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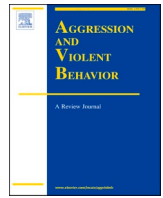
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# “It was different because I was a man”: A qualitative evidence synthesis exploring the lived experiences of adult male survivors of female-perpetrated intimate partner abuse

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## ABSTRACT

Between 2018 and 2019, approximately four in 100 men experienced intimate partner abuse (IPA) in England and Wales. The impact of IPA can be severe and pervasive, including physical and mental health difficulties. There are currently few studies exploring the experiences and needs of adult male survivors of IPA, with a large proportion of the literature focusing on the victimization of women. A literature review in the form of a synthesis of qualitative research exploring the experiences of adult male survivors of IPA was therefore completed. 12 studies using a range of qualitative methodologies were included in the review. Original extracts from the data, as well as the first author's interpretations, were included in the synthesis to identify common themes and concepts across the studies. Five superordinate themes were identified. The concept of 'hegemonic masculinity' was present within all of these themes. The review presented here highlights the types of abuse men experience, how they try to make sense of and cope with these, the process of help-seeking, and the way in which societal views of masculinity color their experiences. These themes illustrate the significant impact IPA can have on men, and how their experiences compare to those of adult female survivors of IPA.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Intimate partner abuse

The World Health Organization (WHO, 2013) describes intimate partner abuse (IPA), also known as domestic abuse, as a social and public health issue which can lead to significant physical and mental health difficulties. In the year ending March 2021, there were nearly 1.5 million IPA-related incidents recorded across England and Wales, including people of all genders (Elkin, 2021). In the US, it is estimated that one in four women, and one in 10 men, have experienced IPA at some point in their life (Smith et al., 2018). A literature review of 162 articles undertaken across Asia, Africa, Latin America, Europe, and the Middle East concluded that IPA was prevalent world-wide (Esquivel-Santoveña et al., 2013).

Both in the UK and the US, IPA is defined as a single incident or multiple occasions of behavior involving threats, violence and/or abuse (Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), 2017; Elkin, 2019; Office of Justice

Programs: U.S Department of Justice, 2011). IPA can include (but is not limited to) psychological, physical, sexual, financial or emotional abuse (Elkin, 2018). Controlling and/or coercive behaviors were also introduced as a criminal offence in the UK in the form of Section 76 of the Serious Crime Act 2015, and often form part of IPA (CPS, 2017; Elkin, 2018). While coercive control is recognized within legislation around IPA in some states in the US, this is not the case for all (Bunch, 2022).

The extensive physical and psychological effects of IPA on both men and women across the world has been widely documented (Esquivel-Santoveña et al., 2013; Peterman et al., 2015). This includes (i) physical injury, such as bruising, cuts, and broken bones, (ii) emotional distress, including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), (iii) substance misuse difficulties, and (iv) loss of employment (Campbell, 2002; Watson & Parsons, 2005). In addition, those around survivors are also affected – for example, approximately one in five children in the UK have experienced parental IPA, with exposure thereto in childhood increasing the likelihood of developing anxiety, depression, and aggressive behaviors, as well as the risk of experiencing IPA in

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their own relationships as adults, either as a survivor or perpetrator (Fehringer & Hindin, 2009; Temple et al., 2013). This highlights the impact IPA can have on both survivors and those around them.

### 1.2. IPA and gender

The Office for National Statistics (ONS), as well as studies from across the world, indicate that women are more likely to be survivors of IPA than men (Esquivel-Santoveña et al., 2013). Between 2020 and 2021, 73 % of IPA-related incidents reported to the police in England and Wales were against women (Elkin, 2021). However, both men and women can be survivors of IPA, and approximately four in 100 men experienced IPA in England and Wales between 2018 and 2019 (Elkin, 2019). Furthermore, according to Esquivel-Santoveña et al. (2013), 35 % of women and 21 % of men in the US and other English-speaking Western countries reported experiencing IPA at least once in their life. It is important to note that this is likely an underestimate due to survivors' reluctance around reporting these crimes – for example, Drijber et al. (2013) explored the characteristics of adult male survivors of IPA in the Netherlands using an online questionnaire. Results revealed that only 15 % of participants had reported their experiences of abuse by a female partner to the police, with the most prominent barriers being a belief that the police will not take action, or that their reports will not be taken seriously or believed (Drijber et al., 2013; Huntley et al., 2019). This supports the notion that existing figures of adult male survivors who experience IPA represent an underestimate, both in the literature and in national statistics.

IPA against women is a highly researched topic (Alhabib et al., 2010), with findings supporting the development of national policies, support services, and interventions for survivors, as well as generally raising awareness of this issue. There is also a body of literature which focuses on the perpetration of IPA by men, including around treatment programs for these individuals, their effectiveness, as well as ways to improve interventions for this population (Saunders, 2008; Smedslund et al., 2011). However, there is currently a lack of research focusing on the victimization of men (Tilbrook et al., 2010). Chaudhuri (2012) suggests that there is a reluctance in both the media and academic literature to recognize and discuss IPA beyond the notion of adult female victimization and male perpetration. As a result, it can be argued that the understanding of adult male victimization is limited, and the needs of this population have been somewhat overlooked (Huntley et al., 2019). This is further reflected in the lack of support services available for adult male survivors of IPA compared to adult female survivors. Finally, training for healthcare professionals regarding recognizing signs of IPA is heavily focused on adult female survivors, and many IPA screening tools have been developed with a female population in mind (Drijber et al., 2013).

More recently, there has been a move toward acknowledging the extent to which IPA can impact upon men as well as women (Huntley et al., 2019). Quantitative and survey-based studies have been completed which estimate the prevalence of female-perpetrated IPA, including the type and severity of abuse, as well as the risk factors for experiencing IPA (Dim & Elabor-Idemudia, 2018; Hester et al., 2015; Hines & Douglas, 2016). For example, while Dim and Elabor-Idemudia (2018) suggest that experiences of psychological abuse may be more prevalent in adult male survivors of IPA than adult female survivors, men also experience sexual violence, and both physical and emotional abuse (Hines & Douglas, 2016).

The impact of female-to-male IPA has also been explored quantitatively. According to Hester et al. (2015), men who have experienced IPA are more likely to experience symptoms of depression and anxiety disorders. While such studies are useful in raising awareness of adult male victimization, less is known about the lived experiences of men, given that the use of qualitative approaches to exploring this topic is still an emerging area (Huntley et al., 2019). It is therefore of great importance that adult male survivors of IPA are given a voice in order to ensure that

national policies, support services, and interventions are developed to address the needs of this population.

### 1.3. Qualitative evidence synthesis

While methods for synthesizing quantitative research are well established, methods for synthesizing qualitative research are more recently emerging due to an increasing number of qualitative studies being published. Noblit and Hare (1988) outlined a seven-phase process for synthesizing qualitative research (see Table 1). There are various approaches to synthesizing qualitative research. More specifically, meta-ethnography involves understanding and interpreting participants' direct quotes and authors' interpretations of their results across multiple studies. As such, both of these are treated as original data, which are then synthesized across studies in order to develop new concepts and/or themes to answer a particular research question (Britten et al., 2002; Sattar et al., 2021). A meta-ethnographic approach is often used when exploring perceptions or experiences (Kastner et al., 2016), and can be used to provide deeper analysis, novel research questions, as well as prevent research duplication (Atkins et al., 2008).

### 1.4. Present review

A qualitative evidence synthesis was therefore chosen for the purpose of answering the research question of the present review, namely 'what are the lived experiences of adult male survivors of IPA?'. The chosen approach was deemed to be the most appropriate, given that qualitative research is best placed to answer the research question in light of the in-depth and rich personal accounts it generates about people's life experiences. Furthermore, numerous systematic literature reviews and meta-analyses exist of quantitative research studies that explored this topic (e.g. Chan, 2011; Golding, 1999; Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2012). As such, a review of the existing qualitative research in this area is important in order to further our understanding of adult male survivors' experiences of IPA.

The present review aims to identify what the available qualitative literature tells us about the lived experiences of adult male survivors of IPA perpetrated by female partners. In doing so, the review adds to this emerging field of enquiry by synthesizing the findings from existing qualitative studies. This will further develop our understanding of the experiences and needs of adult male survivors of IPA by providing an overview of the current evidence base, ultimately informing

**Table 1**  
Noblit and Hare's (1988) seven phases of meta-ethnography.

Phase	Description
1. Getting started	Identifying an interest which could be informed by synthesizing the available qualitative data.
2. Deciding what is relevant to the initial interest	Systematic literature search to identify studies which are relevant to the study interest and could contribute to the area of interest.
3. Reading the studies	Becoming familiar with the studies identified to be included in the meta-ethnography. This includes identifying concepts and themes within the studies and what these say about the area of interest.
4. Determining how the studies are related	Metaphors, themes, phrases and ideas which are used within each study to begin identifying how the studies relate to each other. This may be reciprocal, refutational or line-of-argument syntheses.
5. Translating the studies into one another	Synthesizing the data by continuously comparing key concepts, themes and interpretations within and across each study.
6. Synthesizing translations	Comparing the translations identified within the previous step to see if there are common translations.
7. Expressing the synthesis	Communicating the synthesis at an appropriate level for the audience you wish to communicate it to.

recommendations for clinical practice and future research.

## 2. Method

A qualitative evidence synthesis using a meta-ethnographic approach was used to synthesize the available qualitative literature in this area in order to meet the aims of the review. Noblit and Hare's (1988) seven-phase approach was used to guide the analytic process. These steps are outlined in Table 1.

### 2.1. Phase 1: Getting started

Phase 1 includes identifying a research area which would benefit from a synthesis of the available literature in order to further inform and develop our understanding thereof. This started with an interest in IPA, and the impact of this more broadly upon women, men, and children. I<sup>2</sup> conducted initial literature searches in these areas to better understand the available literature, as well as identify any existing meta-syntheses. As outlined above, there is currently limited understanding of the experiences and needs of adult male survivors of IPA perpetrated by a female partner. This appears to be an important gap in the literature, as such understanding may facilitate the development of better support services for this population (which, in turn, may subsequently increase help-seeking, and reporting by adult male survivors of IPA). Following the initial literature searches, my initial research interest was refined to answer the following research question: 'What are the lived experiences of adult male survivors of IPA?'

### 2.2. Phase 2: Deciding what is relevant to the initial interest

Following establishing an area of interest, a systematic literature search was conducted to identify any relevant studies that had used a qualitative methodology.

#### 2.2.1. Search strategy

Web of Science, PsychInfo, Embase, and ProQuest Social Sciences databases were searched using a number of search terms (see Table 2). These databases allow a search across 'all years', covering the time period of 1900–2019 (i.e. the time at which the review was conducted). As this is an emerging area of enquiry, the search was not limited to peer-reviewed journals, and therefore enabled the identification of theses and dissertations. As such, it was deemed important to also search for theses and dissertations specifically, which was done via the Electronic Thesis Online Service (ETHOS), ProQuest Dissertation and Thesis Global, and the Open Access Thesis and Dissertation databases.

**Table 2**  
Database search terms.

	Search term or restriction
1	Experience* OR "lived experience**"
2	"domestic violen**" OR "domestic abus**" OR "intimate partner violen**" OR "intimate partner abus**" OR "partner violen**" OR "partner abus**"
3	Survivor OR suffer*
4	Male OR men OR man
5	Combine 1,2,3 and 4 with AND
6	NOT Perp*
7	NOT elder
8	NOT child
9	NOT youth
Restricted to	Full text, English language and human

A total of 1477 articles were returned overall. Two of these were identified through backward searching, that is, through the studies being cited in the articles that were returned by the search. Search terms 1–4 returned a very large body of literature, with a number of articles relating to elder abuse or abuse in adolescent relationships. As such, search restrictions 6–9 were added. Following the removal of duplicates, and applying the inclusion criteria outlined in Tables 3, 12 relevant qualitative studies were identified by the first author for inclusion in the review. Of these, three results relate to doctoral theses (Christofi, 2019; Hogan, 2016; Josolyn, 2011), and one relates to a Master-level dissertation (Du Toit, 2011). Where there was uncertainty about the relevance of a study, and whether it should be included, the first author sought advice and input from the second author in order to ensure that a consistent decision was made. The search process, including reasons for excluding articles, is documented in Fig. 1.

### 2.3. Phase 3: Reading the studies

#### 2.3.1. Study characteristics

Phase 3 includes becoming familiar with the studies that have been identified for inclusion in the review. I did this by reading through the studies in detail, and extracting information about each study's aims, participants and data analysis. Over half of the studies included in the review were conducted in Europe, including the UK, Portugal, and Italy. The remaining studies were conducted in the US, Canada, South Africa, and Cyprus. Three studies that were included in the review are case studies. Two studies used an online questionnaire or survey design with open-ended questions in order to collect data from a large sample of participants ( $n > 100$ ). One study used diary entries in combination with in-depth interviews, and the remaining studies used semi-structured interviews for the purpose of data collection.

A total of 506 adult male survivors of IPA were participants across the 12 studies included in the review. All were in a heterosexual relationship at the time of experiencing IPA. The age range of participants was large, ranging from 18 to 82 years, although it is important to note that exact ages were not reported within all studies. Finally, several different qualitative data analysis approaches were employed, including thematic analysis, discourse analysis, and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). While there is debate over whether meta-ethnography should include studies that have adopted different methodologies (Walsh & Downe, 2005), the decision to do so was made in light of the limited number of studies that have explored this phenomenon qualitatively. As such, studies with different methodologies were included to gather a sample of papers large enough to develop new insights, understandings, and conclusions. Table 4 provides an overview of the study characteristics, including participant details, study aims, and qualitative methodology.

#### 2.3.2. Quality appraisal

As part of becoming familiar with the studies in Phase 3, it was important to assess the quality of the articles individually. To do so, I used the quality appraisal criteria developed by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (National Institute for Clinical Excellence, 2012). These criteria are outlined in Table 5. Each item in the checklist

**Table 3**  
Criteria for inclusion in review.

Criteria for inclusion in review
1. Papers must be in English.
2. The full text must be accessible
3. Papers must use a qualitative methodology.
4. Papers must explore the lived-experiences of a male survivor of IPA, perpetrated by a female intimate-partner.
5. The sample must be comprised of males only.
6. Papers must present original data.
7. Papers must include a sample of participants over the age of 18.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout the article, 'I' is used in places to refer to the first author.

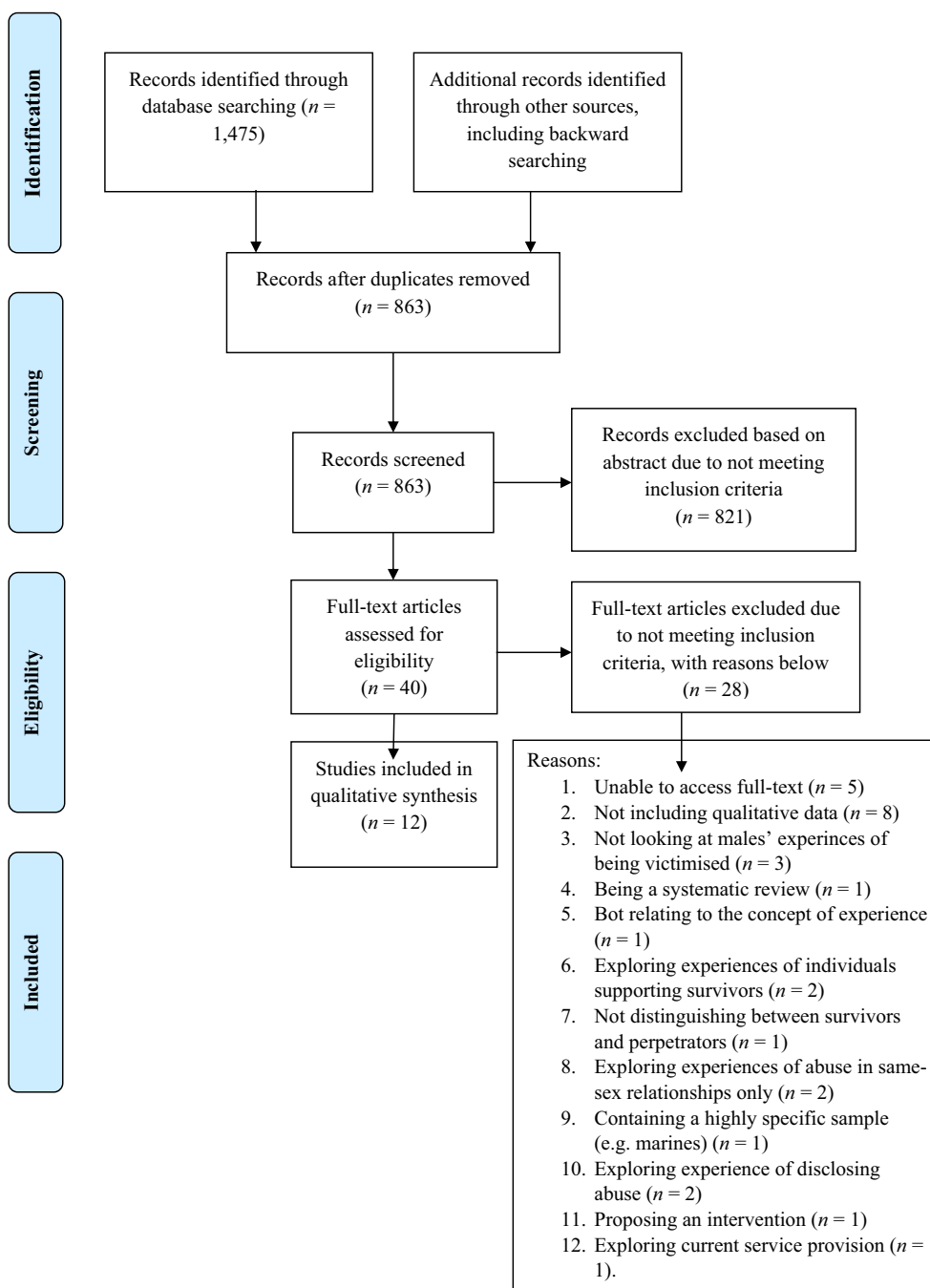


Fig. 1. PRISMA flow diagram of the systematic literature search process (Moher et al., 2009).

was coded green if the criterion was met, amber if it was partially met, and red if it was not met. An overall quality rating was then compiled based on the ratio of strengths to weaknesses, while considering whether the results of the study may have changed if more of the quality criteria had been met. An overview of the quality ratings is presented in Table 6 (studies are presented in the same order as in Table 4).

Each study was rated as 0, 1 or 2 on each criterion, with 0 representing ‘criterion not reported/met’, 1 representing ‘criterion partially met’, and 2 representing ‘criterion fully met’. It is important to note that this scoring was based on the assessment of the first author, and it is possible that others may rate the quality of the articles differently.

#### 2.4. Data analysis and synthesis (Phases 4, 5 and 6)

Phases 4–6 involve extracting information from the studies to identify how they are related to each other. Studies may be related in a reciprocal manner (in which the results support each other). Studies may also be related in a refutational manner (in which the results of the studies refute or contradict each other). Phases 4–6 were applied in a dynamic manner which involved moving back and forth through these phases.

In order to begin this process, I created a data extraction grid using an Excel spreadsheet; this included the names of the themes, a description of each theme, the authors' understanding of each theme, as well as my own interpretation of it (if it differed from that of the authors). Quotes from participants and the authors were also included.



**Table 4**  
Characteristics of studies included in the review.

Title and author	Country	Study aims	Participants	Method of data analysis
1. A marked man: a case of female-perpetrated intimate partner abuse (Allen-Collinson, 2009)	UK	To address a gap in the literature relating to qualitative accounts of intimate partner abuse from an adult male survivor's perspective.	One white male in his mid-fifties – exact age and further details not provided.	Thematic content analysis of a diary written in third person by the participant, and a series of five interviews.
2. A narrative inquiry into the experience of a male survivor of domestic violence (Du Toit, 2011)	South Africa	To give a voice to adult male survivors of IPA by exploring the experience of a heterosexual man in an abusive relationship, taking a social constructionist view.	One 54-year-old American male.	The author describes the analysis as circular, involving coding themes, and taking a categorical-content perspective.
3. Men's experiences of violence and abuse from a female intimate partner: power, masculinity and institutional systems (Joselyn, 2011)	UK	To explore how men construct their experience of abuse from a female intimate partner. To highlight internal and external practices acting on this population which impacts upon their identity, and response to the abuse.	Nine males aged 38–70 years ( $M = 52$ years). Various cultural backgrounds, including Indian, Black British, White British, and South African. All participants had separated from the partner from whom they experienced abuse.	Discourse analysis.
4. The lived experiences of a male survivor of Intimate Partner Violence: A Qualitative Case Study (Nayback-Beebe & Yoder, 2012)	USA	To explore/understand the lived experience of a male survivor of IPA, and the context in which the abuse happened.	One 44-year-old Caucasian male. Inclusion criteria ensured that he was either in the process of leaving, or had left the relationship.	A phenomenological qualitative case study using Colaizzi's method.
5. When the Woman Gets Violent: the construction of domestic abuse experience from heterosexual men's perspective (Entilli & Cipolletta, 2017)	Italy	To investigate the experience of abuse from the perspective of men who are survivors of IPA perpetrated by female partners. To shed light on abusive and coercive behaviors that could be perpetrated by both men and women.	20 Italian men aged 26–66 years ( $M = 47$ years). Ten participants were still in the abusive relationship, or had ended the relationship <12 months before the study. Ten participants had ended the abusive relationship >12 months before taking part in the study.	Discourse analysis with a qualitative approach. Analyzed using ATLAS.TI software, with the aim of reducing data being contaminated with subjective opinions.
6. It's deemed unmanly': men's experiences of intimate partner violence (IPV) (Morgan & Wells, 2016)	UK	To explore how male survivors of female-perpetrated IPA make sense of their experiences.	Seven men. Participants were not asked to disclose demographic information. Relationship length ranged from 3 to 13 years. Time since relationship ended ranged from 8 months to 14 years.	Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA).
7. Men's experiences of female-perpetrated IPV: a qualitative exploration (Hogan, 2016)	UK	To explore men's experiences of female-perpetrated IPA, their experiences of help-seeking, and/or their expectations of accessing support. To explore barriers to men leaving the abusive relationship.	23 men aged 24–74 years ( $M = 47$ years). Various ethnicities, including White British, British Pakistani, and Black Afro-Caribbean. 17 participants reported being in one abusive relationship in their lifetime, and six reported two abusive relationships. Length of abusive relationship ranged from 6 weeks to 31 years ( $M = 12$ years).	Thematic analysis.
8. Exploring help seeking experiences of male victims of female perpetrators of IPV. (Machado et al., 2017)	Portugal	To explore what forms of abuse adult male survivors experience, and what consequences of the abuse men report. To explore how adult male survivors cope with IPA, and their experiences of seeking help/support.	10 males aged 35–75 years ( $M = 51.6$ years). The majority of participants had left the abusive relationship by the time the study was conducted, with two men still in an abusive relationship. Mean length of relationship was 15.5 years. Cultural and ethnic information was not discussed.	Thematic analysis.
9. "How many silences are there?" Men's experience of victimization in Intimate Partner Relationships. (Brooks et al., 2017)	Canada	To explore men's experiences of being a survivor of IPA, with a particular focus on masculinity.	9 men aged 19–59 years. Authors reported ethnicities as Caucasian, European, or First Nations. Information on length of abusive relationship, or whether participants were in the relationship at the time of the study, was not discussed.	Thematic analysis.
10. An exploration into the experiences of Cypriot male victims of domestic abuse; An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (Christofi, 2019)	Cyprus	To explore the lived experiences of men in Cyprus who reported IPA from a female intimate partner. This includes how the men made sense of their experiences, how the experience impacted upon them, their experiences of seeking support, and any barriers they faced in the process of seeking support.	6 men of Cypriot nationality, and living in Cyprus. All participants were English speaking. Mean age was 42 years. Further demographic information is not reported.	Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA).

(continued on next page)

Table 4 (continued)

Title and author	Country	Study aims	Participants	Method of data analysis
11. "Walking on eggshells": A qualitative examination of men's experiences of intimate partner violence. (Bates, 2019)	UK	To explore the impact of culture on this experience of being an adult male survivor. To qualitatively explore men's experiences of intimate partner violence (IPV) from their female partners using an anonymous, qualitative online survey.	161 men aged 20–82 years ( $M = 44$ ). The majority of participants identified as White (77.6 %), with others identifying as having a mixed ethnic background (5.6 %), Asian (1.9 %), Black (0.6 %), Other (2 %), or choosing not to answer (13 %). The majority of participants identified as British (57.9 %), followed by American (15.1 %), Australian/New Zealand (10.7 %), Canadian (5.7 %), European (7.5 %), Other (3.1 %), or choosing not to answer (1.2 %). Less than half of the sample identified as being in a relationship (39.8 %).	Thematic analysis.
12. Male victims of female-perpetrated intimate partner violence, help-seeking, and reporting behaviors: A qualitative study. Psychology of men and masculinities. (Walker et al., 2019).	Australia	To increase understanding of adult male experiences of female-perpetrated IPA by exploring their experiences of abuse, help-seeking, and reporting. This paper aimed to avoid using terminology with strong implications regarding gender and masculinity. An anonymous, qualitative online survey was used to meet these aims.	258 men aged 18–77 years ( $M = 40.14$ ). 60.9 % were in an intimate relationship, 32.2 % had never been married, and 32.2 % were married or lived with their partner. Almost all participants were living in an Australian state or territory. Information regarding ethnicity was not reported.	Thematic analysis.

Following the initial extraction of data, I then explored how the data were related to each other. I began by identifying common concepts and characteristics which appeared across the papers, grouping them together by using a color-coding method within the data extraction grid. This identified both reciprocal and refutational translations. These initial translations were part of Phase 4. I then went on to continuously compare the key concepts and characteristics across each study, and began to group similar characteristics as I moved through Phase 5. Through continuously comparing the key concepts, I began to develop an overarching understanding of each concept, and labelled these based on my interpretation, moving into Phase 6. During this phase, my initial labelling of themes changed, and some separate themes merged, while other themes split into multiple separate themes.

The synthesis process resulted in five themes being identified. Before finalizing these themes, I revisited my initial extraction grid to confirm that these themes accurately represented the data within them, as well as ensuring that no data had been missed. These themes are built upon and supported by synthesized data from the 12 original articles below. Discussions and consultations took place throughout the analytical process with (i) the second author; (ii) two members of staff in the Centre for Applied Psychology, University of Birmingham, who are also clinical psychologists; and (iii) three trainee clinical psychologists who were also completing qualitative evidence syntheses. The latter two occurred within the context of small-group workshops which are organized for trainees on doctorate programs for the purpose of facilitating guidance and support throughout this process. In order to ensure reliability, a fellow trainee clinical psychologist analyzed the initial extraction grid and offered suggestions on any themes they noticed within the data. These observations were then compared with my own analysis, and any conflicting interpretations were discussed, resulting in my revisiting the themes accordingly.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Phase 7: Expressing the synthesis

A total of five themes, with one theme encompassing two sub-themes, were identified to best represent the findings of the articles

included in the present review. An overview of the themes is presented in Table 7, and each one is discussed in more detail thereafter. Table 7 includes a number of quotes both from the participants, and the author (s) of the articles from which the data have been derived. The concept of 'hegemonic masculinity' was present in a large proportion of the articles, and is represented by most of the themes identified.

#### 3.2. Multiple forms of abuse

A total of nine studies contributed to this theme. Across the studies, participants described experiencing abuse in several different ways. This includes physical violence, verbal and psychological abuse, sexual abuse, coercive control, and isolating the individual from their friends and family, as explained by Machado et al. (2017):

"The majority of participants reported being subject to five types of direct violence, (i.e. violence perpetrated directly against them): psychological, physical, economic, stalking and legal administrative (i.e. when one partner uses the legal and administrative system to the detriment of the other partner)" (author, Machado et al., 2017, p. 517).

Participants across a number of studies also reported experiencing indirect abuse, describing experiences in which their partner made false allegations of violence about them to the police, friends, and family. Indirect abuse also included restricting contact to children or threatening to/actually directing abuse at the children themselves. Authors across the studies suggest that participants' accounts of experiencing multiple forms of abuse support the notion that female-to-male perpetrated IPA is an "existent phenomenon" (Christofi, 2019, p. 95), and that males experience IPA in similar forms to females. Concepts of direct and indirect abuse were very salient across the articles, and they will therefore be discussed as separate sub-themes below. Furthermore, it was apparent that the abuse occurred as "a pattern of abuse which had occurred across time" (Morgan & Wells, 2016, p. 409), often increasing in intensity as the relationship progressed (5–9). This often involved "subtle changes in the format and method of abuse... the escalation from predominantly verbal to physical abuse" (Hogan, 2016, p. 137).

**Table 5**  
Quality appraisal criteria developed by NICE.

1. Theoretical approach	
1.1. Is the qualitative approach appropriate? e.g. does the research question aim to understand processes or subjective experiences? Is a qualitative approach a better fit for the question than a quantitative approach?	
1.2. Is the study clear in what it seeks to do? e.g. are the aims and objections of the study clear? Is appropriate literature and theory discussed?	
2. Study design	
2.1. How defensible/rigorous is the research design/methodology? e.g. is the research design suitable to answer the research question? Is a rationale given for the approach, sampling strategy, data collection, and analysis methods used?	
2.2. Method of data collection. This criterion was added by the researcher. Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were rated as '2' (green) due to the benefit of being able to identify social and non-verbal cues. Telephone interviews, interviews conducted using online video technology, e-mails, or studies using open-ended surveys were rated as '1' (amber) (Opdenakker, 2006).	
3. Data collection	
3.1. How well was the data collection carried out? e.g. are the data collection methods clearly outlined and is the method appropriate to answer the research question? Was data collected in a systematic way?	
4. Trustworthiness	
4.1. Is the role of the researcher clearly described? e.g. is reference made to the relationship between the researcher and participants? Is it clear how the research was explained to participants?	
4.2. Is the context clearly described? e.g. is information about the participants, the setting and context of the research described? Is context bias discussed?	
4.3. Were the methods reliable? e.g. was the data collected using multiple methods? Is triangulation discussed? Do the data collection methods explore what they set out to do?	
5. Analysis	
5.1. Is the data analysis sufficiently rigorous? e.g. is the procedure clearly outlined and described? Is the analysis systematic and reliable? Is the way in which themes were identified explicit?	
5.2. Is the data 'rich'? e.g. has the context of the data been described? Has sufficient detail been described?	
5.3. Is the analysis reliable? e.g. did more than one researcher analyze the data and if so, is it clear how differences of opinion were resolved? Were participants able to feedback on the analysis?	
5.4. Are the findings convincing? e.g. are findings reported and presented in a clear manner? Are extracts/quotes from the original data included and are they appropriately referenced?	
5.5. Are the findings relevant to the aims of the study?	
5.6. Conclusion. e.g. are there clear links between data, interpretation and conclusions which are drawn? Are conclusions clear and reasonable? Have other possible explanations been discussed? Do the conclusions enhance the research area? Are implications of the findings discussed? Is there a discussion of limitations?	
6. Ethics	
6.1. How clear and coherent is the reporting of ethics? e.g. have ethical considerations been discussed, such as consent and anonymity? Have possible consequences of the research been discussed? Was the study approved by an ethics committee?	
<b>Overall assessment: how well was the study conducted? ++, + or -</b>	

3.2.1. Direct abuse

Nine studies contributed to this sub-theme which represents the direct abuse participants experienced by their partners. Hogan (2016) suggests that there is a “common assumption that physical violence perpetrated by women against their male partner is trivial in nature” (p. 48), however, the evidence contradicts this assumption. Across the studies, the data showed that participants experienced direct abuse, including physical violence and threats, as well as psychological, emotional, and sexual abuse. For example, one participant described extreme, pervasive physical, and emotional abuse:

“It was scary, because there were many times plates, cups smashed, shards of glass going into my leg, stuff like that, where she'd open up the spoon drawer, the utility drawer and start chucking...I wasn't

**Table 6**  
Quality ratings of studies included in the review.

Study	1. Theoretical approach		2. Study design		3. Data collection		4. Trustworthiness		5. Analysis		6. Ethics		Overall assessment (++, +, -)			
	1.1 Is a qualitative approach appropriate?	1.2 Is the study clear in what it seeks to do?	2.1 How defensible/rigorous is the research design /methodology?	2.2. Method of data collection	3.1 How well was the data collection carried out?	4.1 Is the role of the researcher clearly described?	4.2 Is the context clearly described?	4.3 Were the methods reliable?	5.1 Are the data rich?	5.2 Is the analysis reliable?	5.3 Are the findings convincing?	5.4 Is the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?		5.5 Are the findings relevant to the aims of the study?	5.6 Conclusions	6.1 How clear and coherent is the reporting of ethics?
1	2	1	2	2	2	0	1	2	1	0	1	0	2	1	2	+
2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	0	1	2	1	2	2	2	2	+
3	2	2	2	2	2	2	1	2	2	1	2	2	2	2	2	++
4	2	2	2	2	2	0	1	0	1	0	2	2	2	2	2	+
5	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	0	2	1	1	1	2	2	2	+
6	2	2	2	2	2	0	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	1	+
7	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	1	2	1	2	2	2	2	2	++
8	2	2	2	2	2	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	++
9	2	2	1	2	2	0	1	1	0	0	2	1	2	2	0	+
10	2	2	2	2	1	2	0	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	+
11	2	2	2	2	1	0	1	1	2	0	1	1	2	2	0	+
12	2	2	2	2	1	1	1	0	1	2	2	1	2	2	0	+



**Table 7**

An overview of each theme, including quotes from author(s) and participants.

Super-ordinate theme	Sub-theme	Number of papers contributing to theme ( <i>papers which contribute</i> )	Participant and authors quotes supporting theme
Multiple forms of abuse ( <i>this includes the abuse being patterns of behavior and not isolated events</i> )		9 (4–12)	<p>“My partner denied all access (custody and communication) with my son.” – (Walker et al., 2019, p. 4), quote from participant.</p> <p>“None of the participants experienced the abuse as a series of single isolated incidents – they emphasized a pattern of abuse, which had occurred across time.” – (Morgan &amp; Wells, 2016, p. 409), quote from author.</p> <p>“Subtle changes in the format and method of abuse they experienced, from one-off events, to something more routine, and the escalation from predominately verbal to physical abuse.” – (Hogan, 2016, p. 54), quote from author.</p>
	Direct	9 (4–12)	<p>“The majority of participants reported being subject to five types of direct violence, i.e. violence perpetrated directly against them: psychological, physical, economic, stalking and legal administrative (i.e. when one partner uses the legal and administrative system to the detriment of the other partner).” – (Machado et al., 2017, p. 517), quote from author.</p> <p>“Various forms of verbal abuse were described... screamed at... name calling... criticized or belittled.” – (Bates, 2019, p. 5), quote from author.</p> <p>“It was scary, because there were many times plates, cups smashed, shards of glass going into my leg, stuff like that, where she’d open up the spoon drawer, the utility drawer and start chucking... I wasn’t allowed to listen to a female singer on the radio... it was constant, whether it was the verbal or the actual physical, it was there all the time.” – (Brooks et al., 2017, p. 8), quote from participant.</p> <p>“I was in fact severely and barbarically injured. I was kicked in</p>

**Table 7 (continued)**

Super-ordinate theme	Sub-theme	Number of papers contributing to theme ( <i>papers which contribute</i> )	Participant and authors quotes supporting theme
	Indirect	7 (4–7, 9–11)	<p>the head and in my ribs with sharp-toed boots. When I went to hospital, I thought that I had broken my ribs” (Machado et al., 2017, p. 517), quote from participant.</p> <p>“We are talking about absolutely extremely aggressive [violence] you know, attack on my face with deep cuts. I’ve had to have plastic surgery on my skin.” – (Morgan &amp; Wells, 2016, p. 410), quote from participant.</p> <p>“His female partner used sexual aggression, including insisting on sex.” – (Hogan, 2016, p. 49), quote from author.</p> <p>“There were several descriptions of sexual assault and instances of forced penetration.” – (Bates, 2019, p. 16), quote from author.</p> <p>“My partner pressured me into sex when I didn’t want to by threatening to leave me if I didn’t” (Walker, 2019, p. 4), quote from participant.</p> <p>“All those things I heard from her... the constant accusations and saying that I was worthless and the nasty things she always said about my looks, my body type or my personality, were really bad for my self-esteem, I believed them for a long time.” – (Christofi, 2019, p. 96), quote from the participant.</p> <p>“This was evident in a variety of different aspects. For some respondents, it was the effect of physical violence targeted upon the children (directly or indirectly) that caused the most concern... the fear and anxiety that the participants felt in regard to their children (including potential loss) engendered a sense of hopelessness within a number of participants. Sometimes this resulted in them feeling trapped within the relationship.” – (Morgan &amp; Wells, 2016, p. 411), quote from author.</p> <p>“Some men also</p> <p><i>(continued on next page)</i></p>

Table 7 (continued)

Super-ordinate theme	Sub-theme	Number of papers contributing to theme ( <i>papers which contribute</i> )	Participant and authors quotes supporting theme
Searching for understanding		9 (1–6, 8, 11, 12)	<p>described indirect violence, i.e. violence that was not perpetrated directly against them. More specifically, men reported that their children were also survivors of IPV.” – (Machado et al., 2017, p. 517), quote from author.</p> <p>“Used son, even before he was born, against me to control my behavior. Said she knew he was the only thing I truly loved and would use him to get me to do what she wanted, that she’d never let me see him if I left her.” – (Bates, 2019, p. 20), quote from the participant.</p> <p>“The behavior is constructed as explicable as a result of childhood experiences of the female partner which have caused her ongoing psychological problems.” – (Joselyn, 2011, p. 46), quote from the author.</p> <p>“NH indicated that on many occasions he sought to ascertain what he had ‘done wrong’ and identify what he might do differently to improve matters.” – (Allen-Collinson, 2009, p. 31), quote from the author.</p> <p>“Mental health was a theme that was evident in Tom’s story when he told me more of Lidia’s behavior. Tom saw Lidia’s questionable mental health in the later years of the marriage as an excuse for Lidia’s behavior toward him.” – (Du Toit, 2011, p. 85), quote from the author.</p> <p>“Daniel was stabbed multiple times but continued to say he was responsible for his partner’s violence and he wanted that acknowledged.” – (Brooks et al., 2017, p. 1), quote from the author.</p> <p>“I was starting to think what is it that I have done to cause her to act the way she does. What could I have done differently have change it?... And then you get</p>

Table 7 (continued)

Super-ordinate theme	Sub-theme	Number of papers contributing to theme ( <i>papers which contribute</i> )	Participant and authors quotes supporting theme
Finding ways to live within an abusive environment		6 (1, 5–7, 11, 12)	<p>to the point where you play the scenario in your head over and over and over again. Trying to figure it out... to make some sense of it... and there is no sense to be made.” – (Nayback-Beebe &amp; Yoder, 2012, p. 92), quote from the participant.</p> <p>“I believe she was the only one responsible as she was the one that chose to react in that way and she chose to be abusive.” – (Christofi, 2019, p. 93), quote from the participant.</p> <p>“Participants described using strategies such as leaving home temporarily, trying to hide, trying to calm themselves, trying to leave the relationship, sleeping in separate rooms, crying, isolating themselves, devaluing the situation, avoiding the problem, and consuming alcohol.” – (Machado et al., 2017, p. 518), quote from author.</p> <p>“After an episode of violence, survivors’ strategies including talking to the partner, trying to calm the partner and acting in self-defense. Participants reported having attempting talking to or trying to calm the partner more than acting in self-defense.” – (Machado et al., 2017, p. 519), quote from author.</p> <p>“In order to live within the parameters of an abusive relationship, survivors report developing a range of coping strategies and tactics.”; “NH indicated... staying out of the way of his wife was one of the principal means of avoiding confrontation... sitting in his car, sometimes for hours.” – (Allen-Collinson, 2009, p. 30), quote from author.</p> <p>“I just couldn’t take it anymore... I finally decided to seek some help because I wasn’t able to cope.” – (Christofi, 2019, p. 93).</p>

(continued on next page)

Table 7 (continued)

Super-ordinate theme	Sub-theme	Number of papers contributing to theme ( <i>papers which contribute</i> )	Participant and authors quotes supporting theme
Seeking help ( <i>negative, positive and expectations of help-seeking</i> )		9 (2, 4-8, 10-12)	119), quote from participant. "He constructs himself during the interaction with the police as being positioned as the perpetrator and consequently feeling that his version of events was not believed." – (Josolyn, 2011, p. 61), quote from author. "I went to the hospital to get a medical report and make a complaint of assault. I waited six hours and from behind the curtains, it was 3 in the morning, I heard a nurse that said... 'it's that dumbass who got battered by his wife.' The guy burst out laughing." – (Entilli & Cipolletta, 2017, p. 2336), quote from participant. "The participants' descriptions included both positive and negative experiences of seeking support. Positive experiences for the participants of this study included the reassurance that they are not the only male victims of abuse, which helped to relieve some of the anxiety, fear and shame they were feeling in terms of their experience of victimization, and seeking support, and also, the feeling that they were understood and that their experiences were validated." – (Christofi, 2019, p. 113), quote from author. "Conversely, men reported that they had received valuable support from friends, family and colleagues at work." – (Machado et al., 2017, p. 519), quote from author. "They heard me, they didn't judge me, they gave me support. Sometimes, only hearing what we have to say and having friendly words makes a difference." – (Machado et al., 2017, p. 519), quote from participant. "Some participants described a lack of faith in support services being

Table 7 (continued)

Super-ordinate theme	Sub-theme	Number of papers contributing to theme ( <i>papers which contribute</i> )	Participant and authors quotes supporting theme
Rules of being a man ( <i>the link between internal and external, internal may develop as a result of external rules</i> )		10 (1, 2, 4-6, 8-12)	able to help them, on account that services are not set up to help male survivors." – (Hogan, 2016, p. 74), quote from author. "Participants noted several reasons for not disclosing their experience of abuse to family and friends... survivors reported a fear of being disbelieved or of being thought of as a wimp." – (Walker et al., 2019, p. 7), quote from author. "He feels that women are seen as a protected class by society in regard to domestic violence and because of this special class, many men and children are harmed." – (Du Toit, 2011, p. 87), quote from author. "Gender (a cultural construction which ascribes values, behaviors and expectations to a given biological sex) was a key aspect... in particular, the men described how their abusive partners utilized widely-held gendered stereotypes of abuse (male perpetrator/female survivor) as a means of facilitating and furthering partner abuse." – (Morgan & Wells, 2016, p. 413), quote from author. "I think that in Cyprus, no one even considers that men can also be victims... most people think that only women can be victims... ." – (Christofi, 2019, p. 76), quote from participant. "The man's agency to respond to his wife's behavior or seek support is constrained by his embodied feelings of embarrassment associated with his masculinity." – (Josolyn, 2011, p. 44), quote from the author. "Men described themselves as responsible for their partners, engaging in a caring role and showing extreme tolerance for even severe physical attacks toward them... taking responsibility for their partners and not

(continued on next page)

Table 7 (continued)

Super-ordinate theme	Sub-theme	Number of papers contributing to theme ( <i>papers which contribute</i> )	Participant and authors quotes supporting theme
			<p>reacting to the attacks gave these men the perception of being a good representation of the male stereotype and acting as a good partner.” – (Entilli &amp; Cipolletta, 2017, p. 2333), quote from author.</p> <p>“I never retaliated as I don’t hit women.” – (Bates, 2019, p. 15), quote from participant.</p> <p>“I haven’t measured up in like some way to my perception of what I should be as a male member of society.” – (Hogan, 2016, p. 76), quote from participant.</p>

allowed to listen to a female singer on the radio...it was constant, whether it was the verbal or the actual physical, it was there all the time” (participant, Brooks et al., 2017, p. 8).

Another participant described the injuries they sustained as a result of physical abuse:

“We are talking about absolutely extremely aggressive [violence] you know, attack on my face with deep cuts. I’ve had to have plastic surgery on my skin” (participant, Morgan & Wells, 2016, p. 410).

Across the studies, verbal and emotional abuse was also described, and this was often referred to as the beginning of the abuse prior to any physical violence taking place. One participant described the verbal abuse they suffered as particularly difficult:

“All those things I heard from her... the constant accusations and saying that I was worthless and the nasty things she always said about my looks, my body type or my personality, were really bad for my self-esteem, I believed them for a long time” (participant, Christofi, 2019, p. 96).

Bates (2019) suggests that “for a significant number of men, the verbal aggression was the antecedent to the development of something more serious... verbal aggression could develop into physical aggression” (p. 12). While there is an assumption that females cannot be physically violent toward males due to physical size and strength (Flynn, 1990), the data gathered across the studies challenged this. A large proportion of the studies suggest that females may use alternative methods to counteract the physical size and strength differences, including using objects and weapons. For example, one participant stated:

“To negate that size and strength difference she would wait until I was asleep, until my back was turned, until I was lying down, or using a weapon or something like that” (participant, Hogan, 2016, p. 48).

Moreover, sexual aggression and physical violence targeting participants’ genitals is also described across a number of studies, supporting the notion that males, as well as females, can be survivors of sexual violence (Hogan, 2016). For example, one participant stated:

“Knee to the groin was always a good one she enjoyed, because she knew, you know, that would, you know, any grown man that, that puts you out” (participant, Hogan, 2016, p. 49).

Another participant described being a survivor of “several ordeals of

sexual torture” (Bates, 2019, p. 16), with the author referring to “several descriptions of sexual assault and instances of forced penetration” (p. 16). Again, this counteracts the stereotypical view that women cannot and/or would not perpetrate sexual assault and violence due to their lesser strength, and smaller size (Bates, 2019).

Finally, four of the studies also report the use of coercive control and isolation. One participant stated that his partner would “severely limit my contact with friends to being only through phone or Facebook messaging” (Bates, 2019, p. 5). Morgan and Wells (2016) described that participants experienced their partners engaging in “behavior which served to reduce the respondents’ social networks (and access to support)...both facilitated by, and facilitative of, other forms of abuse” (p. 412). Furthermore, Bates (2019) suggested that some men were also exerted control over by means of “emotional blackmail, or through feelings of fear” (p. 21–22). Overall, this sub-theme highlights the range of directly abusive acts males may experience at the hands of their partners in the context of a relationship that is characterized by IPA.

### 3.2.2. Indirect abuse

Seven studies contributed to this sub-theme, describing the types of more indirect abuse participants experienced from their partners (i.e. “not perpetrated directly against them”; Machado et al., 2017, p. 517). For a large number of participants this related to their children, including physical violence and emotional abuse, with one participant stating:

“If I do not toe the line then my sons are subjected to emotional abuse that affects me as well” (participant, Bates, 2019, p. 6).

Morgan and Wells (2016) described violence targeted toward children as one of the biggest causes of concern for participants within their relationship:

“For some respondents, it was the effect of physical violence targeted upon the children (directly or indirectly) that caused the most concern...the fear and anxiety that the participants felt in regard to their children (including potential loss) engendered a sense of hopelessness within a number of participants” (author, Morgan & Wells, 2016, p. 411).

Participants also described experiencing threats to have contact with their children denied. The use of children to inflict indirect abuse was seen as a “powerful tool” (Bates, 2019, p. 20). Many of the men described feeling “trapped within the relationship” as a result of the indirect abuse relating to their children (Morgan & Wells, 2016, p. 411), and this was one of the key reasons why individuals chose to stay in the abusive relationship. One participant stated:

“Used son, even before he was born, against me to control my behavior. Said she knew he was the only thing I truly loved and would use him to get me to do what she wanted, that she’d never let me see him if I left her” (participant, Bates, 2019, p. 20).

Furthermore, participants stated that their partners used other techniques to “damage” them through “indirect action” (Entilli & Cipolletta, 2017, p. 2335), including making false allegations. For example, one participant stated:

“The false allegations started. The first false allegation was that I’d caused all her self-harm injuries” (participant, Hogan, 2016, p. 52).

Another participant stated:

“She used false allegations of child abuse to have me removed by family court from my children’s lives for around the 5 months it took to have the allegations shown to be baseless” (participant, Bates, 2019, p. 20).

Overall, this sub-theme highlights the types of indirect acts men may experience at the hands of their partners in the context of a relationship that is characterized by IPA, including the use of their children to further

the abuse, which again will impact on the children themselves.

### 3.3. Searching for understanding

A total of nine papers contributed to this theme. It was apparent across these studies that the men attempted to excuse or explain their partners' abusive behavior in several ways in order to make sense of their experiences as a survivor of IPA. Hogan (2016) stated:

“Almost all of the participants reported that they had tried to make sense of their experiences by attempting to understand why their partner was abusive” (author, Hogan, 2016, p. 66).

This included explaining the behavior as a result of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) or previous abusive relationships in which they were the survivor of IPA. Participants also excused the behavior as a result of mental health difficulties, and therefore took the responsibility away from their partner. They also blamed themselves for causing their partner to become angry or upset and subsequently behaving abusively.

The concept of ‘searching for understanding’ is salient in the participants' accounts of their experience. For example, one participant explained the behavior as a result of mental health difficulties:

“She'd been through a lot in her childhood...I, personally think she's bipolar, but it's almost, the person I fell in love with, and then it's the alternate person who comes out when things aren't going her way” (participant, Josolyn, 2011, p. 46).

By suggesting that the abuse was perpetrated by an “alternate person”, the participant takes the responsibility away from his partner, and attempts to make sense of the behavior in the context of ACEs and mental health difficulties. Some participants also suggested that they believed their partner's behavior to be a normal reaction to something they were doing, with one participant saying:

“I didn't know it was abuse... I just thought that I was doing something wrong” (participant, Hogan, 2016, p. 66).

Another way of making sense of their partner's behavior was to interpret it as a result of their partners' own experiences as survivors. For example, one participant stated:

“I think she'd had a bad relationship with her ex-husband like you know and this sort of thing you know, and I think she used to take it out on me” (participant, Hogan, 2016, p. 67).

Others attempted to explain and understand the abusive behavior in the context of mood and hormonal changes. For example, one participant suggested:

“Most of the times the abuse was worse and happened during that time of the month, usually those two weeks, before and during” (participant, Christofi, 2019, p. 93).

Allen-Collinson (2009) suggests that “routinization, normalization, and even acceptability of IPA, by both survivors and perpetrators form a salient feature of many accounts” (p. 28), suggesting that both survivors and perpetrators attempt to normalize their experiences of IPA, and begin to accept it as part of their daily life rather than challenge the behavior. Brooks et al. (2017) suggest that men may do this in an effort to reject their status as a survivor, and “preserve their own power and control” (Brooks et al., 2017, p. 9). While some felt as though the abusive partner was wholly responsible for their behavior, for example:

“I believe she was the only one responsible as she was the one that chose to react in that way and she chose to be abusive” – (participant, Christofi, 2019, p.93).

Others continued to share this responsibility with their partner or even took sole responsibility for the abuse. For example:

“So she was being... ignoring me, but obviously her temper was mounting and I started forcing my way into my own bed... ‘this is my house’, yelling, bla bla bla. So, of course, I pushed and I pushed and I pushed until something broke... and then, all of a sudden, probably I was still too much in her face, I was mad, too. She grabbed whatever she could get her hands on to get me away from her. It happened to be a very large knife” (participant, Brooks et al., 2017, p. 10).

Furthermore, some participants stated that while they initially excused the behavior based on ACEs and mental health difficulties, their understanding of the abuse changed with time:

“Some of the participants initially excused their partner's (abusive) behavior. However, as the abuse continued this view changed to the belief they had been deceived” (author, Morgan & Wells, 2016, p. 412).

Overall, there is a salient theme in the literature relating to participants seeking to make sense of their experience by attempting to understand why their partner became abusive toward them. Several different ways of understanding their experiences are highlighted, ranging from understanding the behavior as a consequence of mental health difficulties or difficult life experiences, blaming themselves, or placing the responsibility on the abusive partner. For some, their understanding changed as the relationship progressed, or after the relationship came to an end, often moving from self-blame or excusing the behavior to holding their partner responsible for the abuse they experienced.

### 3.4. Finding ways to live within an abusive environment

Across the studies, it was apparent that participants tried to find a way to cope with the abuse “in order to live within the parameters of an abusive relationship” (Allen-Collinson, 2009, p. 30). Six studies contributed to this theme. Participants described several ways of coping with and managing the abusive situation, including:

“Leaving home temporarily, trying to hide, trying to calm themselves, trying to leave the relationship, sleeping in separate rooms, crying, isolating themselves, devaluing the situation, avoiding the problem, and consuming alcohol” (author, Machado et al., 2017, p. 518).

Participants also experienced themselves becoming more passive throughout the relationship, and “standing there taking it” (Hogan, 2016, p. 63). One participant described feeling as though they were:

“Walking on eggshells the whole time, desperate not to do something that might annoy her” (participant, Morgan & Wells, 2016, p. 410).

It seemed as though this theme was interconnected with the theme of ‘searching for understanding’, as some participants described “devaluing the situation” (Machado et al., 2017, p. 518) in the same way as others engaged in “normalization, and even acceptability” (Allen-Collinson, 2009, p. 28) in order to understand the abuse they were experiencing. Some participants also described trying “to seek some help because I wasn't able to cope” (Christofi, 2019, p. 119). Furthermore, many participants described needing to find ways to cope with their own feelings, such as anger, in order to avoid retaliation. For example, Allen-Collinson (2009) states:

“NH found various techniques of managing his own anger and dealing with the stress and pain so as not to show any anger towards his wife” (author, Allen-Collinson, 2009, p. 30).

This theme highlights the fact that men, as well as women, seek a variety of ways to manage and cope with the abusive relationship. Authors across the studies suggest that the experience of trying to cope with the abusive relationship, and the ways in which men do this are similar to that of adult female survivors of IPA, particularly the techniques of trying to limit contact with the abusive partner (Hogan, 2016), blaming



themselves for the abusive behavior, and trying to hide their own feelings of anger from their partner (Allen-Collinson, 2009).

### 3.5. Seeking help

A total of nine studies contributed to this theme which describes participants' experiences of seeking help from formal sources, such as police and support services, as well as informal sources, such as friends and family. The experiences of seeking help from informal sources, such as family and friends, were mixed. A number of participants described negative experiences of seeking help from friends and family while experiencing IPA, such as not being believed, or their experience being minimized or belittled. For example, one participant described:

"Going to my in-laws for Sunday lunch with a black eye, and my father-in-law asking me, you know, 'How did you get that' and I sort of, you know, 'She'.

((moves head to the side)) you know. And he laughed, and they all thought it was hilarious you know, and it's like if that had been the other way round it wouldn't have been funny now would it?" (participant, Hogan, 2016, p. 79).

In contrast, some participants described positive and supportive experiences of seeking support from friends and family. For example:

"Men reported that they had received valuable support from friends, family and colleagues at work" (author, Machado et al., 2017, p. 519).

Machado et al. (2017) suggest that participants within their study often sought support from friends, family or colleagues in the first instance, and these individuals often informed them of formal services they could contact. Across the studies, a large proportion of participants described their experiences with formal support services, including police, medical professionals, social care, and judicial services, as negative. One participant described their experience of attending hospital following sustaining injuries from their partner:

"I went to the hospital to get a medical report and make a complaint of assault. I waited six hours and from behind the curtains, it was 3 in the morning, I heard a nurse that said... 'it's that dumbass who got battered by his wife.' The guy burst out laughing." (participant, Entilli & Cipolletta, 2017, p. 2336).

Regarding seeking support from police when experiencing IPA, men described feeling disbelieved, not listened to, or blamed. For example, one participant described his experience of calling the police to intervene:

"When the police came... they tackled me to the ground, and here she was the one beating on me, and they seen that, the whole damn neighborhood seen it, but I'm the guy that they tackled, and they walked her inside the house" (participant, Brooks et al., 2017, p. 14).

There was a sense across the studies that the reaction of formal support services was influenced by gender stereotypes. Walker (2019) suggested that:

"Police appeared to have a gender-stereotyped perception of IPV, which seemed to lead to inadequate support of male victims... police sometimes accused the victim of being the perpetrator or threatened them with arrest" (author, Walker, 2019, p. 7).

In contrast, it is important to note that some participants did report positive experiences of seeking help from formal services, namely counsellors and IPA support services. More specifically, participants reported validation and reassurance that there are other adult male survivors of IPA as particularly helpful. For example, one participant stated:

"They were also very good in reassuring me that these things happen to both men and women and that it wasn't only me that was abused

by his partner. They also reassured me that what Emily was doing was not okay" (participant, Christofi, 2019, p. 115).

Participants also described the value of not being judged when they were seeking support in relation to their experiences of IPA. For example, one participant stated:

"She offered no judgement at all, which is one of the things that makes it very easy to talk to a counsellor" (participant, Hogan, 2016, p. 85).

Furthermore, there was also a theme across the studies of men not seeking help at all due to negative expectations in terms of the type of reactions they would receive. Joselyn (2011) stated that one participant decided "to not access support, anticipating a negative response from a male friend" (p. 59). One participant, speaking of seeking support from friends, stated:

"I couldn't even bare to tell other friends... they wouldn't understand it... I didn't know how they would react, would they make fun of me?" (participant, Christofi, 2019, p. 112).

It is also suggested that participants had little faith in support services as these are commonly designed with adult female survivors of IPA in mind (rather than adult male survivors of IPA). Hogan (2016) stated:

"Some participants described a lack of faith in support services being able to help them, on account that services are not set up to help male victims" (author, Hogan, 2016, p. 34).

Overall, this theme provides an overview of the mixed experiences participants described having when seeking support from friends, family, and formal support services. It was apparent across studies that gender stereotypical views in regards to IPA were a large barrier when it came to seeking help, with many participants feeling that these views would lead to them not being believed or taken seriously.

### 3.6. Rules of being a man

Across the studies, there was a sense that participants' experiences of IPA were shaped by 'rules', expectations, and stereotypes around what it means to be a man, and how a man should act. Some men spoke of these expectations being placed on them by society, while others spoke of rules which they themselves hold toward themselves as a man. Such internal rules will have likely been informed by participants' experiences, including family scripts, which are shaped by societal expectations regarding masculinity over generations. This theme was very prominent, with ten studies contributing to it.

These 'rules' may mean that men are not seen as survivors of any form of IPA as "it is deemed unmanly" (Morgan & Wells, 2016, p. 414), as well as due to being considered "potentially dangerous because of their relatively large size, greater strength, and potential use as a tool of sexual violence" (Allen-Collinson, 2009, p. 33). As such, many of the participants across the studies felt unable to seek help from professionals, friends or family, as society holds preconceptions that men are the perpetrators (rather than the survivors) of abuse. One participant stated:

"I think that in Cyprus, no one even considers that men can also be victims...most people think that only women can be victims" (participant, Christofi, 2019, p. 76).

The way in which participants felt able to respond to the abuse perpetrated against them by their partner was also influenced by an emphasis in society that "a 'real man' should never under any circumstances hit a woman, whatever the provocation" (Allen-Collinson, 2009, p. 34). For example, one participant stated:

"I never retaliated as I don't hit women" (participant, Bates, 2019, p. 15).

This caused participants to feel confused and unsure as to how to

respond when their partner was abusive toward them, as they felt that they could not respond to a female in the same way they would respond to a violent male, with one participant stating:

“I could deal with a man but I couldn’t deal with a woman” (Hogan, 2016, p. 146).

Furthermore, rules and “negative associations with male victimization” (Morgan & Wells, 2016, p. 76) led to many of the participants across the studies to feel “less of a man” (Christofi, 2019, p. 64), with one participant stating:

“I haven’t measured up in like some way to my perception of what I should be as a male member of society” (participant, Hogan, 2016, p. 76).

As such, many of the participants in the studies rejected the label of ‘survivor’, and instead took on a role of being responsible for and taking care of their partner, despite the abuse they were experiencing. For example, Entilli and Cipolletta (2017) stated that:

“Men described themselves as responsible for their partners, engaging in a caring role and showing extreme tolerance for even severe physical attacks towards them...taking responsibility for their partners and not reacting to the attacks gave these men the perception of being a good representation of the male stereotype and acting as a good partner” (author, Entilli & Cipolletta, 2017, p. 2333).

Overall, this theme offers an insight into the pressure men experience as a result of the perceived expectations society places on them, which substantially impacted on the way participants made sense of their experiences. Many of these expectations served to exacerbate the “shame and embarrassment for not having met these expectations” (Hogan, 2016, p. 72). Additionally, across three of the studies, participants expressed a desire to change these rules and “spread the word” (Hogan, 2016, p. 89) in order to reduce the impact these rules have on adult male survivors of IPA.

#### 4. Discussion

The aim of the present review was to synthesize what the available qualitative literature tells us about the lived experiences of adult male survivors of IPA perpetrated by female partners. Several themes relating to this were identified. Adult male survivors of IPA experience a range of different forms of abuse, including physical violence, emotional, psychological and sexual abuse, as well as indirect abuse often involving their children. While going through the abuse, participants attempted to make sense of what they were experiencing in a number of different ways, including blaming themselves and justifying their partner’s behavior as a result of mental health difficulties and/or their own experiences of IPA by a previous partner.

The men used different strategies in order to try and find a way to live within the parameters of a relationship characterized by IPA. For example, participants described becoming passive and submissive within their relationship, feeling the need to be wary of anything that may trigger abusive behavior by their partner, as well as tolerating it when it did happen. Participants also described trying to evade their partner by spending more time at work or outside of the house, and hiding their own emotions to avoid a negative reaction from their partner. Many of the participants across the studies included in this review also described both positive and negative experiences of seeking help, or the expectations they held of help-seeking, if they chose not to do so.

##### 4.1. Male experiences of IPA

Hegemonic masculinity refers to a pattern of behaviors and views within society which normalizes the dominance of men over women (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Within Western(-ized) societies, this form of masculinity is characterized by certain ‘macho’ traits, including

physical strength, control and aggression (Durfee, 2011). It can be argued that while this places men in a position of power within society, it also causes conflict when they are experiencing IPA which is in stark contrast to this ‘ideology’. As such, men are less likely to accept the label of ‘victim’, and instead describe their experiences in ways which conform to the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity (Durfee, 2011). An overarching theme of masculinity and gender was present across the studies in this review. Participants described the expectations placed upon them by themselves and society in relation to their gender. This included the view that men are perpetrators of violence, cannot be a victim of IPA, and that experiencing IPA by a female partner reduces masculinity. These ‘rules’ had a significant impact on the way men experienced IPA; for many participants, these increased levels of shame which subsequently reduced the likelihood of them seeking support.

Evidence suggests that male survivors of IPA use careful language and humor, as well as minimize their experiences, in order to balance the conflict between ‘being a victim’ (seen to be associated with weakness) and a ‘strong male’ (Burcar & Akerstrom, 2009). In an interview-based study with adult male survivors of IPA, Migliaccio (2001) found that men would present as ‘stoic’ while discussing their experiences in order to maintain a ‘masculine identity’ (Migliaccio, 2001). The tendency to reject the ‘victim’ label/status by emphasizing traditionally masculine characteristics is particularly apparent within the theme ‘searching for understanding’, which describes the way in which men attempt to understand and/or explain their experiences in a way that fits with the ideals of hegemonic masculinity. For example, some men attempted to normalize the abuse they experienced (Brooks et al., 2017). Others emphasized their self-determination and willpower by highlighting the fact that they did not retaliate when they were physically abused by their partner (which is another important characteristic of hegemonic masculinity). Some men also explicitly expressed a fear that their experience of IPA reduced their masculinity (Allen-Collinson, 2009; Hogan, 2016).

Furthermore, the societal expectations of masculinity create an assumption whereby men cannot be seen to be victims of IPA due to their often larger physical size and strength in comparison to their female partners (Migliaccio, 2001). However, a growing body of literature suggests that when this is the case, adult female perpetrators of IPA compensate for their smaller size by using objects and weapons to physically harm their male partners. For example, Drijber et al. (2013) found that 54 % of adult female perpetrators of IPA in the Netherlands used items, such as chairs and knives, to harm their partners. This is supported by the findings of the present review in which participants described how their partners used objects and weapons to compensate for the difference in size and strength.

##### 4.2. Seeking help as a male survivor of IPA

The prevalence of female-perpetrated IPA against an adult male partner may be significantly underestimated as many men do not report IPA due to shame, fear of not being believed, and a perception that there is no support available for them (Migliaccio, 2001). Drijber et al. (2013) found that, in a sample of 372 adult male survivors of IPA in the Netherlands, 49 % did not report their experiences of IPA to the police due to a belief that their claims would not be taken seriously, and 41 % believed that the police would not act upon their reports. This may not only be shaped by wider societal views that men cannot be victims of IPA, but is further reflected in the lack of support services specifically designed for, and targeted at, men. In their systematic review, Huntley et al. (2019) found that men perceived support services to predominantly be tailored for women, which further acted as a barrier to help-seeking.

The findings from the present review are in line with the current literature on help-seeking. More specifically, participants described anticipating a negative response from others if they were to disclose or report their experiences, which ultimately prevented them from doing

so, and coming forward. Those who had sought help mainly described negative experiences, in particular with police and health professionals. Participants reported not feeling believed or being blamed as a result of gender stereotypes. However, it is important to note that some participants also reported positive experiences – those deemed to be most helpful involved feeling listened to, believed, validated, and being informed that there were other men with similar experiences.

Overall, the findings of the present review suggest that the ‘rules’ placed on men by hegemonic masculinity serve to create a cycle whereby the phenomenon of female-perpetrated IPA remains hidden. Suggesting that men cannot experience IPA increases shame for survivors, and reduces the likelihood that they will come forward and disclose their experiences. Even worse, they will try to hide the abuse by minimizing or justifying it, as well as concealing their injuries. This is likely to exacerbate the negative impacts of IPA for male survivors. Across the studies, participants reported experiencing difficulties with parenting, friendships, finances, employment, and future relationships. This is in line with existing evidence which suggests that adult male survivors of IPA report physical injuries, increased substance misuse, and mental health difficulties, including anxiety and depression (Perlyman & Appleton, 2016).

#### 4.3. Critique of the review

Meta-ethnography was developed as a method to draw connections between multiple qualitative studies, increasing the power and generalizability of qualitative findings (Nye et al., 2016). However, meta-ethnography has been critiqued for a number of reasons. Some argue that by synthesizing the results of numerous qualitative studies, these results become simplified, and the complexity of the results can be lost (Nye et al., 2016). Additionally, Walsh and Downe (2005) emphasized the importance of being able to understand the context in which the original data was collected, as otherwise the meaning behind it may become lost or skewed. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge the subjective nature of meta-ethnography, as it relies heavily on the interpretations of the researcher, as well as the interpretations of the author(s) of the included articles. However, it is suggested that the process of triangulation helps to reduce subjectivity. Walsh and Downe (2005) argue that the process of qualitative evidence synthesis by nature includes a process of triangulation through including multiple studies. They also suggest that the analysis should be reviewed by two independent researchers (Walsh & Downe, 2005). Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that the use of different methodological approaches, each underpinned by its respective epistemological position, may have led the authors of the included studies to come to varying interpretations and understandings of ‘lived experience’, further impacting on the data analysis undertaken as part of this review.

Furthermore, the review is also limited by the quality of the available literature. While a number of strong studies were included in the review, it is important to highlight the areas which require improvement. For example, it was felt that, across the studies, the role of the researcher(s), and the way in which the research was described to participants, could have been outlined more clearly within the articles. The use of triangulation – collecting data by more than one method – could have also been used more frequently in the studies in order to improve the reliability of the results. Future studies may endeavor to employ more than one researcher to independently analyze the data, as this did not consistently happen across the studies included in this review.

In addition, some of the studies included in the present review only reported data from one participant. While this may be appropriate given the choice of qualitative methodology (e.g. Allen-Collinson, 2009; Du Toit, 2011; Nayback-Beebe & Yoder, 2012), it does limit the identification and interpretation of themes and patterns across a group of participants who have shared experiences. Conversely, two of the studies recruited large groups of participants (i.e. Bates, 2019; Walker et al., 2019) by means of anonymous online surveys, which may be at risk of

losing important detail, nuance, and depth, especially in the context of meaningful life experiences. Such a variation in recruitment methods may have also led to biases in reporting (e.g. those engaging in face-to-face interviews may have found it more difficult to be fully open and honest about their experiences compared to those taking part in anonymous online surveys).

#### 4.4. Practical implications and future directions

The findings of the present review reveal a number of areas in which current practice could be adapted and improved in order to better support adult male survivors of IPA:

- i. Raising awareness of and further developing our understanding of female-perpetrated IPA, and the impact it has on male survivors. This will undoubtedly help both survivors and those close to them in recognizing signs of potential abuse, ultimately facilitating survivors to come forward, disclose their experiences, and seek help. Awareness-raising will also serve to challenge widely-held gender stereotypes, and thereby help break the cycle of keeping adult male IPA victimization hidden.
- ii. Further developing support services in order to reflect the varied nature of adult male survivors' experiences (compared to those of adult female survivors), as well as meeting their differing needs. This is suggested to further contribute to adult male survivors seeking help, and thereby increase help-seeking behaviors in this population. Future research exploring the specific intervention and treatment needs for this population would facilitate the development of such support services.
- iii. Tailoring guidance and training by further developing its content to be representative of adult male survivors. A significant amount of the existing literature focuses on adult female survivors of IPA. As such, police and health professionals are more likely to receive training on how to respond to this population. However, it is important that such professionals are also aware of, and know, how to respond to adult male survivors of IPA in order to ensure that this population is adequately supported and encouraged to seek help. Often, police and health professionals are the first interactions adult male survivors of IPA have with support services; their experiences of these therefore likely play a role in whether or not adult male survivors go on to seek help and access other support services in the future. The findings in this review emphasize the importance of men feeling listened to in a non-judgmental manner, and the detrimental effects inadequate responses from services and/or professionals can have on their physical and mental health going forward.

## 5. Conclusion

The present review offers an overview of the unique and complex experiences of adult male survivors of IPA, and the needs this population may present with, strongly suggesting that support services should be specialized and tailored, rather than generalized. This is of importance given the notable differences between adult male and female survivors of IPA, in particular in relation to men tending to stay in abusive relationships in light of threats surrounding custody of their children. The very fact that many participants in the studies included in this review felt unable to come forward and/or seek help and support also enables their experiences to remain hidden, which in turn facilitates a belief in society as a whole that male victimization is rare, if not non-existent. Increasing awareness of the very real reality that men also experience IPA may encourage more survivors to speak out and seek support, which in turn may trigger an increase in available and adequate support services.



## Declaration of competing interest

We have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

## Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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