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Male Victims of Female-Perpetrated Partner Violence: A Qualitative Analysis of Men's Experiences, the Impact of Violence, and Perceptions of Their Worth

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Abstract

There has been a recent increase in the amount of research on male victims of female-perpetrated partner violence (PV) but research needs to be conducted to understand how the patterns of abuse persist in these relationships. In the current study, the experiences of 59 male PV victims in the USA, recruited through online advertisements in professional networks and websites (e.g., agencies that specialize in male victims of PV), were explored through a thematic analysis. Analyses suggested that the help seeking process of male PV victims is complex and heterogeneous and can often lead to further negative consequences due to various structural, cultural, social, and organizational factors. The findings also highlight the potential societal issues that male victims perceived as contributing to male victimization and lack of available resources for them. The results are discussed in terms of its implications for agencies, service providers, and general societal attitudes that are relevant to raising awareness about this phenomenon.

Keywords

male victims; experiences; help seeking process; perceptions

Partner violence (PV), defined as physical, sexual, emotional, economic, and/or psychological actions or threats of actions to gain or maintain power and control over another intimate partner (see U.S. Department of Justice, 2015), is widely acknowledged as a serious social problem with complex negative implications for individuals, families, and communities (Cannon & Buttell, 2016; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015; Dobash & Dobash, 2004; Shuler, 2010). This complex social problem has been primarily

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viewed through a lens that portrays women as victims and men as perpetrators (Barocas, Emery, & Mills, 2016; Bates, 2019; Dutton & White 2013; Loseke, 2001). A growing body of literature, however, shows that men are also victims of PV perpetrated by female partners, and that when they seek help, they encounter multiple barriers (e.g., Bates, 2020; Dixon, Treharne, Celi, Hines, Lysova, & Douglas, 2020; Douglas & Hines, 2011; Hines, Brown, & Dunning, 2007; Hines & Douglas, 2010a; 2010b; Huntley, Potter, Williamson, Malpass, Szilassy, & Feder, 2019; Machado, Hines, & Matos, 2016; Walker et al., 2020). The majority of this work has been conducted using quantitative methods, and although qualitative studies have been published more recently, they largely focus on the men's help-seeking experiences. Thus, the goal of this paper is to present qualitative data on male PV victims who sought help, focusing on their abuse experiences, the consequences of the different strategies that they adopted to cope with PV, and the potential societal issues that the male victims perceived as contributing to their victimization.

Prevalence, Types, and Correlates of PV against Men

The recognition and study of PV against men has existed since the 1970s, but such research has been largely overlooked (e.g., Corbally, 2015; Hines & Douglas, 2011). The interest in PV against men dates back to 1978 with the first mention of battered men (Steinmetz, 1978) in an analysis of the first wave of the U.S. based National Family Violence Survey (Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980). Currently, the study of this phenomenon is gradually receiving acceptance in the international scientific literature on PV (e.g., Archer, 2000; Costa et al., 2015; Douglas, Hines, & McCarthy, 2012; Hines et al., 2007; Randle & Graham, 2011; Reid et al., 2008; Tsui, Cheung, & Leung, 2010).

Worldwide data provides further evidence that men are victims of PV (e.g., Archer, 2000; Bates, 2019; Beel, 2013; Black et al., 2011; Desmarais et al., 2012; Esquivel-Santovena, Lambert, & Hamel, 2013; Hines & Douglas, 2011; Walker et al., 2020). In the United States, for example, the 2015 National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (Smith et al., 2018) indicated that more than one-third of men (33.6%) reported lifetime PV that encompassed any contact sexual violence, physical violence, and/or stalking. In order of prevalence, men report sustaining psychological violence, followed by physical violence, and in lower prevalence, sexual violence (Hines & Douglas, 2010a, 2010b, 2016a; Machado & Matos, 2014). As with women, the majority of PV against men is minor, but there are consistent findings that men are victims of severe PV by their female partners and sustain life-threatening attacks and injuries (Allen-Collinson 2009; Bates, 2019; Hines & Douglas, 2013; Machado, Hines, & Matos, 2016; Machado, Santos, Graham-Kevan, & Matos, 2016; Stitt & Macklin, 1995; Walker et al., 2020).

Although male victimization is not perceived by society to be as severe and as harmful as female victimization (Bates, 2020; Dutton & White 2013; Walker et al., 2020), research shows that PV against men is associated with a range of negative physical and mental health outcomes (e.g., Bates, 2020; Berger, Hines, & Douglas, 2015; Black et al., 2011; Coker et al., 2002; Cook, 2009; Dixon & Graham-Kevan, 2011; Fergusson, Horwood, & Ridder, 2005; Hall, 2016; Hines & Douglas, 2011, 2015, 2016a, 2016b; 2018; Randle & Graham, 2011; Reid et al., 2008; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000; Tsui, 2014; Wallace, Wallace, Kenkre,

Brayford, & Borja, 2019). Overall, these studies show that men who have sustained PV have higher rates of post-traumatic stress symptoms, depression, suicidal ideation, psychosomatic symptoms, cardiovascular disease, general psychological distress, poor overall health, isolation and loneliness, and job loss. The majority of this research is quantitative and the literature could benefit from the voices of victims themselves, as seen by the work of Bates (2019) that revealed that additionally to these negative consequences, IPV experiences have a negative impact on future relationships (both intimate relationships, as well as family and friends). Therefore, although we understand more now about male victims, there are still gaps in the literature (Bates, 2019). This study will provide in-depth qualitative data on a sample of help-seeking men in the US, exploring their experiences with PV, their perceptions of the impact of that abuse, and their beliefs regarding how others see them, in order to identify the potential societal issues that male victims perceived as contributing to male victimization.

Experiences of Male Victims Seeking Help

Help-seeking is a multifaceted behavior that varies across a range of individual, interpersonal, and sociocultural factors (e.g., individual trauma histories, cultural, and religious beliefs, economic resources, and awareness of formal support; Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Ansara & Hindin, 2010; Liang, Goodman, Tummala-Narra, & Weintraub, 2005). Men in general are less likely than women to seek help for a wide range of both physical and mental health problems (e.g., Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Hammer et al., 2013; Syzdek et al., 2014), and men tend to not seek help for problems that society views as non-normative for men (e.g., Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Machado et al., 2016). Recent research shows that men must overcome multiple internal and external barriers when seeking help, including not understanding that their experiences constitute abuse, loving their partners, wanting to find a solution within the family, a fear of seeking help, a feeling that there is nowhere to go, and that no one would believe in them (Bates, 2019; Huntley, 2019; Lysova, Hanson, Dixon, Douglas, Hines & Celi, 2020).

Nonetheless, there is a growing body of research which shows that some men seek help for their PV victimization. Our review of the literature on men's help seeking behaviours following PV victimization showed that there are limited services available specifically for male victims and the existing services may often perceive men as the primary aggressors, even when the female partner is the only perpetrator (e.g., Barber, 2008; Cook, 2009; Douglas & Hines, 2011; Drijber, Reijnders, & Ceelen, 2012; Dutton & White 2013; Hines et al., 2007; Machado et al., 2016; Walker et al., 2020). In fact, there is a considerable amount of research that details the differing perceptions of men's and women's aggression, sustaining that women's aggression is judged less harshly, and that male victims are blamed more (Sorenson & Taylor, 2005). Men victims report a need for recognition of their experiences and impact (Bates, 2019; Machado et al., 2016; Wallace et al., 2019). This lack of recognition and the attitudes and perceptions about them influenced their help-seeking behavior, namely, an inability to accept and/or recognize the abuse, delayed or absent help-seeking and limited knowledge of services (Bates, 2019; Wallace et al., 2019).

Even so, the literature shows that male victims seek and receive support through varied sources, including formal (e.g., DV helplines, police, mental health professionals) and informal (e.g., friends, relatives, the internet) sources (e.g., Ansara & Hindin, 2010; Bates 2020; Douglas & Hines, 2011; Huntley et al., 2019; Machado et al., 2016; Wallace et al., 2019). In many instances, domestic violence service providers, law enforcement, and other legal entities failed or refused to act, arrest, charge, and/or seek penalty for the female perpetrator partner (e.g., Bates 2020; Douglas & Hines 2011; Espinoza & Warner, 2016; Huntley et al., 2019; Walker et al., 2020). The justice system also exhibits difficulty understanding or recognizing patterns of male victimization and can at times exacerbate problems for male victims (e.g., Bates, 2019; Douglas & Hines, 2011; Machado et al., 2016; Tilbrook, Allan, & Dear, 2010).

Other studies have revealed that male PV victims reported losing custody of their children and being a target of false accusations of child abuse (Hines et al., 2007; Hines, Douglas, & Berger, 2015). For instance, Henning, Renauer, and Holdford (2006) and Hines and colleagues (2007) showed that false allegations of PV, or merely the threat of making false allegations, are sometimes used by abusive women to dominate their male partners. Cook (2009) and Douglas and colleagues (2012), found that when male victims of PV file complaints against their female partner, there is a high probability of the women filing a false allegation against men, which may lead to their arrest.

Additionally, prior studies have demonstrated a pattern of legal-administrative abuse (i.e., when one partner uses the legal and administrative system to the detriment of the other partner), and although both men and women are victims of this form of abuse, men seems to be particularly vulnerable (e.g., Hines et al., 2015; Machado et al., 2016; Tilbrook et al., 2010; Tsui, 2014).

Overall, help-seeking males often have negative experiences when seeking help through formal channels (e.g., Douglas & Hines 2011; Huntley et al., 2019; Machado et al., 2016; Walker et al., 2020). Furthermore, research suggests that negative experiences when seeking help for PV victimization are associated with worse mental health in male victims (Douglas & Hines, 2011). What remains missing from the literature is an examination of male helpseekers' perceptions of PV and their beliefs regarding how others see them, in order to identify the potential societal issues that male victims perceived as contributing to male victimization. This is a gap the current study seeks to fill.

The Current Study

The present study uses a qualitative approach to examine the nature of male victimization of female-perpetrated PV, the impact of this abuse on male victims (i.e., the consequences of the different strategies that they adopted to cope with PV), the response male victims receive when seeking help for this pattern of PV, and the general issues in society that male victims perceive as contributing to their pattern of victimization.

Method

Participants and Procedure

We recruited a help-seeking sample of male physical PV victims ($n = 611$). To be eligible, the men had to speak English, live in the U.S., be between the ages of 18 and 59, and have been involved in an intimate relationship with a woman lasting at least one month in their lifetimes. In addition, the men had to have sustained a physical assault from their female partner at some point in their relationship, and they had to have sought help/assistance for their partner's violence from at least one of the following sources: medical doctor or dentist, domestic violence agency, domestic violence hotline, the Internet, a lawyer, the police, a clergy member, a family member, a friend, or a mental health therapist.

In order to recruit our sample, we posted advertisements on our study's webpage and Facebook page, and we posted ads on webpages and Facebook pages of agencies that specialize in male victims of PV, the physical and mental health of all men and those specializing in minority men, fathers' issues, and divorced men's issues. We also sent announcements to a database of researchers, practitioners, and other interested parties who signed up to be on an e-mailing list through our website which focuses on male victims of PV; it has been in existence since 2008. The advertisement stated that we were conducting "a study on men who experienced aggression from their girlfriends, wives, or female partners." The ad then provided a link to the anonymous online questionnaire. After providing consent, the next two pages of the survey contained questions to assess for the above screening criteria. Men who were eligible were allowed to continue the survey. Men who did not meet the eligibility requirements were thanked for their time and were redirected to an "exit page" of the survey.

The survey was largely quantitative and assessed their abuse experiences, their mental and physical health, their children's exposure to the abuse, and their children's behavioral health. We also had a goal of exploring men's experiences as expressed in their own voices. Therefore, the end of the survey was qualitative and asked participants: "Aside from what was covered in this survey, please use the space below to tell us anything you would like about your relationship or situation." Of the 611 men who completed the quantitative portion of the survey, 425 chose to respond to this open-ended question. We developed the coding scheme (described below) using data from all 425 respondents. The coders determined that theoretical saturation was achieved at 55 participants, and therefore, for ease of presenting the qualitative analyses, 55 participants were selected at random to represent the full dataset (i.e., choosing every 7-8 participants in the dataset based on their participant ID number). Also, an additional four cases, whose data were considerably more detailed than the other responses, were intentionally included for the richness of the qualitative data. Demographic characteristics of the participants included in the final qualitative analysis are displayed in Table 1. Participants were largely middle-aged, White, with income between \$45,000-54,999. About half had a college education and most had been in serious, long-term relationships.

The methods for this study were approved by the boards of ethics at the participating institutions. All participants were informed of their rights as study participants and

participated anonymously. At the completion of the survey, participants were given information about seeking help for PV victimization and psychological distress, and on how to delete the history on their internet web browser.

Thematic Analysis

The primary coder (Graduate Research Assistant) initially reviewed all 425 qualitative responses in order to become familiar with the qualitative data. Themes were identified within each of the summary codes, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), to: (a) familiarize the coders with the overall set of qualitative data, (b) generate initial semantic codes and collate data relevant to each code, (c) collate these codes into potential themes, (d) create a thematic ‘map’ while reviewing themes to make sure they accurately match coded extracts and information in overall data set, and (e) create names/definitions for each of the themes which captures their relevance in relation to the original research question. Because the purpose of the study was to examine the experiences of male PV victims, a constructivist epidemiological approach (Creswell, 2007) was used in developing themes within each summary code that reflected the participant’s viewpoint and perspective. Finally, themes within each summary code were developed utilizing the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965) for developing the final set of themes within each summary code.

Based on each of these steps, a set of 31 summary codes were developed to capture the information reported across the various qualitative responses. These summary codes were designed to capture the socio-demographic characteristics of the partner, patterns of abuse, consequences of abuse, forms of help-seeking, and outcomes of help-seeking for the abuse. In addition, the summary codes assessed general comments participants made regarding norms and societal factors that they perceived influence the prevalence and nature of male victimization and the general impact it has had on their lives. The summary codes were reviewed by the first author to ensure agreement about the relevance and validity of each code and that the codes were accurate in capturing the experience of the participants. All cases ($n = 59$) for the current analysis were coded independently by the primary and secondary coders, and then both coders met to discuss any discrepancies and arrive at a final coding decision. This was done using NVivo 10. An overall reliability statistic was calculated for the summary codes on 42.37% of the final sample and a kappa of .702. was found indicating a substantial agreement between the coders (0.61 – 0.80 indicates moderate agreement, according to McHugh, 2012).

Results

The major themes and subthemes analyzed for this paper are presented in Table 2. Below, we present the results, along with illustrative quotes to demonstrate each subtheme. Additionally, to guarantee balanced participant representation, identification numbers are shown in parentheses after each quote.

Forms of Abuse

This summary code is broken down into two primary themes of “direct forms of abuse targeted at participant by partner” (i.e., psychological, controlling behaviors, physical and

sexual abuse) and “indirect abuse of participant by partner through parties outside of the relationship” (i.e., legal-administrative abuse).

Direct abuse.—The direct forms of abuse theme was the theme that appeared most in the qualitative data. All of the participants addressed different forms of direct abuse, and examples of each form follow.

Psychological abuse:

“My partner abuses me emotionally with denial of visitation (...) there is... constant derogatory comments and intimidation” - ID2;

“She seemed to disregard all my suggestions and ridiculed me for being so weak” – ID27.

Controlling behaviors:

“Partner used false allegations to obtain restraining orders as an instrument of intimidation and control” – ID41;

“My wife stalked me (...) harasses me with constant calling” – ID56.

Physical abuse:

“I was viciously attacked in my house, knocked out, concussion, thrown through the front window of my residence” – ID18;

“[My wife] tried to stab me in the back with both knives (...) I had seen her reflection in the mirror and spun around at the last moment, so the knives didn't go deep. Some blood splattered on the mirror and white wall next to it” – ID67.

Sexual abuse or aggression:

“She talked about me being poor in sex”- ID53;

“Demanded sex from me or she would ban me from seeing our children (a threat which she actually followed through with)” – ID56.

Notably, psychological abuse was considered by participants to have a negative effect similar to physical abuse:

“What women lack in muscle strength they more than make up in deceit and cunning... just as violent in their ways if not much more” – ID73;

“My abuser never hit me hard enough to draw blood or send me to the emergency room, but the near constant emotional abuse sure felt like terrorism to me”- ID180.

Indirect abuse.—Indirect abuse also emerged as a theme from the data. Most commonly, men discussed that their partner would engage in legal-administrative abuse:

“She lied in court about domestic violence and child abuse to get a restraining order against me and temporary custody and child support and alimony” – ID67;

“She frequently uses my children and the family court system to make false allegations about me and inflict further abuse” –ID277.

Impact of Abuse

This theme comprises four sub-themes regarding the consequences on male victims of the different strategies that they adopted to cope with PV, including: (a) consequences of abuse on participant prior to any form of help-seeking; (b) consequences of addressing abuse directly with partner; (c) consequences of involving informal sources of support; and (d) consequences of involving formal sources of support.

Consequences of Abuse on Participant Prior to Seeking Help.—Participants reported different ways in which they were adversely affected by PV. These impacts occurred socially, financially, legally, and on personal and emotional levels.

“I don't think I have the emotional strength to keep going on. I can't leave but I can't stay - and there is no help for men anywhere....I frequently think about suicide (I've called the helpline multiple times) but I stay around to protect and provide for the kids” – ID91.

“I eventually lost everything, most importantly the ability to see my dear children and so my mental health” – ID121.

“Consequences include nervousness and fear of repeat accusation; diminished ability to stand up to spouse” – ID139.

“At the time, what bothered me the most was the emotional/psychological abuse and the feeling of confusion/helplessness/hopelessness/despair/defeat (...) It was awful and has caused me a great deal of psychological pain” – ID180.

“I am still scared all the time” – ID421.

Consequences of addressing abuse directly with partner.—In addition to discussing the impact the abuse had on them, the men also described the outcomes or consequences of addressing the abuse with their partners. Four main patterns of behavior arose in this theme: (a) the partner denied any issues in the relationship; (b) the level of conflict and disagreement in the relationship heightened; (c) the partner directly mistreated the participant; and (d) the partner indirectly mistreated the participant. These results suggest that participants received variations of negative responses when addressing abuse in the relationship, which resulted in heightened disagreement, deception, and/or mistreatment. Thus, the act of addressing the abuse in the relationship often escalated into worse circumstances. For example:

“She called the police making-up all these awful stories about me” – ID53;

“When I tried to talk about all of it to her she would get angry and violent and call me names” – ID53;

“I point out to my wife that I am taking care of all of them and they should at least talk to me. My wife says ‘big deal -that your job - a ‘real man’ would do more’” – ID91.

Consequences of involving informal sources of support.—This theme was limited in number, suggesting that either this was not a frequent source of support used by men or

that men did not feel it was necessary to address this issue in their responses, perhaps because there was nothing negative to say. Nonetheless, this theme conveys important information regarding informal support as a helpful source of support:

“I confided in two people who told me to take pictures so I did” – ID53;

Consequences of involving formal sources of support.—This theme includes the diverse sources of formal support available for victims, including professionals, police, domestic violence agencies/hotlines, and courts.

Professionals.: This theme is comprised of two sub-themes corresponding to positive and negative consequences of seeking professional help. Most of the participants reported negative consequences of seeking formal help from outside professionals:

“I was not a stereotypical victim of domestic violence, pursuant to the criteria of most organizations and agencies. When I sought relief from abuse as a man, I was ridiculed and portrayed as the abuser” – ID250.

“It was taken as a joke” – ID386

Only two participants reported positive experiences when seeking formal help. Here is one example.

“I would like to thank my therapist for her support to the men she has helped over the years, including me. Her talking to me, personally, has helped me with my struggles going through a violent marriage leading to divorce” – ID157.

Police.: The majority of the participants stated that they felt treated unfairly by the police due to false allegations or administrative, legal, or personal biases:

“In the meantime, the police have done a poor job investigating and seemingly taken only her word. I have told them about me being abused and her threats to take the kids from me but I feel like I am not being taken serious. When I told them about the abuse and these threats they asked why I stayed with her and when I told them it was for the kids - I was made to feel as if I should have done something different” – ID53

“I called the police 3 times, once she was arrested and pled guilty to assault. The last time I called the police she ran out into the street and started crying hysterically, so the police arrested me” – ID252

Domestic Violence Agencies/Hotlines.: This theme of help-seeking only has one code indicating that participants who sought help received a negative response:

“Domestic violence organizations literally chuckled at me when I called for help they told me they were set for “violence against women' victims” – ID56

Court System.: This theme is comprised of two main sub-themes: positive and negative consequences for male victims who become involved in the court system. Overall, it should

be noted that there is variation in how men felt mistreated and being at a disadvantage in the court system regarding custody or other PV-related issues:

“I have had to fight every day for my sons in the courts. They have ruined my life all on accusations from her, and what really hurts me is that nobody seems to hear me about the abuse and neglect she caused on me and the boys. I feel this has been very one-sided and mainly because I am male. Yet, all she had to do was say I was an abuser and awful and I was automatically suspect and every day I am left in a state of blank bewilderment ”– ID53

“(…) and proven false accusation, judge dismissed it, however did not prosecute the ex-wife in the matter for making false accusations”– ID64

Only one participant reported positive consequences involving the court system:

“After my divorce, aided by Father's for Equal Rights, I ended up with full custody of all 6 kids and she had supervised visitation only”– ID217

Male Victims' Perceptions of PV, Male Victims, and Worth in Society

Three different sub- themes emerged in this theme: (a) lack of sources of support and understanding for male victims, (b) current legal statutes that may harm the interests of male partners, and (c) perceived forms of societal, legal, and administrative bias that the victims feel contribute to a culture that can allow male victims to be treated unfairly.

Lack of sources of support and understanding for male victims.—This sub-theme includes instances where men reported experiencing an absence of available/adequate resources when trying to seek formal help:

“(…) and although I have proof of 90% of these claims audio recorded, the courts, law enforcement, mental health therapists, and other organizations could not picture her as an abuser, and more importantly, me as a victim. I called the police, got a lawyer, took her to court, and in the end, my violent ex-wife managed to make herself the victim. No matter how violent or abusive she was to the children or me, no one could picture her as an abuser. We men are lost; we have no direction; no one will listen” - ID56.

“Abused men are thought to be mythical and are therefore ignored (...) I could not find one group designed to help male victims. Abused men and divorced men are the most non-sympathetic groups in this country” - ID56.

Perceptions of legal statutes that may harm the interests of male partners.—

This sub-theme consists of reports on how they thought statutes and the legal system can contribute to abuse by female partners:

“Restraining orders in Massachusetts [and other states] are granted to women who simply fill out a form and judges grant and sustain restraining orders” – ID41.

“At the time I feared the courts - they seems to always side with the female and give her the kids” – ID53.

Perceived forms of societal, legal, and administrative biases.—This sub-theme is related to the general societal biases that male victims perceived in their help seeking process:

“Most people find it hard to understand how a man can be submissive to a woman and tolerate such behavior (...) As a man it is extremely hard to talk about a situation such as this” - ID85.

“The courts seem to believe that maternal instincts and parental rights are automatic for a woman regardless of her history or behavior towards the children” – ID121.

“(…) since I exited my relationship I have become an advocate to end family violence but I believe as a nation and society we approach the problem wrongly. Often law enforcement just arrests the man (...)they choose one side, not understanding that there is no help or counselling mandated for who they call the victim which is usually the instigator of the argument” – ID161.

Discussion

This study adds new findings to the existing qualitative studies focusing on male victims of female-perpetrated PV, namely about the consequences of the different strategies that men adopted to cope with PV and the societal issues that male victims perceived as contributing to male victimization. Additionally, this study also confirms previous research concerning the types of victimization and reinforces the negative impact of perceived cultural, societal, and legal responses to male victims.

The findings of this study confirm that men can be and are victims of direct (physical, psychological and sexual violence) and indirect forms of abuse perpetrated by female romantic partners. This is consistent with past research showing that men are victims of different forms of abuse (e.g., Bates, 2019; Costa et al., 2015; Hines & Douglas, 2011a, 2011b; Machado et al., 2016; Walker et al., 2020), including a pattern of indirect abuse through social or legal avenues which may be more prevalent amongst male victims (Hines et al., 2015). Furthermore, the findings in the current study indicate that the impact of abuse can be serious for male victims, which has also been found in past studies (Bates, 2020; Black et al., 2011; Coker et al., 2002; Cook, 2009; Dixon & Graham-Kevan, 2011; Fergusson et al., 2005; Hall, 2016; Hines & Douglas, 2011, 2015, 2016a, 2016b; 2018; Randle & Graham, 2011; Reid et al., 2008; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000; Tsui, 2014; Walker et al., 2020).

Notably, men in this study discussed and provided much detail on an indirect form of abuse - legal/administrative abuse (Hines et al., 2015) - which also has been documented in other qualitative research (Lysova et al., Conditionally Accepted; Walker et al., 2020). Legal-administrative abuse can sometimes emerge due to stereotypes or biases that men are always the perpetrators of PV and the lack of understanding of how men can also be victims within intimate relationships. These gender stereotypical constructions may also lead to more generalized patterns of disbelief, insensitivity, ridicule, or even hostility on the part of both professionals and peers in response to a man’s claim of victimization by a female partner (e.g., Allen-Collinson, 2009). As Machado and colleagues (2016) suggested, legal-

administrative abuse seems to be a “contemporary” phenomenon that still remains absent from general definitions of PV. As mentioned in prior studies (e.g., Hines et al., 2015; Machado et al., 2016), it may be important to update the common definition of PV to include legal-administrative abuse.

Regarding impact, consistent with the literature, this study revealed that PV has a wide range of complex and negative implications (e.g., Bates, 2020; Cannon & Buttell, 2016; Centers for Disease Prevention and Control, 2015; Dobash & Dobash, 2004; Shuler, 2010; Walker et al., 2020). The negative impact of PV that participants in our study reported encompassed many domains, including social, financial, legal, and on personal and emotional levels. Participants described suffering from suicidal ideation and several losses (e.g., children; mental health), as has been reported in prior research (e.g., Black et al., 2011; Coker et al., 2002; Randle & Graham, 2011). The results also show that men report being under-acknowledged, mistreated, and penalized for trying to seek help or address the patterns of abuse in their intimate relationships. In some instances, this lack of acknowledgement perpetuates this form of PV and likely puts victims and their children at additional risk.

Another important result of this study is that the impact and effects of PV in men’s lives may be due to the pressure of the societal expectations of masculinity, gender-stereotyped treatment, and the lack of adequate outlets for help seeking due to not being believed or being treated like a perpetrator by professionals (e.g., Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Bates, 2020; Berger et al., 2013; Douglas et al., 2012; Gorski, 2010; Walker et al., 2020). Some of the factors contributing to the impact of PV on male victims seem to be intrinsically linked to the prevailing gender stereotypes about men. As a result, men can be further mistreated by their support systems or other societal institutions when they try to seek help, which can contribute to further mental health problems (e.g., Bates, 2020; Douglas & Hines, 2011).

Previous research has shown that men face multiple internal and external barriers to seeking help for PV victimization (Bates, 2019; Lysova, et al., Conditionally Accepted; Walker et al., 2020). Our results also showed that men try to address PV victimization through various routes, including addressing abuse directly with their partner and seeking informal and formal sources of support. There is a limited amount of literature on the potential consequences on male victims’ help-seeking (Bates, 2020; Cook, 2009; Douglas & Hines, 2011; Gadd et al., 2002; Machado et al., 2016). The initial research in this area (Cook, 2009; Gadd et al., 2002) revealed that male victims often resorted to self-isolation, physical exercise as a coping tool, and asking for support from third parties. They also used strategies such as not hitting back, hiding, masking the violence, or calling the police (Cook, 2009). More recently, Machado and colleagues (2016), found that men have used numerous strategies to cope with their partner’s aggression (e.g., do something in isolation; engaging with the partner in some way; seeking help), but based on the results of the current study, if male victims attempt to directly address the pattern of abuse within or outside of the relationship, then this can risk causing a negative reaction or additional negative consequences for the men. For instance, when participants tried to address the abuse directly with their partner, their claims were often ignored or disregarded, or the pattern of mistreatment escalated with the female partner harming the participant socially or legally. This pattern may also contribute to male victims not reporting abuse, utilizing independent

coping strategies, or socially withdrawing. This finding is one of the unique contributions of our study.

Contrary to previous research (Douglas & Hines, 2011), we found that seeking informal sources of support was reported less frequently than other help seeking strategies. This may be a function of this study's participants wanting to volunteer information about how formal sources failed them, and Douglas and Hines (2011) found that male victims found informal sources of support to be mostly helpful. On the other hand, Walker et al. (2020) found out that gendered stereotypes of PV also seemed to affect family and friends' attitudes toward male victims, which highlight the power of societal perceptions to impact individual experiences of PV.

Many men in the current study reported negative experiences with trying to seek formal help or addressing the abuse with their partner, which is consistent with prior research (e.g., Bates, 2020; Douglas & Hines, 2011; Walker et al., 2020). This study provides further evidence that male victims perceive encountering prejudice and discrimination, perhaps due to imbedded ideologies, perceptions, and beliefs that PV is something that men do to women (Bates, 2020; Hall, 2016). Recently, Walker and colleagues (2020) found that male PV victimization seems incongruent with masculine gender norms of physical and emotional strength and that male victims struggled with the stigma associated with being a male victim of PV.

The one positive formal help-seeking experience that any of our participants reported on was with a mental health professional. This is consistent with prior quantitative research that shows that male PV victims find mental health professionals largely helpful (Douglas & Hines, 2011), and a qualitative study of focus groups on male PV victims in four Western nations that found the same, as long as the mental health treatment was individual treatment and not couples treatment (Hines & Lysova, 2016).

Limitations

These findings must be viewed in light of the limitations of this study. As with all qualitative studies, generalizability is a concern, which may be further exacerbated by the recruitment process for this study. Male PV victims were recruited online; they had to see the advertisement and think that it applied to their situation, and further, they had to report at least one instance of physical PV and report seeking help. Male PV victims who did not seek help, did not see the ad or have access to the Internet, did not feel the ad applied to them or did not want to take the time to participate, experienced PV that was not physical (e.g., psychological or sexual only) were excluded from participation.

Moreover, participants were asked to provide open ended feedback to researchers on the survey content and not all participants responded to this open question. Future studies could try to adopt an in-depth method to collect data by interviewing in-person participants in order to obtain data that might be richer and more focused. In addition, there is a need to collect more diverse samples and studies in different countries in order to address cultural issues and understand if there are unique issues.

Conclusions

The current study highlights the need to expand quantitative research with in-depth qualitative studies that probe deeper into the context of PV for male victims. This information can contribute to the development of more accurate models of how to conceptualize and respond to PV in different types of relationships. Therein, one important effort in this regard is to perform additional research on male victims of PV in order to effectively inform policymakers, decision-makers, and professionals in the field of the unique challenges faced by male PV victims. Further, this research suggests that need to develop better screening and intervention/prevention measures, as well as methods that are more appropriate to address the concerns and needs of this population.

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Public significance statement

A qualitative analysis of abuse and help-seeking experiences of men who are victims of PV reveals that men report being under-acknowledged, mistreated, and penalized when trying to seek help or address the patterns of abuse in their intimate relationships. The findings also highlight the potential societal issues that male victims perceived as contributing to male victimization and the lack of available resources for them.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of the Male Helpseekers and their Abusive Partners

	Population-Based Sample (<i>n</i> = 59) % or <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)
<i>Male Participant Demographic Characteristics</i>	
Age	45.94 (7.30)
White	91.5
Black/African American	6.8
Hispanic/Latino	1.7
Asian	3.4
Native American	6.8
Income ¹	5.31 (2.92)
Educational Status ²	44.8
<i>Female Partner Demographic Characteristics</i>	
Age	42.32 (8.49)
White	81.4
Black/African American	3.4
Hispanic/Latina	8.5
Asian	8.5
Native American	1.7
Income (in thousands) ¹	3.97 (2.76)
Educational Status ²	3.90 (1.61)
<i>Relationship Demographics</i>	
Currently in a Relationship	21.2
Relationship Length (months)	132.17 (104.04)
Time since relationship ended (months)	46.97 (51.87)
# of Minors involved in Relationship	1.33 (1.19)

¹Income: Where 3=\$35,000-44,999; 4=\$45,000-54,999; and 5=\$55,000-64,999

²Educational Status: Percent with college education or higher

Table 2

Discourses of men victims: Main themes and sub-themes.

Theme	Sub-theme
Forms of abuse	Direct forms of abuse targeted at participant by partner
	Social and indirect abuse of participant by partner through parties outside of the relationship
Impact of abuse	Consequences prior to any form of help-seeking, addressing
	Consequences of addressing abuse directly with partner
	Consequences of involving informal sources of support
	Consequences of involving formal sources of support
Male Victims' Perceptions of PV, Male Victims, and Worth in Society	Lack of sources of support and understanding for male victims
	Current legal statutes that may harm the interests of male partners
	Perceived forms of societal, legal, and administrative bias

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