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Coercive control-based domestic abuse: Impacts on mothers and children

This talk will answer the following questions:



1. How are children harmed by coercive control in contexts where their father/father figure is perpetrating domestic abuse against their mother?
2. How does coercive control produce a hostile context for mothers to parent in?
3. How do children and mothers act to resist coercive control in their daily lives?

Key arguments



- Children must not be invisible or left on the margins in work on coercive control – their experiences are central
- As we continue to recognise coercive control against women/mothers and seek to tackle it more effectively, we must also account for the impacts it has on children
- In DA contexts, perpetrators/fathers not only harm children by exposing them to physical violence, they harm them by infusing children's family lives with coercive control – perpetrators/fathers must be held accountable for this
- Perpetrators'/fathers' coercive control places children in isolated, disempowering and constrained worlds which can hamper children's resilience and healthy development and contribute to emotional and behavioural problems

Published work on this topic



Katz's research on this topic has been published in:

- Katz, E. 2015. Beyond the Physical Incident Model: How Children Living with Domestic Violence are Harmed by and Resist Regimes of Coercive Control, Child Abuse Review, Early View, Available from: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/car.2422/abstract>

Impacts of coercive control



- Well known impacts on physical and mental health (see Dillon et al, 2013)
- Westmarland and Kelly (2013) highlight that coercive control also limits adult victims'/survivors' 'space for action' - that is their freedom to say and do things and to meet their own needs without worry or fear
- As perpetrators microregulate their everyday behaviours, adult victims'/survivors' options, choices and ability to decide for themselves diminish further and further (Stark, 2007)
- Children in these families also frequently suffer from limited opportunities to choose, to feel free, and to develop a sense of independence and competence (Katz, 2015)

Impacts of coercive control



- Constraints on their freedom, autonomy and voice contribute to disempowerment, loss of self and loss of confidence in adult victims/survivors (Matheson et al, 2015; Westmarland and Kelly, 2013)
- Empowering and rebuilding confidence are therefore important strands of work with victims/survivors
- Katz's research suggests that this is the case for children as well as adult victims/survivors – children need to be empowered too (Katz, 2015)

(Lack of) research into children and coercive control



- Vast majority of research into children and domestic abuse has focused on their exposure to ‘incidents’ or ‘episodes’ of physical violence (Holden, 2003; Buckley et al, 2007; Overlien and Hyden, 2009; Stanley, 2011; Jaffe et al, 2012; Clarke and Wydall, 2015)
- This is limiting because physical violence is only one element of coercive control and is sometimes not used by perpetrators/fathers at all
- Katz’s (2015) research considered the *non-physical* forms of coercive control that children live with when their father/father figure perpetrates domestic abuse against their mother



Introducing Katz's study



- Interviewed 15 mothers and 15 children (total: 30)
- Children's ages ranged from 10 to 20
- Interviewed 9 girls, 6 boys
- 12/15 perpetrators were the children's father
- Average time since they separated from the perpetrator: 5 years
- Interviewees contacted through organisations such as Women's Aid



For the full study see: <http://eprints.nottingham.ac.uk/28456/1/FINAL%20Katz%20Thesis%2010.02.2015.pdf>

Findings



- Children were effected by many forms of coercive control beyond the physical violence against their mother, including:
 - Control of time and movement within the home
 - Deprivation of resources and imprisonment
 - Isolation from the outside world



Control of time and movement



Perpetrators/fathers demanded high levels of attention from mothers at the expense of children:

- ‘[My daughter] Leah used to want me to sit and brush her hair – that wasn’t allowed because he’d be jealous. He’d say things like: ‘You’ve spent enough attention on her, what about my attention?’ (Marie, mother)
- ‘When Mum was giving me attention he’d tell her to go over to him so she’d have to leave me to play by myself.’ (Shannon, aged 10)

Control of time and movement



- Perpetrators'/fathers' coercive control limited the amount of maternal attention children could enjoy and reduced the opportunities for fun and affection in their homes
- Children described feeling sad, annoyed and angry at these ongoing situations
- This contributed to the withdrawn or aggressive behaviours that most of the children in Katz's study displayed during the domestic abuse

Isolation from the outside world



When perpetrators/fathers controlled mothers' movements outside the home this severely restricted children's social lives. It prevented them from engaging with wider family, peers and extra-curricular activities:

- 'They [the kids] couldn't have any friends round because he'd kick off or something. Kids' parties were another problem because he'd be accusing me of trying to 'get off' with one of the dads, so parties were out the question. We couldn't do any after school clubs because I had to be back by a certain time. Me and the kids weren't allowed to go round to see their grandparents.' (Isobel, mother)

Isolation from the outside world



- ‘I got to the stage where I didn’t go out apart from to the supermarket. I’d panic and I’ve have to come home or I’d be scared of missing a [housework] job. I just didn’t go out at the end so then the children didn’t go out. It was just school and home, school and home.
- When he was at home at the weekend if I suggested us going out to the park he would moan that he’d been at work all week.
- So they missed out on days out, family trips, just day to day going out and socialising with people. And they’ve missed out on knowing what healthy relationships are about in other families because children don’t make as many friendships if you don’t mix with other mums, so they’ve missed out on all that.’
(Marie, mother)

Isolation from the outside world



- The isolation that children lived with as a result of perpetrators’/fathers’ controlling tactics severely limited their opportunities to create resilience-building relationships with non-abusive people outside their immediate family
- The multiple benefits that positive experiences with grandparents, friends or in after-school clubs can have on children’s social skills, confidence and development were denied to these children
- To help to repair this, building the skills, confidence and opportunities to socialise and explore the wider world should be incorporated into recovery work with children who have lived with coercive control-based DA

Deprivation of resources and imprisonment



Extreme tactics for depriving the family of freedom, independence and resources impacted on children as well as mothers:

- ‘Eloise (mother): He’d tell us we couldn’t touch the food in the fridge, that we weren’t allowed to eat, he’d lock us in the house a lot of the time so we couldn’t get out, he’d unplug the phone...
- John (aged 20): ...He’d take out the power because in the hall we’ve got an old electrical box where you can take things out and that’s it - you’ve got no power...
- Eloise (mother): ...He used to take an element out the central heating so we’d have no heating. He’d lock us in the house and go out. He’d take the modem so John couldn’t do his homework and I couldn’t do my banking on the computer. So we were prisoners in a way.’

Deprivation of resources and imprisonment



- These tactics highlight how some perpetrators/fathers directly and purposefully extend their coercive controlling abuse over their children as well as their girlfriend/wife
- Experiencing this abuse is likely to contribute to poor physical and mental health in children and poor achievement in school
- Rather than seeing the perpetrator's/father's treatment of the adult victim as domestic abuse and their treatment of the child victim as child abuse, both adults and children could be seen as victims of his regime of coercive control

Resistance to coercive control



- Both children and mothers engaged in acts of resistance to the coercive control they experienced
- Possibilities for resistance depended on the opportunities that children and mothers had under the particular regimes of coercive control that fathers/father figures imposed
- Resistance often took the form of finding ways to maintain elements of ‘normal life’ and close mother-child relationships when possible

Resisting deprivation of resources



- ‘Eloise (mother): We did things together. When we went to the pictures or we went shopping we could just ‘let our hair down’ and do what we wanted to do. We were going to the cinema 2-3 times a week to get out of the house.
- John (aged 20): When we would come back with shopping bags, sometimes we had to hide them...
- E: ...because he would go mad that I’d spent money on John. We used to throw the bags over the hedge...
- J: ...into the garden, so he wouldn’t see them.’

Resisting control of time and movement



- ‘Well, some days he would be out, and me and Mum would watch a movie and have some time together [which he wouldn’t let us do when he was at home]. I used to help cook tea with my mum because I enjoy cooking so we’d, like, help each other.’ (Katie, aged 12)
- ‘On those days when we were alone we would snuggle up on the sofa and watch films together, and we always emotionally supported each other then.’ (Ruby, mother)



Resisting emotional distress



- ‘He always made her [daughter] sleep on her own you see, but she wouldn’t go to sleep without me being next to her, so I’d wait for him to go to sleep and then I’d get in next to her or she’d get in next to me.’
(Ellie, mother)
- ‘When he had a tantrum and went off to the pub then I’d just comfort Mum and hug her and she’d hug me as well.’ (Shannon, aged 10)
- ‘When we were locked in the house and Mum was upset I would hug her and tell her it was going to be okay.’ (Roxie, aged 11)

Resisting coercive control



- Mothers and children found opportunities to promote each other's well-being and reduce the negative impacts of the domestic abuse - this was the case even when much of their lives were being overrun by perpetrators'/fathers' coercive control
- By defying perpetrators'/fathers' control when possible, children and mothers maintained some sense of autonomy and prevented perpetrators/fathers from gaining total control over them
- Highlighting the ways that they resisted can help mothers and children to recognise their strengths and see that they were not passive victims

Conclusions



- Children are victims/survivors of coercive control – they are harmed by it and can also act to resist it
- In addition to safety, victims of coercive control need support to gain/regain their confidence and sense of empowerment – this applies to children as well as adult victims
- As coercive control is increasingly recognised, children’s experiences of it must not be left invisible
- Like adult victims/survivors, children need safety from coercive control, help to recover from it, and justice for the crimes that have been committed against them

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Thank you



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