control in relationships, which is significant when considering that safeguarding systems primarily manage harm within the home as opposed to extra-familial abuse (Firmin et al., 2019), despite updated guidance within Working Together (HM Government, 2018) creating further ambiguity for service providers. Against this background, we turn to ways in which coercive control affects young people.

DOMESTIC ABUSE, COERCIVE CONTROL AND YOUNG PEOPLE

The evidence base exploring the experience of parental domestic abuse and coercive control on children is robust and well established (Callaghan et al., 2018; Fellin et al., 2019; Katz, 2016; McGee, 2000; Mullender et al., 2002; Noble-Carr et al., 2020, Stanley, 2011), whilst research examining young people experiencing coercive control in relationships continues to develop (Barter, 2009; Barter et al., 2009; Barter et al., 2017; Lagdon et al., 2023; Women's Aid & Cosmopolitan, 2018; Wood et al., 2011). This evidence illustrates that young people do experience coercive control, highlighting similarities and differences when compared to adult experiences. Barter et al. (2009) undertook the first comprehensive UK based study of 'partner violence' in teenage relationships via mixed methods schools-based research of young people aged 13–17 years. They gathered 1353 survey responses alongside 91 qualitative interviews across eight secondary schools in England, Wales and Scotland. Their findings underscore the complexity of partner violence, illustrating the significant role of coercive control in young people's relationships and emphasising 'this was the most common form of partner violence experienced by young people' (Barter et al., 2009: 185). Gender differences regarding prevalence were more equally distributed and yet, on examining impact, greater severity and fear was experienced disproportionately by girls thus highlighting the importance of research methodologies to capture the range of complexity (Sears et al., 2007). Furthermore, their findings around 'emotional partner violence' require careful interpretation and intervention by service providers, as this was the most frequently reported form of abuse by young people (72% of girls and 51% of boys) yet understood as the least impactful when separated from the wider controlling dynamic, meaning young people will not necessarily identify this as abusive or controlling; significant knowledge for service providers. This raises challenges for service providers in striking a balance between engaging young people whilst not alienating them, a point emphasised by Fox et al. (2014). Barter et al. (2009) highlight a range of complexities including concern regarding the normalisation and minimisation of violence and abuse in teen relationships, a theme echoed by participants in this study particularly in the context of social media as also espoused by Barter and Koulu (2021). Given that young people's perspectives are frequently filtered through the lens of service providers this suggests the need to be open to possibilities of recognising coercive control when young people themselves might not be.

Fox et al. (2014) report similar findings derived from the Boys to Men research project in which they surveyed 1143 young people aged 13–14, a younger age range than in the study by Barter et al. (2009). High rates of witnessing/experiencing, victimisation and perpetration of domestic abuse were found to co-exist in this sample with 52.5% reporting one of those experiences. Fox et al. (2014) suggest that gender differences were less clearly demarcated with little variation between boys and girls reporting physical and emotional abuse, whilst very small numbers described repeat behaviours. Both of these factors are different in adult populations experiencing coercive control. Features indicative of coercive control such as emotional abuse,

isolation and surveillance strategies were present in high numbers with 45% of participants (44% boys and 46% girls) reporting they had experienced abusive or controlling behaviours. Both Fox et al. (2014) and Barter et al. (2009) observe that different research methodologies garner different responses suggesting the nuances of coercive control may be better understood in qualitative interviews than surveys. Survey data does not capture the complexity of coercive control (specifically its impact), nor the relationship between the coexistence of witnessing/experiencing as a child, victimisation and perpetration, all of which are key messages for service providers.

Lombard (2011) examined young people's attitudes to and understanding of domestic violence (ages 11 and 12). She describes a process of greater acceptance of abstract violence, yet a normalising process became apparent when experiences of violence were related to self, or people known to the study participants. Processes of justification in the context of stereotypical gender roles were evident, highlighting themes, which included young people's understandings of gender inequalities, the construction of heterosexuality and marriage, accepted frameworks of male dominance, the morality of gender codes and the construction of 'deserving' and 'undeserving' victims. In addition, Barter et al. (2017) found that for many young people coercive control may be normalised or be deemed a demonstration of love and protection (Barter et al., 2009). If the findings of Lombard (2011), Lagdon et al. (2023) and Barter et al. (2009) regarding gender inequalities and minimisation are indicative of how young people frame their understandings of coercive control this suggests a significant need for greater education, with service providers being willing to problematise both young people's *and* their own understandings in this context. If young people are unable to recognise coercive control, then service providers have a delicate line to walk in terms of confronting processes of normalisation whilst maintaining relationships with young people. Cognisant of these issues we next outline the methodology used in our study, which sought to gain service provider perspectives on young people and coercive control.

METHODOLOGY

Methods and analysis

The data for this article was derived from a larger study commissioned by a police authority and focused on the nature, extent and prevalence of domestic abuse in the North of England, and in which coercive control emerged as a pressing issue for participants, details of whom are given below. The research aim of the larger study was to analyse whether domestic abuse had increased and if the incidences had changed in nature. The research adopted a twofold design with quantitative and qualitative strands and the findings in this article are drawn from the qualitative component of the study. Whilst the larger study was mixed methods, this qualitative strand independently complied with 'characteristics of good qualitative research' (Yardley, 2000: 219) through sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance.

Commitment and rigour were achieved through in-depth semi-structured interviews with 35 service providers from a range of voluntary and statutory agencies (at varying levels of seniority) involved in the prevention and management of domestic abuse; the full list of participants and job roles is included below. The level of cumulative experience within the sample was high, with the majority of individual participants working in the field for over 10 years, translating to rich data. Adopting a convenience sampling approach we relied on self-selecting, 'directed' volunteers and utilised the research team's contacts within the sector. This sampling strategy provided widescale perspectives on domestic abuse from frontline implementation to strategy development. Once research momentum started, a snowballing approach based on a networking system

of recommended participants began (Sharpe, 2000). All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed prior to analysis with participants anonymised. Ethical approval had been sought and granted from the University ethics committee and all participants signed a written consent form. Presented data is anonymised with the interview number and details of the role, gender and broad range of experience provided in the table below. No further details have been provided to protect the anonymity of participants (Table 1).

Although the central focus of the original research project was not specifically on young people and domestic abuse, this paper responds to the themes that emerged from the interviews. Recognising the flexibility of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021) generating themes occurred via the six-stage process of thematic analysis; systematically reading and reviewing the data, colour coding the themes and grouping these appropriately to generate the central organising theme of service providers perspectives on domestic abuse, coercive control and young people. This data emerged as an area for further analysis during the writing up of the larger study. In acknowledging the authors own positionality through reflexivity, it was clear that as researchers who have worked as practitioners in domestic abuse with young people, they were sensitised to the central themes in this paper. While this directed a deep exploration in this area, the thematic analysis demonstrated new and important practice insights into service provider perspectives on young people and coercive control. It further identified a gap in the research and knowledge base with clear messages for practice whilst providing insights into how service providers identify, react and work with young people experiencing coercive control. Further research with young people could supplement these findings to gain insight into the effectiveness of service provision and the lived realities of youth relationships. The terms teenagers, young people and youth relationships are used interchangeably to refer to children under the age of 18 in the next research findings section.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The findings here are from the perspective of service providers with regard to domestic abuse and coercive control relating specially to young people and they provide a unique insight into the complexity of service providers' accounts of young people's experiences of coercive control. The findings are separated into five key areas; firstly, participants raise concerns about the capacity for young people to recognise coercive control especially when separated from non-physical behaviours. The second and third are linked, creating a duality between the normalisation of coercive control by young people combined with the minimisation of such by some service providers and the impact this can have. The paper then analyses the views on Preventative Education Programmes, with the final section exploring the paradoxical role of social media in both raising awareness and assisting victims to come forward versus the normalisation of abuse. The data was punctuated with examples whereby abusive behaviour was both justified and tolerated by young people in certain situations, examples in which abuse was 'deserved', aligning with Lombard's (Lombard, 2011) analysis of gendered morality codes. For service providers, this raises several questions, which will now be explored.

LACK OF RECOGNITION OF COERCIVE CONTROL

The following powerful quotation provides insight into the subtle, insidious and nuanced manifestation of coercive control in youth relationships. This participant, an Independent Domestic Violence Advocate (IDVA), highlights the complexity of controlling behaviours and domestic

TABLE 1 Participant information.

Interview number	Gender	Role	Experience
1.	Female	Senior Police Office: Specialist Domestic Abuse Role	10 years plus experience
2.	Male	Senior Police Office: Specialist Domestic Abuse Role	10 years plus experience
3.	Female	Domestic Violence Strategic Manager	10 years plus experience
4.	Female	Domestic Violence Charity Chief Executive	10 years plus experience
5.	Female	Domestic Violence Co-ordinator	10 years plus experience
6.	Female	Domestic Violence Co-ordinator	10 years plus experience
7.	Female	Specialist Domestic Violence Child Protection Social Worker	10 years plus experience
8.	Female	Independent Domestic Violence Advocate (IDVA)	10 years plus experience
9.	Female	Independent Sexual Violence Advocate (ISVA)	Under 5 years' experience
10.	Female	Independent Domestic Violence Advocate (IDVA)	Under 5 years' experience
11.	Female	Refuge Manager	10 years plus experience
12.	Female	Refuge Support Team Leader	10 years plus experience
13.	Female	Perpetrator Services Practitioner	10 years plus experience
14.	Female	Independent Domestic Violence Advocate (IDVA)	Under 5 years' experience
15. (Joint Interview)	Male/Female	Strategic Police Management x 2	10 years plus experience
16. (Joint Interview)	Male/Female	Office for Police & Crime Commissioner x 2	10 years plus experience
17.	Male	Probation Officer	5–10 years' experience
18.	Female	Young Person's Sexual Violence Advocate (ISVA)	Under 5 years' experience
19.	Female	Clinical Commissioning Group Member	10 years plus experience
20.	Male	Local Authority Commissioner	10 years plus experience
21.	Female	Independent Domestic Violence Advocate (IDVA)	5–10 years' experience
22.	Male	Safeguarding Board Manager	10 years plus experience
23.	Female	Independent Domestic Violence Advocate (IDVA)	5–10 years' experience
24.	Female	Local Authority Child Protection Social Worker	5–10 years' experience
25.	Female	Child Protection Manager – Voluntary Services	10 years plus experience
26.	Female	Social Worker Children & Families - Voluntary Services	Under 5 years' experience
27.	Male	Probation Officer	10 years plus experience

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Interview number	Gender	Role	Experience
28.	Female	Domestic Violence Voluntary Sector Manager	10 years plus experience
29.	Female	Operational Police Officer	5–10 years' experience
30.	Female	Operational Police Officer	5–10 years' experience
31.	Female	Independent Sexual Violence Advocate (ISVA)	5–10 years' experience
32.	Female	Independent Domestic Violence Advocate (IDVA)	5–10 years' experience
33.	Female	Independent Domestic Violence Advocate (IDVA)	Under 5 years' experience

abuse in young people's relationships. She notes how societal and gendered pressures can feed into coercive, controlling behaviours and can be used in manipulating ways to undermine the confidence of a young person, as is typically observed in adult relationships in which coercive control is a feature.

Interview Ten: This was one of the first cases that I worked on and it's always stuck with me because there was a girl, she was 14 or 15 I think, 14, she was quite young, she was really, really glamorous to the point where she wore extensions every day, false eyelashes to school, full make-up and that kind of thing. As a kind of punishment when her boyfriend didn't like anything that she'd done, maybe she'd liked someone's picture on [social media], she wasn't allowed to wear her false eyelashes and that was a massive blow to her confidence and probably one of the worst punishments that he could have given her. It was just mind blowing to me and he knew exactly how to target her, and it worked because he knew how important that was to her... In an adult relationship those eyelashes could have been the children. (IDVA).

Coercive control in young people's relationships is implicitly constructed as gendered, demonstrated by reference to the patriarchal concept of 'ownership' designed to limit and constrain behaviour. As argued by Stark (2007: 15), 'many of the regulations involved in coercive control target behaviours that are identified with the female role' and this is clearly illustrated in the narrative above. A young person prevented from wearing false eyelashes embodies a crushing sense of control and constraint, designed to have maximum impact yet simultaneously barely identifiable to service providers who are not consistently sensitised to these behaviours. The damaging effects of this were clear to this IDVA, symbolic of a bespoke psychological attack engineered to undermine both confidence and identity. Significantly, physical violence was not present and this remains one of the contested areas of coercive control as noted in the literature review above (Barlow & Walklate, 2022). The police officer extract below highlights a number of non-physical behaviours indicative of coercive control held in place by, or the threat of, physical violence.

Interview One: ...it starts off with a bit of control, "You're not going out," or, "You're not wearing that," then a bit of putting them down, isolating them, then a bit of pushing and shoving...it seems to go bang quite quickly, certainly with young people, I find it a very short period. When it's a MARAC (Multi-Agency Risk Assessment

Conference) case you're going, "They've only been together for however long... I feel as if it escalates a lot quicker, so that gives us a shorter period of time to get in."

Lagdon et al. (2021, 2023) describe behaviours resonant with stereotypically gendered expectations commonplace within coercive control such as restriction of movement and freedom, mirroring Stark's (2007) analysis of this as a liberty crime. This narrative clearly illustrates a primary function of coercive control as being what a young person *cannot* do, as opposed to what they can do. The issues raised here signal apprehension around rapid escalation leading to concern around high-risk victimisation and perpetration. Coercive control in tandem with physical assault in adult relationships can be associated with high-risk perpetration behaviours and domestic violence homicide, as evidenced by Monckton-Smith (2019) and these concerns can similarly be applied to young people (Barter, 2017). Evidence indicates young people are experiencing coercive control on a consistent basis (Barter et al., 2009; Fox et al., 2014; Lagdon et al., 2023) whilst often failing to recognise these behaviours as abusive as evidenced in the next section on the normalisation of coercive control by young people and the minimisation of this by service providers.

DOUBLE IMPACT: NORMALISING COERCIVE CONTROL BY YOUNG PEOPLE & MINIMISATION BY SERVICE PROVIDERS

In this section we analyse the normalisation of coercive control by young people, followed by the potentially damaging double impact of some service providers minimising instances of coercive control. Several participants discussed how they perceived young people as normalising coercive control in relationships, indicating that abuse and harm are not always recognised, with others expressing concern that some young people felt physical violence was acceptable in certain gender stereotypic circumstances.

Interview Six: ...I also get quite worried about the attitude of young people and the fact that they feel that things are acceptable. So that's kind of a paradox really.

Interview Eight: ...some of the feedback that the workers have had coming out of those is just they're appalled at some of the views of the young people, both boys and girls. Not just a boy saying it's okay, but a girl thinking, yes, of course it's alright. If I cheat on him then yes, of course he can slap me, or do whatever. And it's just like really worrying.

This aligns with the work of Barter et al. (2009), Lombard (2011) and Fox et al. (2014) who note concern regarding the normalisation of violence and abuse in teen relationships, with Barter et al. (2017) suggesting coercive control may be constructed as love or protection. Whilst the literature has explored these topics, it is important to note that service providers are continuing to see this in practice. While training and educational interventions may be having some positive impact on addressing this trend, it remains problematic if, and because, workers are discussing this lack of recognition and normalisation of domestic abuse and coercive control behaviours.

In addition to young people not always recognising coercive control, one of the unique findings of this study is the minimisation of coercive control in young people's relationships by some service providers. The quotes below demonstrate the need to analyse coercive control through a youth specific gendered lens acknowledging that coercive control can happen even if the young people are not living together or do not share the same environment on a regular basis.

Interview Ten: A lot of the victims that I work with might still be living at home with parents, they might not live with the perpetrator, they might not even go to the same school, and it's looking at those kind of dynamics, how can somebody have that much control over another person and not share the same kind of environment, vicinity and that kind of thing...

Recognising that controlling behaviours can still occur despite not going to the same school or living together highlights the importance of analysing young people's experiences as distinct from adults' perceptions of when and where coercive control takes place. As this IDVA notes,

Interview Eight: So, don't compare it to yourself, "They've only been together two minutes, how can she be controlled by him?" or, "They don't live together" or whatever, so it's really going in with that approach... especially if it's a young person or anybody under 25 really, sometimes I've found that professionals don't always empower them, they like to make decisions for them...

Professionals failing to acknowledge young people have agency renders them incapable of making informed decisions, which, in turn, has the potential for young people's experiences to become minimised and devalued. Used as the title of this paper, this refuge manager discussed an example of a school minimising the experiences of abusive behaviours as banter. This raises the question that if overt abusive behaviour is being minimised as childhood banter, then would coercive controlling behaviour even be recognised within this context?

Interview Eleven: We'd been told in one school that the girls were wearing shorts... Lycra shorts under their skirts. When we challenged that, they said it was playground banter. My challenge to that is when 15-year-olds are preparing...because that's what this is...preparing to be sexually abused, how dare you call that playground banter?!

Within each of these narratives, different service providers allude to the potential for minimisation of control and abuse in young people's relationships, which, in turn, can negate the seriousness of harm or risk. Underlying this sense of disbelief are constructions of children lacking agency and this permeates the accounts. Several of the service providers in this study constructed young people as actively experiencing coercive control. However, they also indicated that this was not a commonly held view in a wider multi-agency context, suggesting the need to challenge underlying assumptions about young people experiencing coercive control. This does not align with contemporary thinking on the ways in which young people experience coercive control albeit in a parental context (Callaghan et al., 2018; Katz, 2016) and suggests young people are being denied agency and understood as passive or, even worse, their experiences are rendered invisible, and they are left unheard, unsupported and at risk.

PREVENTATIVE EDUCATION PROGRAMMES

Discussion on education regarding victimisation and perpetration was apparent throughout the interviews. Participants discussed broader prevention programmes located in schools alongside those working specifically with young people who experienced coercive control and those who may go on to become perpetrators. In some areas there are proactive 'perpetrator' programmes

working with children from as young as 10 years old but there is a proactive move not to label these young boys 'perpetrators' at such a young age.

Interview Three: Prevention of Domestic Violence and that's a perpetrator programme and they work with age ten I believe, they've just changed it, they used to work with a bit younger than that, they work with ten and upwards and then they've got the victim service and then they've got the children's service... we don't like to label young men as being perpetrators so we're saying that they're young people who cause harm to others.

Interview Twenty Eight: there needs to be something for those young people who are perpetrating violence to support them to understand that it's not right.

Participants went on to discuss the impact generational violence can have, particularly on young males, and the need for training programmes to work across the youth age range in providing intervention, guidance, training and, crucially, the support to understand what healthy relationships look like. This speaks to the complex coexistence of witnessing, victimisation and perpetration outlined by Fox et al. (2014), as articulated by this child protection manager whilst also alluding to gender bias.

Interview Twenty Five: We see a lot of young lads in our groups that have got to the point of where they're 10 and 11 and are developing the same patterns of behaviour as the male partners in the family, and this whole challenge they have of being able to identify that because of the loyalty that they still have to their dad, and see that as kind of part of their recovery process, I guess, and to see it as part of what they've learned, and I think that's a hard thing to tackle, and I think it's good to see that in schools now really young kids are having more information lessons/discussions about what are healthy relationships, and that's great, but I think there's this whole age group of 13 to 17 year olds where the secondary school that ... how do we tackle that? It's really hard because the mums are the ones that are expected to kind of deal with that.

THE PARADOX OF SOCIAL MEDIA

The role of social media was constructed as paradoxical by several participants. It was considered essential to communicate with young people and to raise awareness of services, whilst simultaneously it had the potential to normalise harmful behaviours and become a vehicle for abuse. For some, it was deemed to popularise violence and to be a tool for coercion whilst others highlighted its powerful role in communication and recovery. The digital dimension of domestic abuse creates an omnipresence of harm and coercion, which is described by Woodlock (2017) as extensive and all encompassing. Similarly, Barter and Koulu (2021) highlight the paradoxical role of digital technologies as a platform for and facilitator of gender-based abuse and surveillance, arguing this provides greater opportunity to harm, harass and stalk whilst simultaneously promoting recovery and activism. These contradictory perspectives on social media were apparent in several interviews as illustrated below.

Interview Five: ...there's also a hell of a lot of violence on TV. And I think watching it, again it's like working within the services, if you see it day in day out you get slightly normalised to it. So, for people watching things like that, then potentially

it's become slightly acceptable...I think social media plays a massive part in normalising stalking and harassment, and that for me is a big increase in stalking cases or reporting of it.

Interview Eight: Yes, I mean on Facebook, you can't go more than a few days without a post come through about domestic abuse. You know or some saying about strong women and independence and you know, it's out there in the media about you know strong women, and women.

Interview Seventeen: There's a lot goes on in terms of the texting and the sexting and all the other things that run alongside that. A lot of things are done via social media, that has quite a powerful impact at the minute, for both parties really, it's very powerful because things get misinterpreted and that can leave somebody in a very vulnerable place.

Service providers did, however, highlight good practices that they felt had positive outcomes. Outreach work, national campaigns and a more traditional youth work approach building relationships and creating safe spaces for young people to discuss their views and experiences, combined with social media, seems to have been of benefit.

Interview Ten: So, I've been going into schools and colleges, offering workshops, assemblies, I created a promotional campaign to go alongside with the role, we adopted the theme of social media for that, we found that we wanted something that young people could resonate towards; and just putting up posters and handing out business cards doesn't really work anymore because we live in that society where everybody's got everything at the tip of their hands. We've used a great campaign, we created that, it's gender neutral, it used Twitter, Facebook, iMessage and Snapchat and it really gets across the control issues, the harassment issues, not just focusing on the physical abuse within an abusive relationship, but really looking at the sides that people might assume are the norm or every day, the high levels of contact via phone throughout the day and that kind of thing.

In this context, social media extends the space for support and action creating new ways of interacting, crossing boundaries between the personal and the public not previously possible and so illustrating the transformative potential of digital technologies (Marres, 2017). Bracewell et al. (2021) found that access to digital technologies was a high priority for young people living in refuges and emphasising the educational, social and creative aspects of such, summarising how digital access engendered happiness, further underscoring how this has transformed adolescence. Applying this to a service provider lens, engagement with social media and digital technologies is an essential practice tool when working with young people by offering extended space and time for relationships and action. Yet, this new space and place for communication offering transformative possibilities also creates mechanisms and platforms for harm. Accessibility issues are mitigated as the opportunities to support, harm or hurt are available 24/7 extending into young people's homes and private lives. Being engaged and knowledgeable as a service provider, in the ways and mediums young people engage with may help in tackling misunderstanding and promote recognition of coercive control.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Although this paper is based on service providers' views on young people and coercive control, a key limitation is not gaining the comparable views of young people themselves. In addition, the sample is based in one localised geographical area. Irrespective, the depth of insight provides a unique contribution to this field and provides important lessons, both theoretically and practically.

This article provides a unique insight into the views of service providers' perspectives on young people and coercive control. As previously identified (Brennan et al., 2019), coercive control is often poorly understood by service providers and when identified, their capacity to respond effectively can be limited. We have previously articulated the need for a change in attitude to coercive control, a clear consensus on the definition, effective tools to record instances and enhanced resources to respond to cases in an empowering and confident manner (Brennan et al., 2019). This article highlights the need for those working with young people to gain an additional set of specialist skills that acknowledges and responds to the context of young people's lives as unique and different from that of adults. Moreover, the paper reveals the minimisation of coercive control by professionals. Understanding that young people have agency and can actively experience coercive control in relationships is vital. Comparing young people's experiences of coercive control against an adult's barometer may result in key experiences being dismissed, diminished or deemed not serious enough. While recognising the challenges in identifying and responding to coercive control in young people's relationships there are some clear recommendations emerging from the highlighted data. Education and training are vital in addressing coercive control experienced by young people. Initially, the education of workers in identifying, recognising and supporting young people is crucial. Secondly, is the need for education for young people in supporting them to self-identify coercive control and know how and where to access relevant support services of which social media is an essential tool. However, education on engaging with social media and recognising the potential harm it can occasion is important for both service providers and young people. Thirdly, there is a need to view young people as active agents and to reject notions of passivity and rather regard young people as having the capacity to identify and address coercive behaviours. Those who already engage with young people, such as teachers, youth workers and community practitioners, are potentially in a position to provide positive support, signposting and guidance for those experiencing coercive control. Effective multi-agency working can ensure young people do not fall through the 'cracks' of children and adult services if the three recommendations above could be implemented.

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