"Sanctioned by the Legal System":

Women's Experiences of Child Contact in the Context of Intimate Partner Violence and Abuse.

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'You might not have been my first love / but you were the love that made / all the other loves / irrelevant' (by rupi kaur)

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sisters by rupi kaur

'On days I could not move

it was women

who came to water my feet

until I was strong enough

to stand

it was women

who nourished me

back to life'

Abstract

Purpose: This thesis explores women's experiences of the child contact process where intimate partner violence and abuse (IPVA) was a factor. The thesis builds on knowledge within England and Wales, as there is currently limited research exploring how survivors feel about the process and outcomes of such cases. The thesis adopts a feminist methodology and draws on systems theories to place survivor experiences in context to examine structural and system inequalities.

Background: Child contact where IPVA has occurred is both complicated and distressing, and professionals working within the courts often believe that one should have little to do with the other (Saunders, Faller & Tolman, 2012). Research suggests that IPVA should be given full consideration for child contact because of the implications and consequences of a formal arrangement on both mother and child (Chesler, 2011; Mullender, 2002). Despite this, survivor (Hunter, Burton & Trinder, 2020) and child experiences (Holt, 2018) highlight that this is rarely the case, with professional conduct and bias within systems contributing to further inequalities for women and their children (Barnett, 2020).

Methods: This thesis is based on three qualitative studies. Study one used thematic analysis to analyse online public threads detailing female survivors' experiences of the child contact process where IPVA was present. Study two consisted of four in-depth interviews with women that had a contact arrangement in place for at least a year, adopting a case study design. The case studies were analysed using narrative analysis. The third study consisted of an active-learning training workshop with professionals working in the field of child contact/IPVA. Attendees developed ecograms depicting survivor resources and agency involvement. These were analysed visually, alongside practitioner discussions from the workshop.

Conclusions: Together, the three studies analyse the impact of the court process on both survivors and their children, highlighting economic, behavioural, and emotional consequences. The thesis identifies common myths held by professionals working in the field of child contact and IPVA, including the notion that anger is expressive and IPVA is a relationship problem. Gendered systems and gaps in the law allow for structural inequalities, exacerbating women's experiences of victimisation and leaving them feeling unprotected and at-risk of further harm. Mothers were concerned that their children were forced into contact that could be harmful, leaving their children distressed and without a voice.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis explores women's experiences of child contact in the context of intimate partner violence and abuse (IPVA). Formal contact is the focus, however informal contact forms part of the contact journey, often as a precursor to more formal processes, such as arranging contact through the family courts.

Child contact and IPVA are inexplicably linked, with literature detailing how child contact is used by fathers[1] to continue abusing their ex-partner and children (Chesler, 2011; Mullender, Hague, Imam, Kelly, Malos & Regan, 2002). Child contact in the context of IPVA can be a complicated and distressing situation for both mother and child; Children who live in a household where IPVA is present often suffer numerous emotional and physical negative consequences which may continue post-separation (Mullender et al., 2002); the IPVA itself can have long and short term consequences for the survivor of abuse, including mental health concerns and issues surrounding safety and fear (Mullender et al., 2002; Walby & Allen, 2004). Despite this, IPVA is often overlooked within the family courts both in England and Wales (Hunt & Macleod, 2008; Hunter, Burton & Trinder, 2020) and the USA (Saunders, Faller & Tolman, 2016). In fact, some would argue that this is intentional, with many professionals believing that IPVA aimed at the mother should not be considered when it comes to contact arrangements (Saunders, Faller & Tolman, 2016). Saunders, Faller and Tolman (2016) believe this to be because of attitudes and beliefs that endorse myths around contact and gender, for example, the belief that mothers seek to alienate children from their father (Barnett, 2020; Saunders, Faller & Tolman, 2016). In addition, there is a failure by the courts to fully consider the dangers of post-separation violence and of a perpetrator having access to the survivor via the children (Mullender et al., 2002). For example, Morrill, Dai, Dunn, Sung and Smith (2005) claim that joint contact or visitation rights can put the mother at risk by providing the location of the mother and the child/ren, allowing continued abuse and threats from the father. In the past, mothers who have refused to provide contact details or have refused to implement contact orders due to fears for the safety of themselves and their children have been held in contempt of court and some have gone on to have sole residency passed to the father as a result (Mullender et al., 2002). However, with IPVA likely to continue post-separation (Latz, Nikupeteri, & Laitinen, 2020) and the continuing risk to wellbeing for mother and child, this thesis argues that IPVA should be given full consideration from the first stages of the contact process.

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[1] For the purposes of this thesis, fathers are taken to mean anyone that is acting with parental responsibility, whether the father be biological or not.

Definitions

There are several definitional issues to consider in discussing violence towards a partner or ex-partner. Firstly, there are several terms used in the literature that reflect the same concept, for example, domestic abuse and domestic violence. Whilst the two terms ultimately draw upon the same meaning, the term abuse is preferred to violence because violence is often associated with physical methods of abuse rather than capturing the broader range of abuse that can take place e.g., emotional, economic, and sexual.

The government definition in England and Wales uses domestic abuse and defines behaviour as abusive if it consists of: physical or sexual abuse; violent or threatening behaviour; controlling or coercive behaviour; economic abuse; and/or psychological, emotional, or other abuse (Domestic Abuse Act, 2021). Abuse can be an incident, or a course of conduct directed towards someone the perpetrator is 'personally connected' to, and both parties must be over 16 years of age (Domestic Abuse Act, 2021). A personal connection is defined as including two people that have been or are currently: married or in a civil partnership; in agreement to be married or in a civil partnership; in an intimate personal relationship; in a parental relationship with the same child; or a relative. Crucially, the Domestic Abuse Act (2021) adds that, *'A's behaviour may be behaviour "towards" B despite the fact that it consists of conduct directed at another person (for example, B's child)'*. This was a new addition compared to previous definitions (Home Office, 2015).

The term 'domestic' has negative connotations associated with both trivialising issues related to domestic violence and abuse (for example, 'just another domestic'), and reinforcing the notion that this type of harm is a private family matter that takes place in the home (Easteal, 2003).This thesis therefore uses the term intimate partner violence and abuse (IPVA), defined as **a pattern of incidents including: physical or sexual abuse; violent or threatening behaviour; controlling or coercive behaviour; economic abuse; and/or psychological, emotional or other abuse between those aged 16 or over who are, or have been, intimate partners.** This definition reflects both the government definition and the fact that this thesis will be exploring intimate relationships. It removes 'any incident' referred to in the government definition, reflecting the fact that IPVA is a pattern of behaviours rather than one incident (Easteal, 2003), and removes the term 'relative' to focus on intimate partners.

This thesis considers survivors from the age of 16 onwards, in line with the government definition of domestic abuse (Domestic Abuse Act, 2021). This is not to say that IPVA cannot be experienced by

those younger – it can and does take place (Barter et al., 2017). However, this is dealt with using a child protection framework (Domestic Abuse Act, 2021).

For this thesis, IPVA will be discussed in reference to male towards female abuse (heterosexual couples only). It is largely acknowledged in the literature that abuse is gender-based and that women are more likely to suffer abuse at the hands of a man than vice versa (Hester, 2009; Walby & Allen, 2004). Males are often survivors of IPVA (Office for National Statistics; ONS, 2021), but this thesis considers violence and abuse from the gender-based perspective.

The term survivor will be used to refer to those who have experienced abuse as opposed to the term victim or victim-survivor. Referring to women as survivors highlights the inner strength of the individual who has experienced the abuse and serves as a more empowering term than labelling the individual as a victim (Kelly, 1988).

Finally, for the purposes of this thesis, children will be positioned as experiencing IPVA alongside the mother, rather than being passive bystanders to the coercive control, abuse and violence taking place around them (Callaghan, Alexander, Fellin & Sixsmith, 2018). Whilst s120 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 amended the Children Act 1989 to include *"impairment suffered from seeing or hearing the ill-treatment of another"*, it was not until the Domestic Abuse Act (s3, 2021) that children were positioned as experiencing domestic abuse in their own right when living in a household with IPVA.

Research Aims and Strategy

The thesis centres on women's narratives, presenting an in-depth exploration of female survivor experiences within England and Wales, and their attitudes towards paternal contact. This thesis aims to give survivors a voice, drawing attention to the challenges faced by those using the (private) family courts. In doing so, recommendations can be provided for future action, reducing risk and secondary trauma for mothers and children.

This thesis presents the findings of three interlinked studies: exploratory research that forms the basis for two further studies: survivor interviews developed into case studies; and a training workshop with professionals working within the contact process.

Research Approach

This section outlines the research paradigm, ontology and epistemology that form the foundations for the methodological research approach of this thesis. O'Reilly and Kiyimba (2015) discuss

the research paradigm as an overarching approach that creates a theoretical foundation for the ontological and epistemological positions of the researcher. Ontology refers to the researcher's own beliefs about the nature of reality and how they understand existence (O'Reilly & Kiyimba, 2015). Epistemology refers to the philosophical and theoretical position a researcher takes when interacting with participants (O'Reilly & Kiyimba, 2015).

Research Paradigm.

O'Reilly and Kiyimba (2015) discuss the research paradigm as an overarching approach that creates a theoretical foundation for the ontological and epistemological positions adopted by the researcher when designing a project. In essence the research paradigm is the beliefs and assumptions that the researcher holds and that shape the research design (Kuhn, 1962). Ponterotto (2005) argues that there are two core paradigms: one that explores general principles and one that explores individual perspectives. These can be broken down into further categories (e.g., nomothetic, or idiographic). This thesis explores individual perspectives and adopts an emic approach. O'Reilly and Kiyimba (2015) explain that an emic approach is inductive, exploring the lived realities of individuals in a bottom-up way that enables the researcher to be led by participant perspectives and experiences, rather than being theory or hypothesis driven. Study one sought to identify common survivor experiences and adopted a bottom-up approach when it came to analyse these (see chapter four for more on the individual studies). The subsequent studies built on these findings, allowing the thesis to be centred on and led by survivor narratives.

Ontology.

Ontology refers to the researcher's own beliefs about the nature of reality and how they understand existence (O'Reilly & Kiyimba, 2015). For example, whether the researcher believes that there is a social reality that is distinct from how individuals might interpret that reality (Bryman, 2016) or whether the researcher believes that reality is socially constructed and therefore we can only understand it through the human mind (Smith, 1983). The ontological position of this thesis (or rather, the researcher) is one of critical realism. Developed by Bhaskar (1975), critical realism is the belief or assumption that reality is layered. There is an observable 'truth', however this is being explored in a complex social world (Roberts, 2014). Critical realism therefore seeks to uncover what contributes to the observable truth and how it is understood. This thesis views women's lived realities as truth but truth that must be understood in the context of the systems, processes, and social realities in which the women are situated or form part of.

Epistemology.

Epistemology refers to the philosophical and theoretical position a researcher takes when interacting with participants. It is concerned with knowledge production and acknowledges that participants are the providers of knowledge when it comes to inductive research (O'Reilly & Kiyimba, 2015). How the researcher then presents this knowledge will depend on their epistemological position. The epistemological position of this thesis is critical feminist phenomenology.

Phenomenology seeks to understand the lived realities of participants. It is *'a way of thinking that emphasises the need for researchers to achieve an understanding of their participants'* worlds from the participants' point of view and the ways in which those participants make sense of the world around them' (O'Reilly & Kiyimba, 2015, p. 14). In this respect, the researcher aims to become fully embedded in the lived reality of the participant to be able to see the world through the participant's perspective. This thesis focusses on the experiences of women survivors but is positioned in a way that acknowledges social inequalities, taking a critical feminist approach (Stanley & Wise, 2010) in addition to a phenomenological one.

Critical feminist research seeks to conduct research in a participant-centred way, acknowledging issues such as agency and power (Stanley & Wise, 2010). In essence, the research aims to consider the broader social context, acknowledging women's position in society and seeking to contribute to social change (O'Reilly & Kiyimba, 2015). Doucet and Mauthner (2006) discuss the sciences taking a traditionally masculine approach to data collection and argue that feminist epistemologies take this into account, challenging the more traditional methodological approaches to produce knowledge that is meaningful to women, whilst recognising that women come from multiple perspectives, have different backgrounds and have differing positions of power (Stanley & Wise, 2010). Feminist epistemologies take on board the role of the researcher and acknowledge that research is rarely value-free, encouraging reflexivity (Doucet & Mauthner, 2006). There is much discussion in the literature regarding whether feminist methods and methodologies are distinct from traditional methods and whether they consist of an approach in and of themselves (see Doucet & Mauthner, 2006). This thesis is not constrained by the technicalities of this discussion and simply seeks to acknowledge the influence of feminist epistemology on the methodology developed and the interpretation of the research findings.

This thesis seeks to present knowledge that is meaningful for women; will be driven and led by women contributors; will consider women's position in society as being unequal; and acknowledges power, both in that it recognises power differences within society, and it acknowledges there can be a

power difference when it comes to the participant-researcher relationship. The researcher has used this approach to develop three studies that explore women's experiences of child contact, considering the abuse experienced and the perceived impact this might have had. It places women's experiences at the forefront of the research, ensuring that the studies are designed in a way that minimise trauma and place survivor voices as central. The findings are led by survivor experiences, allowing flexibility to focus on the experiences that are meaningful to them rather than what the researcher thinks might be important. However, it is also acknowledged that the researcher comes with preconceived biases, beliefs and values that will inevitably impact on the interpretation of survivor experiences.

Summary.

To summarise, this thesis sought to understand the lived realities of survivors (phenomenology) and acknowledges this reality as their 'truth' (critical realism). However, it also acknowledges the social context, systems and processes that may impact on survivor experiences (critical realism and feminist epistemology). The thesis will provide research that will allow survivor voices to be heard, acknowledges power and agency, and is *for* survivors rather than about them (feminist epistemology).

Synopsis of Chapters

This section provides an overview of the chapters included in this thesis. **Chapter 1** has introduced the thesis, including definitions and the research strategy.

Chapter 2 provides the context and theoretical framework for the thesis. It outlines feminist theories of IPVA, and how they fit within a systems theory perspective. Systems theories are then explored and applied to the multiple systems involved in IPVA and child contact. This chapter outlines the importance of systems working together to form a cohesive 'ecological model' (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Chapter 3 is a literature review. The review focuses on literature from England and Wales. It makes use of grey literature alongside the academic evidence due to a paucity of publications in this field. Excluding the grey literature would silence women who chose to participate in that research and ignore the work of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) who undertake most of the frontline support work with survivors. This is followed by the main research questions.

Chapter 4 provides a detailed methodology of the three studies included in this thesis. The first study is exploratory in nature and examines women's experiences of formal and informal contact arrangements. It uses survivor posts from online parenting forums. The second study builds on the first, adopting an in-depth case study approach based on four interviews with survivors. The third study is a

training workshop with IPVA professionals working in the field of child contact. The training workshop used ecograms and discussions with professionals to examine professional practice and triangulate findings from study one and study two. In addition, the methodology provides an overview of key ethical considerations in survivor research.

Chapter 5 provides a reflective account of the PhD process, including personal challenges in positioning the research considering previous experiences of abuse. It examines various points in the PhD journey, reflecting on important stages and personal growth in the research process.

Chapter 6, **7 and 8** provide the findings and analysis of the three studies that form this thesis. Study one and two used thematic analysis, and study three used visual analysis to explore ecograms, making use of workshop discussions to build on these.

Chapter 9 provides the overall discussion for the three studies, connecting the findings and placing them in context of the theoretical framework – systems theory. The thesis ends with a conclusion, exploring the implications of the thesis, and future recommendations. These include recommendations for practice, policy, and research. Chapter 8 is followed by a **references** section, and the **appendices**.

Chapter 2: Theory and Context

This thesis takes a feminist perspective. It considers IPVA as a form of gender-based violence, acknowledging power and control as underpinning violent and abusive behaviours towards women (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Pence & Paymar, 1990). This chapter provides a brief overview of feminist theories and how they apply to this thesis. It provides context and considers IPVA from a societal perspective whilst acknowledging the limitations of the feminist perspective. In addition, this thesis takes a systems approach. It applies systems theories and system-based tools (e.g., ecograms – see chapter four) to understand the multiple interconnected organisations and perspectives that form and interact with the child contact system. This chapter explores systems theories and how they apply to child contact in the context of IPVA.

Intimate Partner Violence and Abuse: Theories and Explanations

The World Health Organisation consider IPVA to be a form of gender-based violence and acknowledge the role of society in maintaining this; WHO, 2021a). Society has been slow to adapt and afford women the same rights as men, especially when it comes to IPVA. Traditionally IPVA has been seen as a private matter and one that takes place in the home (Easteal, 2003), with the right to a family life (Article 8, Human Rights Act 1998) used to justify or ignore violence and abuse taking place in intimate relationships. This serves to limit the opportunities for women to seek help and support, and for society to hold men accountable for their behaviour (Stanko, 1995; WHO, 2021a). Such issues were brought to the forefront by the women's liberation movement in the 1970s, with women coming together to fight against violence towards women (Hague, 2021). Most of the progress is a result of women's work (Hague, 2021), despite acknowledgement that this is a 'men's issue' (Katz, 2012).

IPVA remains a persistent and pervasive global issue in society (WHO, 2021b). Stark (2007) first coined the term coercive control, highlighting it as a way for men to strip women of their human rights, enforcing a gendered regime that, if breached, would result in threats, intimidation and/or violence. This often includes micro-regulation (e.g., detailing what partners should wear, who they should speak to), coupled with monitoring and surveillance (e.g., CCTV, checking of the partner's phone, stalking), and limiting resources or opportunities for escape (e.g., providing a weekly allowance rather than access to bank accounts, limiting contact with family members that may support the survivor). IPVA adds to women's everyday fear of violence (Stanko, 1995), using patterns of behaviour such as coercive control to diminish women's autonomy and 'space for action' (Hester, 2011; Jeffner, 2000; Stark, 2007). IPVA can penetrate every aspect of a survivor's life, making them feel like they are 'walking on eggshells'.

Constantly moving regulations and rules handed down by the perpetrator reinforces the view that women cannot live up to abuser's expectations and serve to justify men's actions (Dutton & Goodman, 2005; Stanko, 1995; Stark, 2007).

Men who abuse women may hold several implicit beliefs. These include: viewing women and children as property (Stark, 2007); a general sense of entitlement (superiority over others, expectations of social standing and respect; Weldon & Gilchrist, 2012); superiority to women ('I am the man', believing in strict gender roles; Weldon & Gilchrist, 2012); normalisation of violence and relationship violence (Weldon & Gilchrist, 2012); relationship entitlement (believing that their needs are superior to their partners and expecting partners to meet them); dangerousness of the opposite sex (believing women to be naturally manipulative or deceitful); and neutralisation (failure to take responsibility for their own actions (Pornari, Dixon & Humphreys, 2013), or blaming external factors for their violence (Weldon & Gilchrist, 2012). In addition, they may hold implicit beliefs affecting their need for control, revenge, and the policing of women (Weldon & Gilchrist, 2012). Arguments include that these implicit beliefs may stem from upbringing (Weldon & Gilchrist, 2012), and/or wider societal power.

For example, some feminist theorists (Pence & Paymar, 1990; Stanko, 1995; Stark, 2007) argue that abusive men seek to and can control women within the home because of the societal power that they hold in daily life. It is wider than just the individual - it is steeped in social traditions and requires societal change (Stanko, 1995). Historically, men have been the 'owners' of women – marriage was a way for fathers to pass ownership and responsibility to husbands (Stretton & Kesselring, 2013), and women had little say in finances with mortgages and bank accounts being limited to men until the Married Women's Property Act in 1882 (Stretton & Kesselring, 2013). When it came to bodily autonomy and choice, men were entitled to their wives' bodies. It was not until 1991 in England and Wales that rape in marriage was criminalised (*R v R, 1991*).

Awareness of IPVA has increased over time, with legislation and policies attempting to protect those experiencing IPVA (Hague, 2021). However, the gaps in support, knowledge and understanding mean that women are still left unprotected. In England and Wales, the Domestic Abuse Bill (2019) was intended to fill some of these gaps and was revivified in 2021 to form the Domestic Abuse Act (2021). The Act provides a statutory definition of domestic abuse, powers to use lie detectors for perpetrators of domestic abuse on probation, and further protectionary measures for survivors. In addition, it ends the cross-examination of survivors by their ex-partners in the family courts.

However, the Domestic Abuse Act (2021) is still limited in its provision, offering basic changes that should have been in place before 2021. The changes to do not go far enough to support survivors in the family courts and undo harms from previous legislation. For example, the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act (2012) made it difficult for survivors to access legal aid, and in doing so could breach Article 6 and Article 8 of the European Convention of Human Rights (Choudry & Herring, 2017). Eligibility criteria mean that women are often left in a position where they cannot afford legal representation in the family courts and therefore do not have access to fair and reasonable justice (Choudry & Herring, 2017).

In addition, the Ministry of Justice recently commissioned a panel of experts to investigate harm in the family courts (Hunter, Burton & Trinder, 2020), alongside a literature review (Barnett, 2020). Both reports identified significant failings in the family courts to protect survivors and their children, highlighting that the Domestic Abuse Act (2021) does not go far enough and that much work is needed to ensure women and children have fair access to a justice system that understands and acknowledges IPVA as a significant concern. For an overview of policy and legislation relating specifically to child contact in England and Wales, please see chapter two (p. 36).

Whilst there are several limitations to feminist theories such as same-sex relationships (Donovan & Hester, 2011), or mutual violence (as per Johnson's differentiation theory; Johnson, 2008), they are of little relevance given the participants in this study (heterosexual couples) or are considered harmful to the wider discussion of the family courts (Meier, 2015). For example, Meier (2015) argues that Johnson's typology (2008) is widely used in the family courts to discredit IPVA, arguing that it is relationship conflict or situational couple violence despite evidence provided to the contrary. Meier (2015) argues that the very foundation of Johnson's (2008) claims lack empiricism and warrant further investigation.

However, there are alternative theories available to explain abuse, including: evolutionary theories, psychodynamic theories, and biological theories. These are briefly considered next.

Alternative Theories

In addition to implicit belief theories outlined in the previous section, evolutionary, biological, and psychodynamic theories provide alternative explanations for IPVA.

Evolutionary theories argue that men are inherently more aggressive than women and that IPVA is a protectionary mechanism to ensure that women are faithful and therefore offspring are biologically

their own (Le Page, 2018). Male sexual proprietariness theory, an evolutionary perspective, argues that men use fatal violence when they fear loss of sexual exclusivity (Wilson & Daly, 1993). Buss & Duntley (2011) discuss this in relation to cost and benefits. Men benefit from exclusivity by increased survival of children, biological reproduction and maintaining their heritage when children go on to pro-create. Women benefit from exclusivity as they are given protection for themselves and their children, and resources such as food, which increases the survival rates of children. Men have evolved to using violence to maintain this (Buss & Duntley, 2011). However, this can be clearly positioned alongside feminist theories who essentially are arguing the same concept – men are striving for the control and dominance of women, and society allows this to continue (Brownmiller, 1975). We are no longer in a position whereby women need men to provide protection or resources. Evolutionists would argue that this loss of control is one explanation for rates of IPVA (Buss & Duntley, 2011; Wilson & Daly, 1996). Men are trying to reclaim what is 'theirs' and to keep offspring biologically related to them. The difference here is that evolutionary theory positions this as a form of adaptation, inherent in men rather than a conscious choice that they make (Buss & Duntley, 2011), whereas feminist theories would argue that this is steeped in societal inequalities, and men choose to behave this way because they think they are entitled to do so (Lombard, 2013).

Theories based on the biology of perpetrators argue that there is something inherently different about perpetrators of abuse compared to other people (Umhau, George, Reed, Petrulis, Rawlings & Porges, 2002), whether because of their biological make-up or being of an altered mental state (such as alcohol consumption; Bergman & Brismar, 1994). Most of these arguments can be disputed – for example some argue that perpetrators are more likely to be sober when they behave abusively (Kantor & Straus, 1995; Umhau et al., 2002; ONS, 2020), although this statement has been contradicted by others. For example, Gilchrist, Ireland, Forsyth, Laxton & Godwin (2014) analysed secondary data related to police call outs and found that over 65% involved alcohol, with 60% of these cases related to perpetrator alcohol use. However, Gilchrist et al., (2014) argue that alcohol use is a manifestation of IPVA, rather than a cause. Gilchrist et al. (2014) discuss the role of alcohol in IPVA and identify several reasons for alcohol consumption related to IPVA: sense of male entitlement to drink; to control their partner; and/or to restrict finances (Gilchrist et al., 2014). This can also be associated with the implicit beliefs outlined in the previous section, for example, the need for control, or blaming of external factors (Weldon & Gilchrist, 2012). Despite this, alcohol is acknowledged as a risk factor for IPVA (Gilchrist, Radcliffe, Noto & d'Oliveira, 2017). One key point to be made here is around interventions – often men who substance abuse are restricted from access to domestic violence perpetrator programmes (DVPP; Tarzia, Forsdyke, Feder & Hegarty, 2020), resulting in lack of access to support and rehabilitation. Dheensa, Halliwell,

Johnson, Henderson, Love, Radcliffe, et al. (2021) discuss the creation of 'Advance', an intervention that focusses on both IPVA and substance use. They highlight the benefits of such a programme for improving self-regulation – an important factor for both IPVA and substance use.

Poor self-regulation links to another biological argument that perpetrators cannot regulate their autonomic system (ANS), therefore experiencing exaggerated arousal and increased heart rates. Their actions are argued to be manifested unconsciously because of arousal of the ANS (Bitler, Linnoila & George, 1994). However, it would be difficult to separate this from increased arousal because of feelings of anger based on implicit bias, for example. Umhau et al. (2002) explored ANS arousal using ten male and three female participants in the USA, disproving the concept. They found no significant differences in heart rates between perpetrators and 'healthy' volunteers. This was further identified by Babcock, Green, Webb and Graham (2004), although Umhau et al. (2002) did identify that there was a difference in the extent to which perpetrators can control (or self-regulate) their reactions to ANS arousal.

Psychodynamic theories such as attachment theory (Bowlby, 1988) argue that abuse occurs because of maladaptive or dysfunctional attachment with primary caregivers in childhood. For example, children may form insecure attachments to caregivers who are unresponsive to their needs, resulting in lack of trust or higher levels of anxiety. This then forms the basis for future relationships, resulting in unhealthy relationships. Insecure attachments have been associated with increased use of violence in men (Dutton, Saunders, Starzomski & Bartholomew, 1994). The paradox of longing for closeness yet fearful of losing the loved one can result in partners exhibiting controlling behaviours, attempting to 'force' the loved one to stay out of fear and anxiety (Bowlby, 1988). However, Velotti, Rogier, Zobel, Chirumbolo and Zavattini (2022) conducted a meta-analysis on attachment and IPVA and found no significant differences for most attachment types, excepting anxious attachments. Those with anxious attachment styles are said to experience increased ANS arousal when their needs are not met (Godbout, Sabourin, Dutton & Lussier, 2009), perhaps providing some explanation for the findings identified above by Umhau et al., (2002).

Dutton (2006), a key American psychologist, argues that the feminist literature dismisses psychological explanations of violence such as attachment and personality disorder (PD), arguing that community-based intervention models (such as the Duluth intervention programme: Pence & Sheppard, 1999) and current policies fail to take such issues into account. He argues that the feminist literature has barely developed since the 1970s and that most perpetrators of abuse have a personality disorder of some kind. However, DeKeseredy & Dragiewicz (2007) argue that this is not the case and that a brief search through journals exploring violence from a feminist perspective identifies that feminist authors

incorporate such psychological concepts whilst taking into account the broader social challenges faced by women. However, taking into account PD may be useful for intervention purposes rather than as an explanation for abuse in and of itself. For example, Saunders (2006) explored personality pathology, randomly assigning 136 men to either psychoeducational or cognitive behavioural interventions (CBT). Those with personality pathologies that attended the psychoeducational programme showed lower recidivism compared to those that attended CBT two years post treatment. In contrast, those without personality pathologies showed lower rates of recidivism when attending CBT compared to psychoeducational interventions. Dutton (2006) therefore raises important factors to be taken into account. However, focussing on PD or attachments as an explanation dismisses the gendered experiences of IPVA, with Dutton (2006) arguing that women abuse as often as men. This is a simplistic argument failing to consider how gender impacts experiences of violence for each gender, and therefore limits the tailored support that could be available for both men and women. Whilst personality disorders such as borderline and antisocial PD have been considered a risk factor for IPVA perpetration, experiences of childhood maltreatment and complex trauma show a stronger relationship (Green & Browne, 2020). Notable here is that borderline PD and complex trauma share many of the same diagnostic criteria (Green & Browne, 2020).

Another factor to consider is generalisation. Holtzworth-Munroe and Stuart (1994) examined the literature on perpetrator typologies and identified that those with PD are a distinct type of abuser where abuse forms part of wider anti-social behaviour. Such offenders are more likely to be found in prison than in the community (Holtzworth-Munroe & Stuart, 1994). Other types of perpetrators may respond very differently to interventions such as psychoeducational programmes and one should avoid generalising across different types of offenders. Holtzworth-Munroe and Stuart (1994) propose three types of perpetrator: the family only perpetrator uses less severe abuse, is unlikely to have a PD and does not offend outside of the family (approximately fifty percent of those that abuse when taking into account perpetrators both in prison and in the community); dysphoric/borderline abusers mainly offend against family, using a moderate level of abuse, and may have issues with substance use. Some criminal activity outside of the family setting may have taken place (approximately twenty-five percent of those that abuse); and finally, the generally violent/anti-social type is likely to have a criminal offence history both in and out the home, have a PD, and use severe abuse, including both sexual and psychological abuse. Each type of perpetrator warrants consideration and may require a different intervention type and level.

Evolutionary, biological and attachment theories are limited in their approach to explaining IPVA, particularly on a societal level. The evidence-base for these theories is inconsistent when it comes to IPVA

and have less widespread support than a gender-based approach (for example, the World Health Organisation's position on IPVA). However, they can be drawn together to form a more cohesive whole, if considered as smaller parts of a bigger picture rather than segmented theories.

Feminist theories can provide the key context for abuse, providing a macro level explanation for abuse in England and Wales. In as early as 2001, Lawson, Dawson, Kieffer, Perez, Burke and Kier argued that a systems approach was necessary to understand IPVA. This thesis argues that gender-based inequalities have a cascade effect, penetrating every level of the ecological system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and influencing biopsychosocial factors (for example, implicit beliefs). Feminist theories therefore provide a strong starting point to effect change in the system as a whole.

A Framework to Aid Understanding: Systems Theories

General systems theory, developed by Bertalanffy in 1945, originally catered to the natural sciences but has been increasingly applied to various fields such as social work (family systems theory; Bowen, 1966). Systems psychology is the application of psychology to general systems theory, with Bertalanffy arguing that these go hand in hand (1967), for example, when exploring the organism as a system. Psychology is about understanding behaviour, and behaviour is formed from an *'active personality system'* (Bertalanffy, 1967, p. 127) that responds to stimuli. *'System disturbance'* (Bertalanffy, 1967, p. 127) can result in behavioural change, for example lesions to the brain can change the way an individual behaves, communicates, and understands information. In turn, this can have an impact on other systems that the individual interacts with, for example the workplace or school.

The main principle of systems theories is that one component of a given system would behave differently on its own than when interacting with other systems, or within the supra-system. For example, an individual is likely to continue to impact and be influenced by their family system (Bowen, 1966). Bertalanffy (1967) refers to this as a *'feedback system'* (p. 133) – the systems interact with each other, and these interactions feedback to influence system change. This feedback system is not linear, but a *'multivariable interaction'* (p. 133). In other words, interactions can take place between multiple systems at the same time, and feedback will not necessarily have an immediate or direct impact. Bowen (1966) discusses this in relation to family dynamics, explaining that anxieties can build over generations. For example, how grief is dealt with in the present is influenced by what we have learnt about dealing with grief from past generations in our own families (Brown, 1999). Therefore, psychopathology, or system disturbances can be understood in the context of the family system and how it has functioned over time (Bowen, 1966).

Interactions between and within systems, such as those discussed above, can be further understood by applying Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (1979). Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (1979) is a nested systems theory and has been applied to various fields, including: immigration (Paat, 2013); teaching (Tissington, 2008); and sexual victimisation (Pittenger, Huit, & Hansen, 2016). Four overarching systems impact a child's development: the micro system (immediate family); the meso system (community); the exo system (structures that hold power); and the macro system (attitudes, belief systems and overarching governance).

Each system interacts with the other - meso factors interact with micro factors, and vice versa (Zawisza, 2005). A change in one level of the system can produce change in other levels of the system, influencing child development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The most influential system on a child is the micro system, followed by the meso system. By strengthening the relationship between the meso system and the micro system, we strengthen the influence that the meso system can have on the child (Zawisza, 2005). For example, a strong positive relationship between schools and the home will result in more positive factors for child development (Zawisza, 2005).

If we consider this in light of survivors, we can see that survivors are a system in and of themselves (Bertalanffy, 1967). Their own personalities shape how they understand and interact with others (Bertalanffy, 1967). However, their immediate families can impact this – a strong family system may increase resilience, one that has experienced IPVA may result in a fractured understanding of relationships or impact the ANS (Brown, 1999). Those in the community can either provide support, increasing the chances of a better outcome for the survivor, or leave the survivor feeling isolated and unprotected. This can shape how survivors view and understand the world, for example, feeling that the world is an unsafe place (Kuban & Steele, 2011). If a survivor then tried to seek justice or medical intervention and experienced unfavourable care, this could further impact their world view, but also their opportunities to be safe. All these systems are affected by wider governing bodies (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For example, a country that values women, putting in place IPVA policies and ensuring survivors are protected will affect how those within the country view IPVA, but also how the individual systems operate (Garcia-Moreno, Jansen, Ellsberg, Heise & Watts, 2005). Their beliefs, attitudes and how they put these into practice have a cascading effect, with strong supportive systems increasing opportunities for survivors to be protected, safe and supported (Garcia-Moreno et al., 2005). In addition, co-ordinating action within the macro system can result in well-rounded protection – for example, sexual violence mostly occurs in intimate relationships however policies and research on sexual violence rarely combine with IPVA policies and research (Morgan & Gilchrist, 2010). Bringing these two fields together combines

action, reducing the silo effect. For example, Morgan and Gilchrist (2010) argue that sexual violence should be considered when ascertaining the future risk of an IPVA perpetrator, alongside motivations for the sexual offence.

We can now begin to see how feminist and gender-based violence theories (discussed in chapter two) fit within this model. Societal values and beliefs, policies and governance, and community support all need to work together to create the best possible outcome for survivors (Pence & Paymar, 1996). Societal imbalance, lack of protection from governing bodies, and/or lack of action from the justice system can result in inequality for women experiencing IPVA (WHO, 2021a), increasing *system dysfunction* in their individual organism-based systems (Bertalanffy, 1967).

Whilst this thesis makes use of systems psychology, there are alternative systems theories available that may enhance the discussion throughout, for example, autopoietic systems theory.

Autopoietic systems theory was developed by Luhmann (1970), a sociologist who believed that communication was a key component to societal functioning and understanding how systems work. Luhmann's (1970) focus was on how social systems interact, identifying 'society systems' (for example, England is a societal system) that consist of 'interaction systems' and organisation systems' (Kihlstrom, 2011). Interaction systems are those that are likely to involve in person interactions such as family or neighbours. Organisation systems are those that have 'formal rules for inclusion and exclusion' (Kihlstrom, 2011; p. 289). This involves communication between systems and parties, and connections synthesise specific communicative understandings around the what, the how and the reaction to these (Kihlstrom, 2011). For example, a survivor might enquire with a solicitor about a protective order – this gaining of information would be the 'what'. They might then apply for the protective order with the solicitor – this would be the 'how'. The reaction would depend on the understanding or misunderstanding of what the protective order can achieve, or whether this has been successfully gained. The individual themself would not be a considered a system, but the communications between parties would form that specific social system (Kihlstrom, 2011). The system in itself is flexible because it is formed by such communications (Kihlstrom, 2011), and operates based on a binary scheme (e.g., something is illegal, or it is legal). As Stichweh (2011) states,

> Social systems as autopoietic communication systems which always produce and reproduce a specific type of communication (e.g., payments in the economy, published truth claims in the social system of science) and which do this only on the basis of processes internal to the system. (p. 6)

In other words, decisions and communications are made based on system specific binaries. For example, the legal system operates with consideration of the law, including legislation and case law (Barnett, 2017). Something is either legal, or it is not, and all decisions about law are made by this system. The legal system will understand its own coding, and, as such, will generate its own decisions about whether new laws are appropriate. However, such communications and codes are not always understood by other systems (Barnett, 2017). Observing communications from outside the legal system may result in other systems perceiving the same situation differently – reality is therefore constructed. When applied to family law, Barnett (2017) argues that there are misunderstandings when it comes to communications between the family courts and survivors, resulting in the legal system interpreting legislation accurately but in a way that is seen as unhelpful to survivors. For example, solicitors advising clients based on what they believe to be the best legal outcome in their case can be viewed as problematic or even coercive to mothers who may consider this communication to be dismissive of the abuse they have experienced.

One crucial criticism of Luhmann's (1970) theory may be helpful to consider here. The individual does not have a role in the system until communications are formed (Kihlstrom, 2011), and stops being part of the system when communications end. As Kilhstrom (2011) states, "You are a client when you, for example, visit social services. When you leave it you are *nobody*" (p. 293). In excluding the individual as a system in and of itself, Kilhstrom (2011) argues that Luhmann's model is simplistic, failing to recognise the autonomy of an individual, and failing to take into account ethics and morality. For example, Autonomy is perceived as chaotic and something that can be negated by structural messages produced by the system (Brunkhorst, 2007). Kilhstrom (2011) argues that this ignores ethics and morality, and the application of this by individuals in social justice,

> For example, when a young staff member in a Swedish elderly care institution, reacted against ill treatment of old people. She was brave enough to draw back for her role as employee and use her freedom as an individual to criticise the eldercare system. Her action resulted in a new law, Lex Sara. (p. 292).

It is important to note here the importance of autonomy to a survivor, and the importance in understanding survivors as a system that has experienced trauma. This will inevitably impact perceptions, actions and reactions – all important aspects of Luhmann's (1970) model. Without understanding the survivor and their experiences, we cannot understand their role or how they fit in the legal system without dismissing their needs – for example, by not taking a trauma-informed approach.

In addition, Munro and Turnell (2022), exploring best practice framework 'Signs of Safety' in child protection, outline that binary thinking, such as right and wrong or over compliance with rules and legislation, can produce dysfunctional practice that fails to address the individual factors in a case. This results in learning taking place in hindsight when should have or could have thinking replaces the binary based on negative case outcomes. Communication can fall into blaming the system or relying on the fact that rules were being followed, rather than using professional judgement or being adaptive in practice (Munro & Turnell, 2020). The Signs of Safety framework is innovative in its approach to child protection, ensuring that change is made at every sub-system level with the aim of improving not only practice but system culture across child protection (Munro & Turnell, 2020). Munro and Turnell (2020), in their evaluation of the framework, argue that practice and organisational goals should align. Focus should be on leadership, learning, effective practice that takes into account expertise, and communication within and outside the organisation (Munro & Turnell, 2020). Where the framework was adopted, local authorities showed significant improvement in practice that took into account child welfare and allowed social workers to be flexible in their approach to families as a whole (Munro & Turnell, 2020). This increased accountability but with a focus on learning and honesty rather than the extent to which the rules were followed. This allowed for reflective practice that benefitted all parties (Munro & Turnell, 2020). This would provide some evidence for a mixed systems approach – the binary coding in Luhmann's (1970) model does not appear to quite fit with a child protection model however communication is clearly a key aspect of system failures that could be understood by applying Luhmann's (1970) autpoietic model.

Applying Systems Theories to Child Contact

There is an emerging body of literature in England and Wales focusing on how women experience the family courts and professionals working within this system (Birchall & Choudhry, 2018; Coy, Perks, Scott & Tweedale, 2015; Thiara & Gill, 2012; Thiara & Harrison, 2016). There is also a well-established body of literature that explores women's experiences of IPVA (for example: Stark, 2007). Missing from the literature is an exploration of how one impacts the other and the context of the journey a survivor takes. The family court experience can reinforce trauma already experienced (Rivera, Sullivan & Zeoli, 2012) and hinder the healing a survivor may have begun post-separation. Systems theory can be helpful to understand the multiple systems and perspectives involved in the child contact process.

For example, the family courts are part of the legal system, child protection forms part of its own system, and policing forms part of the criminal justice system (Hester, 2011). IPVA may overlap with all of these. However, all these systems work within a supra-system. The supra-system is goal oriented

(Bertalanffy, 1967). These goals inevitably merge with other systems, but each system will have its own components, aims and values (Bertalanffy, 1967). These goals or aims may not always be compatible (Hester, 2011).

Hester's (2011) three planet model explains that this is because abusive behaviour is dealt with in different ways by different agencies who have differing needs, systems, and responses (Hester, 2011). For example, the father's behaviour towards the mother is dealt with by the police (police 'planet') whose job it is to protect the mother and inform the prosecution of the father (Hester, 2011). Children witnessing this abuse would be dealt with by children's services (child protection 'planet'). Their job is to protect the children and stop them from being in an abusive household, if necessary, by removing them or advising the mother to prevent access to the children by the father (Hester, 2011). A mother that does not leave the relationship may be viewed as failing to protect children. The final system is that of child contact, dealt with by the family courts (child contact 'planet'). Their role is to act in the best interests of the child, and this is presupposed to include both parents (Hester, 2011).

The child protection and child contact systems however are at a discord. For instance, a mother can be viewed as failing to protect the children on the one hand (child protection planet), and then as obstructing child contact on the other (child contact planet; Thiara & Gill, 2012). Equally a discord is seen between IPVA and child contact whereby a mother with a protection order can be forced to attend child contact proceedings with the father in the same room (Coy et al., 2012), highlighting system failures when it comes to working together to meet the goals of the supra-system. Hunter, Burton and Trinder (2020) still highlight silo working and discord between systems as an issue in the child contact system. They highlight four specific points of silo working. Systems are failing to work together resulting in detrimental impacts on the child, including evidence from criminal cases not being taken into account in the family courts (Hunter, Burton & Trinder, 2020). There are differing cultures and approaches to child protection within the systems creating confusion for all (Hunter, Burton & Trinder, 2020, and as highlighted by Hester in 2011). Finally, children's voices within the study showed that the family courts were not engaging substantially with those that are working closely with the child and know the child best (e.g., support services; Hunter, Burton & Trinder, 2020). It is concerning that research findings from 2011 are still being echoed in research findings from 2020.

These differing frameworks, core beliefs, and lack of understanding of the other systems interact to exacerbate an already difficult situation (Hester, 2011). Even where there are frameworks and systems in place to effectively deal with IPVA and child contact, beliefs around IPVA and contact can impact on how these systems are used, making them less effective. For example, Practice Direction 12J stipulates

that fact-finding hearings should be undertaken where there has been a disputed allegation of IPVA and that this should occur before a final contact order can be set. Where a judge feels this unnecessary, the reasons should be provided in writing. Crucially, a fact-finding hearing is required where the judge feels IPVA could affect the outcome of the case. Research suggests that judges hold the belief that IPVA should have little to do with child contact outcomes (Hunter & Barnett, 2013), and a fact-finding hearing can be discounted (or not conducted at all) because of the personal beliefs of a judge. For example, research from England and Wales (Hunter & Barnett, 2013) surveyed 623 professionals consisting of: circuit judges; district judges; family court magistrates; magistrates court legal advisors; Cafcass officers; solicitors; barristers; domestic abuse advocates; children's advocates; and expert witnesses. They found that 67% of respondents stated this as a reason to not hold a fact-finding hearing (Hunter & Barnett, 2013). Other reasons for not holding fact-finding hearings included: the IPVA being 'historic' (61% of respondents; Hunter & Barnett, 2013), despite the fact that fear and intimidation may still be ongoing; the belief that IPVA should be considered as part of 'more substantive hearings' (p. 22; Hunter & Barnett, 2013). In addition, allegations deemed as minor were less likely to be considered as the impact of IPVA was not fully understood (Hunter & Barnett, 2013). Hunter and Barnett (2013) identified a potential reason for such beliefs – training on the understanding of IPVA outside of legal terms was lacking, resulting in judges considering IPVA from a purely legal perspective. This provides further evidence for both binary thinking (autopoietic systems theory), and the negative impact of silo working (Hunter, Burton & Trinder, 2020).

Equally, a system that is lacking in tools and guidance can result in negative change or inattention when it comes to action and the system is likely to reflect and impact the beliefs of those operating within it. For example, Cafcass[2] replaced their domestic violence toolkit in 2012 with an overall child protection policy, something Coy et al. (2012) state does not properly address IPVA. The removal of the toolkit reflects how much importance Cafcass place on IPVA when considering child contact recommendations and the organisational culture (Women's Aid, 2016). These opposing systems result in a lack of coherence and protection, which risks mothers feeling bewildered, unprotected, and re-victimised (Hester, 2011), and that can be used by fathers to further abuse the mothers and children (Sutherland, 2004).

The impact of such systems is that they create individual environments that may not reflect reality or the environment outside of those systems (Barnett, 2017), particularly where a system is 'closed' or

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[2] Children and family court advisory and support service - Independent of the courts and social services, seek to place children's best interests at the forefront of family court proceedings and make court recommendations in contact cases (amongst other roles). Cafcass have legislative powers under the Criminal Justice and Court Services Act 2000.

'private'. The impact is that they become the authority on their communications – i.e., only the family courts can decide what is in the best interests of the child for contact and they know best about this, after all, they decide what is acting within the law and what is not (Barnett, 2017). Individuals within any system are likely to need to communicate with other systems – Cafcass operate in the child protection system as well as the legal system (Barnett, 2017). However other systems may not receive their communications in the same way, creating communicative misunderstandings (Barnett, 2017). It should be noted here however the Barnett (2017) used an alternative systems theory to explore such communication challenges – autopoietic systems theory (see p. 21).

David Mandel (2013) proposes a new model of intervention that considers systems across IPVA. He calls this the 'Safe and Together^{TM}' model. Whilst this model focusses on child protection, Mandel (2013) argues that child protection and IPVA systems have been viewed as distinct, with emphasis on mothers to protect taking away from perpetrator accountability. Safer and Together^{TM} aims to increase cross-collaboration between systems, ensuring that information is not missed that could impact child outcomes. For example, the model proposes maintaining the relationship between the non-offending parent and child, promoting healing, whilst working with the perpetrator to increase their accountability. The model ensures that team members are taking into account the harm that IPVA can cause children and warns against focussing on the choices of the mother or 'failure to protect', and instead focussing on the choices of the offending parent. In addition, the model empowers the mother, working with her and highlighting her decisions that have kept the children safe so far. Whilst the model is currently US based, working with a model that takes into account how systems work together would be very beneficial in England and Wales, particularly given the strengths-based approach towards mothers and the increase in accountability for fathers.

Chapter 3: Literature Review and Research Questions

The following literature review explores IPVA, the family courts and child contact. It explores survivor experiences, coping mechanisms and trauma. It goes on to discuss children's experiences of IPVA and the impact of this on well-being and development, detailing implications for the family courts. The literature review outlines policy and legislation in relation to IPVA and child contact, exploring professional practice within the child contact system. Finally, it outlines social constructions of motherhood and fatherhood, and how these affect our perceptions of being a 'good mother' or a 'good father'. This is applied to the family courts, exploring how parenting is framed within this setting.

Intimate Partner Violence and Abuse: Brief Overview

This section provides a brief overview of IPVA. It aims to provide context and show how a survivor's journey might develop, highlighting the circumstances the survivor has been living with prior to child contact. This includes experiences of post-separation IPVA and coercive control, as well as highlighting recent legislative changes. It is important to recognise the trauma a survivor may have experienced, and may still be living with, when considering child contact and the courts. This undoubtedly has an impact on how they perceive and experience interactions with others, and the system as a whole. A discussion of trauma will be included here.

IPVA can have serious consequences. Two women per week in England and Wales are killed by a current or former partner (Office of National Statistics, 2019; ONS). In addition, it is estimated that three women a week die by suicide because of IPVA, and thirty women attempt suicide every day (Hestia, 2020; Walby, 2004). Further research with Refuge (a charity offering women a safe place to stay when leaving abuse) by Aitken and Munro (2018) identified that 854 out of 3519 Refuge clients included in their research felt suicidal or had previously attempted suicide. This equates to just under a quarter of participants. However, attempts to prosecute perpetrators as liable for suicide have either not succeeded (R v Dhaliwal, 2006), or perpetrators have been charged with offences related to physical abuse (Lodge, 2020). So far only one case has held a perpetrator responsible for the suicide of his partner - Nicholas Allen was convicted of manslaughter because of his controlling behaviour that led to the suicide of Justine Reece (R V Allen, 2017). There is potential for further convictions like this using more recent additions of 'controlling or coercive behaviour' to the Serious Crime Act (s76, 2015).

Using a sample of 318 women, the ONS found that just under a quarter of women experiencing IPVA in England and Wales suffered physical injuries in the 12 months leading to March 2018 (ONS,

2020). This included bruising or a black eye (18%) and other physical injuries such as poisoning (4%). Over half experienced other effects, including mental health or emotional consequences (53%), a lack of trust in others and difficulties in other relationships (26%), and suicide attempts (8%). Dillon, Hussain, Loxton, and Rahman (2013) conducted a review of the literature and identified several mental health concerns associated with IPVA, including: depression; anxiety; self-harm; chronic and somatic disorders; PTSD; and difficulty sleeping. IPVA can also result in loss of employment (Anitha, 2019), isolation (Hill, 2020), and for some, having children's services involvement that could potentially result in children being taken into care (Hester, 2011).

Leaving a violent and abusive relationship may be perceived as a legitimate option by those outside of the relationship (Evans & Feder, 2014), particularly given the consequences outlined above. However, separation is a significant risk factor for serious harm or death (ONS, 2020; Spencer & Stith, 2020), with the likelihood of violence and abuse escalating when a perpetrator feels as though they are losing dominance and control of the survivor (also known as male sexual proprietariness theory; Wilson & Daly, 1993).

If IPVA is proven, several restrictions can be placed on an abusive (ex) partner to protect the survivor, including:

- **Non-molestation orders** require the perpetrator to not contact, harass or threaten the survivor. Additional provisions can be added to the order, for instance allowing email contact to arrange child visitation. Breaching this order is now a criminal offence.
- **Occupation orders** are a civil order that require the abusive partner to leave the family home and allow the mother and children to occupy the home until the children reach 18 years of age or leave full-time education. An occupation order may also limit the perpetrator from entering the surrounding area of where the home is located.
- **Domestic violence protection orders (DVPO)** have been implemented with some success (Kelly, Adler, Horvath, Lovett, Coulson, Kernohan & Gray, 2013) – these require the perpetrator to leave the family home for a specified period allowing the mother 'space for action'. In the first instance, a Domestic Violence Protection Notice (DVPN) is issued. This may remain in place for 48 hours whilst a DVPO is formally sought. Breaching the restrictions is a criminal offence and can include not contacting the survivor and not coming within a certain distance of the family home. Crucially, although this is a civil order, permission or agreement from the survivor is not required to action a DVPO – it is acknowledged that survivors may change their minds about taking a case forward or deny IPVA out of fear. The DVPO effectively removes responsibility from the survivor.

- The Domestic Abuse Act (2021) brings two new orders: **Domestic Abuse Protection Notice (DAPN) and Domestic Abuse Protection Order (DAPO).** These are similar to, and repeal, the previously described DVPNs and DVPOs (Home Office, 2022). However, the new orders bring increased opportunities for survivors. For example, survivors and third parties can now apply for the orders via the family court, and all courts can now implement a DAPO during court proceedings if they feel it is necessary and whether the court case is related to IPVA or not. Following, concerns about the lack of sanctions for breaching the previous DVPNs and DVPOs, DAPOs can require substance use, IPVA or mental health related interventions. Such requirements can change over time, allowing the courts flexibility to consider changing needs and risk. In addition, DAPOs can now require electronic monitoring, and all DAPOs require mandatory notification of changes of perpetrator circumstances (such as name or address) to the police. This allows for enhanced monitoring of the perpetrator and compliance. Breaching a DAPO can result in a maximum five year prison sentence and/or a fine – unlike the previous orders, breaching a DAPO is a criminal offence.

However, evidencing IPVA can be difficult (Bishop & Bettinson, 2018) for several reasons. Whilst the courts will require evidence of any injuries (including photographic and/or written medical statements), statements from others (e.g., neighbours) may be deemed hearsay, although use of 'hearsay' evidence is increasing (Bishop & Bettinson, 2018). In addition, IPVA is often unreported and therefore there may be a lack of police evidence (HMIC, 2014), although the use of body worn cameras by police officers has helped with this (Lister, Burn, & Pina-Sanchez, 2018). Therefore, providing sufficient evidence to gain any of the protective orders detailed above can be difficult.

Coping Mechanisms

In addition, a survivor's feelings on leaving the relationship may not be as simple as perceived by those outside of the relationship. For example, the use of coercive control and abuse in violent relationships can create what is referred to as 'trauma bonding'. Painter and Dutton (1985) provide a social-psychological model that explains trauma bonding. They claim that trauma bonding requires two elements: a power imbalance between the victim and perpetrator; and shifting from positive to negative behaviours. This study was based on interviews with a small sample (n=12) of 22–63-year-old women transitioning from 'battered women's shelters'. On a basic level, IPVA can be explained as occurring due to a power imbalance, both in terms of structural inequalities, and on an interpersonal level. In this respect, trauma bonding can be explained as a form of psychological protection from this imbalance (Painter & Dutton, 1985). Survivors bond with the perpetrator, as they cannot cope with the abuse and

constant uncertainty of the perpetrator's moods. Essentially, trauma bonding is a coping mechanism. This bond between survivor and perpetrator can be the reason someone remains in an abusive relationship or finds it difficult to leave. Other coping mechanisms include: self-harm (Boyle, Jones & Lloyd, 2006); consumption of drugs and/or alcohol (Overup, DiBello, Brunson, Acitelli & Neighbors, 2015); minimisation of abuse (Rodriguez, 2011); and self-blame (Akbari, Sadeghi & Jahedi, 2017). In addition, a significant proportion of women that experience abuse will go on to experience symptoms of trauma (Humphreys & Jacobs, 2004).

It is necessary to understand trauma and implement trauma-informed practice when it comes to IPVA (Humphreys & Jacobs, 2004; Women's Aid, 2021). Trauma symptoms have significant impacts on the wellbeing of survivors, and how they receive support. For example, trauma can include hypervigilance, loss of sleep or nightmares, flashbacks and reliving the event, avoidance or numbing of emotions, and irritability (Murphy, 1997). Trauma can result in hyperventilating, increased arousal, and fear responses (Batsleer et al., 2002; Smith & Heke, 2010), suicide, self-harm (Stark & Flitcraft, 1995) and dissociation (Smith & Heke, 2010). Importantly, trauma can change the structure of the brain, resulting in memory loss (Smith & Heke, 2010), and impacting how a survivor might react to any given situation – including exhibiting counter-intuitive behaviour (Westera & Powell, 2017).

Herman (1992) was a leading campaigner, researcher, and practitioner in this area, arguing that women and child survivors of IPVA experience complex trauma with little to no support. Herman (1992) advocated for a social movement away from diagnosing women survivors of experiencing borderline personality disorder, and instead diagnosing trauma. She viewed this as victim-blaming, focussing on dealing with psychopathology as opposed to underlying symptoms of experiencing abuse and trauma, preventing healing and negating survivor experiences of abuse. This was the beginning of the redefinition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) criteria for PTSD, recognising the person's reaction to an event as important, and not simply what the DSM should define as a traumatic event (Humphreys & Jacobs, 2004). Herman (1992) also advocated for social and community recognition of IPVA, allowing those around the survivor to better understand violence and abuse, rather than create further silence, and legitimise abuse, therefore denying a survivor's experiences. Gilfus (1999) talks about the importance of discussing trauma to recognise not only the severe and long-lasting effects of violence against women, but also to ensure that the effects are understood as occurring because of something that has been experienced, and not a pathological issue. Gilfus (1999) claims that framing the experiences of survivors in a trauma framework is helpful as it furthers understanding and empowers survivors by acknowledging that they are not at fault. Equally, it provides the opportunity for appropriate trauma-based

interventions, allowing survivors to heal (Gilfus, 1999). Social support and recognition are protective factors when it comes to developing trauma, as well as a vital tool when it comes to recovery (Evans & Feder, 2017; Latta & Goodman, 2011). In some respects, trauma can be argued as political. Placing trauma at the forefront of discussions of IPVA requires widespread recognition of IPVA and keeps IPVA in the public and political spotlight, requiring action, or at a minimum acknowledgement of this societal and social injustice (Profitt, 2020). In fact, Women's Aid and IMKAAN undertake a significant amount of political lobbying when it comes to IPVA (see their websites), demanding action from those in power and increasing awareness of IPVA in the community. As a result of their work, public policy changes have been implemented in the sector – for example, the Tackling Violence against Women and Girls strategy[3] (VAWG; Home Office, 2021a).

Research in trauma has been increasing (Humphreys & Jacobs, 2004), however little of it focusses on the intersection of IPVA and trauma (Vostanis, 2002) even though a large proportion of mental health and psychiatric services are occupied by survivors of IPVA (Barron, 2004). This highlights that much still needs to be improved to benefit survivors. This thesis argues that it is not just mental health and psychiatric services that need to recognise trauma and improve services, but every service and social setting in contact with survivors should operate on a trauma-informed basis. This is particularly true for legal and court services where much is at stake if trauma is not recognised and understood (Safelives, 2021). Post-traumatic growth is possible (Humphreys & Jacobs, 2004) if survivors are supported in a way that speaks to them and their symptoms. Pathologising survivors and their coping mechanisms is an ongoing concern in the court system (Erickson, 2006), and not just in psychiatry. Women's Aid (2021) discuss how the pathologisation of women links directly to sexism and the historical positioning of women as *'unstable, over-emotional or hysterical'* (p. 13).

It is important to note that coping mechanisms adopted by women in abusive relationships can result in women being perceived as unfit to parent by police, children's services, and the courts (Hester, 2011). For example, a survivor who refuses to leave a relationship because of trauma bonding or fear of death may result in children's services removing the child to protect the child from witnessing any abuse (Hester, 2011). Equally, survivor coping mechanisms (such as substance use or trauma symptoms) may be highlighted in contact scenarios by the perpetrator to gain sole residency of any children the couple have together (Coy et al., 2012). In some cases, IPVA will leave the survivor in a position where she is unable to take care of her children (Stanley et al., 2010). These consequences impact the survivor, the children and

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[3] The VAWG strategy (Home Office, 2021) sets out how the government will tackle issues such as IPVA and female genital mutilation by 'strengthening the system' and fostering information sharing between agencies. It shares government priorities for prevention, support, and perpetrator accountability, and increases funding for the sector.

extended family. What can be perceived as guarded or negative behaviour is actually underlying fear (Pranzo, 2013), particularly when considering the potential further harm to the children and mothers in this situation. Increased fear and arousal can be a symptom of trauma, but it is also legitimate when it comes to IPVA. Survivors are justly afraid, and that fear can act as protection, leaving women in a state of constant readiness for the next 'incident' of abuse. When we combine these challenges, it becomes easier to recognise the obstacles women face when considering whether to leave an abusive relationship, and how leaving might create further difficulties, including potentially placing children at risk of further harm.

The implications of the information presented in this section are clear - women facing the family courts have faced several impossibly difficult challenges. From physical and psychological harm to loss of social networks, to adopting potentially harmful coping mechanisms - including returning to an abusive relationship, and finally, attempting to manage traumatic symptoms whilst simultaneously attempting to keep their children and themselves safe. It is not the average person that stands before a family court judge, but someone that has faced a journey of abuse and violence, often alone and unsupported.

Children Experiencing IPVA

This section will explore children's experiences of IPVA in the home, and children's experiences of post-parental separation. As explained on p. 9, children are positioned as experiencing IPVA in their own right rather than being witnesses (Domestic Abuse Act, 2021). This section highlights the challenges children face when navigating abusive relationships between caregivers, and the implications of living with IPVA. This section argues that child well-being can be negatively affected by child contact with an abusive parent and positively affected by a strong mother-child relationship.

It is estimated that 831,000 children may be living in households with reported IPVA (Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2019). Radford et al. (2011a) conducted research with over 6000 children from the UK and estimate that 1 in 5 children have experienced IPVA. Stanley et al. (2010) explored police case files of 460 children experiencing IPVA and identified that 45% directly witnessed the abuse, with 69% being located somewhere in the home at the time of an 'incident' taking place. Safelives (2017) identify this figure as much higher – they undertook research with 1,695 children in England and Wales and found that 95% of participants were in the home when IPVA took place, and 74% of children in their study directly witnessed an 'incident'.

Holden's (2003) taxonomy of exposure provides a detailed account of the various ways children can experience IPVA, ranging from being aware of changing atmosphere to death. Jaffe and Juodis (2006)

explore this further, identifying various ways in which IPVA can result in the death of children in the household, identifying both direct and indirect harms. Children can be directly killed as an act of revenge or as part of a murder-suicide plan (Jaffe & Juodis, 2006) and children can be indirectly killed by trying to protect their mother or by being caught in the crossfire of IPVA (Jaffe & Juodis, 2006). Rose and Barnes (2008) argue that child death reviews consistently highlight IPVA in the home, building on Radford et al. (2011b) that IPVA in the home should be given serious attention when it comes to ensuring the welfare of children.

In addition, research suggests that children who experience abuse in their homes are also more likely to directly experience child abuse from the aggressor (Hamby, Finkelhor, Turner & Ormrod, 2010; O'Keefe, 1994). The co-existence of IPVA and child abuse directed towards the child in the home is recognised in the academic literature. For example, Radford et al. (2011a), using a sample of 1,761 18–24-year-olds, analysed retrospective childhood experiences of abuse, stating that over 34% of their sample had both 'witnessed' IPVA and directly experienced child maltreatment. Stanley (2011) highlights IPVA as being a key risk factor for child abuse and neglect.

Aitken and Munro (2018) describe IPVA as a *'slow drip, drip effect of 'apparently minor' acts of humiliation, control and subtle undermining that cause the greatest harm…and the duration'* (p. 8) - children are likely to experience IPVA as continuous, with the figures being much higher if we measure the pattern of behaviours rather than individual incidents. In a study comprising of 110 semi-structured interviews with children across four countries (UK, Greece, Spain, and Italy), Callaghan et al. (2018) found that children are very much aware of the continuing IPVA experienced by mothers, including coercive control. They may even blame themselves for the abuse taking place. Safelives (2017) found this was the case for 23% of participants in their study. Callaghan et al. (2018) argue that children can be directly and indirectly affected by IPVA. Regimes of coercive control can result in children attempting to 'manage' the abuse taking place for example, by changing their behaviour to prevent IPVA towards their mother (Callaghan et al., 2018; Katz, 2016; Mullender et al., 2002). Children report *"consciously and carefully reading his moods, anticipating his potential responses"* (p. 14), being conscious of irrational rules (for example not being allowed to read a newspaper before their father had read it or risk being grounded), and being aware of the rules and regimes that restricted the freedom of mothers and themselves (Callaghan et al., 2018). Extended family relationships may also be impacted by IPVA. For example, children describe fathers as infringing upon relationships with grandparents, viewing this as an extension of the coercive control experienced (Katz, 2016).

Consequences for Children

Children who experience IPVA in the home can suffer several consequences including: externalising behaviours (e.g., aggression); bed-wetting; lower school attainment; nightmares; anxiety; and difficulties in relationships with peers (Lourenco, Baptista, Senra, Adriana, Basilio & Bhona, 2013; Stanley, 2011). Like adult accounts, children describe a constant state of hypervigilance and 'walking on eggshells' (Callaghan et al., 2018; Stanley et al., 2010). At the same time as trying to manage their own symptoms of trauma, they are trying to navigate how they feel about the abuse, and their relationship with both parents (Mullender et al., 2002). However, not all children will experience the negative outcomes and impacts detailed. Kitzmann, Gaylord, Holt and Kenny (2003) argue that one third of those experiencing IPVA will not have worse outcomes than their peers. Stanley (2011) highlighted several protective factors, including high IQ (for boys); high self-esteem and self-worth; a supportive relationship with a caring adult; and other social support such as positive friendships.

In addition, manifestation of trauma can differ depending on the age of the child. Stanley (2011) conducted a literature review exploring impacts of experiencing IPVA and identified several age-related differences. Pre-school or younger children may experience delayed language, delayed toilet-training, sleep disturbance, fear of being left alone, temper tantrums or emotional distress (Stanley, 2011). Stanley (2011) describes the impact on school aged children manifesting as lower school attainment, being quiet or withdrawn, being loud or aggressive, and exhibiting signs of conduct disorder.

Like the discussion had around misdiagnosing mothers who are experiencing trauma symptoms, one must question whether trauma is being identified for school-age children, or whether they are receiving alternative diagnoses. Grasso, Boonsiri, Lipschitz, Guyer, Houshyar, Douglas-Palumberi et al. (2009) explored diagnoses of trauma in 199 children aged from 6-14 years in the USA. They found that 55% of the children met the criteria for trauma but were not diagnosed with it. The main reason for this was lack of multi-agency working – children's services had differing accounts to mental health services. Bringing these accounts together would have resulted in a complete picture, allowing accurate diagnosis and care (Grasso et al., 2009). Other research identifies children being misdiagnosed with ASD (Boudino, 2010) and ADHD (Weinstein, Staffelbach & Biaggio, 2000) as opposed to trauma. In the case of ADHD and trauma, there are similar presentations in behaviour that can result in misdiagnosis or comorbid diagnoses (Weinstein et al., 2000). Weinstein et al. (2000) therefore argue for clearer guidelines in diagnostic manuals to highlight trauma as an alternative diagnosis. Brown (2021) discusses the legal implications of this, holding that abuse is under-diagnosed by medical professionals, and diagnoses of trauma/abuse by such professionals are unduly questioned by legal professionals who believe the

opposite. Brown (2021) calls for trust-building between professions and highlights the importance of this to best serve the interests of children.

Future relationships might also be impacted by IPVA. Exposure to abuse in the home is highlighted as the most significant predictor of intergenerational abuse (Unicef, 2006). Intergenerational theory states that children who experience IPVA can go on to exhibit or experience abusive behaviour themselves in their own intimate relationships (Siegel, 2013; Unicef, 2006). However, Mullender et al. (2002) undertook a detailed investigation of children's perspectives and experiences of IPVA, including a survey of 1395 children aged 8 to 16, and interviews with 54 children whose mothers had experienced IPVA. This study, conducted in England, is one of the few studies that explores children's narratives and seeks to gain understanding of IPVA from children living with this abuse in the home. Mullender et al. (2002) found that the children in their study were more likely to condemn violence than condone it and where children had self-reported using violence, this was against the father to protect the mother. SafeLives (2017) identify that 30% of children in their study intervened to try and stop the violence. Mullender et al. (2002) argue that children in their study often went to great lengths to intervene to protect their mother, ranging from use of violence to hiding so as not to exacerbate the situation, a finding upheld by Katz (2016). Women's Aid (2015) argue that intergenerational theory is disempowering and that educational programmes at school should teach children about healthy relationships, rather than there being a focus on intergenerational transmission of abuse.

Implications for Contact Arrangements

Bancroft (2002) argues that children from violent homes who are faced with a contact dispute suffer two sets of consequences: the trauma of witnessing abuse and the trauma related to the separation of their parents. He argues that the courts should be aware of the destructive parenting styles often used by an abusive parent and whether this meets the needs of the child, including whether it allows the mother to meet the needs of the child. For example, Levendosky et al. (2011; p. 156) describe IPVA as an *'assault on the caregiving system'* of the mother impacting on her ability to form a healthy attachment with the child. One of these elements alone can have detrimental effects on children's well-being and as recommended by the Children Act (1989), children should be placed at the forefront of decisions and intervention recommendations.

IPVA directly impacts parenting, making IPVA an important consideration in child contact cases (Bancroft, 2002). Fathers who are abusive may hold characteristics that impact their ability to parent successfully (Bancroft, 2002). Bancroft (2002) argues that abusive fathers typically use an authoritarian

parenting style that is discipline orientated and lacks affection. Some fail to engage effectively with their children at all, often because of lack of interest in meeting their needs or viewing children as a tool to manipulate the mother (Bancroft 2002; Jeffries, 2016). Some children will go on to take part in abusive behaviour towards their mother (Callaghan et al., 2018), damaging the mother-child relationship.

Post-parental separation, the abuse is likely to continue (Macleod, 2018), with children describing how fathers would use child contact to reinforce coercive control (Callaghan et al., 2018). Children discussed fathers constantly rearranging contact, turning up unannounced, asking children to pass on messages and using the children to gain information about the mother (Callaghan et al., 2018). Callaghan et al. (2018) found this ranged from using money to 'buy' the children, to limiting contact with the mother once she had accessed a refuge. In this case, the child was a boy – it is important to acknowledge here that some women must leave sons behind when trying to access support because of restrictions in place in refuges.

Some children actively resisted their father's attempts to continue controlling their mother, with one child describing how she would not respond if her father asked her questions about her mother rather than about her, and another child describing how he would withhold information from his father (Callaghan et al, 2018). Callaghan et al. (2018) describe children as being active agents and using such means to resist control. This could also be interpreted as children trying to regain control that has been lost because of IPVA.

Child contact may not always offer children this option. Holt (2018), using a sample of twenty children based in Ireland, explains that leaving the room or identifying a safe space is much more difficult when child contact is taking place, and that only seeing their father weekly means that the visits are more intense. As one child stated, *'it's the same crap crammed into one day a week!'* (p. 457). Holt (2018) highlights that several children interviewed did not want to see their father, contradicting the belief within the family court system that contact is wanted by children but restricted by mothers. Holt (2018) points out that a number of the children's wishes were ignored, if they were consulted at all. Those that were given a voice and had their choices considered felt safer, more empowered, and showed higher levels of self-esteem, highlighting the benefits of taking children's voices into account. The children in the study wanted to be supported to decide, rather than controlled (Holt, 2018). Callaghan et al. (2018) argue that the children in their study were able to see the intention behind child contact (Callaghan et al., 2018) and rationalise their feelings about this in coherent ways (Holt, 2018).

In addition to acknowledging the trauma and potential further harm to a child 'witnessing' abuse (Coy, Perks, Scott & Tweedale, 2012), parenting capacity should also be considered where the father has had limited or no contact with the child/ren prior to formal proceedings. This is not uncommon (Coy et al., 2012; Mullender et al., 2002). Coy et al. (2012) note that one third of the survivors in their study state fathers had not had any contact with their children between the time of the relationship ending and the court application for contact. Reasons for this include that the relationship had only just ended, and the father had no interest in seeing his children until this point (Coy et al., 2012). Issues of safety, fear and parental capacity were also highlighted, resulting in survivors ending contact between fathers and children.

This delay is particularly important when considering child welfare and the kind of arrangements considered by the courts. As part of the court process, the courts should consider and abide by a welfare checklist (s1, the Children Act 1989). This checklist includes consideration of disruption and changing circumstances in the child's life and enforce limitations on this impact. To limit this disruption and change, the courts should consider introducing contact slowly, perhaps by establishing indirect contact initially before proceeding with supervised contact. In the case of Re S (2015) the judge stipulated that supervised contact should always lead to unsupervised contact. The initial ruling was later appealed on the grounds that indefinite supervised contact may have been more appropriate and that there is no reason that contact cannot be indefinitely supervised (Re S, 2015). Disruption to the child and mother was cited as one of the main reasons for issuing indirect contact for the father. Despite this, there is still a pro-contact culture within the family courts, with the belief that supervised contact should progress to unsupervised contact no matter what (Hunter, Burton & Trinder, 2020). Time delays in contact should also be considered as part of another welfare checklist point: the capability of the individual seeking contact to meet the child's needs. It could be argued here that a time delay could potentially result in the father not actually knowing what the emotional or physical needs of a child are.

In turn, the capacity of the mother may be impacted by the IPVA. For example, Stanley et al. (2010) highlight mental ill health, and substance misuse as scenarios that impacted mothers' parenting, resulting in them being deemed unable to care for the children. These were likely to be consequences of the IPVA. Bancroft (2002) provides further scenarios, such as the mother parenting differently when the father is present, or capacity being reduced because of the abuse experienced (Bancroft, 2002). For example, attachment and bonding between mother and child can be negatively impacted by IPVA (Levendosky, Huth-Bocks & Bogat, 2011). Buchanan, Power and Verity (2014) interviewed sixteen survivors that had children under the age of 10 in Australia. They found that mothers were *'too busy*

protecting my baby to attach' (p. 1). One survivor notes, *'I was always having to do other things to prevent problems… I didn't get to bond as well as what I would have liked to'* (p. 219).

From fathers undermining mothers parenting abilities, to creating a lifestyle that is chaotic, IPVA can have an ongoing impact (Buchanan, Power & Verity, 2014). Exhaustion might make it more difficult to form a relationship with the child – including exhaustion from completing household tasks required by the father (Buchanan, Power & Verity, 2014). For some, the social isolation means that parenting becomes even harder as they do not have the support or shared knowledge that other new mothers might (Buchanan, Power & Verity, 2014), adding to the pressure.

Older children's views of their mother may provide another challenge for mothers. For example, Mullender et al. (2002) highlight that children felt their mothers should have left the relationship sooner. Societal perceptions of mothers as protectors and nurturers may play a role in fostering these views (see chapter two, p. 35 of this thesis). However, in a study by Mullender et al. (2002), most children in their study placed responsibility for the abuse with the father.

The relationship between mother and child is not always damaged because of IPVA. Katz (2016) conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 children and 15 mothers in England. Katz (2016) describes children and mothers coming together to resist regimes put in place by fathers. This included going to the cinema when the father wasn't present, secretly buying items and throwing away evidence of this, and offering each other solace and support (Katz, 2016). Pinna (2016) highlights the importance of a strong mother-child relationship, arguing that parental warmth can mitigate harm caused by experiencing IPVA as a child.

In addition, the father-child relationship is likely to be complex, with children responding in a variety of ways. This includes feelings of ambivalence, love, fear, hatred, and maybe even a mixture of all the above (Mullender et al., 2002). It is possible for children to disagree with their father's actions but still love their father and want a healthy relationship with them. This can result in children questioning their own loyalties and feeling 'stuck in the middle' (Mullender et al., 2002). These fluctuating feelings may continue regardless of whether the children have a relationship with their father.

Social Constructions of Motherhood and Fatherhood

There are broader theoretical discussions in relation to parenting capacity and the social construction of motherhood and fatherhood. Societal beliefs regarding gender and parenting roles will have an influence on perceptions of what constitutes a 'good mother' or a 'good father'. Gorman and

Fritzsche (2002) acknowledge that a 'good mother' is perceived by society as one that focuses on the development of her children above that of the workplace and stays at home to facilitate this. A 'good father' is characterised as one that provides resources for his family, including financially, and this can be internalised by fathers because of societal expectations (Carlson, Kendall & Edleson, 2016). Jackson and Mannix (2004) argue that women are placed under a higher level of scrutiny because of these beliefs and are subject to blame when their mothering role is viewed as questionable. The role and societal expectations of a 'good mother' is something that abusive fathers can use to further their control and diminish motherly self-esteem (Stark, 2007). Views and beliefs about parenting roles and what constitute 'good enough' parenting can have an additional impact on professional judgement. For example, Stanley et al. (2010) interviewed 58 professionals within CS, the police and independent domestic violence advocate (IDVA) services. They also reviewed 251 police and CS case files related to IPVA in England. They note that 'failure to protect' is perceived as gendered by some working within CS – for example, a family support manager in their study noting, *'it's easier to lay the law down to mother and say you have to protect these children. Whereas, with a male, you would be more wary how you say it.'* (p. 178).

Studies exploring the interplay between IPVA, parenting style and child contact have stated there is a double standard around effective parenting (Jeffries, 2016). Seeking contact can result in the courts and professionals viewing the father as 'good enough', setting a much lower expectation than what would be considered for a mother (Dragiewicz, 2010; Jackson & Mannix, 2004). A mother who does not remove her children from a violent home may be viewed as ineffective and questioned on her ability based on 'failure to protect' (Stanley et al., 2010). This has previously resulted in the paradox where the father, who carried out the abuse in front of his children, was deemed fit to parent (Hester, 2011). This paradox describes the behaviour of the father towards the children as being vastly different to the behaviour of the father towards the mother – one set of behaviours has little to do with the other and an individual can be a great father whilst being a violent man (Hester, 2011).

Separation is a key high-risk stage for survivors of IPVA (Sutherland, 2004). A common feature of those who are abusive is to seek revenge (Weldon & Gilchrist, 2012) or punish the partner/ex-partner due to the survivor abandoning the relationship, as well as providing the abusive partner an opportunity to regain control and recommence the relationship (Sutherland, 2004). Although these needs may shift from one purpose to the other, Sutherland (2004) argues that it is clear to see why and how family courts can be used to benefit the abuser, particularly as a method of coercion. The mode in which a family court operates, and the process of a contact battle facilitate contact with the survivor, potentially placing the survivor at further risk of harm (Sutherland, 2004).

Policy and Legislation in Relation to Child contact in England and Wales

This section will explore the legislation and policies that govern and guide child contact in England and Wales. It will provide a broad overview of child contact, including statistics on the scale of child contact involving IPVA. This section will also explore processes in relation to IPVA and child contact, including restrictions that can be placed on abusers and changes to procedure as a reflection of proven IPVA.

Overview of Child Contact

Court applications regarding children and contact come under s1(5) of the Children Act 1989. As part of a divorce, if children are involved, a child arrangement or parenting plan (previously statement of arrangements for children) must be provided (Home Office, para. 2a). This document consists of basic information relating to the child, for example: where the child attends school; where the child lives; informal contact arrangements; and medical details (Cafcass, 2017). This statement of arrangements is not binding and is requested for the court to gain an overall understanding of the situation. Alternatively, parents can request their solicitor to craft a consent order, making this legally binding (Home Office, para. 2b). Parents disputing child contact must usually undergo mediation prior to a case being heard in court unless IPVA has been alleged (Home Office, para. 3). The judicial system in England and Wales is biased towards non-intervention unless that would be better for the child (the Children Act 1989). All decisions made by the court must be in the best interests of the child. In addition to this, Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights (1953) provides the right to a private family life, strengthening this bias. Courts do not like to intervene in family matters and many now actively encourage parents to develop a parenting plan or attend a Mediation Information and Assessment Meeting (MIAM) carried out by a family mediation council registered family mediator. This is to assess suitability for mediation where the aim is to reach an agreement out of court (Practice Direction 12B, implemented in 2014). However, these options are not considered suitable for survivors of IPVA (section 3.8, Family Procedure Rules 2010) given the power dynamics between parents.

Contact Arrangements

The Children Act (s8, 1989) stipulates that the family courts can make arrangements for children relating to *'a) with whom a child is to live, spend time or otherwise have contact, and b) when a child is to live, spend time or otherwise have contact with any person'. Child arrangement orders* replace the previous terminology adopted throughout the legal system, including contact and residence orders (Children and Families Act 2014).

Child arrangement orders can range from direct contact (unsupervised), to supervised contact, and indirect contact (Jarrett, 2020). Unsupervised contact can take place with or without overnight visits. Supervised contact (for example, by a contact centre, or a family member) means that someone must oversee the child contact, the father is not allowed to have contact with the child on his own. Indirect contact means that a parent can, for example, write letters to the child but not have physical contact with them (Jarrett, 2020).

Where a child arrangements order is requested, a welfare checklist will be considered in accordance with the welfare principle (s1 (1) the Children Act 1989). The welfare checklist outlines any risks or harm to the child, the child's wishes (where age appropriate), needs, parental capacity, and the impact of any circumstance or contact changes to the child. The courts may request a s7 report. In this case, children and parents will usually be interviewed by a Cafcass officer, with the Cafcass officer returning a statement to the judge (Cafcass, 2017). This may include: contact recommendations; the child's wishes; consideration of home and educational stability or living conditions; views on parenting capacity; and whether the child is at risk of harm (Rights of Women, 2021). If a child is considered at risk of significant harm, a s37 report may be ordered. A s37 report would result in the local authority investigating the circumstances of the child with the potential to act to protect the child from further harm. They may request care or supervision orders, for example, or aid the family in order to reduce risk (Rights of Women, 2021). In addition, a child may be designated a guardian *ad litem* to represent them and their wishes in court. A guardian *ad litem* is usually a Cafcass officer and is allocated by the courts (the Children Act 1989).

Contact is separate to residency (where the child lives most of the time). Child Arrangements Orders replaced such terminology in 2014, instead making use of 'spending time with' (previously contact) and 'lives with' (previously residency) orders. This comes under section 8 of the Children Act 1989, and a separate application for 'lives with' orders can be made by a parent, guardian, or anyone with parental responsibility. Awarding sole residency to a parent does not necessarily take away the other parent's responsibilities and rights. Parental responsibility (PR; as explained by the Children Act 1989) requires, amongst other things, a parent to provide a home for the child and to protect and maintain the child. If a parent with PR does not live with the child, they are required, and have a right to, discipline the child, choose, and provide the child's education, agree to medical treatment, agree to name changes, and look after the child's property (the Children Act 1989). PR is distinct from financial agreements and maintenance pay. Even if a parent does not have PR, they must support their child financially. This applies even to parents with no contact arrangements in place. In England and Wales, the mother automatically

has PR. The father has PR rights if married to the mother of the child or is listed on the birth certificate. An unmarried father can gain PR by jointly registering the birth of the child (from 1 Dec 2003), if there is a PR agreement with the mother, or if they have been granted PR via a court order. In this respect, parental rights can be divided into physical custody and legal custody (or in England and Wales, PR).

Child arrangements orders and PR can be challenged at any time and contact can be re-instated subject to the parent providing substantial evidence of their stability (the Children Act, 1989). In some circumstances, the courts may decide to award a 'lives with' order o a parent that has previously been excluded from having contact (see the Children Act 1989). However, where there is intimate partner violence and abuse in the home, child contact can become even more complex.

Child Contact and IPVA

Section 31(9) of the Children Act acknowledges that IPVA is harmful to children and therefore must be considered. Barnett (2020) estimates that 42% to 64% of private family law cases in England and Wales include allegations of IPVA. Despite this, IPVA in and of itself is not considered to be a reason to revoke child contact. Both parents are considered to have a right to child contact by the courts, irrespective of crimes committed or past behaviour – this is known as the statutory presumption of parental involvement (Section 1 (2A) Children Act 1989). Re L, Re V, Re M, Re H [2000] FLR 334 provide further support for the consideration of IPVA in child contact. Butler-Sloss, in her appeal judgement, questions the judgements made in the original cases, outlining that the evidence base provides substantial evidence that IPVA should be considered in contact cases. In her judgement, Butler-Sloss states:

> Sources do not, therefore, unequivocally support either a presumption or an assumption that contact is almost always in the child's best interests. It is my view that the courts and court welfare officers alike have been emphasising the importance of contact to an extent not warranted by the available research evidence and that they have paid little attention to studies that cast doubt on their approach. (Para. 10)

In this seminal appeal, Butler-Sloss also dismissed the notion of parental alienation, highlighting that this has not been supported by research evidence and that the concept is built from misconceived beliefs. This was an important case for IPVA and child contact, however despite the balanced and evidence-based approach adopted by Butler-Sloss, such beliefs and practice still operate in the child contact system today.

Where IPVA is alleged, courts are required to follow Practice Direction 12J. Practice Direction 12J was developed in 2008 and incorporated in the Family Procedure Rules in 2010. PD12J was subsequently revised in 2017, 2014 and 2010 following complaints about its effectiveness (see, for example, Women's Aid, 2016). Women's Aid first highlighted the ineffectiveness of the family courts to safeguard children in 2004 with their report 'twenty-nine child homicides' (Saunders, 2004). This report looked specifically at child contact arrangements that resulted in the death of twenty-nine children between 1994 and 2004 and ultimately led to PD12J being implemented. Concerningly, IPVA was involved in 12 of the 13 families, and some homicides occurring during overnight contact. In their report, Women's Aid state (p. 5; 2004):

> It is clear that not only did the court grant orders for unsupervised contact or residence to very violent fathers but that these decision were made against professional advice, without waiting for professional advice or without requesting professional advice. There was nothing to indicate that any court professionals have been held accountable.

PD12J was subsequently revised in 2017 once again with most provisions becoming binding after a follow-up Women's Aid report (2016) entitled 'nineteen child homicides'. The report reviewed serious case reviews between 2005 and 2015, highlighting that lessons had not been learned over time and that change had not been effective in safeguarding those most at risk. In their report, Women's Aid called for 'independent, national oversight into the implementation of Practice Direction 12J' (p. 8).

PD12J provides guidance on child contact where IPVA is alleged, however its implementation is said to be ad hoc (Hunter, Burton & Trinder, 2020), with fact-finding hearings (one of the provisions) said to be ordered in approximately 10% of cases alleging IPVA (Barnett, 2020). Most of the provisions of PD12J are bound by law since the 2017 update. However, a fact-finding hearing is to take place in all cases alleging IPVA *if the judge thinks* a finding of IPVA would impact the outcome of the case being heard. It is this element of PD12J that impedes effective execution. If abuse is proven following a fact-finding hearing, contact will be considered carefully in light of this finding. If a fact-finding hearing is unsuccessful, IPVA will be discounted as a consideration in the child contact case.

Research shows that the courts do not consider IPVA to be an important consideration. Hunt and Macleod (2008) examined 308 child contact cases from 2004 and found that judges in England and Wales discounted evidence of IPVA more than they accounted for it when considering contact arrangements (based on an examination of 308 child contact cases conducted in 2004). Research from the USA is consistent with this and suggests the courts demonstrate several false beliefs regarding mothers and child contact (Saunders, Faller & Tolman, 2016). Saunders et al. (2016) conducted a survey exploring

beliefs and knowledge surrounding domestic abuse allegations by legal professionals involved in child contact hearings in the USA. The sample consisted of 1,108 professionals, including: 465 contact evaluators, 200 judges, 131 legal aid attorneys, 119 private attorneys, and 193 domestic violence program workers. The authors of this study identified several crucial findings in relation to beliefs and knowledge of IPVA and contact recommendations by legal professionals because of this, including: the belief that mothers make false allegations of abuse, the belief that mothers seek to alienate children from the father, and the belief that mothers who are reluctant to co-parent are damaging their children. Saunders et al. (2016) argue that these beliefs are based on patriarchal thinking and gender bias, with core beliefs focussed on justice and equality underlying this. For example, believing in social hierarchies and believing that the world is fundamentally just, both associated with victim-blaming and inequality.

Research and policy in England and Wales show similar attitudes to the ones described in the USA. In 2001, the advisory board on family law, Children Act sub-committee delivered a report to the Lord Chancellor entitled 'making contact work'. The report discussed how mothers were assumed by the courts to have a level of 'implacable' hostility towards children having contact with their fathers and that mothers opposing contact are viewed by the courts as being deliberately hostile and seeking to alienate children from their father. This was to be the final report delivered by the Children Act sub-committee (advisory board on family law Children Act sub-committee, 2001). Practice direction 12J was subsequently developed and implemented. A recent report to the president of the family division stated that cultural change is required in the family courts and that this should be made a priority by government, family courts and Cafcass to ensure child safety (Cobb, 2017).

Mothers mentioning abuse in court are often viewed negatively (Dragiewicz, 2012) and legal representatives have advised against mentioning issues of abuse and violence in the past through fear of their client being perceived as hostile (Mullender et al, 2002). Mullender et al. (2002) found that, where children have expressed wishes to not see their father, evaluators and the courts have assumed this to be because of interference by the mother, despite the Children Act (1989) requiring courts to consider the child and their wishes. Hunt and Macleod (2008) state that, for children aged thirteen and above, the courts usually respect their wishes. When coupled with the finding that women feel silenced in court and IPVA frequently minimised or dismissed (Coy et al., 2012; Hunter, Burton and Trinder, 2020), it is clear how a sense of injustice can manifest for the women and children involved.

Rivera, Sullivan and Zeoli (2012) discuss the child court process being experienced as secondary victimisation, defined as *'the negative or unresponsive behaviours by others toward an abuse victim, who experiences such response as a further violation of their rights'* (p. 3). They argue that the family courts

can leave survivors of IPVA feeling re-victimised which is further exacerbated by fathers using the system and processes, for example: by using mediation to exert power and control over the survivor (Coy et al., 2012); by ordering multiple assessments and hearings (Hunter, Burton & Trinder, 2020), draining the survivor financially and mentally (Hunter, Burton & Trinder, 2020); by threatening the children (Mullender et al., 2002); or by using the children to continue contact with the mother (Thiara & Harrison, 2016). Studies with survivors are consistent in identifying fathers as using the family court system to continue their abuse (e.g., Coy et al., 2012; Mullender et al., 2002; Thiara & Gill, 2012; Thiara & Harrison; 2016) resulting in women and children feeling unsafe and powerless.

The family court process comes with its own difficulties for survivors - beyond the lack of evidence available to prove IPVA and the economic implications. Until the Domestic Abuse Act (2021), fathers have been allowed to cross-examine mothers in contact cases even where a mother has a protective order against the father. Following a report by Women's Aid in 2016 and an emergency review of the family courts and cross-examination in the House of Commons, the Domestic Abuse Act (2021) brought an end to cross-examination in family courts where there has been IPVA, with judges being appointed powers to appoint a legal aid lawyer instead. Judges have, however, had the power to limit cross-examination (Family Procedure Rules 22.1) or to cross-examine a survivor themselves in place of an abusive partner, for a considerable amount of time (s31g (6), Matrimonial and Family Proceedings Act, amended in schedule 10 of Crime and Courts Act 2013 and implemented in 2014), although this is rarely undertaken (Women's Aid, 2016). The Domestic Abuse Act (2021) protects survivors from the trauma of being cross examined or having to cross-examine their abuser if they can evidence IPVA. However, it does not protect survivors where IPVA cannot be evidenced, either because the judge has not ordered a fact-finding hearing, or because not enough evidence is available. In addition, it does not protect survivors that are fearful of disclosing or have been advised against disclosing abuse by legal professionals.

Gaps in training and knowledge concerning IPVA, including: knowledge about post-separation violence, screening for IPVA and assessing dangerousness (Harne, 2009; Saunders, 2017) may also impact legal decision-making. Harne (2009) notes that where screening and/or risk assessment takes place, knowledge of screening and risk assessments is variable amongst family court advisors resulting in dynamic risk not being given due consideration. Harne (2009) discusses risk assessment as being a useful exercise when passing notes on to another colleague and a way to ensure all relevant information is included, however advisors showed a lack of awareness of individual risk factors. Despite this, there were significant improvements in identifying risk when using the risk assessment form compared to when risk assessments were not utilised (Harne, 2009). However, caution should be taken when considering the

tools being used to screen for IPVA. For instance, Saunders, Faller & Tolman (2012) reviewed screening for domestic abuse (term specified by the authors) in the USA. 94% of evaluators stated that they directly asked about abuse 'always' or 'almost always'. However, when considering the screening tools used, 38% never used screening tools and 15% used only personality-psychopathology instruments. The use of personality-psychopathology instruments infers that the mother is the issue as opposed to the perpetrator. Saunders (2017) argues that it is important to consider that some symptoms of trauma, anxiety and depression may be similar to symptoms of personality disorder, and therefore identified as such by screening tests – a point made throughout chapter three in relation to misdiagnosis of trauma. Equally, using such instruments does not inform the professional about the nature of the abuse or the risks (Harne, 2009).

Campbell (2001) proposes an alternative risk assessment and form of safety planning based on a lethality assessment. As part of safety planning, autonomy and survivor empowerment are key components – Campbell (2001) proposes that there is little that can completely remove the risk of IPVA, however empowering the survivor and increasing their sense of autonomy have significant benefits not only in risk reduction but also survivor wellbeing. Safety planning is viewed *'as an opportunity for the abused woman to gain information in order to strategize her responses'* (p. 129). The conversation involved can increase knowledge of perpetrator behaviour and the plan is individualised based on this and survivor needs. In ensuring this, cultural and community needs can be taken into account as the plan will highlight support networks that may be helpful as well as barriers to support. Campbell (2001) highlights five key components to safety planning. The first is dangerousness, or, as Campbell (2001) calls it - lethality. The second is relationship status – is the partner leaving the relationship or staying in the relationship?. The third explores the emotional wellbeing of the survivor and their needs. The fourth and fifth aspects focus on the safety of the children, and whether the survivor has resources available withing the community, from work or support from family. In including these aspects, Campbell (2001) ensures that the micro and meso systems are taken into account and gaps in safety opportunities identified. The lethality assessment is key. Campbell (2001) highlights that whilst women are able to manage risk and know they risk death, they often underestimate their level of risk, minimising harm in order to protect themselves emotionally. Addressing lethality with them can highlight this risk and give them an opportunity to understand the dangers in their relationship whilst providing them with the opportunity to discuss their fears openly (Campbell, 2001). The Danger Assessment was developed by Campbell in 1995. It measures 15 factors related to lethality and has been identified as a reliable in valid tool in six studies. The Danger Assessment is unique in that it asks women to insert the dates of 'incidents' over the past year and rate them on a scale from 1 to 5 according to severity of harm. The aim here is to enable women

to obtain a clearer picture of the IPVA they are facing and increase awareness. The tool is self-administered, and women are requested to discuss their results with a professional once completing it. In addition to the calendar exercise, the lethality tool measures fifteen factors such as: whether there are children in the home; whether the IPVA has increased in frequency; threats made; and whether the perpetrator has ever tried to 'choke' them (Campbell, 1995). These factors are based on known risks for homicide and serious harm in the context of IPVA. Open discussion, measuring risk and safety planning are therefore viewed as crucial factors in increasing women's safety and exploring options for criminal justice or refuge intervention. However, increasing empowerment and autonomy is unique to this process and assessment, as well as the multi-systemic approach. This tool highlights how working together and considering the wider system can benefit women and children living with IPVA, and avoids diagnostic language that can be harmful in the future.

Research considering survivor voices identifies several themes and recommendations for practice. Hunter, Burton and Trinder (2020) analysed 1, 266 responses to a call for evidence as part of their research into private law proceedings and IPVA. Of these responses, 769 came from mothers with personal experience of the contact system. Hunter et al. (2020) identified that survivors considered evaluations to be rushed and considered IPVA to be minimised during evaluations, if not completely ignored (Hunter et al., 2020). Survivors felt that they were reproached or perceived as 'hostile' when reporting any domestic or child abuse, whereas those being accused of domestic abuse were treated more favourably (Hunter et al., 2020). In addition, survivors felt that evaluators focused unevenly on mental health symptoms and were one-sided in their approach to the evaluation, valuing the father's word over their own (Hunter et al., 2020). These findings are consistent with previous research in England and Wales (Coy et al., 2012; Mullender et al., 2002).

Survivors in a US study (Saunders, Faller & Tolman, 2012; n=24) provided several recommendations for future contact hearings including: mandatory training for all court professionals, judges, evaluators, and guardians *ad litem*[4]; investigating child abuse allegations and enforcing child protection laws; thorough evaluations; and expanding the available selection of supervised visitation possibilities – all recommendations also highlighted by research in England and Wales (see Hunter et al., 2020). Participants in both studies had overwhelmingly experienced negative outcomes and the results

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[4] Under the Family Procedure Rules (2010), the court can appoint a guardian *ad litem* to represent the child in proceedings. This is usually a Cafcass officer (see footnote 1) appointed by the courts however applications can be made by others, e.g., a solicitor acting for the child.

may be biased because of this. A clearer picture may be gained by exploring both positive and negative outcomes, as experienced by the survivor, and this should be considered for future research.

Research Questions

As discussed throughout the previous two chapters, child contact in the context of IPVA is fraught with challenges both for survivors and professionals within the system. Post-separation contact has been noted in the literature as being abusive from the outset, with the abusive behaviour continuing over time (Mullender et al., 2002; Coy et al., 2012, Hunter et al., 2020). However, research in England and Wales is minimal in comparison to that from the USA, although literature is increasing over time. Similar findings to research from the USA are expected, however the thesis will be led by survivor voices and exploring the unique system operating within England and Wales. Research exploring survivor perspectives of their experiences of the system as a whole is piecemeal, with professional practice rarely explored. Missing, for example, is a comparison of informal and formal contact, and the longer-term outcomes of each. Much of the research in England and Wales discusses informal and formal contact simultaneously. In addition, the impact of child contact on mother and children is more clearly highlighted from a US perspective, and with little consideration of non-verbal cues or mothers' perspectives of their own children's wellbeing. This is particularly concerning given that mothers are likely to be the one's spending the most time with their children and that will understand them best. Professionals are often explored in silo's – for example, separating mediators from the judiciary – with little consideration given to how they interact, or the challenges they may face operating within the child contact system. This is important to understand given the impact professionals and their actions may have on both mother and child. This thesis therefore seeks to explore such gaps in the literature, making use of systems theories to see the 'parts' and the 'whole', and using the following research questions:

1. How are formal and informal child contact in England and Wales experienced by mothers?
     a. Do experiences of contact change over time (e.g., one year into a contact arrangement)?
     b. Do experiences differ based on whether the contact was formal or informal?
2. What are women's experiences of the child contact *system* in England and Wales?
     a. What are women's experiences of professionals operating within the child contact system in England and Wales?
     b. What are women's experiences of formal contact processes in England and Wales (e.g., the family courts)?
3. What (if any) is the impact of the child contact system on mothers in England and Wales?

4. What do mothers perceive is the impact of the child contact system in England and Wales on children (if any)?

5. What are professionals' experiences of the child contact system in England and Wales?

    a. How do professionals perceive and interact with other professionals working within the system in England and Wales?

    b. How do professionals perceive mothers within the system in England and Wales?

    c. Do these findings reflect those from previous studies?

Chapter 4: Methodology

The thesis takes a mixed methodology approach to understand and explain the lived realities of survivors navigating child contact. This included three studies with survivors and professionals to triangulate the findings. This chapter will explore ethical considerations of research with survivors. The studies are then explored individually in relation to design and analysis. For the overarching research approach, please see chapter one of this thesis.

Mixed-Methodology

This thesis used a mixed-methodology to gain a complete picture of women's experiences of child contact. O'Reilly and Kiyimba (2015) distinguish between mixed-methods and mixed-methodologies. They argue that mixed-methods involves combining the findings of multiple studies (e.g., interviews and focus groups) at the point of analysis, whereas mixed-methodology studies identify the findings of each study and synthesise them at a later stage (O'Reilly & Kiyimba, 2015). This thesis combines three qualitative designs: analysis of online posts; interviews with survivors; and a training workshop with professionals. Each study was analysed individually for the findings to inform the design of the subsequent study (Barbour, 1998), with different analytical approaches taken for each of the studies: thematic analysis, thematic narrative analysis, and visual analysis. The findings of the three studies were later synthesised to gain a fuller understanding of how the findings of each study work together.

Using mixed-methodologies offers the ability to view the overall research question from differing perspectives (Morse, 2010), revealing alternative findings (Lambert & Loiselle, 2008) and adding depth to the overall findings (Nolas, 2011). Research exploring mixed qualitative methodologies is minimal (Lambert & Loiselle, 2008), however concerns around adopting differing methodological approaches are not limited to the quantitative-qualitative debate (O'Reilly & Kiyimba, 2015). One of the main concerns when adopting qualitative mixed-methodology research is that the studies adopt differing ontological frameworks that are deemed incompatible (O'Reilly & Kiyimba, 2015). This is not the case for this thesis as the main theoretical framework of critical realism guided all three studies, with the feminist epistemology constant throughout. The phenomenological framework however most closely guides the second study (interviews with survivors); however, phenomenology and feminism can work in harmony and therefore there are no opposing paradigms present. In contrast, the thesis is underpinned by a clear theoretical and ontological framework, ensuring that concerns about integrity are minimal (Annells, 2006) and that the research is reflective in acknowledging its positionality (Frost, 2011). Using a mixed-methodology as opposed to a mixed-methods approach also means that each study can be checked for

quality based on their individual criteria (e.g., checking the analysis adheres to the coinciding framework, ensuring inter-rater reliability, individual study reflexivity; O'Reilly & Kiyimba, 2015).

Ethics in Research with Survivors

This section outlines the key ethical considerations in conducting research with survivors. It includes discussions of consent, reporting child abuse, ensuring safety of participants and the researcher, and maximising benefit whilst minimising harm. This section has been developed from best practice guidelines across the literature and provides an overview of the practice of the researcher when conducting the studies in this thesis.

Prior to commencing data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the Middlesex University Department of Psychology ethics committee. The ethical approval letters can be found in Appendix A.

Maximising Benefit and Minimising Harm

Research with survivors provides 'unique risks' (Newman, Risch & Kassam-Adams, 2006, p. 29). Careful consideration should be placed on minimising harm to participants and maximising benefit, not only balancing the risks to participants that have experienced trauma but also ensuring that the research is beneficial and contributes to growth and well-being. When researching with survivors, the usual ethical requirements apply (for example British Psychological Society guidelines around informed consent, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw), however further ethical implications may need to be considered, particularly around protection of vulnerable individuals (Ellsberg & Heise, 2005; Fraga, 2016; Newman et al., 2006; WHO, 2001). For example, respect for autonomy should be central to all research however it is of additional importance when placed in the context of coercive control and what autonomy may mean to a survivor of abuse (Fontes, 2004). When placed in the context of an individual who has a lack of freedom of choice because of an abusive relationship, special care should be taken to acknowledge the extent to which participation is truly considered a choice and is truly voluntary (Fontes, 2004). Equally, protection of vulnerable individuals is required to be considered in all research with human participants, however this becomes more complicated when considering the complexities around researching with survivors that may have children. In this case, the researcher is required to balance the need to respect the autonomy of the survivor (whereby removing autonomy may impact upon the wellbeing of an already vulnerable individual) with the need to protect a child in a vulnerable situation (Ellsberg & Heise, 2005). Balancing such risks is a necessary but not impossible task and should not be else research may inadvertently exclude those that have experienced trauma (Newman et al., 2006), effectively silencing survivors of abuse. The following section will discuss the ethical and methodological

considerations specific to researching with survivors of abuse, providing an overview of the decisions made throughout the research process in relation to these (see Figure 1).

Informed Consent

Informed consent is a requirement of all research and forms part of the British Psychological Society guidance (BPS, 2021) – it effectively ensures that individuals know exactly what they are consenting to before they agree to partake. Studies two and three explicitly stated that it would ask about violence in the information leaflet and opted to send survivors in study two the interview questions in advance. A clear information leaflet was provided for both studies, and this was revisited with the participants prior to research taking place. This ensured there was time to ask questions about the studies.

Figure 1

Ethical Considerations in Research with Survivors
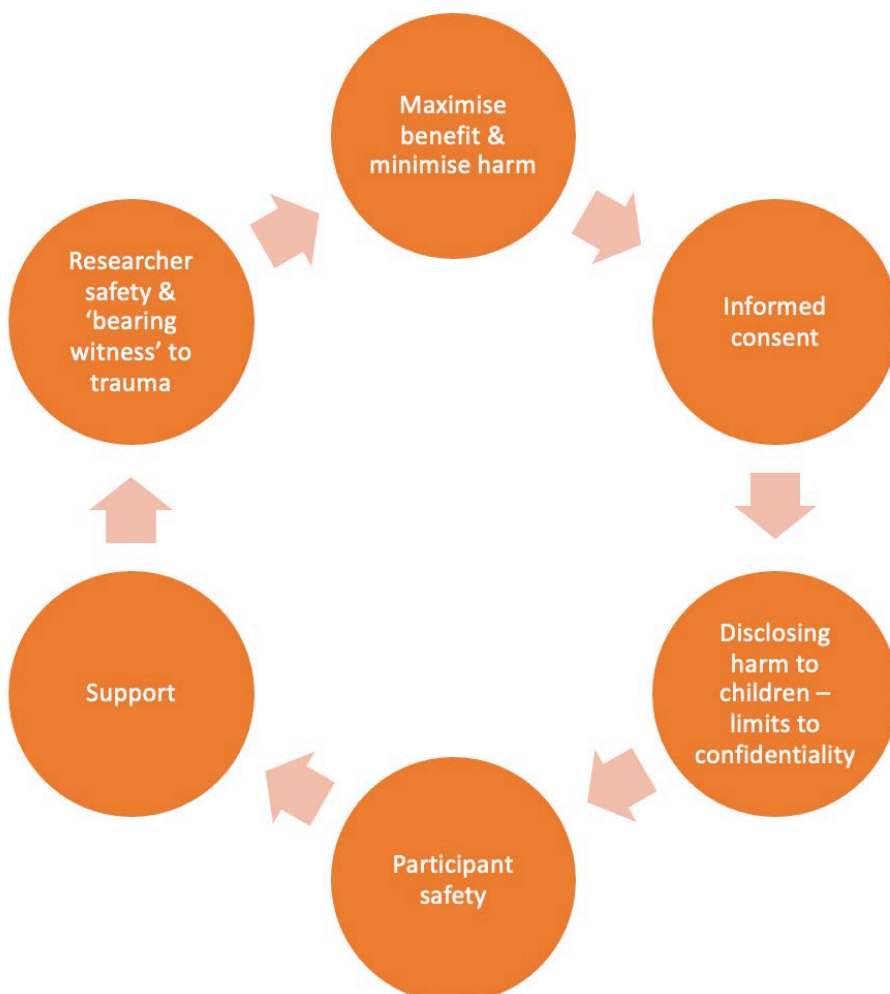
Those attending the workshop were informed of their right to withdraw from the research aspects of the workshop (up to one month after the event for those that completed a consent form, or by not providing a consent form at all). Those that had previously consented and wished to withdraw could do so by emailing the researcher, however none of the participants revoked consent.

There were multiple challenges when considering consent for study one. An opt-out letter was sent to those responsible for comments on online forums to ensure there was an opportunity for them to have any data excluded from the study. This letter detailed what the research would entail, how to opt out of the research and contact details of the researcher and supervisors. This was in line with the British Psychological Society then-prevailing guidance for internet mediated research (2013). One of the forums did not respond and the other responded to provide consent for using the content. During the time this PhD was conducted, but after analysis had been completed, a new set of guidance was published in line with the changes to the Data Protection Act (2018). The guidance required researchers to consider the extent to which those posting online would be aware of the possible ways that their comments could be used (including research), and where it was felt that people commenting would not be aware that their comments were being observed that any quotes utilised would be summarised. This posed an ethical challenge in terms of balancing the two sets of guidance, particularly as the guidance came in during the PhD. Several factors were considered in light of this, including the fact that participants were posting on a public forum, that they self-anonymised, survivor safety and the position of survivors in terms of not further silencing women's voices.

Implications of Using Online Content

The threads included in the study were all available to view by conducting a google search. Material that was not publicly available was not considered, for example, blogs that required a password or any material marked as confidential. However, there is a wider discussion to be had concerning use of publicly available data and whether individuals posting online are aware of how their content might be used. Participants undertook a great deal of self-anonymisation when posting comments on threads (for example by not using their names in threads and not disclosing personal data), suggesting that participants were aware that their comments would be observed. In most cases, participants self-anonymised because of ongoing court cases or because of the safety implications that may arise (as noted by survivors in some of the threads). In this instance, the researcher made the decision to include

quotes from forums where it was likely that participants were aware that their content was accessible to the public.

However, the researcher was also careful to acknowledge safety implications for survivors, further anonymising survivor handles (the names they used online), checking for any identifiable data and choosing not to include the links to threads in this thesis. However, it should be noted that the study can never be truly anonymous because of the data collection method. Further consideration is needed around use of direct quotes and the implications of this. Guidance has recently been issued to consider summarising quotes that have been obtained from social media. The researcher opted to use direct quotes without any amendments to keep the survivor voices authentic. It was deemed that to edit the quotes (including summarising them) would interfere with this and contribute to the silencing of women's words. There would be potential for misinterpretation and/or incorrect summarising of the quotes. This decision was weighed carefully with that of survivor safety.

Beyond the potential safety implications discussed, it was important to consider ongoing court cases and how the research could impact this. With court cases often continuing for long periods of time, this can be difficult to ascertain. The researcher attempted to identify court cases that were currently in progress (as isolated court cases rather than ongoing child contact proceedings) and exclude these from the analysis. Recent posts (for example comments posted in 2016) were also excluded as this increased the likelihood of a court case being ongoing.

Reporting Child Abuse

An additional factor to be considered is that of harm to children (Ellsberg & Heise, 2005). There is a fine line between protecting confidentiality, respecting the autonomy of survivors, and taking the decision to not report harm to a child. This is further complicated when considering that *'reporting is likely to trigger a cascade of events that might put the child at even greater risk' (*Ellsberg & Heise, 2005, p. 37).

Whilst it was considered that the researcher should do what they can to not infringe upon the autonomy of the survivors in the study (unless a survivor should request assistance), a decision was made to include in the study two information leaflet and consent form that any incidents disclosing harm to a child not previously reported would be shared with the NSPCC. The NSPCC have statutory powers in England and Wales. This was repeated before the interview commenced so that survivors were clear about limits to confidentiality. In line with previous training, the researcher listened carefully during the

interviews and prepared to remind the participant if it was felt that they might say something that would require the researcher to break confidentiality.

Sullivan and Cain (2004) highlight the importance of informing survivors if there are limits to confidentiality in advance, noting harm to children as a factor where ethical requirements and national laws may apply. This is a fluid process. Documents should clearly signpost to the disclosure process throughout. It is important to note here that this may impede disclosure as participants may not feel comfortable with disclosures being shared outside of the research.

Participant Safety and Confidentiality

Ellsberg and Heise (2005) discuss how simply agreeing to participate in a study that asks questions about violence can result in women being harmed by partners. The WHO provide several recommendations when it comes to ensuring participant safety and minimising harm, including ensuring that any questions related to violence are asked in complete privacy (except where children under two are present; WHO, 2002). Identifying ways to ensure absolute privacy can be a challenge and researchers are urged to be somewhat creative in achieving this (for example, walking interviews or having a 'safe' questionnaire to hand that they can switch to should someone walk in the room – see Ellsberg & Heise, 2005). Telephone interviews are not immune to such challenges as someone may be present in the room (Ellsberg & Heise, 2005). Researchers can undertake steps to minimise harm by listening to ensure that others are not present and asking whether the participant would like to be called back another time (Johnson, 1996; Sullivan & Cain, 2004) – a step factored into the current PhD.

For the purposes of the second study, telephone interviews were undertaken. Participants arranged a time that they would be available (and in private), and the researcher asked participants if they were still able to talk freely when calling. The researcher also listened to determine if children or any other adults might be present in the background. Participants in the study were not living with their ex-partner at the time, however it is possible that participants may have been living with a new partner who may or may not have been abusive. Safety should not be presumed simply because the relationship has ended – particularly when considering the literature around post-separation violence and abuse. Consent is a fluid process throughout the research process, the researcher checked consent throughout.

In addition, Sullivan and Cain (2004) stress the importance of providing a guide to researchers and provide an example of a comprehensive guide that can be used when conducting research with survivors. This includes aspects such as checking the survivor is safe to talk, developing a safety plan and what to do

if crisis intervention is required. Please see Sullivan and Cain (2004; p. 611-12) for the complete guide. The thesis made use of this guide when planning the studies and interacting with survivors.

Beyond this, survivors can feel fearful or anxious about how their data is going to be used and about the extent to which the project might put them at risk, particularly in terms of confidentiality (Sikweyiya & Jewkes, 2012), making a transparent research design of the utmost importance and safety considerations vital. Data protection was of vital importance for all three studies. A data protection checklist was completed as part of the ethics process.

Care was taken to consider participant confidentiality and safety, as well as following the Data Protection Act 2018. Hand-written notes, recordings and/or transcriptions were all encrypted, password-protected, and/or stored in a locked cabinet or locked devices. They were then deleted when no longer needed (Ellsberg & Heise, 2005). Interview and workshop recordings were overwritten and deleted once transcription had taken place. Names were not written on the interview or workshop recordings, but a pseudonym used, and a list of these were stored separately to the interview (WHO, 2001). When presenting data, care was taken that individuals (and/or communities) could not be identified (WHO, 2001). All data collected from across the three studies were anonymised and identifiable information was removed.

Minimising Distress

Interviews with survivors can cause distress, particularly where survivors might relive the experiences they are sharing (Ellsberg & Heise, 2005). The researcher should seek to minimise distress during the interview by ensuring their responses are appropriate. Ellsberg and Heise (2005) recommend that interviewers are trained to: understand the impact a question might have on a participant; identify distress and how respond to this (for example, when to decide to end the interview; WHO, 2001); and reflect on their own beliefs and biases. Interviewers are not immune to societal attitudes and beliefs that may be damaging (such as victim-blaming) and that this may have an impact on not only the data but also the participant's well-being (Ellsberg & Heise, 2005; WHO, 2001). Any questions should be phrased in a way that is supportive and non-judgemental (WHO, 2001). Cultural factors may also play a role here – social constructions of what is deemed to be appropriate behaviour may differ between cultures and may be considered differently by the interviewer and the survivor (Fraga, 2016).

Researchers should be trained and, in a position, to manage their responses to survivor distress, whether this be ending the interview at the survivor's request or simply acknowledging the distress, ensuring that they take the time to consider the survivor's feelings, body language and thoughts

throughout (Ellsberg & Heise, 2005; WHO, 2001). However, the researcher should not be afraid of displays of emotion or signs of distress (Bradley, 1999, cited by Ellsberg & Heise, 2005). It is important to also consider that distress does not always equate to regret in taking part (Johnson & Benight, 2003; Kassam-Adams & Newman, 2005), and that consideration of distress should be contextualised – experiences of trauma are already distressing and therefore the question is whether the study will increase this distress further rather than negate all distress (Newman, Risch & Kassam-Adams, 2006).

The researcher felt comfortable following this guidance, and equipped to do so, given their previous role working with survivors of IPVA as part of Victim Support (a charity that supports victims of crime). The extensive and helpful training provided focussed on knowledge and awareness, but also on how to respond to survivors, engage in active listening and be aware of discomfort. Breaks and questions were considered in full when developing interview materials, the study was overseen by two psychologists, and was reviewed for ethical practice by the Middlesex University Ethics Committee.

The researcher should do everything possible to empower, support and minimise harm. Bradley (1999, cited by Ellsberg & Heise, 2005) provides some guidance when it comes to interviewing survivors, including how to make the empowering and supportive for those being interviewed. This includes: engaging in active listening; allowing the participant time to speak, process and cry if this should take place; ensuring that the researcher does not interrupt, act as an authority, or give advice; and reminding the survivor how their responses have helped (at the end).

The training workshop used quotes detailing women's experiences of violence and abuse (from study one). Professionals were informed of this in advance, and in the information leaflet. Distress of participants was considered in advance, although this was expected to be minimal as those attending were professionals working in the field of child contact and/or IPVA. The ethics process considered possible tensions that may rise during the workshop between professional groups. Ground rules were developed together at the beginning of the workshop to minimise any issues.

Support

At a minimum it is recommended that survivors are provided with information about support services when participating in research (Sullivan & Cain, 2004; WHO, 2001). However, researchers should check first with the participant that it is safe for them to receive this (Jewkes, Watts, Abrahams, Penn-Kekana, Garcia-Moreno (2000). Two of the studies that form part of this PhD included a debriefing leaflet (studies two and three) and this was emailed to participants before and after the study (see Appendix H and N). The purpose of this was to ensure that those that showed interest in either of the studies but

then did not take part would have a list of support services in case this was part of the reason they chose not to participate.

Researcher Safety

The safety of the researcher is an important consideration when it comes to researching IPVA. The physical safety of a researcher may be compromised by an abusive partner/ex-partner, family member or even by a community (Ellsberg & Heise, 2005). In the case of this PhD, the researcher did not have face to face contact with survivors, engaging in an online analysis and telephone interviews. In addition, the researcher did not display a caller ID when contacting survivors by telephone and provided an office number on the information leaflet. Whilst Sullivan and Cain (2004) discuss the drawbacks of not providing a caller ID (for example, the survivor not picking up the phone or the lack of caller ID creating extra anxiety as the survivor does not know who is calling), suggesting instead to use an office number, this was deemed to be suitable for the current study as the survivor was expecting the call at that time. The researcher also asked for the survivor by name and had prepared an alternative line of enquiry in case someone else answered the telephone (Sullivan & Cain, 2004), balancing the needs of the survivor and the researcher. The researcher did engage in a face-to-face workshop with professionals working with survivors, however this was not deemed to pose a risk.

'Bearing witness' to Traumatic Narratives.

The most common risk to researchers however is not physical harm but emotional harm that may come from 'bearing witness' to traumatic narratives (Ellsberg & Heise, 2002, 2005; Scally, Adler & Horvath, 2018). Repeatedly hearing stories of abuse can result in distress for the researcher as they are faced with the reality of women's experiences, potentially resulting in feeling drained and/or emotional (Ellsberg & Heise, 2005; Ellsberg, Heise, Pena, Agurto & Winkvist, 2001; Herman, 1992).

The women's narratives in this study all shared information that was of a sensitive nature and discussed abuse. A reflective journal was kept throughout and further support (e.g., supervision, counselling) was sought to minimise any detrimental impacts of the material on the researcher. A reflective journal was also important as a measure of quality control. It allowed the researcher the opportunity to reflect on interactions with the data and any personal bias that might impact (see reflexivity section for more on this).

There is a further discussion to be had here regarding the safety of a researcher that has previously experienced violence and abuse themselves. Ellsberg and Heise (2005) suggest that this should

be given consideration in terms of support and discussed openly, however it should not limit engagement with the research, or hinder data quality if dealt with appropriately (Ellsberg et al, 2001; Jansen, Watts, Ellsberg, Heise & Garcia-Moreno, 2004). This was important to note given the researchers first-hand experience with IPVA. Whilst for some researchers, previous experiences may prove challenging and result in the need to withdraw from the study, for others this may result in heightened skills (particularly when it comes to interviewing; Ellsberg & Heise, 2005), and may contribute to their own healing (Ellsberg et al., 2001). Researcher self-care was a significant factor throughout, with the decision made to stop interviewing once an impact had been noted (see more in reflexivity section). In addition, a blog post was written about this (Scally, Horvath & Adler, 2018) and therefore this section has not been expanded.

Maximising Benefit

Maximising benefits refers to balancing the risks of the project with the benefit to survivors (individually or as a community; Ellsberg & Heise, 2005). Research with survivors should maximise benefit as much as is possible and consider how the findings can be utilised to best serve the participant group (Sullivan & Cain, 2004). This includes considering how the methods might be beneficial for survivors and the wider practitioner community. Taking part in a survey or interview, for example, might be the first time a survivor has told anyone about their experiences of abuse (Jansen et al., 2004). Interviews can be a powerful experience for both the researcher and survivor. Whilst taking part can cause some anxiety or distress, research has identified that often survivors feel that the research has had a beneficial impact (Johnson & Benight; 2003; Sikweyiya & Jewkes, 2012). For the survivor, sharing their story can be a healing experience and one that can contribute to the helping of others (Ellsberg & Heise, 2005). It can be a way for survivors to share their experiences safely (Sikweyiya & Jewkes, 2012). For the researcher, it can provide the opportunity to contribute to this experience and 'give voice to women's suffering' (Ellsberg & Heise, 2005, p. 43). It can also be an opportunity to validate women's experiences, providing them with information or sources of support that send a clear message that violence and abuse is not ok (Ellsberg & Heise, 2005; WHO, 2001). In this respect, Ellsberg and Heise (2005) suggest that the interview process can almost be considered an intervention in and of itself.

If possible, research should include those that work directly with survivors (Ellsberg & Heise, 2005) or survivors themselves (Sullivan & Cain, 2004). Sullivan and Cain (2004) suggest sharing written work with survivors and if possible, including them in the planning of the research. This thesis did not co-create the studies with survivors but did allow them space to add information later and consider advice and recommendations for the future. Future research will seek to work with survivors more closely, including

them at every stage of the process, something that is difficult to do when one is pre-PhD due to experience. The research did include those working directly with survivors in study three.

Maximising benefit also means ensuring that the data is of the highest quality, that the research design is carefully planned, and that the research team are suited to undertaking the project in training and/or experience (Fraga, 2016). With the findings of research on this topic being encouraged to contribute to social change, it is of vital importance to ensure that the findings in question are reliable and valid. The studies that formed part of this thesis were reviewed by two psychologists working in the field of violence against women and checked by a university ethics committee. The projects were planned extensively before taking place.

When considering interpretation of the data, researchers should take care to note that findings can be interpreted in multiple ways, and that overly negative findings can result in negative consequences for survivors (Sullivan & Cain, 2004). For example, Gilfus (1999) notes that survivor trauma responses have been pathologized in the literature, rather than contextualised. This has been considered when presenting the findings from this thesis.

Summary

Research should be conducted with a clear indication of what the benefits will be, and these should outweigh the risks. Research should be conducted sensitively, competently and with survivors in mind. As stated by Ellsberg and Heise (2005), *'in the case of gender-based violence research, the risks are potentially large, but so too are the risks of ignorance, silence and inaction'* (p. 45). Maximising the benefits of research can contribute to real social change if conducted responsibly and harm minimised. The PhD findings from the three studies are already contributing to the field and the researcher will ensure that this continues, producing beneficial change and avoiding inaction. See the reflexivity section (Chapter four) for more about this.

The Individual Studies

The following section will discuss the individual three studies including the design and analysis of each (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

A Visual Illustration of the Three Studies that Form this Thesis
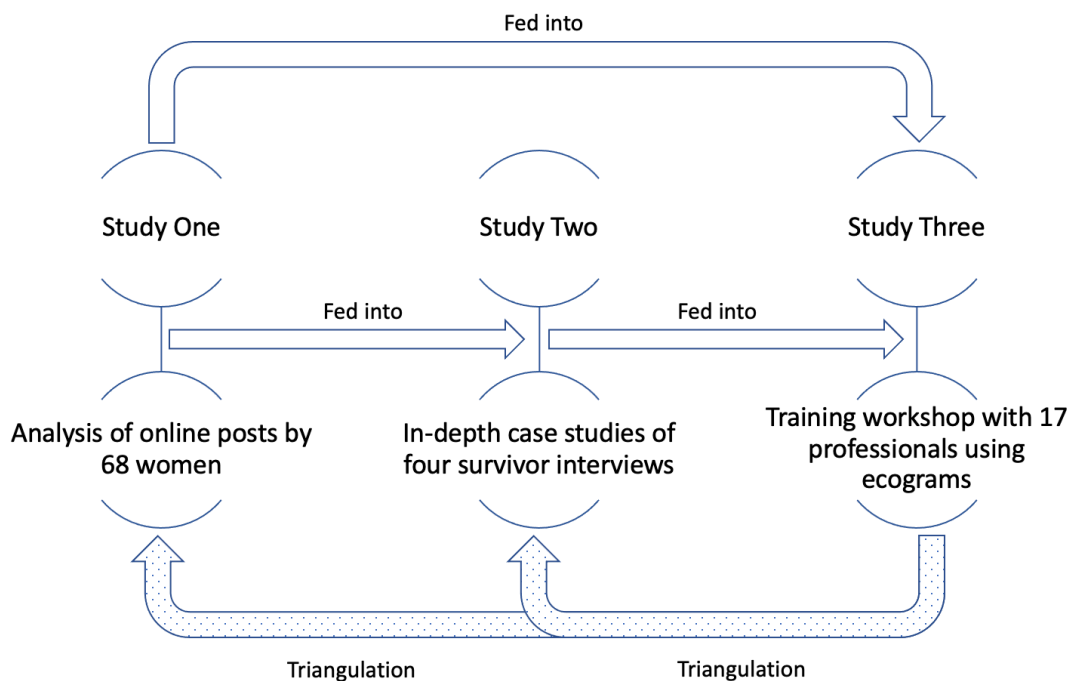
The three studies undertaken were: analysis of online posts; interviews with survivors; and a training workshop with professionals. The studies will be discussed in relation to the overall research approach to show how this has provided a theoretical framework for the design of the studies and decisions made through their development.

Study One: Analysis of Online Posts

Design.

Study one sought to explore survivor experiences of child contact by undertaking an analysis of threads and comments posted to publicly available forums (after Bartlow, 2014). This method was adopted for several reasons. There is minimal literature on survivor experiences of child contact in England and Wales and therefore this study was exploratory in nature. In line with taking a feminist approach, this method considers the potential trauma involved in re-telling (and potentially re-living) stories of abuse. By using secondary accounts for example, no survivor is being asked to re-tell their story. By adopting this method, a larger dataset could be formed with fewer possible consequences for those whose voices are central. In addition, this study could then be used as a scaffold to inform future studies, ensuring that the subsequent two studies were based on these findings. Future methods could then be tailored to meet the likely needs of the women involved. This method could also potentially benefit hard

to reach groups that may not be able to share their stories and moves away from more traditional forms of data collection.

Sources.

The study focussed on heterosexual female survivors over the age of 16 (based on the then Home Office (2013) definition of domestic violence and abuse) that had experience of child contact in England and Wales. It was impossible to determine other demographic factors, including those that may have contributed to marginalisation (e.g., ethnicity, disabilities). In total, 68 women commenting across 22 threads are represented (see Figure 1 for a thematic map). The 22 threads came from two different parenting forums.

Materials.

The primary materials were comments on threads detailing survivors' experiences and accounts of the child contact process where IPVA had been present.

In line with the British Psychological Society then-prevailing guidance for internet mediated research (2013), an opt-out letter was sent to those responsible for included comments to ensure there was an opportunity for them to have any data excluded from the study. This letter (Appendix B) detailed what the research would entail, how to opt out of the research and contact details of the researcher and supervisors.

Procedure.

Prior to commencing data collection, ethical approval was sought and granted from the Middlesex University Department of Psychology Ethics Committee. Search terms were initially developed (for e.g., "child custody" and "domestic violence") alongside a list of sources (e.g., google, blogging sites such as WordPress) and inclusion/exclusion criteria (e.g., material that was not publicly available was not considered, such as password protected material or that marked as confidential). Posts were checked to ensure they referred to heterosexual relationships, from the survivors' perspectives, that the abusive partners were male, and posts were excluded if it appeared that a court case was currently ongoing (insofar as it was possible to tell). A full list of search terms, sources and the inclusion criteria can be found in Appendix C.

Like a rapid evidence assessment (Horvath, Alys, Massey, Pina, Scally & Adler, 2013) each search was undertaken systematically and recorded on a database. This included the search terms used, the date of the search, where the search took place, the link to the material, and any additional notes. Search terms and data sources were refined as the process developed. For example, the term 'thread' was added to search terms, and parenting forums were individually searched once it became clear that these sources were being consistently identified. Searches were carried out between the 10th of July and the 17th of September 2016. Once material was checked against the inclusion criteria, an opt-out letter was sent to those responsible for the comments. None of the forums contacted opted out of the research, and one of the forums responded to give permission. Data was then uploaded to NVIVO by thread so it could be coded for thematic analysis. Threads included for analysis where detailed on a spreadsheet with an identifying number. Individuals included in the dataset were recorded in a separate spreadsheet by username (that they used to post comments), thread identifier and an individual identifier for the current study (e.g., 'Mia' posted on thread 22 and can be identified in the current study as Survivor 86).

Analysis.

Thematic analysis was used because of the exploratory nature of the study and to allow the identification and exploration of common themes arising from the data set as a whole, rather than considering individual accounts and experiences. Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that thematic analysis is a more flexible method of qualitative analysis than other forms (e.g., discourse or IPA) and allows the researcher the opportunity to consider the data from multiple perspectives as they are not bound by specifics, for example, IPA would consider experiences and personal meaning but would not consider use of language in the same way that discourse analysis is theoretically bound to do (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The analysis followed a six-phase approach as detailed by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarisation with the data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining themes and creating a report of the identified and defined themes. Initially the data was read in full and re-read several times to ensure familiarisation. Using NVIVO, the data was then coded line by line. For example, any contact arrangements were identified and coded as such. This developed a set of nodes to organise the data by topic (initial themes). The nodes were then printed, re-read for familiarisation, coded by hand to search for further themes or any missed detail. Once the themes were identified, they were reviewed. The review process involved printing out the data set, organising comments on threads by person and displaying them using a flipchart. This served two purposes: the first was to ensure that the themes captured the dataset and the larger meaning; the second was to ensure that the individual comments came together to form each individual's story. For example, one individual may have commented on

multiple threads regarding different aspects of the contact process and contact arrangements. By placing all these comments together, a more complete picture was visible to the researcher and information pertaining to one individual was not viewed as different individuals. Themes were then drafted, refined, further defined in supervision and as part of checks of rater reliability, and are presented in chapter 6. It is important to note that refining and reviewing of themes continued throughout the development of the findings. For example, the findings began with seven themes that were eventually refined to four. The final analysis includes four themes and 13 sub-themes.

Study Two: Interviews with Survivors

Design.

Study two adopted telephone based semi-structured interviews with survivors over the age of 17 that had a contact arrangement (formal or informal) in place for over a year. The study aimed to build on the findings of study one, addressing the key themes raised by the women and forming the interview schedule around these. It also aimed to provide more in-depth analysis than study one and fill in gaps that were identified previously. The design of this study was deemed to be most appropriate as it sought to take a phenomenological approach, further exploring women's experiences.

Participants.

Participants were recruited using a snowballing technique. Participation was voluntary and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time. Four participants took part in interviews. Two were known contacts, and two were recruited from twitter. A total of eight participants responded to the recruitment advert. Two individuals felt they were not suitable for the study after enquiring. Two respondents were not interviewed. The decision to end the study after four interviews was taken to protect the mental wellbeing of the researcher (see p. 82).

Recruitment took place using social media (Twitter and Facebook). Tweets and Facebook posts directed potential participants to a Qualtrics landing page where women could read about the study in the information leaflet and register their interest by leaving an email address. The participants were then contacted using the researcher's university email address, forwarding: the information leaflet; the consent form; the interview schedule; and a debriefing sheet. In addition, contacts known to the researcher were approached via email (for example, known contacts working with women's support services) to take part in the study or to distribute a link to the Qualtrics landing page. The researcher felt it was important for prospective participants to be able to see the questions in advance prior to deciding

about the study and to have a copy of the debriefing leaflet that detailed support regardless of whether they participated or not. The questions could potentially trigger individuals, participants could decide they are not ready and/or may need support. The debriefing leaflet therefore may have been beneficial.

Table 1

Overview of Survivor Demographics

Name*	Children	Ethnicity	Ethnicity of ex-partner	Contact arrangement
Federica	2 girls	White British	White European	Formal arrangement via courts
Meredith	2 girls	White British	Black African	Formal arrangement via courts
Martine	1 boy	White British	White Irish	Informal arrangement
Kelly	1 girl, 1 boy	White British	White British	Formal arrangement in writing

Four women participated in the telephone interviews. Participants all had a contact arrangement (two had a formal arrangement and two had an informal arrangement) in place for at least one year. All four participants were White British, although ex-partners varied in ethnicity (White Irish, Black African, White British and White European). One of the women included in the study had a disability and another had experienced mental health issues in the past. Please see Table 1 for a breakdown of participant demographics. All participants were English-speaking.

Materials.

Materials consisted of: a recruitment advert for twitter (see below); a Qualtrics landing page (Appendix D); an information sheet (Appendix E); a consent form (Appendix F); a semi-structured interview guide (Appendix G); and a debriefing sheet (Appendix H).

The study was advertised on twitter using the researcher's academic twitter handle. The tweet stated the following, "*call for participants to take part in a study exploring child custody process and intimate partner violence/abuse. See link below. Pls r/t*".

Participants were then directed to a Qualtrics landing page developed to provide potential participants information about the study. Qualtrics is a digital survey platform. The page detailed how to express an interest in the study and request further information, alongside the details of the research team and what the study entailed. Participants were able to provide an email address so that the researcher could email them a copy of the information leaflet, consent form, semi-structured interview questions and debriefing sheet.

The information leaflet was emailed in advance and explained what the research would entail, how to withdraw from the study and provided contact details of the research team (the researcher and supervisors). The information leaflet also detailed information about data protection (Data Protection Act, 2018) and informed participants that incidents disclosed involving children that had not previously been reported would be referred to the NSPCC by the researcher.

The written consent form detailed that the interviews would be audio recorded, and that participation was voluntary. It checked that participants had been provided with an information leaflet and reminded participants that they had a right to withdraw from the study within one month of taking part. The consent form also reminded participants that incidents involving children that had not previously been reported would be referred to the NSPCC by the researcher.

The semi-structured interview guide was sent to participants in advance. This was developed from the findings in study one and designed to build on pertinent themes around child contact. The interview questions explored experiences of the court process (e.g., can you tell me about any hearings or assessments that have taken place as part of the process?), experiences of intimate partner violence and abuse (e.g., have you experienced any violence or abuse from your ex-partner since you separated? If so, can you tell me about this?), and future practice recommendations (e.g., what, if anything, do you think could be improved about the court process in relation to child contact cases and IPVA?). Researchers stress the importance of ending interviews on a positive note, focussing on women's strengths (Parker & Ulrich, 1990; WHO, 2001). The interview schedule was therefore developed with this in mind, ending on a positive note, and beginning with generally introductory questions. This left the potentially difficult and upsetting questions for the middle of the interview.

A debriefing sheet was emailed to participants in advance and at the end of the interview. The debrief sheet thanked participants, informed them of how their interviews would be used and provided details of relevant support services (e.g., Women's Aid).

Procedure.

Prior to commencing data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the Middlesex University psychology department ethics committee. Participants were identified using social media (twitter), via email or via word of mouth. Participants were directed to the Qualtrics landing page (either via twitter or via email). Participants were then able to read about the study and leave an email address if they wanted to know more.

Participants that were interested in taking part were provided with an information leaflet, a consent form, and the semi-structured interview questions in advance. Participants then emailed the researcher to arrange a telephone interview at a convenient time. Telephone interviews were chosen as opposed to in-person interviews so that the participant could select a time that suited their schedule; the participant would not need to travel therefore widening the participant pool; the participant and researcher would both be safe (in case of ongoing post-separation IPVA); and they might feel more comfortable discussing their experiences in their own chosen locations as opposed to a public place.

At the beginning of the interview, participants were provided with an explanation of the study, informed that the interview would be recorded and asked to verbally consent. Participants were also reminded of their right to withdraw, and that participation was voluntary. Participants were then asked the semi-structured interview questions. The interviews adopted a trauma-informed approach and considered the emotional safety of the survivor carefully. The interview guide was constructed with consideration of previous trauma, beginning the interview with a demographic overview and information about contact arrangements rather than with abuse experienced. Despite this, most of the women jumped straight into their experiences of abuse wanting to provide context for the contact arrangements in place. Throughout the interview guide, consideration was given to participant welfare, ensuring that participants were reminded that they could stop or take a break at any time. In two of the interviews the participants broke down in tears. At this point, the researcher asked the participants if they wanted to stop or wanted to take a break. Both women chose to continue. The interviews ended with stories of support and future recommendations, with the aim of a positive ending and one that illustrated to survivors that their voices were being heard. Two of the survivors noted that they had much more to say, with one survivor adding comments once the recording had ended and the interview had finished. Notes were made with permission to include these, and the survivor sent a follow-up email with additional narrative that they wanted the researcher to consider. At the end, participants were thanked for their participation and sent a copy of the debriefing sheet.

Interviews were subsequently transcribed verbatim and anonymised. Each participant was allocated a pseudonym next to their name in an encrypted file. This allowed the researcher to identify the participant and their interview data should the participant wish to withdraw (up to one month after the interview). Once the interviews had been transcribed, participants were sent a copy of the transcription and asked to return any comments, amendments, or additional feedback within two weeks. Survivors were sent a full anonymised transcript in advance of analysis taking place. For one survivor, issues of safety became paramount after viewing the transcript. It was noted that viewing the narrative in this way might mean that participants could be identified. For this reason, transcripts of the interviews and the thematic narrative analysis of the case studies will not be included in this thesis. One month after the interview had taken place (and two weeks after transcription if this was later), the interview transcripts were analysed.

Analysis.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim from recordings, and these were then sent to survivors for approval prior to commencing analysis. Only one of the survivors responded to the email, adding information, and making edits where comments were noted as 'unclear'. It was of importance to the researcher to provide survivors with the opportunity to look over the interview content and add/remove information if necessary. The researcher wanted to be clear as to what was going to be included in the analysis, to ensure that women were not silenced throughout the process, and that they had the opportunity to remove content if they felt uncomfortable with it post-interview. Having a transcript of the interview sent to them was deemed the most appropriate to way to account for this and is in-line with the critical feminist epistemological approach taken.

The interviews were considered as case studies and analysed using narrative analysis (see for example work by Shukla, Wilson & Boddy, 2014), followed by a cross-case analysis using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis process is detailed below.

Narrative Analysis of Individual Case Studies.

An adapted narrative analysis was chosen for the case studies for several reasons: to consider the narratives as a whole; to be able to identify key themes within the case studies (more consistent with thematic analysis); and because the sample was not homogenous and therefore interpretive phenomenological analysis could not be applied.

Narrative analysis seeks to explore the construction of participant stories (Riessman, 2005) and how participants make their own meaning (Georgakopoulou, 2006). Narrative analysis looks at how individuals position themselves within these stories, exploring agency and the wider context of 'participants' understandings of socially and culturally accepted norms' (Shukla, Wilson & Boddy, 2014, p. 4). Narrative analysis explores the story as one, in contrast to thematic analysis that breaks down the data into common themes and patterns (Shukla, Wilson & Boddy, 2014). However, these can also be combined, partly because they have similarities in their aims, because they are both able to be interpretive forms of analysis (Shukla, Wilson & Boddy, 2014), and because of thematic analysis not being based on epistemology or ontology (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is flexible (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

There are multiple forms of narrative analysis. This study undertook a performative analysis, acknowledging the woman as the narrator performing the story and navigating how other characters, settings or contexts are represented and placed within the story (Riessman, 2005). Using narrative analysis initially helped provide context for how women interacted with the systems, processes and professionals involved in the child contact process through a lens of having experienced previous IPVA. Power and agency therefore become important concepts, including how women negotiate this. One cannot dismiss the researcher's role in how narratives are constructed however, as the participants will inevitably be led by the design of the interview schedule. Beyond this, interaction between interviewer and interviewee should be given consideration in narrative analysis, both in what this tells us and how this rapport might impact the interview findings (Riessman, 2005).

Narrative analysis allowed the opportunity to view experiences of IPVA from the beginning of the relationship with an ex-partner to leaving the relationship and then through the child contact process, acknowledging how the wider societal norms (for example, gender) have shaped women's experiences.

Analysis was conducted using paper and pen, although it was refined continuously throughout the write up. The process of analysis itself involved three key steps - indwelling, identifying the stories, and identifying narrative themes (Smith, 2016). Indwelling refers to immersing oneself in the transcription, reading it several times, and making notes as you progress. This was conducted for each interview transcript. The next step was identifying the 'stories' throughout the transcript (Smith, 2016). The researcher looked for cues within the transcript, such as exploring specific events, or opening and ending phrases such as 'so then this happened' or 'and that's when I decided to do x, y, z' (Smith, 2016). These were highlighted in the text and eventually grouped according to similarity and to identify narrative themes. Narrative themes are patterns across the stories (Smith, 2016). The challenge here is keeping the

narrative whole, whilst teasing out the common threads (Smith, 2016). In essence, the researcher was identifying the key chapters of the story, and the themes that ran through each. For example, the beginning of a relationship was a chapter, but a theme within this included how the survivor positioned their experiences considering messages received from their partner and professionals around them. Eventually these chapters were formed and organised based on relationship timeline to form a whole 'story', with the narrative themes discussed within the chapters. This then allowed for the next step of the analysis – thematically analysing the women's narratives to form a cross-case analysis.

Thematic Analysis of Cross-Case Analysis.

Following analysis of the individual case studies (see Appendix I), a cross-case analysis took place using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis (see more on this on p. 57) allowed the researcher the opportunity to identify common themes or stories across the four accounts, rather than in one individual account alone. The themes were developed based on the women's narratives but also sought to highlight where women's experiences coincided with the findings of study one, allowing us to gain a deeper understanding of these.

Steps followed were the same as those described in study one. The analysis followed a six-phase approach as detailed by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarisation with the data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining themes; and creating a report of the identified and defined themes. Initially the data was read in full and re-read several times to ensure familiarisation. Coding the narratives took much less time given the narrative analysis that had taken place prior to this, and more emphasis was placed on searching for key themes that were shared. These were formed into initial themes and then reviewed several times, allowing the wider themes to shine through and form the final report. For example, identifying and forming the theme on professional practice took several attempts as it was interweaved with the complexities of feeling coerced by the system. These were eventually deemed to be sub-themes of 'Discord in the System'. The final analysis presents three key themes and six sub-themes, with one sub-theme including seven key smaller sub-themes or conceptual categories.

Study Three: Training Workshop for Professionals

Design.

This study formed part of a training workshop for professionals. In this training workshop, the panel of experts were professionals working in the field of child contact, and the feedback provided

related to survivor narratives, rather than their own previous comments. The method used for this study used a qualitative approach, with less structure than is usually required (Okoli & Pawlowski, 2004). The workshop used ecograms and focus group style discussions to discuss the previous studies forming the PhD.

The training workshop used the findings from the previous studies to provide training for professionals, while simultaneously gaining feedback about their experiences of working with survivors. The approach taken was collaborative. Ecograms were used to consolidate information in a visual way and to take an active-learning approach.

Developed in 1975 by Hartman, ecograms are a visual way to illustrate connections between family members, professional services, or environments. Ecograms were developed and adapted from General Systems Theory (Calix, 2004), and make use of Bronfenbrenner's nested systems approach. They acknowledge the multiple systems an individual might be working within, including: micro, meso, exo and macro systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Ecograms are traditionally used in social work to identify strengths, resources, and areas of support for a family (Calix, 2004). It is usually a collaborative process that helps social workers gather information (Calix, 2004). Using pen and paper, the family would draw themselves in the centre of the paper inside a circle. Using lines, arrows and other visual depictions, the flow of energy between the family and their outside connections would be added around the circle, with proximity indicating closeness of the connection (Thomlison, 2002). For example, different thickness of lines might indicate strength of bonds, arrows might indicate directionality of the connection and dashes might indicate broken connections. See Table 4 (p. 159), for a visual depiction. Use of ecograms for social work and for research haven't been validated through empirical testing (Ray & Street, 2004), but the benefits of using ecograms have been noted in the literature (see Calix, 2004).

Participants.

Participants attended the training workshop on women's experiences of child contact in the context of IPVA (n=18). Participants were professionals that were, or have been, involved in the child contact process. This included professionals from: IDVA support services (men's IPVA services were represented in addition to women's services), children's services, court report writers, and legal representatives. Figures for each profession type have not been provided to protect anonymity. Attendance on the training workshop was booked using Eventbrite and the workshop was advertised using twitter and via known contacts with the potential for snowballing. The workshop was also

advertised via email. Details were sent to Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service (HMCTS), Cafcass, children's services, IPVA support services, and family law offices in England and Wales.

Materials.

Materials included a recruitment email (Appendix J), an information letter (Appendix K), a consent form (Appendix L), a debrief sheet (Appendix M), a workshop outline and agenda (Appendix N), a guide to the workshop (Appendix O), a guide to using ecograms (Appendix P), and a workshop presentation (Appendix Q).

The recruitment email detailed what the study was about, what the training entailed, how to contact the researcher and their supervisor, and how to book a place on the training.

The information leaflet was emailed in advance and explained what the research would entail, how to withdraw from the study and provided contact details of the research team (the researcher and supervisors). The information leaflet also detailed information about data protection (Data Protection Act, 2018).

The written consent form detailed that the workshop would be video, and audio recorded, and that participation was voluntary. It checked that participants had been provided with an information leaflet and reminded participants that they had a right to withdraw from the study within one month of taking part.

A debriefing sheet was emailed to participants in advance and at the end of the interview. The debrief sheet thanked participants, informed them of how the workshop data would be used, and provided details of relevant support services (e.g., Women's Aid).

The workshop agenda simply detailed what would take place and at what time. For example, *'9:45-10am – Registration – Coffee and Pastries provided'.*

The workshop and ecogram guides explained how the workshop would progress (like the outline), and how to conduct an ecogram. The ecogram guide contained a key showing attendees the different types of lines they might use when depicting their ecograms and explained the purpose of an ecogram.

The workshop presentation detailed quotes from study one organised into key themes. This formed the basis for discussion throughout the workshop. The presentation provided attendees a survivor description from which to form their ecograms. Alternatively, they could use their own practice

experience. It also contained literature around both IPVA and using ecograms. This was a PowerPoint presentation and was projected on a large screen where everyone could see it.

Participants were also provided with A3 paper and multi-coloured pens to form their ecograms, and three post-it-notes to provide workshop feedback.

Procedure.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Middlesex University Department of Psychology Ethics Committee (see Appendix A). Those wanting to attend the workshop were able to book a place using Eventbrite. Once individuals booked a place on the workshop, they were sent an information leaflet clearly explaining what the research would entail. Participants were sent a consent form one week before the workshop took place.

The workshop took place at Middlesex University. Refreshments and lunch were provided. Higher Education Innovation Funding (HEIF) was awarded to pay for this. The workshop was scheduled for three hours, from 10am till 1pm, however some participants remained to continue discussions till 2pm. Participants were provided with the opportunity to sign the consent form at the beginning of the workshop if they wanted to have their data included for research and had not done so in advance. Participants were also provided with a copy of the information leaflet, workshop material and debrief sheet. Participants were sent an additional copy of these documents one week after the event.

Rules and regulations for the workshop were set at the beginning. Issues around confidentiality and anonymity were discussed. Attendees were invited to use a pseudonym instead of their real names if they felt more comfortable and were requested to not discuss what others said throughout the workshop outside of the room. Professional disclosures were requested to be kept anonymous in case any of the survivors were known to the other professionals. Workshop attendees wore label nametags Attendees were informed that their responses may be included as part of this research project and quotes may be used in subsequent publications. Attendees were informed that they could choose to not be included in the external publication/analysis by opting out of the research. Attendees were reminded that the training workshop would be recorded but that any data would be destroyed once transcribed and held in line with the Data Protection Act (2018).

Attendees were separated into small groups to work on designing an ecogram for one of the survivors quoted on the slides. Attendees took part in whole group discussions based on quotes and themes identified in study one of this PhD. The workshop ended with attendees providing anonymous

feedback about the training session using post-it notes. These were provided to participants at their seat, but participants were asked to place these on a table by the door before leaving. Three different colour post-it notes were used asking participants to note: what have you learnt that you didn't know before?; What would you like to know more about?; and do you think your practice will change as a result of today, and if so, how? These were collected, summarised, and can be found on p. 177.

Analysis.

The ecograms were analysed using a visual analysis (Hartman, 1995) and the post-it note feedback is presented descriptively. Ecograms were analysed based on the perceptions of the researcher (Hartman, 1995), although the ecograms were presented and discussed by the groups in the workshop (seven in total). This discussion helped the researcher to understand and frame the relationships depicted. Verbal group feedback on the ecograms and verbal discussions throughout the workshop were transcribed and used in conjunction with the visual depictions. The researcher was careful not to influence the ecograms but allow opportunity for professionals to work together to build ecograms representative of practice across the group as a whole (Grbich, 1999).

When exploring the ecograms, the researcher initially took note of the types of organisations detailed throughout. These were listed in a table with the frequency. Whilst it is not ideal to quantify such an analysis, it helped the researcher to process the information being depicted. The organisations were then grouped into types. For example, the inner circle on the ecograms listed the family, other types of organisations listed outside of the inner circle included informal support networks, and government services. Colouring was used to help with this – for example, some groups of professionals used different colours to indicate different types of organisations. Four 'groupings' were identified in total.

The table was then expanded to include the types and strength of relationships depicted on the ecograms for each organisation and group. For example, informal support networks were listed as neighbours, friends, extended family, and work colleagues. Relationships were depicted on the ecograms using arrow thickness, and directionality was noted using the arrowhead (see Table 4). So, where ecograms depicted the relationship between the inner circle and neighbours as broken (a straight line with two dashes in the middle), this was listed on the table as broken, and where arrows were depicted as thicker, this was detailed as a strong relationship. Where the arrows had the spearhead at both ends, this was detailed as a reciprocal relationship, and so forth.

The groupings were then analysed in terms of spatial proximity to the inner circle. For example, if neighbours were listed as close to the inner circle, this would be detailed on the table as being an important relationship. Organisations listed further away (for example, DVPPs) were listed as less important.

The organisations represented across the ecograms as a set were then presented in the written analysis. The focus was the relationship between the four groupings and the inner circle, including strength, type, and importance of relationship.

Methodological Challenges Across the Three Studies

Several methodological challenges arose throughout the studies, and these are discussed here.

Study One

Several methodological challenges arose throughout the study, mostly related to survivor narratives that fit the inclusion criteria. Only two forums included posts from women from England and Wales (that were identifiably so), with far more available from US blogs. However, excluding the US blogs was deemed to be the best choice as the focus for this study was on England and Wales. The researcher was concerned with lack of data, however the forums identified contained a wealth of survivor narratives and therefore this was deemed sufficient to conduct the analysis.

A key challenge was ensuring that accounts used were not part of ongoing court cases. This was much more difficult and required a great deal of discretion from the researcher. Ongoing court cases here refers to cases that are currently being heard rather than a case being brought back to court for a second hearing or for a new arrangement order for example. Wording was looked at carefully when exploring survivor posts but most important was dates. No posts were used if they were posted in 2014/15 (the years data was being collected) and each post was checked carefully for waiting times for a court case – for example if someone posted stating that they were waiting for a case to be heard in 6 months' time then all posts by that username were excluded during that period to make sure that the research wouldn't impact a current court case. Several family members or friends posted comments – these were excluded as well no matter how much detail they provided as it was acknowledged that this information may be incorrect, or that the survivor might not have wanted to share this.

Study Two

Recruitment was a methodological challenge for this study, as was interviewing. Recruitment was initially slow, although known contacts were more forthcoming with taking part. Word of mouth and sharing the study often eventually resulted in more participants that met the criteria taking part. In reality, patience was required, and this was less of a practical challenge than originally thought.

Embracing the research guidance on best practice (discussed in Chapter 4) meant that revising the interview schedule several times was necessary, as was practising the questions to ensure that they were well-rehearsed for the interviews taking place. In addition, a flowchart was developed for the study to make sure that no steps were missed before and during the interview. For example, ensuring that data protection legislation was being followed. This helped to not feel overwhelmed as a researcher. Interview style was important here as well – ensuring that the researcher was staying neutral whilst not being ambivalent and each interview resulted in some small adjustments. For example, in one interview it was noted that the researcher's response of 'that's really interesting' may be mis-interpreted and not reflect the seriousness of the content being shared. This was adjusted for future interviews to not cause discomfort.

Study Three

The key challenge for study three was identifying participants from the recording, capturing voices, and identifying who had consented from the video and the forms. This was a difficult process but was helped by video recording being used in conjunction with dictaphones placed in different parts of the room. If the voice couldn't be heard clearly on one device, it had been captured on another. Identifying consent forms was helped by the video recording but also drawing out the seating plan at the beginning. As a consent form was filled in, it was left on the desk of the participant. The participant was identifiable from this and the video recording, ensuring quotes were only used where individuals had consented.

The original design of this study was a survey for professionals. This was developed and ethics approval was gained from Middlesex University and children's services. Whilst some family law solicitors across the country and some professionals from children's services did engage with the survey, unfortunately overall participation was low (n=10), and the survey data was unable to be used. This resulted in the current design which is far more original and produced strong data that may not have been achieved with a survey. Cafcass and HMCTS were approached to participate in the survey, but

Cafcass declined and HMCTS failed to respond to the request for access. A summary of the study design can be found in Appendix V.

Chapter 5: Reflexivity

This chapter provides a critical reflection of the PhD process, including methodology and the research journey. After originally beginning a research degree in 2013 and interrupting my studies, I began the process once more in September 2015. I feel I have grown considerably as a researcher since this time and am more able, because of personal and emotional developments as well as skills acquisition, to take an honest approach to data and acknowledge what I bring to this as a researcher. This critical evaluation outlines my journey and next steps. Please note that some of this chapter has been published in a blog post for MDX minds (see Scally, Adler & Horvath, 2018).

Starting Over

I started this research degree in 2015 after returning from a long absence. I experienced a bereavement that had a significant impact on me and required me to move away from my previous project. It was important to maintain a level of emotional safety after a very difficult time and ensure that I could contribute to the research process rather than hinder this (Williamson, Gregory, Abrahams, Aghtaie, Walker & Hester, 2020). This came with some difficulties initially in that I felt very strongly that I wanted to continue exploring intimate partner violence however also needed to ensure that I explored this in a safe way (Williamson et al., 2020). My husband was abusive prior to his death in 2014 and this would inevitably shape my perspectives. Child contact is a topic I felt strongly about but did not have personal experience of and it was felt that this would be appropriate. Equally it was (and still is) a topic that lacked research and awareness, and I was sure I could make a positive contribution in a sensitive and survivor led way. This was particularly positive for me as prior to arriving at this point I was concerned that I would have to remove myself from the topic of intimate partner violence completely and this made me feel quite lost. I did not want to do a PhD for the sake of it and could not see myself having an interest in any other field. With the help of my supervisory team, I navigated this to reach what I felt was a personal milestone; creating a research plan that would contribute and was in line with my research interests. These initial stages of shaping a new research topic and plan were vital for me.

For me, this started a research process that felt positive and, whilst there have been difficulties along the way, has stayed true to my own values and beliefs regarding research with survivors, for example, developing a set of studies that would be led by survivor's voices and reflect on the experiences of survivors, positioning them as the experts in this topic (Gilfus, Fineran, Cohan, Jensen, Hartwick & Spath, 1999; Tomlinson, 2021). This in itself was a process as the initial plan was to begin with a survey for professionals. This felt uncomfortable and for a period I could not understand why. Through

supervision meetings and reflection, I realized that this was because it was not survivor led and it would not begin with women if it started with this study. It would be led by professionals. Simply by switching the order of the studies, the research took a different shape, and everything fitted into place in way that I felt aligned more with my own vision for the degree and my own personal beliefs. This way, the studies that followed from study one would be built on by the experiences of those that are the focus of this research degree.

The Researcher vs the Survivor

One paper that particularly helped this journey was a journal article by Gilfus (1999). Gilfus's article provided a framework to help me consider how to position myself as a survivor in research and the positive aspects of bringing the survivor and the researcher together. This was quite inspiring to read as I generally look upon my experiences as negative and the fact that I'm a survivor as being something that reduces my worth or value rather than builds on it. I felt previously as though this was a weakness and something that would be perceived as such by others if I were to bring this into the equation. Gilfus (1999) reframes this as a strength and discusses how being a survivor and our personal experiences impact how our world is shaped and how we perceive things. It is interesting to explore these elements as strengths. Until I read the article, I was very opposed to undertaking this PhD as a survivor and positioning myself as such. However now I am wondering how I can do the PhD justice without doing this, given that what Gilfus (1999) said makes so much sense to me. For example, Gilfus (1999) presents survivor experiences as '*a legitimate way of knowing*' (p. 1) and ultimately raises the question as to whether you can ever truly remove yourself from who you are as a researcher.

In 2017 I attended a conference (Psychology of Women Section, British Psychological Society) where Sue Wilkinson (2017) explored this further, as did researcher Tanya Beetham (2017). At this point, I was undertaking analysis for study one of the thesis. Sue Wilkinson has had a significant impact on the psychology of women and the psychology of sexuality. In her conference presentation, Wilkinson (2017) highlighted how her journey was shaped by what was happening around her and in her personal life. From the beginning of her journey Wilkinson has drawn from her personal experiences to shape her research self and her research journey, from coming out as a lesbian shaping her research focus to sexuality to the life-threatening injuries of her sister-in-law shaping her current research focus on end-of-life decision-making. Tanya Beetham built on this when she was reflecting on her own experiences of negotiating her research self with other parts of herself.

Beetham (2017) explored how her practice shapes her research, which shapes her views and vice versa. Beetham (2017) highlighted points in her research findings where this was directly evident, for example using quotes of children's narratives of a domestic violence intervention programme at a school. Beetham (2017) explained how her own views of school (based on previous experiences but also therapeutic work as a practitioner listening to children talk about school), and her positioning of power within schools she was accessing as a researcher (for example being viewed as an adult and/or part of the school) made her therapeutic-self uncomfortable in terms of impartiality and power. Beetham (2017) highlighted how this affected the interpretations of her data, and how upon reflection she decided to remove certain quotes from her research altogether not because they were biased or because they were not valuable but because of how they could be interpreted by others and the stereotypes that she might inadvertently feed into, something she did not want to do as it conflicted with her own personal beliefs. Here, Beetham's research self and indeed output has been directly affected by other parts of herself however Beetham embraces this rather than fights it. She uses this to create ethical and sound research that will have a positive impact on how child survivors of domestic violence are perceived.

Both talks helped me continue to grow as a researcher and negotiate the journey of bringing the aspects of myself together to produce research that is valuable and speaks to people on a human level. I have realised over time that I cannot ignore what I bring to the table and that sometimes I can bring something valuable to the research process. This is something that makes my contribution unique and can be valued if it is reflected on and addressed. The next question is how can I do this in a responsible, safe, and ethical way that ensures I am representing the voices of survivors rather than just my own?

Here, Goldstein (2003) provides some insight. Goldstein states that self-scrutiny and awareness of the self is vital to the research process highlighting that often as researchers, we address the impact we might have on the participant and their responses but ignore the impact the participant might have on us and how we might interpret their responses. Goldstein (2003) highlights that by reflecting on our studies, engaging in supervision, and receiving feedback from others we can control for this influence. This was positive to read as all three elements are things I was already engaging in throughout the PhD (e.g., reflective diary keeping, regular supervision that is open and honest, receiving feedback from peers/supervisors). I will continue to build on these practices in my work post-PhD.

Interpersonal Skills: Interacting with Survivors and Professionals

Reflexivity and supervision played a key role for me when it came to negotiating challenges with interactions. For example, balancing neutrality with compassion when interviewing; interviewing

survivors I knew prior to the research and challenging those viewed as being more expert than myself. I explore these challenges further below.

Two of the studies involved interacting with people and this brought its own set of challenges. For example, when interviewing survivors, it could be quite difficult to balance remaining neutral with compassion. In one interview, I recall responding 'that's really interesting', the survivor then responded with, 'or horrifying!'. In this instance I recognised that my role as a researcher could potentially cause some to misinterpret my responses – I was attempting to respond in a way that would acknowledge the survivor without creating or exhibiting any bias, however this could be interpreted as lack of acknowledgement of how upsetting the situation was. As someone who has previously worked with survivors, supporting them through IPVA, it was challenging to maintain my role as researcher rather than slip into my previous role. Greene (2014) refers to this as *'shifting social identities'* (p. 6) and discusses the importance of making sure that *'disturbance to the research setting'* (p. 7) because of this is minimised. There is a balance to be had, especially because how a researcher responds to survivors in interviews can have an ongoing impact on them in terms of reporting rates, feeling believed, and so on (WHO, 2001).

The interviews with survivors I did not know were much richer however and seemed a more cathartic experience (for those being interviewed). They were freer flowing, with survivors readily contributing their narratives. Anonymity may have a role to play here, as well as interview technique (Greene, 2014). Greene (2014) suggests that interviewing should be more comfortable when you are an 'insider' as you do not need to build the same rapport or relationship, however I found it to be more of a hindrance, and more awkward for both - all things I did not expect. I think this is due to several reasons. Participants that knew me and the project wanted to answer my questions in a way that they thought I wanted them to - I had to ask a lot more questions to get anything out of them. Knowing a participant brings with it knowledge of their previous experiences that they also knew I had, and therefore I missed some questions that I knew the answer to. Finally, you make more presumptions during interviews with known individuals based on preconceived notions (DeLyser, 2001). The result was that the interviews were very fact-based. There was less reason for participants to expand because I already had a foundation of knowledge about their circumstances. Greene (2014) discusses the importance of making sure this does not translate to bias and increased subjectivity – I paid extra attention to this when conducting analyses.

The final study involved a training workshop with professionals. The most difficult aspect here was challenging viewpoints that could be interpreted as 'problematic'. For example, one of the participants made some comments that were victim-blaming. The issue for me here was challenging the viewpoint of

someone I viewed as more experienced than me. Power differentials can have a significant impact when it comes to qualitative studies (Greene, 2014), however I think this was more about my own insecurities and the feelings of imposter syndrome – not uncommon in academia (Abdelaal, 2020) or with doctoral students (Nori, Peura, Jauhiainen, 2020). In this instance, I sensitively added in alternative explanations for the behaviour, allowing other professionals to raise their own experiences with these options in the process.

Reflexivity was key to managing these different scenarios. Discussing challenges with supervisors helped put everything in perspective whilst still holding me accountable. In addition, reflecting on my own experiences via a reflective journal helped me understand both myself and the 'data', allowing me to grow as a researcher. For example, I was able to identify why I felt so uncomfortable challenging professionals, and how I might build confidence in this area.

Analysing with Qualitative Accounts

Analysing the personal accounts of survivors obtained as part of study one has developed my skills in qualitative analysis. Initially, I found thematic analysis to be overwhelmingly difficult as I considered it to be less structured and procedurally led than quantitative data analysis (which is what I had concentrated on in the past). I spent a considerable amount of time working out how to navigate the data and draw out the themes and was struck by the level of interpretation that could be brought to the process, from the development of the themes through to the representation of quotes in the writing up of the findings. Working with my supervisors helped me considerably during this process and engaging in the writing of a reflective journal helped me identify points where my own personal views impacted on interpretation of the data.

One example of this that can be drawn from my personal thoughts and beliefs (and can be seen already in the paragraph above) is that of psychology as being a science and scientific research as being a place for impartial research whereby researchers do everything possible to ensure lack of bias (O'Reilly & Kiyimba, 2015). From the way questions are framed to the way a room is set up, the onus is on ensuring the researcher obtains objective, valid and reliable data. As an individual that has mostly quantitative experience, interpreting numerical data is relatively straight forward. A mean, for example, is the same for all who read it. Interpretations and explanations of this mean may differ according to what literature has been read and the perspective of the researcher, but overall, this is more limited in my opinion than when you have qualitative data. With qualitative data I felt that it was much more difficult to be an impartial researcher as I felt that it was almost impossible to remove myself completely from the data as I

had to interpret it. What I think a comment means and what the person next to me thinks a comment could mean could be vastly different depending on personal experiences, previous employment or even personality characteristics. I have negotiated this journey throughout the process of analysis and have now reached a point where I am more comfortable about what I bring to the research process, however this journey has been difficult at times.

Initially, I felt very strongly that I should be completely removed from the analysis. I felt uncomfortable about considering my own views and tried to remove any interpretation that did not come from a scientific basis. This felt as though I was fighting the natural research process and I considered my inability to do this to be a weakness. For example, in supervision my supervisors would raise examples of where within my findings they felt my data could perhaps be interpreted in a different way and I realised that I had been avoiding this because of both my personal experiences and my belief that science should be impartial. However, because of this, I was losing sight of what was happening for me as a survivor (rather than a researcher) and what this was bringing to the research process (lack of interpretation). For example, I have been reflecting for a while now on feedback from my findings and the points made regarding how I see men's actions when it comes to IPVA. One comment was in relation to the complexity of IPVA and the fact that men may not always know or intend their actions to be purposefully manipulative and another comment was in relation to reflecting on why it is that some of the findings suggest that they are. Thinking about this, I felt that this was coming across for several reasons. I was trying to ensure that the women came first and that I believed their narratives no matter what. Where there was evidence of behaviour I felt was subtly manipulative, I was trying to highlight this to draw out the more subtle ways IPVA takes place as this is the kind that can be overlooked by the courts. In addition, I am conscious of abusive behaviour towards women and children being hidden or ignored (on a societal level) – this naturally creates a bias when I'm exploring the data. This is a bias that appeared to be coming through regardless of how much I tried to remove myself from the data. I realised I was pulling away from the data rather than fully exploring it, partly because of previous experiences and self-care but mostly because I felt that if I considered the data from a personal perspective this would come through in the findings section. In doing so, I realised I was inadvertently dehumanising the process and the men. In trying to ensure that I did not negatively impact the research process, I had impacted it anyway. By undertaking further reading, engaging in supervision, counselling, and keeping a reflective journal it occurred to me that if I did consider some of my own circumstances and personal feelings when reading the women's comments, the men and their behaviour would be represented in a softer and more human way, and the findings would show far more understanding. If I considered my own journey, I would be more likely to embrace the complexities and to consider the relationship in all this process

rather than just the anger and hurt that is coming through from the women's accounts. IPVA is not as simple as is sometimes described by the person who experienced it and I know this because I have lived with that kind of behaviour. I realised I needed to spend more time considering how to incorporate what I know on a personal level when reading the extracts rather than constantly battling to be a blank slate when I am not.

In examining this, I also found that I was failing to consider some of my other personal beliefs about behaviour overall, i.e., the behaviour is bad, but the person is not fundamentally bad. Everyone can make positive choices and reasons why they might be making bad choices. Initially, I felt this belief contradicted what I was interpreting and representing in the findings – intentionally manipulative decisions made by men. In attempting to explore and understand the intricacies of the IPVA and pick out evidence of this (whether it be subtle, implicit, or obvious), I found I was losing the bigger picture. This being that a) the research is designed to represent women's experiences and b) that I want to look at women's experiences not just to understand them but also to be able to use this understanding to help – how can this process be improved for everyone based on how women experience it? And to improve the process both the women and the men need to reach a place whereby this can happen. Women cannot feel more comfortable about the process unless they feel safe and feel that their children are happy and safe – this requires the men to do something as well and by ignoring that it makes it an impossible task. By taking a step back I was able to negotiate a position whereby I could feel as though I was fully supporting survivors without dehumanising the perpetrators.

A similar challenge that required a great deal of reflection is the extent to which I was complicit in allowing survivors to avoid discussions of harm to children. Davis (2010) discusses her own experiences of this in relation to being complicit in allowing white women to be silent over racism. Davis (2010) felt uncomfortable raising or challenging race as a topic, and participants felt uncomfortable discussing race, so when they steered the conversation away from the topic of race the researcher allowed them to do this. Davis (2010) discusses how she feels this makes her complicit in this process. In study two of this PhD when I interviewed survivors, some of the women avoided or brushed over questions about the impact of their relationship on the children. The women discuss the impact of the father's behaviour after the relationship had ended, but do not really discuss the impact of the court case/s either. The impact stays firmly with the father and distanced from anything that the mother was a part of i.e., relationship and court. I did not confront this as I did not want them to feel bad about the impact on their children, and their own accountability. I did not want to instigate a scenario in which I would have to break confidentiality. Mostly, acknowledging this impact and confronting the notion of accountability would

have an impact on myself as a survivor. I would be faced with reflecting on my own previous experiences and the extent to which my children have been affected (which, like the mothers in the study, I argued has not been visible – but now I recognise it clearly has). This was an important moment for both the research and myself as I was able to go back to the women's narratives and ensure this was considered.

Researching with Survivors

Research with survivors of any traumatic event or series of events can be an incredibly powerful experience. 'Bearing witness' to a survivor's experience should not be undertaken without full consideration of the potential costs and challenges that might arise for both the survivor and the researcher, and the benefits of undertaking such research should be clear and justifiable (Ellsberg & Heise, 2002). This includes prioritising the emotional safety of the researcher as part of the design of a project (Coles, Astbury, Dartnall & Limjerwala, 2014), and as a prerequisite for ethical approval (WHO, 2001).

The second study of this PhD included interviews with survivors and these reflections were noted as part of a reflective diary whilst embarking upon the analysis process. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim resulting in repeated exposure to the content of each interview. Although fewer in number than the 68 online accounts in study one, engaging with women's narratives first-hand and immersion in their accounts entailed more emotional labour. The interviews included descriptions of violence, deeply personal accounts from women experiencing distress and trauma, and suggestions of poor or limited professional responses that have resulted in feelings of frustration and anger, mostly for the survivors but also for me (Coles, Astbury, Dartnall & Limjerwala, 2014; Pio & Singh, 2016). 'Bearing witness' to these women's lived experiences and their repercussions involved a great deal of personal navigation and active management (Coles et al., 2014; Pio & Singh, 2016).

This is not uncommon and other researchers (e.g., Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen & Liamputtong, 2009) have discussed various forms of emotional labour throughout trauma-related research. Dickson-Swift et al. (2009) argue that emotions are part of being human and that qualitative research requires you to view things from the perspective of the participant. Emotional labour in such research can include feeling and showing emotions (e.g., as part of post interview reflection, or during an interview itself), suppressing emotions (particularly in academia, rigour and emotion may be perceived as incompatible), and navigating these emotions as part of the research process (e.g., considering one's own relationships in a different light).

I found myself experiencing each of these elements: feeling emotionally exhausted by the interviews, then subsequently by the transcription; avoiding writing in my reflective journal because I wanted to suppress these emotions; and finally, reflecting on how my world view might have changed because of what I now know. Some of these reactions can be explained as vicarious or secondary trauma and can result from one-off or repeated exposure to survivor trauma (Coles et al., 2014). Vicarious trauma (in this context) is defined as a reaction to or an alteration of the inner world of the researcher because of empathising with the survivor and their traumatic experiences (e.g., someone researching child abuse might become more protective of their own child; Dickson-Swift et al., 2009). Secondary trauma can also result from such research and is characterised by a symptomatic response similar to post-traumatic stress disorder (Coles et al., 2014). This can include taking on the trauma of the survivor, avoiding the research that is the source of the secondary trauma, and experiencing symptoms such as sleep disturbance or hyperarousal.

Research has explored the impact of working in the field of violence against women on practitioners and clinicians. Vicarious trauma experienced by researchers is less well understood (Campbell, 2002), although there has more recently been acknowledgement that *'the role of a researcher is different from that of a clinician or counselor and potentially more traumatizing because of an inability to "help" the victim'* (Coles et al, 2014, p. 96). I found this particularly difficult to balance (partly because of my previous experiences in supporting survivors of violence and abuse) and I spent time reflecting on my role in this research and what I could do to ensure the women being interviewed were supported. Offering participants a debrief sheet that listed support services was helpful here (and an ethical requirement). I also chose to send participants a copy of their transcripts prior to commencing analysis. Participants were able to add to these in a different colour so that they could continue their story beyond the time limitations of the interview. This came from one of the women in the study. The participant was frustrated because she had to leave but wanted to finish telling her story. I equally did not want to silence her story, so this is the solution we arrived at together. Another survivor mentioned how helpful the interview experience had been for her and how much she gained from sharing her story with me (Campbell & Adams, 2009). That was powerful and helped me in return because I saw that the research was able to give back. It was able to 'help' albeit in a different way than that of a clinician or a counsellor.

Through counselling, close supervision and a reflective journal I was able to identify and work through the emotions raised by this project. I am much more able to recognise the impact of research and ensure that I practice appropriate self-care when necessary. Some of the work undertaken to help

identify what other researchers have found helpful to mitigate against some of the impact of research with challenging topics is outlined below, I incorporated these into my self-care.

Preparation

Knowing what to expect from the topic and preparing for the project is seen as key (Ellsberg & Heise, 2005). Planning debriefing sessions, regular meetings with the research team, reading around the topic, and considering the risks to researcher wellbeing are all vital. Risk assessments are usually conducted as part an ethics process and emotional wellbeing should be considered as part of this. In addition, when preparing for data collection, it is important to consider how to schedule the interviews and allow time for reading, processing, and engaging with the material generated. The consensus is that too much exposure to challenging content in one day can be overwhelming (Coles et al., 2014). I made sure to only schedule one interview in a day and planned my day so that I would have minimal work or research related activities for the rest of it. This also applies to transcription of interviews (Kiyimba & O'Reilly, 2015) and taking breaks when reading data is particularly important in research in these domains, so I planned out data transcription is much the same way as interviewing; one a day with plenty of breaks in between. Participants in Coles et al. (2014) also found that limiting exposure to challenging topics in the way of media/books/TV was helpful. I found this helpful too. Keeping up with the Kardashians became a house favourite for a short period of time!

Formal and Informal Support

Having a range of support is viewed as beneficial by researchers (Dickson-Swift et al. 2009). Clinical supervision, regular meetings with research supervisors, ongoing counselling and debriefing sessions with colleagues are all cited as helpful forms of formal support (Billings, Cohen, Coles, Contreras-Urbina, Dartnall, Fields et al., 2015). I engaged in all those forms of support throughout the PhD. I was in the fortunate position whereby the Middlesex University Psychology Department offered group clinical supervision to PhD students, and the University were able to put in place ongoing counselling. I was initially reluctant to engage in counselling, however my supervisory team encouraged me to have this in place and I am forever grateful. As a result of the counselling, I was able to recognise the impact of the research on my personal wellbeing and gain further insights into my analysis of the interviews. Informal support is also outlined as valuable by researchers and may include: discussions with family and friends, colleagues, or team members. Making time to process the impact of researching sensitive topics and having open discussions about this is important (Coles et al., 2014). I found it invaluable to be able to discuss complexities in the analysis with friends/colleagues, for example.

Know How to Support Survivors

Coles et al. (2014) highlight this for two reasons: it is important to understand the boundaries of your role as a researcher – you are not typically a counsellor and are unlikely to be able to make professional onward referrals. However, you can signpost sources of support and this may itself provide peace of mind for the researcher. Such signposting can be as simple as developing a debrief sheet for participants with sources of support – vital to minimise harm to survivors – and sharing the contact details or location of local support services (Ellsberg & Heise, 2002).

Understand your Limitations

Being clear with your supervisors and yourself about whether and how you are coping with challenging content is vital (Coles et al., 2014). This can require reflection and may be an ongoing process. Knowing when to stop a task that is causing you harm is important. Evidence around whether having experienced the topic you are researching places you at increased risk (Lerias & Byrne, 2003) of vicarious or secondary trauma is mixed (Gilfus, 1999), however keeping a reflective journal can be helpful here (Malacrida, 2007). In qualitative research, reflecting on what you bring to the research is part of the process. I tried to spend ten minutes whenever possible writing about my experience of doing research and the current task. I found that taking some time to explore how I was feeling about the process, analysis or findings served not only to safeguard my mental wellbeing, but also enabled me to develop as a researcher. For example, through counselling and reflective journaling, I was able to realise that the interviews and transcriptions were having a significant impact on my own symptoms of trauma. Increased hypervigilance, lack of sleep and avoidance were key indicators that I needed to stop the interviews to protect myself. As a result of this, the interviews were analysed as individual case studies followed by a cross-case analysis. The method had to change but this allowed me to explore alternative methods and forms of analysis, growing my skill set whilst not limiting the project.

Self-care

Upon recommendation from one of my supervisors, I made good use of the Self-Care Starter Kit (Butler & McClain-Meeder, 2015) developed by the School of Social Work, University of Buffalo. In addition, I took some time to do something fun or relaxing and schedule this in, whether this be quality time with my children, going for a walk in the woods, spending an hour at the gym, reading a book, taking a long bath, or going out for a nice meal.

For some, knowing that the research will make a difference can help them cope with the content (Billings, Cohen, Coles, Contreras-Urbina, Dartnall, Fields et al., 2015; WHO, 2001). This was very important to me as survivors were trusting me with their narratives. I considered publications, contribution to the literature, policy and contributing to the wider field. For example, I have been writing several articles over the course of the PhD for publication, I have been involved with the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) Victim Strategy as a member of their academic panel (Home Office, 2018), have reviewed MoJ publications, and I have discussed the findings of this PhD as part of the MoJ family court review (personal communication, 2020). I have also presented findings to those working in the field as part of a conference hosted by Support through Court (NGO working with survivors; 2019). Most recently, I have spent some time discussing the findings of this study with Women's Aid as part of their new campaign (Personal Communication, 2020). This gives me hope that this PhD will contribute to change, whilst maximising benefit and minimising harm to both survivors and the researcher. To maximise benefit it is important to consider how the findings can be used to contribute to policy, the academic literature or social change. As Ellsberg and Heise (2005) state, *'we must ensure that when women take risks to share their stories, we honour that risk by using the findings for social change'* (p. 45). Ellsberg and Heise (2005) discuss how research findings can often be confined to the academic world rather than to policymakers or advocates that can make best use of them. They argue that research involving violence against women carries a moral responsibility and that such research should be applied – in other words, it is not enough to collect this information – it must be shared and used to develop effective change.

I have recently joined the advisory group as part of the SafeLives family law cultural change project. They are a third sector organisation focussing on practice and policy change when it comes to IPVA, and this current project is developing training for family lawyers in England and Wales. In addition, I've recently been invited by Nicholas Allen QC (Personal Communication, 2021) to present the PhD findings for the Judicial College as part of their Private Law Children courses, and for the PhD findings to be included in the *Improving Access to Justice for Separating Families* (JUSTICE's new working party chaired by Professor Gillian Douglas, of which Nicholas Allen QC is a member), and by Jenny Beck QC to present for the Law Society (Personal Communication, 2019). Finally, I have been receiving numerous court report quests from professionals working in the field of IPVA within the family courts and have begun discussions with Jenny Beck QC on how to develop this skill so that I can contribute to court report writing in the future (Personal Communication, 2021).

Summary

In conclusion, this PhD journey has been a long and difficult one with many bumps in the road – mostly personal ones. However, it has offered me the opportunity to grow as a person and as a researcher. It has prepared me for some of the challenges I may face in the future whilst providing me with a safety net (my supervisors). It has also been the cause of much turmoil! Counselling and keeping a reflective diary (even though I was originally reluctant to engage in either) were very helpful in negotiating and detangling my 'shifting roles' as a mother, a student, an academic, and a professional. Reflecting on other women's narratives allowed me the opportunity to gain insight into their lives and experiences. This is not a position to be taken lightly and I did not do so at any point in this process. My supervisors challenged me, I challenged myself and the participants narratives challenged me. I will never be able to remove myself from the analysis completely and Gilfus (1999) argues that I should not aim to, however I have done my best to balance researcher and survivor. I think that the outcome is a reflective, balanced, and thoughtful thesis – with a bit of survivor empowerment thrown in.

Chapter 6: "They Have a Lot of Power": An Analysis of Women's Online Posts About Their Experiences of Child Contact in the Context of IPVA

This study engages in an in-depth exploration of the experiences of female survivors and the families of survivors that have been through the child contact process. This includes an in-depth exploration of survivor experiences of professionals within the contact system. This is necessary to understand how the system is perceived as operating within England and Wales. Literature concerning this subject area is sparse and is even more limited when considering evidence specific to England and Wales. The study expands the current knowledge base in England and Wales and adds to the literature overall, whilst ensuring that women's narratives are at the forefront. This study analyses publicly available online posts to explore women's narratives of their experiences. This provides a starting point for the development of a theoretical model and subsequent studies within the PhD. This study builds on the five research questions provided in the literature review of this thesis (chapter two).

Research Questions

1) What are the experiences of survivors of IPVA who have gone through the child contact system in England and Wales?
2) What are the experiences of family members of survivors of IPVA that have gone through the child contact system in England and Wales?
3) What professionals are involved within the child contact process?
4) What attitudes and beliefs do IPVA survivors believe are held by professionals working within child contact in England and Wales?

Background and Context

This section provides context for the subsequent themes, outlining the IPVA women experienced in their relationships and post-separation.

IPVA in the Relationship

The women in the sample all reported experiencing IPVA in their relationships prior to its end and the beginning of child contact proceedings (it should be noted here that women were selected in this way because of commenting about such experiences). This included physical abuse, controlling behaviour, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, and financial abuse. Some of the women described the impact of this abuse and the effect it had on the emotional health of themselves and their children, including fear,

stress, and hypervigilance: *"I can't really fully explain the effect he had on us all, he essentially turned us all into ghosts of ourselves because we were all walking on eggshells around him"* (Survivor 1).

Some of the women in the sample discussed incidents witnessed by their children. Often, they described the incident as happening to them whilst the child was present, rather than considering the child a victim of the abuse.

"Some of the things he did to me are as follows: lots of mental abuse name calling downgrading me makin me fink im worthless etc, stopped all contact between me and my family, broke my laptop into two separate pieces by smashing it on the floor, **threw a big iron stew pan at me whilst I was holding our 1 yr old (I stepped back and it didnt hit us),** smashed a plastic bowl over my head, poured cooking oil over my head and body, **and lots lots more including slapping me and teaching our son to do the same !!!**" (Survivor 2, emphasis added)

Interestingly, the women in this sample often described events as happening to them and the children being caught up, rather than this abuse being something that was also happening to the children. There did not appear to be any acknowledgement that children witnessing abuse were also experiencing a form of child abuse. This may reflect the relatively new consideration of witnessing abuse as a form of child abuse legislatively. In England and Wales this was first implemented in 2005 and it takes time for these changes to become mainstream considerations. It was not until 2021 that children were positioned as experiencing IPVA in their own right (Domestic Abuse Act, 2021). However, it could also be a way for the women to protect themselves from feelings of guilt and/or association when it came to the harm that their children were experiencing – serving as a defence or coping mechanism.

Some women appeared to lack understanding of what constituted abuse (and witnessing it). For example, one mother explained that the children would have been removed if they had witnessed any of the reported assaults but went on to explain that they witnessed arguing and pushing. This suggests that either pushing and shoving are seen as less serious, or that pushing, and shoving are not abusive and therefore witnessing this would not place the children at risk of being removed. It could also refer to mandatory reporting of high-risk cases involving children to child protective services by the police and the fear that children would be removed if child protective services became involved (Mullender et al., 2002).

Mothers rarely described themselves as active agents in scenarios where children were involved, although technically they could be seen as such if they did not protect their children from witnessing abusive incidents, something social workers consider 'failure to protect' (Hester, 2011). Only one mother

discussed this and had strong feelings regarding the witnessing of abuse and the responsibility of the mother to not endanger her children. This was somewhat implied by most of the sample in that most of the women wanted to ensure that their children did not witness further abuse and sought to ensure this did not happen, for example by stopping contact or altering arrangements if it was identified that relationships between the father and a new partner were abusive, or if there were further incidents of abuse towards the mother because of contact with the children.

This lack of acknowledgment of being an active agent is evidenced throughout the comments made and in relation to several scenarios. For example, only one of the mothers addressed their previous relationship with the father of their children as a personal choice and contributing to the choice to have children with the father. Although, the choice to have children cannot and should not be inferred when discussing IPVA. Control and removal of freedom of choice is the underpinning factor of IPVA and is well noted to be the root of subsequent abuse (Stark, 2007).

Of the incidents witnessed by children that were described, children were discussed as being collateral damage or caught in the middle: *"My ex was abusive towards me in every single way imaginable. In themost horrific ways. My DS was often caught up in the middle of it all. He is autistic and was very much damaged by waht he witnessed"* (Survivor 4). In some cases, direct impact was implied because of children receiving support from counselling services however, behavioural, emotional, or psychological impact was not specifically described.

In their interviews with 24 mothers, Mullender et al. (2002) highlight that a great deal of the women they interviewed did not realise how much their children had witnessed and what they felt at the time until they heard their children speak during the research process. Those that detailed psychological and behavioural impacts of witnessing abuse discussed how their children exhibited increased levels of anger, nightmares, anxiety, fearfulness and becoming overly compliant. The data from the current study did not allow for this level of detail.

Post-separation Violence and Abuse

Post-separation violence and abuse was typically characterised as harassment (Beeble et al., 2007; Coy et al., 2012; Hayes, 2017; Zeoli et al., 2013) and this is consistent with many posted comments. Post-separation violence and abuse was identified by approximately one third of participants. This was less than in other research, for example Coy et al. (2012) interviewed 34 survivors, and all had experienced post-separation violence and abuse. However, this is likely to reflect the data collection method and the

fact that women were asked explicitly about post-separation violence and abuse in the study by Coy et al. (2012).

Some of the women discussed leaving the relationship and the impact this had on them financially, as well as emotionally: *"I have since had to quit work as they couldnt accomodate my new hours so am now on income support"* (Survivor 6).

Some of the women had to end their employment, others described being left in debt or fleeing their homes with few belongings, something Daoud et al. (2015) identify as housing related instability that can lead to poorer social trajectories and a reduce self-care and well-being. This ongoing negative impact associated with fathers attempting to maintain coercive control can have a negative impact on children (Katz, 2016) and result in children losing the social support they require (Thiara & Harrison, 2016).

Whilst many of the women detailed the impact as negative, one woman explained that whilst leaving was stressful, it resulted in freedom.

"For me the hardest part was coming to terms with h behaviour...the actual day of leaving was pretty horrendous, 10 out of 10 on the stressometer - but it was one day of my life and the only way I could be free" (Survivor 5)

This could reflect some of the positive reframing involved in a survivor reclaiming a sense of self, namely what Wuest and Merritt-Gray (2016) define as stage two of a four-part process – 'breaking free'. Breaking free is explained as the stage in which survivor's boundary test leaving an abusive relationship and begin to disengage with the abuse experienced. This stage is followed by 'not going back' – a stage that most applies to the contact process and one that will be discussed further on in this analysis.

Many of the women in this study discussed the continuation of abuse after the relationship had ended including further physical violence, threats, stalking and harassment. This abuse post-separation was described as witnessed by the children involved, and at times included extended family.

"My exp assaulted me and my elderly grandmother 2 weeks ago in front of my DD (2 and a half years). Was taken to hospital as I am 35 weeks PG to new DP and took a blow to my abdomen. Was holding DD at time" (Survivor 7)

Some of the women described moving away to escape the abuse. Others described how after leaving the relationship, their ex-partner had moved near their new home and the effect of this: *"He bought a house ten minutes walk away from us and this proximity together with his behaviour makes it now necessary for us to move once my husband [new partner] is settled in a new job"* (Survivor 8).

Using interviews with 41 women living in Canada, Daoud et al. (2015) explored pathways and trajectories linked to housing instability and identified feeling unsafe and loss of control as a form of psychological housing instability – something identified by some of the women in the current study because of the behaviour of the father of their children. Daoud et al. (2015) state this exacerbates levels of stress and decreases levels of self-care, perpetuating and furthering the impact of IPVA already experienced.

Stalking, formed of threats, violence, and harassment, appeared to be a consistent theme. However, because of parenting responsibilities this is rarely viewed as such (particularly by the family courts). It is instead viewed as a right of the father to know and have access to the location of the children and their lifestyle. The repercussions of this are seen across the academic literature (Khaw et al., 2018; Morrill et al., 2005), particularly when survivors are interviewed (e.g., Coy et al., 2012; Mullender et al., 2002). Whilst Coy et al. (2012) detail the post-separation violence and abuse experienced by their participants as mostly harassment, the violence and abuse described in the current study appeared to consist of insidious actions such as moving closer to the mother after she had moved away. Taylor-Dunn, Bowen and Gilchrist (2017) stress the importance of acknowledging these insidious actions as important – what may appear harmless or minor to a police officer for example may be distressing for a survivor. Taylor-Dunn et al. (2017) conducted a study on stalking and harassment. They found that nearly 45% of their sample were women being stalked by a male ex-partner, some for up to 19 years. Children were often used to further abuse towards the mother, and Taylor-Dunn et al. (2017) argue that police officers should be aware of this when discounting 'civil matters' (p. 3).

Analysis

For a detailed methodology, please see chapter four. In total, 68 individuals commenting across 22 threads are represented in the themes. The themes are organised chronologically in that the relationship is discussed first followed by the formal arrangements. This is intended to reflect the complexities, inter-relationships, and interactions throughout. Four themes and 13 subthemes were identified in total. A visual depiction of the themes and sub-themes can be found in Figure 3. The themes

presented are: parenting and contact; children; the contact process; and professionals and the courts. A written summary of the themes, including illustrative quotes, can be found in Table 2.

Although a standard font is used for ease of reading, typographical errors have not been corrected, allowing the extracts to be displayed as written, ensuring the authenticity of the voices of women in the study. A glossary outlining standard parenting forum abbreviations can be found in Appendix R. In addition, women are referred to as women, mothers, or survivors.

Table 2

Table Showing Key Themes and Examples

Theme	Description	Example
Parenting and Contact	Survivors discussed how child contact was used to further intimidate, harass, and control them. Survivors reflected on the parenting role of the father, considering what the father contributed, and what the 'ideal father' would look like to them.	"I don't understand what he would gain from going sitting in a contact centre with a horrible man he doesn't know. My childhood isn't filled with memories like that, and I don't see why his should have to be?" (Survivor 17)
Children	Survivors discussed their children's feelings about contact, explaining the behavioural changes they saw day to day because of contact with father's.	"My son has refused to talk to him every single time right from the start and is wetting the bed, having nightmares and severe behaviour issues because of this access" (Survivor 23)
The Contact Process	Survivors described the arrangements they had in place, explaining the impact of the child contact process on themselves. This included significant economic cost and trauma.	"It has taken me nearly 3 years to get to the point of getting everyone to believe m story, I have attended over 20 court hearings" (Survivor 29)
Professionals and the Courts	Survivors described what worked and what did not when it came to relationships with professionals in the contact system. They discussed their interactions with legal representatives, Cafcass, and judges.	"You need to co operate fully with Cafcass they have a lot of power..the woman who was in our case even told me the courts rarely go against there descsions" (Survivor 41)

Figure 3

Thematic Map of Key Themes
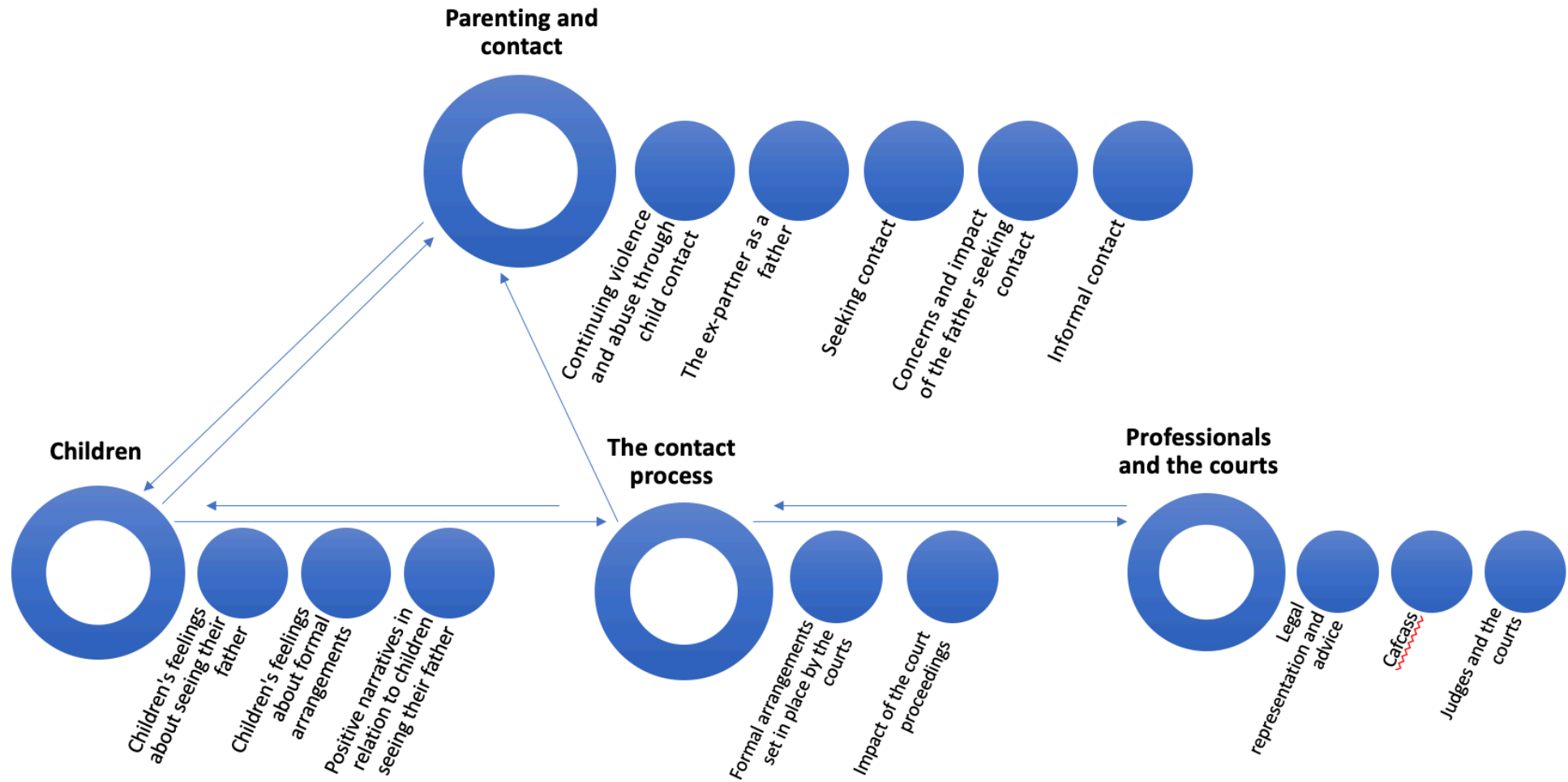
Parenting and Contact

This theme explores the women's perceptions of fathers, including their parenting capacity and behaviour during child contact. It explores women's perceptions of the 'ideal father' and the father's motivations for seeking contact. This is then followed by an exploration of the perceived impact of contact with fathers on children.

Continuing Violence and Abuse Through Child Contact.

Many of the women discussed the motivations of the father to gain access to the children as a continuation of the abuse rather than an attempt to reconnect with their children. One mother discussed the possibility that access was sought because of her ex-partner not being allowed to contact her any other way, using their daughter to continue the abusive behaviour.

> "My ex applied to court in June 2013 after not being able to see her since oct 2012. Alarm bells ring because he only tried to get access via a solicitor in Feb 2013 so as most people worked out, once he was no longer able to harass me. He would before when he was allowed to contact me (his bail conditions were changed in October 2012) he would use my daughter as a weapon to make sure I answered the phone or would use her to make sure I was too scared not to answer him threatening he's kidnap her or get her taken away from me" (Survivor 9)

Numerous studies highlight the ways in which contact can be used to continue violence and abuse, with using the children to contact the mother or pass on messages commonly cited (Chesler, 2011; Coy, Thiara, Kelly & Phillips, 2011; Coy et al., 2012; Goldstein, 2014; Hardesty & Ganong, 2006; Mullender et al., 2002; Thiara, 2010).

Some of the women perceived the father's motivations to be a further attempt at control, while others thought it was purposeful in causing harm. Some considered it to be punishment for a new relationship, moving away, or because financial support had been requested. This is consistent with research on implicit beliefs in abusive men, for example the need for control or revenge (Weldon & Gilchrist, 2012). Asking for financial support can be seen as a precursor to the father seeking contact in other studies (Anderson, 1997; Coy et al., 2012).

> "I firmly believe the application is so he can gain malicious access to myself to go through the children as he knows that is the way to hurt me - to be all nice to the children when he never integrated with them anyway" (Survivor 3)

In most cases, the father instigated court proceedings. This made sense as all the children discussed resided with their mothers prior to child contact arrangements being formally set in place: *"So he has put a contact order in to see the girls, and he's assuming that im moving back to my home town which is 150 odd miles away so he's applying for a prohibited steps order too."* (Survivor 42).

Two of the women described instigating court proceedings, both to put in place a residency order. Both women described undertaking this because of threats to take the children, with one concerned that her ex-partner would take the child out of the country: *"I filed for a residence order out of fear that he would take the children from school and disappear to Scotland with them just to piss me off."* (Survivor 4).

These threats should be taken seriously by police and the courts but often are not (Chesler, 2011). One woman explained how she regretted the decision to seek a residency order as this resulted in the outcome she was trying to avoid; she wanted more protection however going through the courts resulted in what she perceived to be less protection and more risk for her children.

"I feel now that I shouldn't have got my residence order as years would have gone by and he would never have bothered with them, he has been given it by the courts that I felt were there to protect me" (Survivor 10)

Feeling the courts offered less protection despite more protection being sought is evident in other studies (Coy et al., 2012; Miller & Manzer, 2021). This is concerning as the 'no order' principle in section 1 (5) of the Children Act (1989) stipulates that formal arrangements should not be set in place unless deemed necessary and should not be considered unless requested. It is also worth noting that these extracts repeatedly characterised ex-partners as someone only interested in the children for their instrumental value for example, "to piss me off" (Survivor 4). However, some women did discuss the role the father had previously played in the lives of their children and how they perceived the father as a parent.

The Ex-Partner as a Father.

Some survivors described the father as inadequate and not having a strong relationship with children in the past: *"Our child has never been his priority, its always been about what he wants/needs regardless of either of us"* (Survivor 14). This could reflect societal views on gender roles and could be based on a pattern of enforcing gender regimes, typical of IPVA (Coy et al., 2012; Stark, 2007).

Some described the father as being abusive towards the children and not being able to manage their behaviour. In some cases, the father was depicted as child-like himself, with outbursts being described as tantrums and because of not getting his way. Some described this as continuing even after formal contact arrangements had been imposed.

"Here's a man who shouts and screams on a daily basis, when he doesn't get his way. And if that doesn't work, he is threatening and sometimes violent. My 2yo DD just seems to wind him up too, being a typical defiant 2yo" (Survivor 15)

This is consistent with findings in other studies that claim some abusive fathers do not engage effectively with their children, often because of lack of interest in meeting their needs or because of viewing children as a tool to manipulate the mother (Bancroft, 2002; Miller & Manzer, 2021).

Literature around this topic has also discussed how abusive fathers often view their children as property (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002), evident in some of the comments posted by mothers.

*"*He does not admit or show any remorse for what he's done to me. He thinks as he produced a child he has the right to just have her even though he does nothing to provide for her as his money goes on drinking and tattoos. I'm so scared for my daughter being mentally or even physically scared by him if he gets contact*."* (Survivor 9)

Interestingly, a few of the mother's stated that even where there was contact, they were not sure what the father could offer.

"I know this man has nothing to offer him I'm not talking money wise I mean from a relationship. He has no concept of responsibility even for himself and I definitely can't trust him near my son, who is the most precious person in my life" (Survivor 17)

The discourse seems to reflect a vision of 'the ideal father'. Even if the father had a good relationship with his children, he was not the kind of father the mother wanted for the children.

"In the long term he's no good for them, he's a wrong'n as my nan would say. Plus I know he smokes weed and is prob back on the coke and thats not the kind of father I want for my babies." (Survivor 11)

One woman took this further, reflecting on her own childhood and what the child's memories should consist of, which did not involve a contact centre or 'a horrible man'. Essentially it poses the

question as to what they consider a father should be. It suggests that a father is not someone who abuses substances, drinks alcohol, or visits their children in a contact centre, and that this view is constructed from childhood (or social constructions of fatherhood).

> "I don't understand what he would gain from going sitting in a contact centre with a horrible man he doesn't know. My childhood isn't filled with memories like that and I don't see why his should have to be?" (Survivor 17)

Discussions of this nature seem lacking in the literature. It is unclear how survivors constructed their views on 'good' fathers. The analysis suggests that on the surface this is somewhat based on how children felt about their fathers, however there is something occurring on a deeper level.

One consistent finding is that there was a noticeable lack of consideration of survivors' previous decisions. Women did not see themselves as active agents within their relationships, and very few mentioned their decisions to start a relationship or to have a child with their former partner. Only one survivor directly addressed her previous relationship with the father of her children as a personal choice and as contributing to a decision to have children with the father.

> "Actually at the time the weed was not fine and neither was the coke or the drinking or the hitting and punching and throwing about but if you understood anything about domestic violence you would understand that it is about control and when you are in that situation, although you know it is wrong, you feel you can't do anything about it because this person has a hold over you... Yes I did get pregnant twice to this guy and I don't regret that for one second, my kids are my life which is why I got away from him so they don't repeat his cycle. I am not now deciding what kind of guy he is, I've always known what he is and now I'm away from that I will not subject my kids to it ever again" (Survivor 11)

This extract articulates several themes from the literature, illustrating how decision making or loss of autonomy can be viewed within the context of coercion and control. Control and removal of freedom of choice can be underpinning factors of IPVA and are well established correlates to abuse (Donovan & Hester, 2010; Pence & Paymar, 1990; Stark, 2007). It is important to consider agency in this context and to acknowledge the intricacies involved whilst avoiding the pitfalls of positioning women in a way that presents an 'ideal victim' (Meyer, 2016). Mothers can and do make good decisions, poor decisions, and coerced decisions.

Fathers Seeking Contact.

Given how they felt about their ex-partner's parenting and perceived attitudes towards the children, it is understandable that some survivors described fathers' requests for contact as unexpected. This was felt more strongly when time had elapsed between relationship end and the formal request for contact, particularly, where the father had not seen or sought contact with the children, with some mothers stating that children did not remember their father: "My children haven't seen him since April" (Survivor 3, written in October).

These findings are consistent with those highlighted by Coy et al. (2012) and Mullender et al. (2002). Coy et al. (2012) note that one third of the survivors in their study state that fathers had not had any contact with their children between the time of the relationship ending and the court application for contact.

Some mentioned that they stopped contact because of fear of harm to either the children or themselves, others said the father had not requested or wanted to have contact.

"I met a new partner in 2011 and my ex met him too and shook his hand and said look mate I want nothing to do with my ex wife or my son you can have them he is your son now ur problem not mine" (Survivor 2)

Coy et al. (2012) provide two reasons for the delay in fathers seeking contact in their study: the relationship had only just ended, and the father had no interest in seeing his children until this point. This is inconsistent with findings from Hardesty and Ganong (2006). The authors identified that fathers exhibiting coercive control were more likely to continue to see their children and suggested this to be an extension of the control in the relationship. They were unable to let go of the control, and this was a means to continue.

There were some cases of fathers seeking contact and going to great lengths to secure contact, but then neither saw their children nor abided by the arrangements set. For example, several of the women described going through the process initiated by the father resulting in formal contact arrangements being set, for the father to then make the choice to not see the children: *"My ex was told to have supervised contact by the courts. He hasn't. He hasn't seen ds in 7 years. It is wholly his choice."* (Survivor 30). Others described the father taking part in the formal arrangement in so far as the children were collected, but then not engaging with their children or leaving them with relatives.

Whilst this is a multi-faceted issue, it may provide some evidence of non-genuine motivations (Thiara, 2010; Watson & Ancis, 2013), or limited engagement with the reality of contact, once granted. This could reflect a wider evidence base that some fathers seek contact as a form of IPVA (Beeble et al., 2007; Watson & Ancis, 2013) and/or that the parenting capacity of fathers who abuse their intimate partners is questionable (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002). As part of Practice Direction 12J, the courts are obliged to consider the motivation of the person seeking contact in proceedings where IPVA is a factor, highlighting this as a concern for the courts. Cobb (2017) highlights implementation of Practice Direction 12J (2014) as being inconsistent and that training is required to bring about 'cultural change' (p. 3).

Some women discussed the lack of motivation from the father in seeking contact and discussed the role of the paternal grandmother. The perception here was that the paternal grandmother wanted contact and was pursuing this via her son. Others described involvement of paternal grandmothers when writing out applications. The perception appeared to be that fathers would not have taken steps to seek contact with their children had it not been for the involvement of the paternal grandmother. Involvement of paternal grandmothers is discussed elsewhere as being positive, in particular with regards to handing over of children or the supervision of contact when the children are with the father. The use of family and friends to assist with handover appears relatively common in the literature with Coy et al. (2012) stating that many of the participants in their study used family and friends to arrange handover because of fear for their personal safety.

"Oh forgot to mention that he works and gets nearly £1400 a month and has got his mum to pay all the solicitors fees! If she wouldnt pay then he wouldnt bother! He's 37!! He has a son from a previous marriage that he has never bothered about so I know its his mum who is pushing it" (Survivor 6)

Literature surrounding the role of the grandparents when IPVA and contact are being discussed is sparse. As such, it is difficult to determine whether this finding would be identified by others. Mullender et al. (2002) discuss extended family being involved with the children, even when the father is not, however there is no sense of whether grandparents or extended family are encouraging fathers to seek contact or involvement in the contact process.

Concerns and Impact of the Father Seeking Contact.

Many of the mothers were concerned about their partner seeking contact with the children for several reasons including: concerns for the emotional welfare of their children; concern for the children's

safety; and concern for the father's influence and involvement with the children. Much of the narrative centred around child welfare.

> *"What happened between us means nothing to me now, as it's over and I've moved on. But I know for sure that access will have a very negative impact on my kids and I want to protect them from that. I am so worried."* (Survivor 4)

Many of the women discussing the impact of child contact and their concerns talked about protecting their children from negative impacts such as controlling or bullying behaviour. Very few of the women discussed child contact in a way that assumed they did not want their children to have a relationship with their father. Where this was the case, resulting orders have been for indirect or no contact, highlighting the concerns of these women to be accurate. This is a finding replicated by numerous studies (Coy et al., 2012; Hardesty & Ganong, 2006; Mullender et al., 2002) and requires a more nuanced reading of relationship context than the idea that mothers are hostile, wilfully trying to alienate children from their father (Barnett, 2020b), as claimed by authors such as Dunne & Hedrick (1994) or Gardner (1987).

Some women discussed the emotional impact on themselves of fathers seeking contact. This included crying, feeling trapped, wanting to escape, problems sleeping, symptoms of stress resulting in loss of employment, panic, frustration, and confusion: *"I'm just feel so frustrated, confused, controlled, and mostly helpless"* (Survivor 15).

Overall, the women appeared overwhelmed and described symptoms reflective of trauma, for example Survivor 46 states, *"countless sleepless nights, the permanent fear not to see my children ever again... Please if someone can help.. I don't know who to turn to anymore".* This could be ongoing trauma from the IPVA experienced, or additional trauma from the contact process. For example, due to perceived re-victimisation or as a reaction to the potential loss of children.

For one mother, the father seeking contact had an impact on how she felt about the approaching birth of their child and her ability to consider this positively, highlighting a potential impact on attachment and bonding (Levendosky, Huth-Bocks & Bogat, 2011).

> *"Going to bed now...just wish the whole big mess would disappear. Or I could go back somewhere unknown after the baby is born. Horrible horrible feeling. Really struggling to think positively about the baby. I literally have a panic everytime I imagine what's to come. Thanks to you all. Just wish I was stronger"* (Survivor 20)

Some seemed to describe a sense of injustice and their perceptions that the legal system was not helping them or their children, even though they had not done anything wrong: *"I feel trapped by this horrible person and he seems to get sanctioned by the legal system to do so!"* (Survivor 8).

This could be considered secondary victimisation (Rivera, Sullivan & Zeoli, 2012). The courts were viewed as responding favourably towards the father rather than protecting the mother who faced further restrictions and emotional impact despite the abuse (Miller & Manzer, 2021). Haselschwerdt, Hardesty and Hans, (2011) conducted research with contact evaluators in the USA and identified that some participants felt that abusive fathers were capable of being good parents but that victimised mothers may not be because of the anger they felt towards the father. Fathers, conversely, were seen as being in toxic relationships and their violence would resolve itself once the relationship ended. This highlights some of the misconceptions held by some professionals and explains why some women might feel as though the system is victimising them again (Birchall & Choudry, 2021).

Informal Contact.

Several women discussed the informal arrangements in place prior to formal arrangements being sought. Some described previous informally arranged visits to the children as being inconsistent, despite efforts on their part to have the father involved in the children's lives: *"There has been limited contact with their father despite my initial efforts to get him to be involved with them"* (Survivor 4)*.* This is contrary to the belief that mothers oppose contact or seek to alienate their children from their father, as expressed by some academics and legal professionals (Barnett, 2020b; Saunders et al., 2012).

> "He would often let them down, he was sick, his girlfriend was sick, car broke down, working overtime, weather too bad, many an excuse but the final straw came in April when he let them down again as him and his girlfriend were having some problems. I told him that I wasn't having anymore of it as I had watched the children cry once to often and he needed to make some committment to them. He refused to speak to me about the children and to come to some sort of arrangement and hadn't seen the children since last April." (Survivor 10)

Coy et al. (2012) discuss inconsistent contact as being a further way to enter the personal lives of mothers, creating disruption in all areas of their lives. Women viewed this as the father lacking interest in the children however, rather than purposefully disruptive behaviour or an extension of the coercive control. Some went on to explain the effect of this inconsistency on the children, though this was not

explicitly stated: *"After that a couple of weekends passed and he never turned up for the children, my son asked if daddy was coming to get him and I said I really diddnt know"* (Survivor 12).

Some said that contact had been inconsistent because of them stopping contact through fear of the children witnessing further abuse because of new relationships engaged in by the father – an action that can result in women being viewed as hostile by professionals (Birchall & Choudry, 2021): *"Its now been 3 months he's been seeing them again and I got a text message saying his current girlfriend had "smashed his face in" (his words not mine) so he didn't want the kids to see him"* (Survivor 11).

Serial offending against an intimate partner is a significant issue that should be considered when exploring impact on children, both in terms of offending against the same partner and offending against multiple partners and is well-noted in the literature (Bland & Ariel, 2015; Westmarland & Hester, 2007).

Others described being uncomfortable, afraid, or worried about the informal arrangements. This extended to concern about their own personal safety, as well as that of the children: *"He has had limited access to my daughter as I am concerned about her safety when she is with him"* (Survivor 51).

Participants discussed feeling coerced into informal contact arrangements and feeling as though they had no choice but to allow the father contact with the children, either out of fear of losing their children or because they were not aware of alternative options for keeping themselves and their children safe. This highlights the continued impact and control the father can have over the mother's life, even after the relationship has ended (Coy et al., 2012).

Concern about the children being returned was expressed by participants, with some ensuring that contact was provided in their homes because of this, sometimes to the detriment of themselves and their own personal safety: *"He started taking the children away to the park etc and then would take them for the day. I was a little worried about it but felt I had no choice. I wasn't aware about the court system etc."* (Survivor 11).

This was echoed by the fact that two women sought residency orders to ensure that their ex-partners could not take the children. In some cases, there had been threats to take the children and not return them. In one case, the father did take the children and refuse to return them, which resulted in physical injury for the mother and the children experiencing further IPVA.

"The police gave me no help and merely instructed me to go to his property and get her back. I went accompanied by my brother and mother. When we got there, he assaulted all three of us,

damaged my mothers car, and then instructed his brother to drive his car at me (his three children, including our 2 month old daughter were in the car). His brother drove erratically for approx 200yds with me on the bonnet" (Survivor 13)

Police action can be viewed as unhelpful to survivors that find themselves in similar situations to Survivor 13. However, it is possible that policing responses are reflective of the limitations and barriers to action faced by the police. For example, the rights of the father to keep the child in the scenario above can only be waived if the child appears to be at risk of significant harm. Unless a court order or other formal evidence is provided, police cannot remove the child from the father to return them to the mother, unless the father does not have PR (the Children Act 1989). However, viewing this from an IPVA perspective should result in more action – the safety of the mother is important too.

Children

This theme explores mothers' thoughts and perceptions about their children and contact. Mothers discuss their children's feelings about contact, including positive narratives, and the impact of contact on their children.

Children's Feelings about Seeing their Father.

The children were described by their mothers as having a range of reactions to seeing their father. Some of the children stated that they did not want to see their father with the mothers suggesting that this is because of the abuse they had witnessed or experienced. Some of the children were described as finding it difficult to tell anyone that they did not want to see their father, possibly because of mixed feelings, a sense of loyalty or feeling pressured by professionals to say what they want to hear (Callaghan et al., 2018; Mullender et al., 2002).

"My daughter was having counselling with trident reach about the abuse she witnessed, my daughter opened up to trident reach about her dad. My daughter mentioned she didn't wanna see her dad again, and the reasons why… she says I don't know how hard it is to say to him and others that she don't want to see him" (Survivor 19)

Mullender et al. (2002) provide one of the most in-depth explorations of children's perspectives when it comes to IPVA. Children in the study differed in their thoughts, with some being very clear that they did not want to see their father again because of fear and described feeling a sense of relief when

contact stopped because they felt safe again. This desire to feel safe was the primary need for children when it came to seeing their father (Buckley, Holt & Whelan, 2007; Morrison, 2009).

Some mothers mentioned that their children felt uncomfortable or did not like their father, but not that they were against seeing their father. This is described by Mullender et al. (2002) as ambivalence, with children in their study explaining this was because of being fed up or frustrated with their father being aggressive and/or manipulative: *"My DS doesn't feel comfortable around him either. He's aggressive. Negative. Always hard done to. Think he just doesnt like him as a person"* (Survivor 21). The quote below appears to illustrate similar reasons.

"His son has already told me he wouldn't want to live with his father and although he visits his father roughly every other weekend its not something he looks forward to and given the opportunity would stay at home with me if I let him" (Survivor 1)

Children in the Mullender et al. (2002) study ranged in age from 8 to 16. Children in the current study were mostly described as being younger than this, with many being pre-school age. This age group may lack the verbal capacity to explain their thought process or verbalise wanting to see their father in the same way as older children. It is evident however that some of the children asked about their father, and enjoy time spent with their father when they got the opportunity to do so (see p. 104 for positive narratives surrounding child contact).

Children's Feelings about Formal Arrangements.

When discussing formal arrangements, mothers described the impact on their children with more detail, describing the emotions displayed by the child at the time and some of the concerns the children had about the arrangements, for example, not wanting the father's new partner to be present. Mostly children were described as upset. Some say their children were terrified of their father's behaviour. As a result of this upset, some of the children requested that the mother not allow their father to collect them, with some of the mothers refusing to leave their children alone with the father: *"The children desperately don't want me to leave the house and the Sunday just gone he turned up and I did refuse to leave as my youngest was so upset"* (Survivor 10).

In some cases, ceasing contact resulted in threatening behaviour from the father, an issue described as being prevalent in research by Coy et al. (2012). One mother stated this, *"has resulted in many threatening text messages and phone calls"* (Survivor 22). In this case, the father had a court order allowing unsupervised contact. Two years after this arrangement was established, the child refused to

attend, *"there is a court order in place for my dd to go for unsupervised contact with her dad (dated aug2008) she has refused to go with him since July 2010"* (Survivor 22).

This draws attention to several repercussions. Firstly, threats from the father; secondly, repercussions of further court proceedings; and thirdly, repercussions of not following a court order and the legal consequences of this. These repercussions were outlined by several of the women in this study. For example, women in the UK have had to spend time in prison because of not following a contact order (Harrison, 2008), or had contact revoked (Birchall & Choudry, 2021).

> "Regardless of the court order, I have refused contact with our daughter, as in my opinion, my responsibility as a parent is to protect my child. I see a solicitor on Thursday, but as it stands, I am in breach of the order and could go to jail" (Survivor 13)

In some cases, the narrative reflected how the mothers felt about the formal arrangement. Several of the mothers described their children as being forced to attend against their will, with the mother being obliged to pursue this to the detriment of the children: *"My poor daughter who has been upset when being forced to go"* (Survivor 24).

This raises further issues of power and control – even once the relationship has ended the father will seek to have control of the children (Sutherland, 2004), and in many ways the courts can allow this by silencing children (Birchall & Choudry, 2021; Caffrey, 2013; Holt, 2011) and minimising IPVA during the formal process (Hunter, Burton & Trinder, 2020; Thiara & Harrison, 2016). Harrison (2008), using a sample of 71 mothers using six NACCC affiliated contact centres, describes the mothers in their study as feeling powerlessness because of formal arrangements.

Impact on the child's well-being was mostly discussed in behavioural terms such as bed-wetting. This may reflect the age of the children involved. At times, this was discussed in terms of behaviour change. For example, being settled prior to the father seeking contact compared to the child bed-wetting or having nightmares now that the father was visiting the child.

> "When he was coming and going my eldest was on the SEN register and my little one with a speech therapist and nowhere near toilet training. Since he has disappeared and left me too it, both are doing so well developmentally. My eldest is off the SEN register and her reading age is above and beyond what it should be and my little one is talking like a little adult and completely toilet trained. That was until the Sunday visit. Since then she has wet the bed that night and wet herself and messed herself several times since her dad turned up." (Survivor 10)

"My son has refused to talk to him every single time right from the start and is wetting the bed, having nightmares and severe behaviour issues because of this access" (Survivor 23)

Caffrey (2013) argues that this behavioural manifestation is the voice of the child and should be considered to avoid damaging the child. However, children's wishes, particularly when voiced by mothers, are rarely considered in the contact process (Caffrey, 2013; Callaghan et al., 2018). Caffrey (2013) argues that ambiguous wording in legislation has allowed the courts to apply their own judgement in defining how children's views should be considered.

A few of the mothers talked about how they had moved on and built a new life with a new partner, creating a healthy and stable relationship. They discussed the effect this had on the child, and at times the effect it had on the new relationship, for the father to be allowed back into the lives of their children: *"She is very distressed as my partner has been there for a year and she trusts him completely, he is very supportive there for me and the children and both girls are extremely happy and stable"* (Survivor 10).

Positive Narratives in Relation to Children Seeing their Father.

There were some positive narratives in relation to contact between children and their father, particularly when considering supervised contact. Two of the mothers had a formal arrangement set in place for their children to have supervised contact with their father in a contact centre. They felt that their children were happy with this. One mother compared this to a previous arrangement, stating that the children were happy with supervised contact as they knew their father had to be nice to them and could not shout at them when they were there: *"Supervised contact is ok, my children prefer it - they see 'plastic daddy' who has to be nice. They know it's only for 2 hours a fortnight and that he can't shout at them"* (Survivor 25). The children felt protected because of the contact being supervised. The children's happiness could also reflect that the mothers also appeared to feel more comfortable with this arrangement, particularly when compared to unsupervised contact.

"DD's behaviour hasn't been a real concern to be fair, and the staff have reassured me that she hasn't had any problems with her dad during sessions, and that they'd let me know immediately (and probably stop contact) if she was being mistreated. She never eats her tea when I get her home afterwards so she's probably full of sweets but I don't think I could really hold that against him" (Survivor 26)

The mothers in this sample appeared very supportive of their children and what they wanted. It is clear from the statements above that the mothers described in this study wanted their children and themselves to be safe, whilst also not alienating the children from their father. This is evidenced throughout, from the point of trying to get fathers to engage in informal arrangements through to exploring and suggesting ways of contact that felt comfortable and safe for them and their children. Whilst this is a small sample to draw inferences from, these findings are consistent with other research (see for example Barnett, 2020b).

One mother discussed how her feelings about contact had changed over time. Initially she felt strongly that this was not the right choice for her children. However, over time the mother realised the benefits to her children of having a relationship with their father.

"And trust me when I say I was opposed to contact. I actually looked into emigration at one stage just to stop him being part of their lives! I knew that my children would suffer if he was able to have any input in their lives. I knew he was nothing but a negative effect on them. It has taken time and effort but I can see now that it isn't the case. He is far from the ideal father, but my children love him, and he is a valued part of their lives "(Survivor 27)

Interestingly, this was one of the few comments in the women's accounts that considered progress and looked at formal arrangements retrospectively. Most of the comments made were written by women who were going through this process, rather than women who were looking back on the process. There does not appear to be any other literature that explores the concept of time and how women's feelings or thoughts may change. In addition, there does not appear to be any other research that explores if a father's behaviour in the context of contact changes over time – although some explore domestic violence programmes and the impact of this on behaviour change overall (Vigurs, Schucan-Bird, Quy & Gough, 2015).

Crucially, when considering language, Survivor 27 mentions time and effort. It is clear from other studies that not only are mothers willing to put in time and effort to make sure their children can safely see their father (Coy et al., 2012), but that this is required for contact to progress smoothly and be a positive experience overall (Coy et al., 2012). For example, Coy et al. (2012) describe mothers paying for taxi's, involving family and friends in handovers, changing shifts at work – all of which require resources and effort and that often have a detrimental financial impact on themselves. Mullender et al. (2002) also address this issue, commenting that mothers would place themselves at risk if it meant that their children were happy and could see their father.

Another comment reflected how the mother separated the harm to her from the welfare of her children. This is something that was not often reflected in the women's accounts. The mother described the father as being 'awful' to her but stated that he was a good father. Her comment reflects that she was unsure of the intentions of the father at the beginning, however after consideration she could see that the children would benefit from having their father in their lives.

"He convinced me that all he wanted to do was see his children and he was a good dad despite the "alagations I made" which he still denies. I agreed he could see the children at weekends as although he was awful towards me, he was a good dad to them, and I saw him treating them like a prince and princess." (Survivor 12)

This is not particularly discussed elsewhere in the literature in relation to how mothers feel about the father, however it has been discussed in relation to children. For example, the psychological separation and compartmentalisation that some of the children in the Mullender et al. (2002) study engage in, separating out violent husband from loved father figure. In addition, little is discussed in the literature about fathers trying to make amends for the harm they have caused. This would be a good avenue for future research.

The father denying the allegations made could reflect implicit beliefs around seeing violence as normal or being provoked into using violence by the mother (Weldon, 2016). Weldon (2016) argues that some men feel their use of violence is out of control, and this serves to justify it. This happens to protect the men's views of themselves, reinforcing the belief that they are 'not like other violent men' (Weldon, 2016).

The Contact Process

This theme outlines formal arrangements that have been set in place by the courts and the impact of court proceedings on the mother.

Formal Arrangements Set in Place by the Courts.

A number of formal arrangements were set in place, ranging from no or indirect contact to supervised contact at a contact centre to unsupervised overnight contact. Supervised contact was perceived as being used as a stepping stone to unsupervised overnight contact, with an 8-week supervised period at a contact centre being a commonly used contact arrangement whilst the court

process was ongoing. This 'stepping stone' approach reflects a pro-contact culture in which contact must progress, regardless of the consequences (Hunter, Burton and Trinder, 2020).

> "It started off that he woudl see them supervised for an hour or so.
> Then it went to a ferw hours and now he has fortnightly overnight stays. It took 2 years to reach this stage but for the last few months we have been able to reach something that is almost amicable." (Survivor 27)

After this 8-week period had been reviewed, and the necessary professionals had given their input as to how they felt the contact had progressed for the child and the father, unsupervised contact would usually be set in place. In one case, contact was granted for 8 weeks at the mother's house, with the mother being requested to leave during this period *"so as not to 'provoke' a situation"* (Survivor 10). Interestingly this provides some evidence of professionals having implicit beliefs similar to that of those that abuse: 'women provoke violence' (Weldon, 2016; Weldon & Gilchrist, 2012). This is problematic as it potentially reinforces women's experiences of abuse.

Indirect contact was said to be the second most used contact order for those that specified a formal arrangement, after supervised contact (although this mostly led to unsupervised contact). This is inconsistent with findings from Coy et al. (2012), who identified over half of the sample (n=13) as receiving unsupervised contact and approximately one third being granted indirect contact (n=9). This may be because participants of the current study were still in the process of going through supervised contact, whereas Coy et al (2012) measured final contact orders.

Several arrangements included details regarding hand over, with some of the arrangements involving hand over of the child using a contact centre, a police centre, or a family member: *"My ex is not allowed to attend the contact handover, which takes place at the local police station and is carried out by our mothers."* (Survivor 13). This showed consideration regarding the potential issues faced by the mother if coming face to face with the father weekly. Occasionally contact was supervised by a family member or a professional.

In some of the cases contact and/or parental responsibility was denied altogether. This was explained as being because of the court considering IPVA as part of the case: *"My oldest sons dad applied for pr but was refused because of the domestic violence we went through at the hands of him, visitation was refused too."* (Survivor 28).

What worked best for mothers and their children, both in terms of perceived safety, emotional welfare, and overall impact, was supervised contact for children at a contact centre. Staff members working in contact centres were viewed by the women in this study as a source of support, particularly with regards to considering child welfare: *"He was refused contact one weekend precisely because he had raised his voice and had to explain why."* (Survivor 25).

This appears to be inconsistent with views from women in other studies, where they detail staff attitude and support to be like that described of Cafcass and the courts and resulting in lack of safe practice (Coy et al., 2012; Thiara & Gill, 2012; Thiara & Harrison, 2016). However, the reasons for this are cited in the literature as being because of lack of training, inappropriate referrals, and a shortage of centres overall (Thiara & Gill, 2012; Thiara & Harrison, 2016). This was not identified by the women in this study, where they detailed staff as showing consideration for their safety and that of their children, in one case holding the father accountable for his actions when it was felt his behaviour had crossed a boundary.

"I really don't feel like moving things out of the contact centre and feel its best for us to persevere there until he's proved himself (the staff don't even trust him 'cause he brought dd out to me early without arranging it with me or them just because he saw me waiting, then was seemingly waiting for the staff member to leave me outside alone, but thankfully she insisted on waiting with us until he had driven off)." (Survivor 26)

Thiara and Harrison (2016) argue that the courts should make more use of no contact and supervised contact options as part of the new child arrangement orders. Clearly defined limits are vital, and consideration of the voice of the child should be paramount. The mothers in the current study clearly voice the same thoughts, with none or indirect contact always being viewed positively where safety and child-wellbeing was an issue, and supervised contact working best for all when it came to safe contact. Mothers strongly advocated for their children throughout and believed that the views of their children should be considered and heard, often feeling that they were not (echoed by Coy et al., 2012; Mullender et al., 2002; Thiara & Harrison, 2016 – by both mothers and children).

Impact of the Court Proceedings.

Several of the women discussed the perceived impact on their emotional wellbeing through the process of having to go to court. The stress of the proceedings coupled with relationship breakdown and ongoing police action regarding IPVA made this complex and difficult.

"Struggling to cope with the weight of all of this carrying on for another year - writing more statements, going to court, etc., etc., not to mention legal bills - on top of having to testify at my ex's trial in the autumn." (Survivor 15)

"I'm scared witless about seeing him in court as he knows all he has to do is give me a certain look, start making up lies etc and I'll be weak and in tears again. It's trying to get it all accross to the court without proper evidence. If I can't and I appear weepy and irrational because of it he could get unsupervised contact and hurt my children. It's terrifying." (Survivor 31)

Women gave accounts suggesting feelings of powerlessness, fear, worry, stress, uncertainty, and overall emotional exhaustion (Birchall & Choudry, 2021; Coy et al., 2012). Court proceedings were particularly lengthy, lasting approximately 2 or more years: *"It has taken me nearly 3 years to get to the point of getting everyone to believe m story, I have attended over 20 court hearings"* (Survivor 29).

The number of hearings reached 20 or more, with the women describing multiple Cafcass reports and assessments occurring, a point Sturge and Glaser (2000) claim impacts on the well-being of both mother and child. At times, these multiple hearings and assessments were instigated by the father rather than the courts or professionals involved: *"The poor kids he can't love them very much to continually want them to be assessed, he asks for extra assessments professionals don't deem necessary, like he gets off on it or something"* (Survivor 33).

Other studies discuss how multiple hearings and assessments instigated by the father as a tool to exert control and diminish the emotional resources of the mother serves as a manipulation tactic that often goes unnoticed by the courts (Coy et al., 2012; Hunter, Burton & Trinder, 2020).

Two of the consequences mentioned most were fear of having to represent themselves in court, and the cost of the court process. Some of the women had to represent themselves in court because of financial circumstances and issues with legal aid. All the women discussing self-representation were understandably fearful of their ex-partner and nervous of having to face them in court: *"Absolulety terrified of my ex and I've got to represent in court this Thursday because my application for legal aid still hasn't come back :(wish I could run away"* (Survivor 32).

This is known as being a litigant-in-person. Mothers acknowledged being a litigant-in-person as a particularly stressful experience. This was because they had to see the father of their children in court, having to respond to their questions and ask them questions directly. This was also stressful because of the lack of knowledge and information the women had. This resulted in poorer outcomes overall (Coy et

al., 2012; Women's Aid, 2016). In some cases, mothers had an injunction or other protection order, and this was discounted by the courts as being a separate issue, resulting in them having to appear in court alongside their abuser (Coy et al., 2012; Women's Aid, 2016).

The women in this study were concerned about having to represent themselves and the ongoing financial impact of court proceedings, reducing their financial resources, whilst their partners appeared to be financially stable and have money to spare because of either their parents paying for the court proceedings or being relatively high earners.

The process of applying for legal aid, including the time taken to process an application, the requirement of evidence of IPVA, and the financial proof required, were often barriers to the women involved: *"My solicitor is appying for an extension on the legal aid due to domestic violence and the safety of the children under the children's act so hopefully they will carry on funding me"* (Survivor 6). These are concerns also reflected in other research (Thiara & Harrison, 2016) and is undoubtedly exacerbated by the LASPO Act (2012) limiting legal aid in family court proceedings.

The overall economic impact of court is widely considered an important consideration for survivors of IPVA, with legal aid being considered both vital yet burdensome in its processes and evidential requirements (National Federation of Women's Institutes, 2011; Women's Aid, 2016). Women in the current study discussed the amount of time it took to process an application, the earning limits, and evidential requirements as being problematic in their legal aid applications.

For those that were ineligible for legal aid, cost was an important consideration with proceedings estimated as costing from £10,000 a year: *"We are 4 months and £11,000+ (set to be probably 13 by end of tues) into this"* (Survivor 15). Some of the women perceived legal representation as not worth the cost, with one woman suggesting that the outcome would be no different because of how solicitors advise their clients in child contact cases.

Professionals and the Courts

This theme outlines the interactions women had with different professionals in the child contact process. This included legal representatives, judges, and Cafcass. Survivors discussed what worked and what did not when it came to these relationships.

Legal Representation and Advice.

Participants reported positive experiences when discussing their legal representation, highlighting

the actions of their solicitors resulting in protection and legal representation as acting in the best interests of them and their children. In some instances, solicitors were described as reassuring and several of the women had confidence in the abilities of their solicitors. Feeling heard was of vital importance. The women that discussed positive experiences in relation to legal representation mostly evidenced their solicitors listening to their needs and responding to them, or on a procedural level maintaining a level of safety for their client, consistent with findings by Coy et al. (2012): *"Please do make sure you get your solicitor to bring your fears up in court. Mine got the Cafcass reports thrown out and they were no longer used in our case."* (Survivor 27).

However, several the women discussed feeling let down by their solicitors. Some of the women perceived their legal representatives as not acting in their interests, either because they wanted less work for themselves, were unavailable, or lacked attention and interest because of being remunerated by legal aid. A lack of communication was the predominant factor of dissatisfaction with legal representation. This is supported by Thiara and Gill (2012) who state that women felt positive about their legal representation when it was explained to them what would be happening in court and throughout.

"Finally got a call back. The mediation services wanted to hear back by tomorrow, that's why I wanted it sorted today. But the solicitor didn't make me feel any better. Her line was 'can't you just give mediation a go seen as the abuse has abated recently? It'll make hand-overs easier in the future', which I read as, please do this so it's less work for us than going to court. I told her I wouldn't be comfortable with it, so she told me just to ring and tell that to mediation services myself (thanks!). No need for police evidence she said." (Survivor 26)

This could reflect women's perceptions of the interactions rather than practice-based competencies - perception of actions can be affected by trauma and stress. However, Thiara and Gill (2012) note this perception was also held by survivors they interviewed, highlighting the belief that IPVA should be kept out of the courts as it is a private family matter (Easteal, 2003). Coy et al. (2012) address this as an issue of doubt - where survivors felt that solicitors doubted them or were sceptical of their claims, satisfaction and confidence with legal representation decreased.

However, the above quote elucidates a further point - mediation is not recommended for individuals that have experienced abuse, *"I had legal aid and did not have mediation as I said becuase of violence. Even with legal aid they will not make you do to mediation if there has been domestic abuse."* (Survivor 34). This is for a range of reasons. Mediation presumes that both parties are equal, mediation can be used by fathers to further intimidate, harass, and exert power or control over the

mother, and there are physical safety concerns that should be considered (Coy et al., 2012). However, Holtzworth-Munroe et al. (2020), using randomised controlled trials in the USA, found that mediation that took into account safety produced favourable experiences for women compared to further litigation, although contact outcomes did not differ. This would require the family courts to take into account safety and screen for IPVA, ensuring that mediation was in person with a mediator experienced in IPVA (Holtzworth-Munroe et al., 2020).

The advice of the solicitor to *"give mediation a go"*, could be detrimental to the welfare of the mother and reflects solicitors potential lack of knowledge of IPVA and its consequences, a concern echoed by Coy et al. (2012). One mother who did participate in mediation explained how her ex-partner was thrown out of mediation because of *"being nasty"* (Survivor 35)*.*

Others mentioned their solicitor's opinions regarding contact, with one detailing that her solicitor stated, "*it's rare for a court to grant no access"* (Survivor 17)*,* and another mother stating that, *"I also sough legal advice and was told that nealry 100% of cases were there was abuse towards the mother, the father would still be granted access"* (Survivor 12)*.* Survivor 12 shared that her solicitor advised her to request unsupervised contact as supervised contact is rarely granted, and that, "*it would be better for my ex to have unsupervised as he is at no risk to my children".* There are a few possible explanations for these comments including the lack of knowledge of the dynamics of IPVA, personal beliefs regarding the best interests of the child impacting on legal judgements made, or that actually this was the best legal decision for this case.

Other comments included solicitors advising not to go to court due to lack of evidence, and against seeking a residency order*, "unless there's a blatent threat that he may try to come and take her away or keep her after a contact visit"* (Survivor 26)*.* Whilst all these comments were perceived as negative, the last few quotes may reflect the solicitors' judgements about the likelihood of success in court, rather than their personal opinions of the case. It could also reflect a level of scepticism surrounding the violence experienced and the risk posed by the father to the mother and/or child (Hunter, Burton & Trinder, 2020). In all cases included in this study where the mother requested a residency order, the father was granted some additional contact by the courts that he did not have before. Sadly, the legal advice given was possibly more accurate than the women realised.

Mothers gave details of their solicitor's advice or comments regarding contact and the court process. Some of these were general comments, for example, regarding the time it takes to get an interim order set in place, "*my barrister said that it could take 12-15 months more (already been 4*

months) to get the full order, after all the investigations, Cafcass, etc" (Survivor 15)*,* or the likelihood of a mother losing residency of her children to the father**,** *"I quote the solicitor I saw when my XP threatened he would get custody of the dc's, "a mum would have to be lying in the gutter with a bottle of meths before a court considered giving custody to a dad"* (Survivor 35)*.*

Comments around timescale appeared to create frustrations for the women in the study, but were not judged negatively per se. Equally, comments around the father being unlikely to gain sole residency were deemed positive and reassuring. Ultimately, women in the sample wanted support and reassurance from their legal representation rather than worst case scenario or what legal representatives felt was the likely outcome. There is a conflict here in terms of what the participants expected from their legal representatives and the comments some of the women received. It is unclear from other studies whether this finding is held more widely.

Overall, women in this study wanted to feel heard, taken seriously, and kept informed of what was happening. This may reflect a deeper set of needs resulting from experiencing IPVA. In an abusive relationship, partners undertake various actions to ensure that power and control is maintained. Uncertainty, being afraid to voice contradictory thoughts or opinions, loss of control over oneself and one's daily life, 'gaslighting' and fear were all common experiences for women in abusive relationships (Stark, 2007). Part of reclaiming a sense of self (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 2016) is moving on from this and attempting to rebuild an identity. By silencing women, not taking their experiences seriously and being sceptical of the violence experienced, women may feel re-victimised by the very process that they are hoping will protect them and their children (Birchall & Choudry, 2021; Rivera, Zeoli & Sullivan, 2012).

Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass).

Table 3 detailing contact arrangements, including decisions by Cafcass and judges can be found in Appendix S.

The most common grievances voiced by women's posts were directed towards Cafcass and how they dealt with child contact in the courts. Many of the women felt that Cafcass officers believed both parents should always be in the lives of their children, regardless of the circumstances, and that this was in the best interests of the child. This pro-contact stance should be adjusted when there is IPVA, as stipulated in PD12J and wider research (Hunter, Burton & Trinder, 2020). Despite this, participants felt little consideration had been given to IPVA by the Cafcass officers involved in their cases. In one case this

lack of consideration was identified by both the judge and a different Cafcass officer, resulting in indirect contact and further assessments taking place.

> "The Cafcass officer was pretty much ready to hand my children over for contact straight away. I told her my concerns which she listened to, but she seemed very pro dad, the judge decided that there would be indirect contact and more checks done…. we moved house so we had a new officer that I didn't meet, he wrote a report stating that he felt the domestic violence was being dismissed in favour of promoting contact. He backed me up on needing more checks more so psychological assessment." (Survivor 36)

Cafcass has been argued to hold a presumption of contact that overrides the consideration of child protection (Women's Aid, 2016) and this does not appear to have improved from the time of this being declared as a concern by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of the Courts Administration in 2005 (HMICA, 2005).

Some of the women commented on the impartiality of the officers involved in their cases, noting that they felt as though Cafcass were siding with the father or that the officer could not see through their ex-partners lies and behaviour: *"I've had a positive experience with court which included Cafcass (although lots of misunderstandings with the Cafcass officer, her believing ex on alot of lies etc.)"* (Survivor 39). One explanation for some Cafcass officers being one-sided and dismissive of violence and abuse is that they are being charmed by fathers and subject to what Enander (2010) describes as fathers switching from 'Jekyll to Hyde'. Enander (2010) describes survivors detailing their partners as having two sides; the side that is charming, sociable, and smart and the side that is aggressive, manipulative and controlling. Survivors described their partner as being able to switch from one to the other with great ease, although it was Jekyll (the charming side) that was displayed to others (Enander, 2010): *"I'll just say out in public you would think he was/is the man/father of the year"* (Survivor 19).

One of the most common concerns was of not being heard by Cafcass officers or taken seriously with regards to risk, a concern highlighted throughout this thesis when it came to professional practice.

> "So Cafcass rang myself yesterday and I'm very upset by it all I found that the gentleman on the phone was to opinionated and very sexist towards myself. He basically told me because he only attacked me once he will get access, he though he has previous history with the police. He also kept saying he is the father at the end of the day and he has rights even though we never lived together or were married. I thought the whole point of Cafcass was to hear what each side says not to express your opinion." (Survivor 32)

This was the case even where there was evidence from other professionals and in some cases other professionals were said to be concerned about resulting Cafcass decisions, something also highlighted by professionals in study three of this thesis.

"Social services and the police have question marks over my ex-husbands behavior...she is taking no notice of what I 'allege' my evidence is just that of 'my self-reporting' a psychologist and former court's 30 months ago saying that this man needs a psychiatric and neuropsychological assesment!" (Survivor 37)

"I have visited my childrens centre and they have got onto Cafcass themselves who are also concerned as to why such contact was issued following what has gone on in the past...they are also concerned as to why contact has been reintroduced so quickly and after just 8 weeks following violence." (Survivor 10)

Some of the women reported feeling pressured to comply with the requests of the Cafcass officer. Some discussed the power Cafcass had in court and the perception that the courts rarely go against decisions made by Cafcass. One woman stated that she was wary of making a complaint as she felt this would impact her case.

"The Cafcass officer recommended this. She was very very pressurising towards me advising that if I decline that there will be a further hearing as to why I decline interim contact and the stress it would put me under." (Survivor 3)

Cafcass having a great deal of power was described by several women in this study and was reinforced by Cafcass officers themselves and legal representatives: *"You need to co operate fully with Cafcass they have a lot of power..the woman who was in our case even told me the courts rarely go against there descsions"* (Survivor 41).

Having power over the mother was a crucial dynamic experienced as part of IPVA, exacerbating the mothers' feelings of powerlessness and lack of control. This may impact the relationship between Cafcass and the mother. It could result in mothers acquiescing to the requests and recommendations of Cafcass or adjusting their expectations to be more 'achievable' despite them not thinking it is the best decision for themselves or their children (Thiara & Gill, 2012).

This presumption of power within the courts is contradicted by other accounts. In two cases, the mothers felt that whilst Cafcass had not provided the best recommendation for their children, the courts

agreed and took this into account.

> "The next time in court I met one who seemed like she couldn't care less, she dismissed the dv and the assessment findings. She was pushing for contact, I went against advice and disagreed with everything she had said. I pointed out that she had ignored that my children are having counselling and the effects everything has had on them. I pointed out to the judge that not once had it been mentioned that day what was best for my children, thankfully the judge agreed and he made my children parties to the proceeding's and they now have a guardian." (Survivor 36)

Women's accounts suggested the courts take on board Cafcass recommendations, however they also act appropriately if they feel a recommendation is not in the best interests of the child. This highlights that the system is working effectively to safeguard mothers and their children where IPVA is concerned – at least in some instances.

There were some positive comments in relation to Cafcass officers, with one woman detailing that, "*my experiences with Cafcass have been positive and negative*" (Survivor 36). Positive comments generally related to feeling listened to, evidence of IPVA being considered and outcomes where contact was recommended as being limited. For example, one woman felt that she had been listened to and that the officer had been nice, however in this case the Cafcass officer was recommending no contact. This outcome could have had an impact on how Cafcass were viewed.

> "Hi well Cafcass lady in my case was very nice and listened to me, it was all in black and white bout my ex criminal past, violent one, report in my favour, even supervised she doesnt recomend cos my ex is very high risk towards me as well,my last hearin in feb, contested hearin, dreadin it but av to do it,fingers crossed no contact to ex." (Survivor 42)

What is clear from women's accounts is that their experiences of Cafcass improved when they felt as though they were taken seriously. It was also evident that this improved when Cafcass took IPVA into consideration, something that may be happening less because of the removal of the domestic violence toolkit in 2012. However, it was also clear that there were a multitude of factors simultaneously occurring that could create an unhealthy dynamic between parties. It may not be the attitude of the Cafcass officer, but this perceived attitude in conjunction with prolonged episodes of turmoil creating a tipping point, so to speak.

Judges and the Courts.

Similar concerns were raised with regards to the courts as with Cafcass. There were elements and examples of positive action however, for example, one woman described the judge proposing drug testing and a domestic violence course for the father to ensure safe access.

> "The judge proposed to the father to take a perpetrator of domestic violence course and an ranger management course, to release his records and possibly for drug tests (steroid use). He willingly accepted I believe this to be a ploy... He also did a lot of huffing and puffing, he was losing his temper. He kept on glaring at me also." (Survivor 3)

In this case the judge proposed anger management for the father. It is well documented that anger management for abuse does not work and in some cases, can make the abuse worse (Respect, 2013). This suggests an underlying lack of knowledge regarding the nature of abuse which could place women at serious risk of harm (Barnett, 2020a; Coy et al., 2012; Respect, 2013; Thiara & Harrison, 2016).

This misperception of the nature of abuse was shared across cases, whereby judges considered the father's actions as happening because of being upset about the relationship break-down. Others commented on the judge's inability to see through the father's behaviour, or *'playing down'* their actions (Survivor 3), explained by others as minimising violence and abuse (Hunter, Burton & Trinder, 2020; Coy et al., 2012) and being unable to see beyond the father's charm (Enander, 2010).

> "One judge seemed to believe he was simpluy upset at separation therefore lashed out at me - but this should not impact on contact with dc - that is the perceived view: dv against mother should not preclude contact between dad and dc... (different post) ... I felt that various judges I saw at diff hearings believed that ex's anger whatever was due to the break up situation - and missing his dc bla bla bla... So that if he got to see dc all would be better. Might not be he truth, but you have to appreciate how things might be seen" (Survivor 16)

Some discussed evidence not being considered in court, or contact being granted in haste without knowledge or consideration of the full picture.

> "1 year later my ex applied to the court to vary the contact order, and regardless of having had no contact with her for a year, a section 7 report from Cafcass was ordered and my ex was given unsupervised contact for 2 hrs every 3 out of 4 weeks pending the outcome of the report, and a fact finding hearing." (Survivor 13)

Some of the women in this study stated they had evidence of IPVA, by way of the father having convictions, or an outstanding injunction or protective order however this was not considered as part of the process and in some cases questioned. This shows a distinct lack of consideration for other systems that the survivor may have experienced, and further evidence of working in silos.

"I want to do what I can for my children I haven't out ruled no contact completely. Just for now as I don't think it is the right process for the children. I wasn't happy about the hearing as we requested my evidence from the non mol order to be presented towards yesterdays hearing which didn't happen so we just went off his application which says I have lied about the allegations and done this to get legal aid?" (Survivor 3)

Hasty contact was likely to be because of an interim order. The stipulation in section 1 (2) of the Children Act (1989) states that delays can infringe on child welfare (the delay principle). This finding is consistent across the literature, especially with regards to evidence of IPVA and the ordering of fact-finding hearings (Coy et al., 2012; Thiara & Harrison, 2016).

Others discussed concerns about their children's views being considered. Only one of the mothers mentioned her children being appointed a guardian in court to represent their voices, providing further evidence that children's voices were not always advocated in the family courts, particularly if they were younger or non-verbal (Caffrey, 2013; Coy et al., 2012; Mullender et al., 2002). Whilst the guardian-*ad-litem* was there to represent the views of the children, this also functioned to offer support for the mother and showed a level of care for the children that reflected the seriousness of the situation.

"The guardian is lovely, she has listened to my concerns and she witnessed my youngest in full on meltdown over not wanting to see his dad. The last time in court she backed my children up 110%, my ex and his barrister caused her so much grief but she wasn't backing down. She has witnessed the 'manic' side of my ex at her office, all the staff there including those who are higher up were really concerned at xmas. She went out of her way to drop presents off and checked everything 1st. Etc." (Survivor 36)

One of the mothers claimed these challenges were system-wide and that education and training was required for all professionals involved, a recommendation also made by Hunter, Burton & Trinder (2020), Thiara and Harrison (2016) and Women's Aid (2017).

"I know all to well how Cafcass, social care and the court need re-educating. I was treated appallingly by "independent" "professionals", and the family court. Reports from these so called

independent professionals was half truths, important information was missing, and lies was added. I didn't have a leg to stand on. The judge was so stern towards/with me" (Survivor 19)

As with legal representatives, some of this may have been due to expectations of what the court and the legal system should be doing in comparison to what they can do. In some cases, following up with an explanation and consideration of the circumstances of the case was identified as helpful. For example, when considering parental responsibility. It is difficult for the courts to revoke or withhold PR from a father as it is a right that is provided separate from the conduct of the father. For some of the women, this was explained to them by their solicitor or by the judge and this appeased them.

For example, some of the mothers mentioned discussions around parental responsibility with legal counsel. In one case, this discussion was with a judge and other legal counsel regarding PR and its status in the courts,

"Funnily enough a judge/lawyers told me pr is a bit of a joke around the system. Apparently dads are more than likely to get pr now as its their right and nothing to do with the childs riht but apparently while legally they have the same rights as the mum, its unlikely they will be able to exercise it…court told me even with p.r. I would have more moral rights than my ex would ever have and for most things like drs etc I would have the last say as a lot of places have discretion to get hold of me for my permission" (Survivor 45)

In these cases, the limitations of PR for the father were explained and this resulted in the women feeling comfortable with the outcome. This may be because it allowed the women to feel part of the conversation and as though the harm caused was being considered. It may have allowed the women to feel more in control simply because they were being kept informed about what was happening. The exact reasons are unclear, however control and being heard have been underlying factors throughout the findings of this study.

Discussion

Study one sought to explore survivor experiences of child contact in the context of IPVA and identified four research questions. The first of these questions related to how survivors experienced the contact process: what are the experiences of survivors of IPVA who have gone through the child contact system in England and Wales (RQ 1)?

Survivors felt that fathers were using the court process to further violence and abuse and that seeking contact was not a genuine reflection of a father wanting to have a relationship with his children. Sutherland (2004) explains that the family courts and contact cases are often used by the father as a means of asserting control and instigating fear. Numerous studies highlight this concern and the various ways in which contact is used to continue violence and abuse including attempting to manipulate the relationship between mother and children (Coy et al., 2012; Goldstein, 2014), using children to pass messages to their mother, and using children as a means of surveillance (Coy et al., 2011; Coy et al., 2012; Mullender et al., 2002; Thiara, 2010). Sutherland (2004) argues that the family court system is being used as a mode of coercion to fuel the fire and facilitate contact with the survivor, potentially resulting in further risk of harm. For example, Hunter, Burton & Trinder (2020) discuss fathers repeatedly requesting hearings or orders as a manipulation tool that often goes unrecognised by the courts (see also Jaffe, Lemon & Poisson, 2003, who discuss this as a manipulation tool designed to drain emotional resources and finances, a finding echoed by Goldstein, 2014). Actions such as requesting multiple hearings or assessments, contacting the mother via the children, and using the children to further intimidate the mother are evident in the findings of the current study. Mullender et al. (2002) state that this method of coercion can result in survivors returning to their abusers or agreeing to the demands of the father, depleting their inner resources. This was not wholly evident in the current study however, whereby mother's comments showed a level of strength and resilience that allowed them to fight for what they perceived were the children's best interests.

Survivors described negotiating a series of relationships to maintain a level of safety and wellbeing for themselves and their children. For example, trying to get professionals to understand the impact of the father's behaviour on the children to facilitate safe contact and a positive relationship between father and child (Birchall & Choudry, 2020). Mothers described disruption and fear as being predominant factors, with inconsistent informal and formal contact, alongside post-separation violence and abuse that continued for a prolonged period. Survivors described great difficulty when it came to the father-child relationship and facilitating this in a safe and positive way that children felt comfortable with.

The final two research questions sought to identify what professionals were involved in the child contact process and what their perceived attitudes and beliefs were with regards to survivors, child contact and IPVA: what professionals are involved within the child contact process (RQ 3)? What attitudes and beliefs do IPVA survivors believe are held by professionals working within child contact in England and Wales. (RQ 4)?

Survivors mostly discussed legal representatives, judges and Cafcass, with some discussing children's services.

In terms of experiences, attitudes and beliefs, survivors described Cafcass and the courts as having a pro-contact stance that led to IPVA and survivor concerns not being considered (Hunter, Burton & Trinder, 2020). Survivors felt that professionals involved within the contact process didn't understand risk, perceived mothers to be obstructive and discounted evidence of IPVA throughout (Birchall & Choudry, 2020). There is a wealth of literature exploring the pro-contact stance held by courts and professionals working within this framework in family law, and how this should be adjusted when considering child contact in the context of IPVA, with PD12J stating, *"the family court presumes that the involvement of a parent in a child's life will further the child's welfare, so long as the parent can be involved in a way that does not put the child or other parent at risk of suffering harm"* (section 4). However, this may not be being put into practice because of the beliefs held by professionals involved – in other words, IPVA should have little to do with child contact as it does not harm the child or interfere with a father's ability to parent (Birchall & Choudry, 2021). This is reflected in findings identified by Saunders, Faller and Tolman (2012), and is suggested throughout the findings of the current study. Ultimately, whilst there are pockets of good practice throughout, the women in this study perceived professionals to lack understanding of IPVA and consider the seriousness of violence and abuse taking place before separation, post separation and being experienced by children.

Good practice was highlighted by positive experiences, and these were identified where professionals considered the IPVA, took risk into account and listened to survivors and children. There appeared to be a level of frustration evident in the findings whereby mothers explained the impact of having to battle through a process that claimed to place the children's best interests at heart but not considering the mother who knows her children best (Birchall & Choudry, 2021). In essence, the process is not perceived as working with survivors, but against them. This is consistent with findings in other studies spanning from 2002 to 2021 (Birchall & Choudry, 2021; Coy et al., 2012; Hunter, Burton & Trinder, 2020; Mullender et al., 2002).

IPVA provides an additional, significant layer on to what is already a multi-faceted and complex issue. It is however vital that the courts take IPVA into account and hear survivors' voices, so that further harm to both women and children can be avoided. The notion that women seek to alienate children from their fathers or that they are 'implacably hostile' is inconsistent with research (Birchall & Choudry, 2021; Harrison, 2008) and highlights a lack of understanding of risk (as is clearly demonstrated by the reported nineteen child homicides in a decade, Women's Aid, 2016). IPVA harms children, both directly and

indirectly (Callaghan et al., 2018). The women in this study wanted the harm to stop however they felt that the courts hindered this process rather than facilitated it, often leaving them feeling as though they were less supported, and their children were more at risk. It is vital that the courts begin to take women's voices into account and that the culture of the court system in England and Wales changes to become aware of the damage that the process is causing to both mothers and children where IPVA is involved.

Thiara and Harrison (2016) discuss this as a lack of training and understanding of the dynamics of IPVA that mean that the courts and professionals such as Cafcass are not placing importance on considering IPVA in child contact cases. For example, it is concerning that the domestic violence toolkit previously used by Cafcass has now been replaced with an overall child protection policy, something Coy et al. (2012) state does not address IPVA properly. The removal of the toolkit may be reflective of how much importance Cafcass place on IPVA when considering child contact recommendations and an organisational culture overall (Women's Aid, 2016). Further studies should explore this by exploring the role of Cafcass and the extent to which they fulfil this role where IPVA is concerned, ensuring views from Cafcass are considered for the purposes of triangulation.

One of the research questions was not able to be answered fully because of the 'data' and would benefit from further research. This was related to the experiences of extended family members: what are the experiences of family members of survivors of IPVA that have gone through the child contact system in England and Wales (RQ 2)?. Mostly, where survivors did discuss family members, this was in relation to children.

Children were not perceived as experiencing contact with their fathers as positive, with some children perceived as exhibiting physical and emotional difficulties because of contact taking place. This was mostly discussed as bed-wetting and nightmares (perhaps because of the age of the children being discussed), with older children verbalising their concerns and feelings. Thiara and Harrison (2016) discuss the feelings of powerlessness that children can feel in circumstances such as these, with other researchers addressing contact as resulting in a complex range of feelings (Morrison, 2009; Mullender et al., 2002) and Holt (2011), using a sample of 16 17–24-year-olds, going further to say that contact with violent fathers was experienced as predominantly negative Certainly, with regards to the current study, women perceived formal contact as having a mostly negative impact on children. This is not to say that children did not want to have formal contact, although it cannot be ascertained either way from the women's accounts. The sense from the literature is that children want safe contact with a nurturing father that cares for them (Callaghan et al., 2018; Mullender et al., 2002). This was also evident in the current study. Where children had a positive relationship with their fathers, this was perceived as being

because of safe access, usually in a contact centre, where both the mothers and children knew they were protected from harm.

It is important to note here that these are threads regarding proposed or ongoing child contact cases and that the mothers posting on these threads are usually seeking advice or support. This would be much less likely to happen if they themselves were happy with the father seeking contact. This bias in the dataset can have an impact on how information is presented and may not always be reflective of how the children feel for several reasons; children may want to see their fathers but be afraid or concerned, children may feel loyalty towards their mother, children may not want to displease either parent or feel caught in the middle (Mullender et al., 2002). For example, one mother stated that, *"she plays up, and she don't like how her dad is, don't really wanna say"* (Survivor 19). It could be that the child is 'playing up' because of the situation, the abuse experienced, and generally being in a high conflict environment which in this case is unlikely to have ceased when the relationship between her parents ended, rather than because of seeing her father per se. Of course, it is also possible that it is because of contact arrangements. However, this is difficult to ascertain given the nature of the data.

The way in which the data was selected means that the study is naturally more likely to reflect negative experiences. It is more likely for individuals to post on forums when they have had a negative rather than a positive experience as essentially the forums are a space to request help and support. This means that the data will be somewhat biased. Equally, the data selection method naturally excludes those that do not have internet access. This could be for a variety of reasons including socio-economic status or even being a subsequent abusive relationship. It should also be noted here that the nature of qualitative analysis means that the researcher brings their own interpretations to the experiences of others. Whilst it was intended by the researcher to be as impartial as possible, it is impossible for this to be absolute.

However, the current study has attempted to fill a gap in the UK based literature about survivor experiences and has drawn on a large qualitative sample to do this. Whilst much more research is needed, this study has provided an opportunity to explore this topic and shed some light on survivor experiences. Overall, research around child contact in relation to IPVA is limited. The findings of this study raise several areas whereby research is lacking or could be expanded. Some of these will be addressed in a follow up study. For example, the current study highlights that some of the mother's views of the father and of the arrangements in place changed after a few years. It is unclear why this change occurred or if it is a common occurrence amongst survivor experiences. It might be that it is not that time has an impact on mother's experiences, but that it is the stepped contact (i.e., supervised to unsupervised access) that

has an impact. For example, mothers that described their experiences as positive in the current study began the contact arrangements with supervised access for the father with this eventually changing to unsupervised access over a number of years. It is also possible that it is the father's behaviour that changes over time, allowing a more positive experience of the contact to take place for both mother and child. The study that follows from the current study will seek to explore this further and expand on this finding using semi-structured interviews with survivors. Further research is also needed to understand how mothers view 'good' fathers and what leads to this perspective. For example, in the findings of the current study some of the mothers highlighted that their children were happy with their father but that the mothers still felt that the father wasn't the ideal father and wasn't good enough in this respect. It is unclear how survivors construct their views on 'good' fathers and how this impacts contact.

In terms of family members impact and experiences, the findings of the current study touched briefly on family members other than children, highlighting use of family members for handover during contact arrangements and the perception that paternal grandparents had a role in the seeking of contact. Further research is needed to understand the role of grandparents when it comes to IPVA and child contact, and the extent to which they are involved with proceedings either formally or informally (for example by encouraging fathers to seek contact as is suggested in the findings of the current study).

From a professional perspective, the court process and professionals involved need to be explored in terms of secondary victimisation and best practice for working with survivors. Lack of training could potentially exacerbate an already difficult process and research should explore how best to deal with this by not only exploring this from a survivor perspective (as this study and the follow up study seeks to do) but also from a professional perspective. The literature would benefit from expanding on this in two ways; taking professional views into account, potentially by highlighting what survivors have said about their experiences and asking professionals to provide their viewpoint on this, and by assessing professional attitudes to IPVA, how they make decisions when it comes to child contact and IPVA and what knowledge and training they have. This thesis undertakes research with professionals in study 3, exploring professional practice. This will allow the thesis to expand on the literature available and gain further understanding of professional beliefs and practice.

Chapter 7: "We Are Not Here to Micro-Manage your Relationship": A Cross-Case Analysis of Four In-Depth Case Studies with Survivors

This chapter outlines the findings of a cross-case analysis based on four interviews with survivors of IPVA that had a contact arrangement with the father of their children. The interviews were initially analysed individually as case studies before a cross-case analysis took place. The individual case studies can be found in Appendix I. This study aims to build on study one, taking a more in-depth examination of the themes and challenges outlined by survivors. The study builds on research questions one, two, three and four outlined in chapter two (literature review), whilst taking an additional focus by examining women's experiences of contact over time. Contact progression over time is missing in the current literature overall and it would be beneficial to explore the long-term outcomes or impacts of child contact.

Research Questions

1. What are the experiences of survivors who have experienced IPVA and child contact in England and Wales?
2. What are women's experiences and perceptions of professionals in the child contact system in England and Wales?
3. What are women's experiences of contact one year or more after an arrangement has been implemented in England and Wales?

Background

This section provides a contextual summary of the themes to follow. It gives an overview of the coercive control experienced in both the relationships and post-separation. It explains the motivating factors contributing to survivors leaving the relationship, therefore leading us to the next step in the journey: child contact and the courts.

All the women interviewed had a contact arrangement in place, whether formal or informal, for a minimum of one year. Three of the women interviewed had recently been through the process of arranging child contact, whereas one of the women (Meredith) went through the court system over 10 years ago. While the family court system has implemented many changes since Meredith's case, analysis of her case study shows similar experiences to those experienced by the other case studies. This is important to note as it shows the lack of action and change that has taken place since Meredith's case,

despite the evidence highlighted in the literature review showing that change has been necessary. Indeed, PD12J was first implemented in 2008, and the seminal report 'nineteen child homicides' by Women's Aid in 2016 highlighted the failures of the family courts, yet the current thesis shows little difference between Meredith's experiences and those of Federica. However, this time difference should be taken into account when considering Meredith's account as legislation, policy and guidance has since changed. An overview of survivor demographics can be found in Table 1. The current study did not seek to generalise wider than the experiences of the four participants included.

All four women interviewed described the coercive control they experienced in their relationships and the perceived impact this had. Federica described her ex-partner's behaviours as being *"highly critical, really controlling and the gas-lighting as well"* (line 408, p. 16). Federica depicts a pattern of control whereby her ex-partner would act aggressively, stonewall but then provide *"just enough affection to keep you going but you felt like you were living on crumbs"* (line 419-420, p. 16). For Meredith, the abuse began once she was pregnant. Pregnancy is highlighted as a significant risk factor for harm in the literature (Almond, McManus, Brian & Merrington, 2017).

All survivors discussed the isolation they felt because of their ex-partner's behaviour. Kelly explained that during the relationship she felt isolated from her friends and had no financial freedom: *"Removing my bank cards so I had no money to go out and do anything"* (line 165-168, p. 8).

Meredith, like Kelly, eventually escaped the family home after a particularly harrowing set of events. The twins were three months old when Meredith left the family home: *"One day he'd had an absolute, you know, he'd been just shouting at me all night and then he sort of kicked some bits of furniture in in the morning and I took the children and, and left"* (Meredith, line 53-55, p. 3).

All survivors discussed how difficult it was for them to identify their partners behaviours as abusive. For example, Martine states *"it had a massive impact on me, I was really upset a lot of the time and really down and I couldn't really pinpoint on why"* (line 120-121, p. 6-7). This wouldn't have been helped by messages they were receiving from their partners, for example the implicit belief that 'I'm not a violent man, you just provoked me' (Weldon, 2016; Weldon & Gilchrist, 2012).

Martine and Federica both left the family home once they acknowledged their experiences as abuse. Martine explained that naming the abuse helped her move forward and leave the relationship. Federica left the relationship when the family came back to England after living abroad. Federica

explained how counselling helped her realise she was experiencing IPVA and outlined the support offered by the organisations involved and other survivors during group sessions.

"I had um women's aid also started to get some support from them… (line number 456-459, p. 17)… you can go to these open sessions and you can see all the women and you can talk and talk and talk and talk and talk and you can go as long as you want and just as long as you need to so that, having that support is really invaluable" (Federica, line 461-466, p. 17-18)

Both Federica and Meredith highlighted the importance of conversing with other survivors and the role Women's Aid played in this. However, not all locations offer the same level of support for survivors. Holistic and sustained support is necessary to support survivors, rather than focussing solely on more structured support. For example, structured counselling via a GP will be limited to six sessions – the women in this study agreed that this was not enough.

All survivors disclosed post-separation IPVA, with the children and/or contact being used to continue the abuse. After moving out, Meredith described constantly being on edge, explaining that even though her ex-partner did not know where she lived, he would find ways of infringing on her personal space and the new home she was building, *"he would phone up and be really abusive down the phone and I got a second phone line put in and unplugged the one that he would ring"* (Meredith, line 330-333, p. 12).

Kelly described how her ex-partner would use contact negotiations to further harass her, *"he would just randomly turn up outside the house"* (line 86, p4). However, Kelly did not feel her ex-partner's motivations were to see the children, explaining he would visit Kelly's workplace and loiter near their back garden once the children were asleep.

The survivors in this study were still experiencing abuse when they were negotiating contact. It is unfeasible to view the child contact system and processes involved without recognising IPVA and the impact this may have had on their perceptions, experiences, and overall wellbeing. They entered the child contact system having already experienced power imbalances because of abuse. In addition, they entered the child contact system with diminished senses of wellbeing, having put all their energy into leaving an abusive relationship. Finally, they entered the child contact system hopeful that the system and those within it would be able to protect and advocate for their children. In short, their individual systems will have inevitably interacted with the child contact system, resulting in a different outcome

than that of a child contact case where no abuse had been experienced. However, the child contact system brings its own challenges and complexities.

Analysis

Three themes are presented as part of the findings: **Discord in the system**; **Negotiating contact**; and **Progression of contact over time**. The first theme examines women's experiences of the contact system, explaining how they felt controlled by the system, and how professional attitudes and beliefs contributed to this. The second theme explores how women negotiated contact with their ex-partner's, including the planning and effort required to keep contact progressing smoothly. The final theme explores the journey in achieving final arrangements. The themes are presented visually in a thematic map (Figure 4).

Figure 4

Thematic Map of Themes
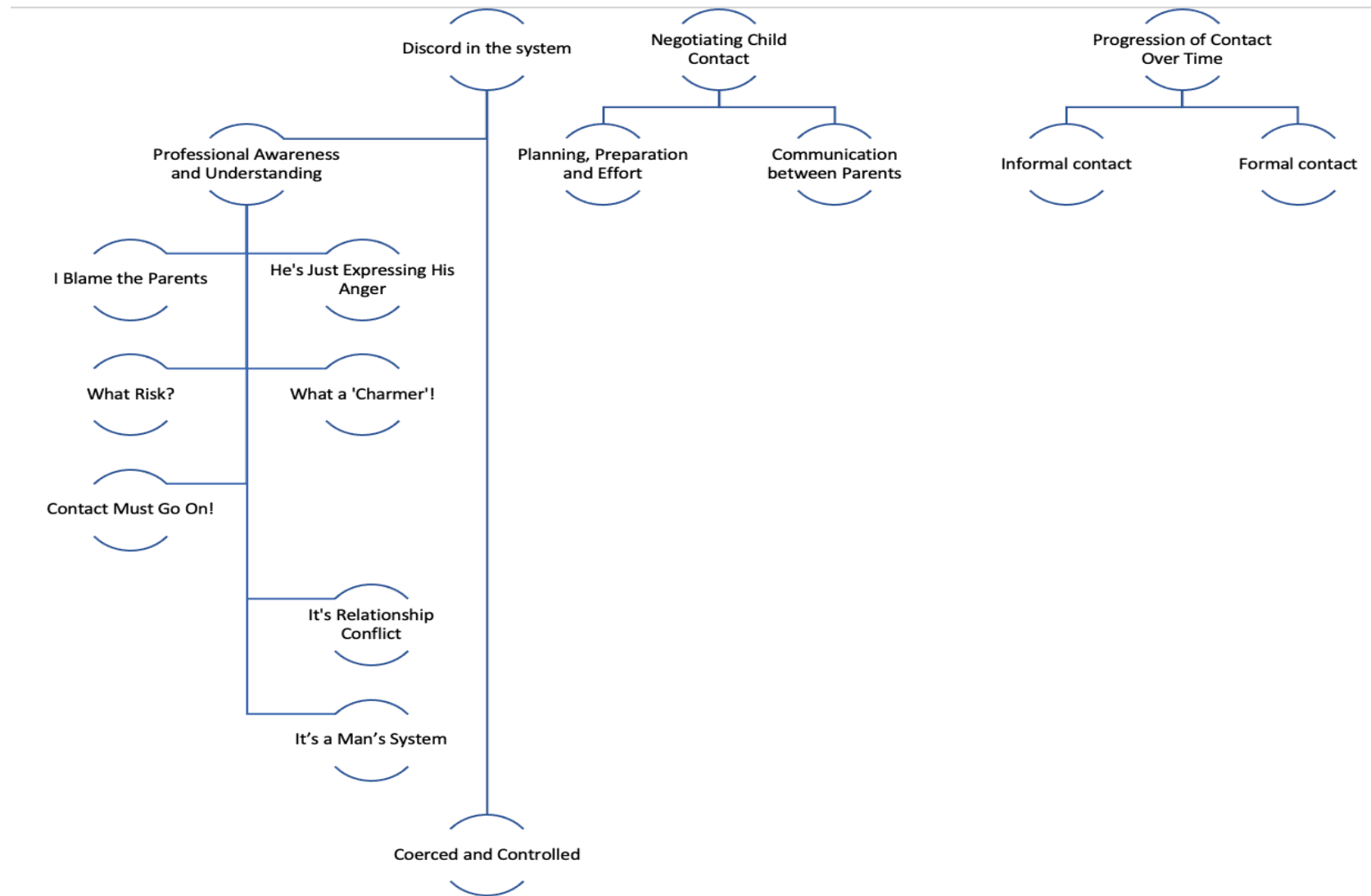
Discord in the System

This theme outlines the women's experiences of the child contact system, including professionals within it, and how they felt coerced and controlled by ex-partners, the system and those operating within it. The women discussed how professional attitudes and beliefs reinforced child contact myths (e.g., it is a parenting problem) and misconceptions about abuse (e.g., it is a relationship problem). The women place this in the context of the wider system, acknowledging the power professionals have, but also the position professionals are placed in to reinforce system wide messages (such as legislation and policy).

Coerced and Controlled.

Two of the women in this study went through a formal process to reach a child contact arrangement, and two had informal contact arrangements because of financial reasons or fear of repercussions. All survivors disclosed feeling restricted and controlled by the contact system, as well as by father's post-separation.

Meredith eventually stopped contact because of abuse during informal contact with the children, thinking that her ex-partner would not be granted access to the children as a consequence. When the children were one, their father sought contact via the courts. Meredith explained that the contact was inconsistent, with her ex-partner often ceasing contact to negotiate more through the courts. This continued "*every 4, 5 or 6 months for quite a few years*" (line 81-82, p. 4). Federica discussed how the coercion post-separation was "*all through the children*" (line 476, p. 18), and how this "*does make it worse*" (line 477, p. 18), because "*you've separated because you want to protect the children and then you can't protect them because they're having unsupervised contact with this person*" (line 479-480, p. 18). When contact did take place, Kelly's ex-partner began making threats to keep the children. This resulted in Kelly temporarily discontinuing informal contact and exploring alternative formal arrangements for contact.

However, the abuse experienced through child contact was not perceived by the courts and professionals as a continuation of abuse and control. The system was viewed as reinforcing the abuse. Meredith depicted feeling powerless to protect her children from her ex-partner and a system that would not acknowledge her experiences. Meredith explained that she felt bullied and unsupported by the family courts and its professionals.

"I felt like the whole system was bullying me actually. Err, the court welfare officer, the blankness and the refusal to listen to anything I was saying… had two solicitors before I found a solicitor who would take me seriously" (Meredith, line 502-506, p. 19).

The child contact system and the professionals within it were viewed as being coercively controlling, resulting in secondary trauma for the survivors (Rivera, Sullivan & Zeoli, 2012). This was the case for Meredith and Federica who explained that they felt bullied, pressured, terrified and hyper-aware of the consequences of not being seen to do what the family courts wanted. An example of this can be seen in Federica's account of being a litigant-in-person.

Federica discussed her experience of being a litigant-in-person during the final set of proceedings, stating that "*on this occasion it was terrible, it was terrifying*" (line 699, p. 27), highlighting financial barriers and the consequences of legal aid limitations.

 "That hearing was terrible so, um, he, he had a barrister, and it was basically his barrister, the judge, and Cafcass all against me, that's how it felt. Cafcass, Cafcass said 'your daughter is having panic attacks and you are partly responsible for that' (Federica, line 684-686, p. 26)

Federica described the effect this had on her, explaining that "*they were asking me questions and you're mind just goes blank, you know, and you just think why have I put myself in this position?*" (Federica, line 699-701, p. 27).

Like Meredith, Federica discussed how this level of scrutiny made her feel as though as she could not protect her children and was forced to accept what the courts told her so as not to place them in a situation where they were at further risk.

"it's absolutely awful cause you're trying to protect your children and you're trying to do what's right for them that they deserve to feel safe and and you're not able to, you know, you're coming under scrutiny yourself um, and and that it's like Solomon's choice or something, you know, you're going to have to put up with this situation because otherwise they might have to go and live with the other person who you know to be abusive." (Federica, line 99-105, p. 4)

The women in the study did not feel this was based on fact, but preconceived judgements, harmful belief systems and dangerous myths related to IPVA – also identified within the academic literature (Saunders, Faller & Tolman, 2016) and discussed further on p. 133. This was juxtaposed with

the scrutiny the women were placed under, having to explain all their decisions (Jackson & Mannix, 2004). Fathers were not perceived as being under the same level of scrutiny.

Federica described feeling trapped – she could not protect her children because if she tried, this would be perceived as hostile by the courts, and risk moving residency to the father.

"It was very unsettling that, um, there was the underlying feeling was that if I didn't comply that they would look at a change of residence, that they were saying dad could relocate to UK and that they could look at a change of residence so, and that's just, it's absolutely awful (laughs)" (Federica, line 96-99, p. 4)

Federica viewed this as coercing her into compliance. This feeling extended to discussions with legal representatives suggesting something similar. In trying to advise that the courts may not be the best route, the legal representative was described as engaging in behaviours that were perceived as coercive.

"The solicitor is not representing you, the solicitor is upholding the Children's Act 1989, so, so they will say to you 'if you don't agree to this and we have to go in front of the judge, the judge might, might make you do, might make the children go live with dad, so you're going to have to agree with this, you might as well agree to it now'. So, then you've got a consent order, but you haven't really consented to that, it's that you've come to that arrangement through coercion." (Federica, line 110-116, p. 5)

This is particularly problematic when considered as secondary victimisation, coupled with the coercion the women experienced in both the previous relationship and post-separation.

The women's reactions were depicted as exaggerated, with Federica explaining that she felt threatened by the courts and faced having residency passed to the father because of highlighting her children's experiences. The courts reinforced the onus of responsibility to safeguard children as being the mother's (Dragiewicz, 2010), with consequences if their judgement was questioned or women were perceived as not fulfilling this role (Hester, 2011). This same responsibility was not placed on fathers – instead they were deemed to be doing an excellent job just for seeking contact (Dragiewicz, 2010), and seeking contact was rarely viewed as coercive (Barnett, 2014).

Women underwent a great deal of emotional labour to ensure they were perceived as balanced, unemotional, and compliant, at cost to their health and the wellbeing of their children (Harrison, 2008). These gender norms permeated through the family court process and were reinforced by those in power.

Not only is this damaging to survivors, it also communicates to children that their fathers can do what they like with little consequence (Dragiewicz, 2010; Jackson & Mannix, 2004; Meier, 2020; Stark, 2007).

Meredith discussed sexism within the family court system, acknowledging that judges were mostly male, and the imbalance of power for women as a result: *"You know what I think the trouble is with this, is that unfortunately we are still in a society where they won't want the women to have power. I think that's probably the problem, you know."* (Meredith, line 706-708, p. 26).

Meredith experienced this as a gender bias within the system. Mothers were expected to be perfect (Jackson & Mannix, 2004), fathers praised for lesser input (Dragiewicz, 2010), with consequences placed on women if they were viewed in a way that did not reflect gender stereotypes (Dragiewicz, 2010; Harrison, 2008). Equally, men's behaviour was explained away if they were to behave in a way that fit within the notion of hegemonic masculinity (Chesler, 2011). For example, aggressive behaviour was explained as men fighting for their children, but if women were vocal, they were threatened with removal of their children or viewed as being hostile – even though increased emotionality, hostility or the opposite may be a symptom of trauma (Erickson, 2006). Carlson (1987) explains this is rooted in contradiction– women are viewed as failing to fulfil their wifely duties if they leave an abusive relationship but are perceived as being irrational or at fault if they stay.

Some of the women described feeling further isolated from support services because of the way the child contact system operates. For example, one distressing aspect of the court proceedings in Federica's case was how her mental health was raised in court by her ex-partner. The inferences about her circumstances then centred on her mental health as opposed to her ex-partner's behaviour. Federica viewed this as a form of manipulation and perceived these actions as attempts to demonstrate she was unfit to parent.

Federica recalled she was happy to provide access to her medical records after requests from her ex-partner's solicitor, only to discover that the junior psychiatrist she originally spoke to before the court proceedings had diagnosed her with type two bi-polar disorder. Federica felt this provided content for her ex-partner to use in manipulating the situation further. This was problematic as Federica had already been questioning her mental state before realising her depression was because of the abuse. Even though this report was challenged, and the diagnosis changed to depression, the report had already been used in court to suggest Federica was not stable, potentially impacting the judge's perceptions of her parenting abilities and suitability for contact.

Federica discussed how this made her feel, *"it was just devastating to just, to be, to have it used against you when you'd gone to try and get help because of what was happening."* (Line 323-325, p. 12), and the impact this had on her willingness to seek support from her GP in the future, *"following that I felt that I could not access help through my GP"* (line 337, p. 13). Federica felt that the family court process restricted access to support because of the scrutiny of her medical records (Saunders & Ogleby, 2016). As a result of this, Federica stated that she developed health anxiety, *"it's just an impossible situation, it's just awful."* (Line 335-353, p. 13).

Lack of resources was another obstacle faced by some of the survivors (Miller & Smolter, 2011). Legal aid was denied to both Martine and Kelly (National Federation of Women's Institutes, 2011), and Martine had the added fear of her ex-partner's father being a barrister. The courts were not an option and their interactions with legal professionals were met with either a lack of understanding of IPVA (Harne, 2011; Trinder, Hunt, Macleod, Pearce & Woodward, 2013), or were limited to minor advice. Kelly received a free one-hour consultation from a solicitor and discovered that she was not eligible for legal aid. This reduced her options and forced her into a situation where she had to engage in informal contact with limited information available to her.

Professional Awareness and Understanding.

All survivors experienced professional misunderstandings and lack of awareness from those involved. Seven key challenges and myths were identified throughout the case studies: relationship conflict; parent blame; He is just expressing his anger; What risk?; What a 'charmer'!; Contact must go on!; and, It's a man's system.

Relationship Conflict.

IPVA was identified by some professionals as relationship conflict rather than abuse, with some of the men's behaviours being labelled as a reaction to relationship break-down rather than attempts to intimidate and control their ex-partner's. Meredith claimed the courts lacked understanding of violent men and IPVA, associating IPVA with relationship discord rather than the men themselves.

"There was no understanding of what domestic violence is about, absolutely none, and they just think it's to do with the relationship between the two of you and you're an equal part of that relationship and actually, it's not like that at all." (Line 511-513, p. 19) … "they just thought it was all to do with our relationship that he was like that, erm, which of course I kept saying no (laugh) it's not." (Meredith, line 322-323, p. 12).

It is important to note that the women in this study repeatedly provided evidence of concerning behaviour, witnessed by others, but felt they were not taken seriously. Wherever abuse is alleged, this should be taken seriously, because the risk of causing harm through ignoring signs outweighs the risk of incorrectly labelling such behaviour. For example, in Meredith's case, the father locked their two children in a room and would not allow access to the mother, friends or family, but proceeded to communicate by shouting out the window.

Federica discussed how her maternal instincts were not trusted by a range of professionals, with the children's reactions being explained away as separation anxiety or conflict in the relationship. As part of the second set of proceedings, the children were provided with a guardian *ad litem*, the Cafcass officer (a man).

"They had a guardian, who was the Cafcass officer in the second set of proceedings (line 597, p. 23) … which was a male, and the second set of proceedings which was about allegations in relation to sexual touching. What a waste of time" (Federica, line 612-613, p. 23).

Federica stated that the guardian suggested the children felt uncomfortable during contact because of the relationship conflict as opposed to the abuse or manner the father interacted with them.

"And in that report, it says, where is it…I can't find it now, basically it said that, um, he visited the children at their dad's and they were enjoying the contact but they seemed a little bit uncomfortable and I think that this was because they were picking up and they were aware of the conflict between their parents, and that's based on, you know, spending 20 minutes." (Federica, line 601-608, p. 23).

This placed the responsibility for relationship break-down on both parties rather than on the ex-partner. This could have been reported as there was no evidence of wrongdoing. However, there was also concrete evidence that the children were uncomfortable in these interactions. In addition, the allegation of sexual abuse by the child was not a focus. With evidence being a particular issue for IPVA cases, the courts should not presume that every case involves a healthy relationship, particularly where IPVA is alleged in the absence of evidence.

Parent Blame.

Another myth identified was the notion that a lack of parenting ability/skill led to abuse (Hunter, Burton & Trinder, 2020). If the parents learned to work together and better parent their children, this

could resolve the problem. For example, during the third set of court proceedings for Federica, several assessments were requested and both parents were mandated to attend a parenting programme. This was despite an absence of evidence suggesting Federica's parenting required support.

Federica's ex-partner did not attend the parenting programme and Federica found the premise of having to attend a parenting programme problematic:

> "I think it's, it's well meaning, um, however I don't think that it's appropriate in the case of, um, domestic abuse cause I think however you speak to somebody who's abusive, however you write to them, they are still going to be that person so it, it, it just doesn't make sense and it's putting kind of the emphasis on the person who's the safe parent, um, to somehow fix that relationship, it makes you feel guilty that your children are experiencing conflict because you are a high conflict person in a high conflict situation and so, yeah. And I think it could do a lot of damage as well." (Federica, line 544-551, p. 21).

Whilst it may be the case that parents would benefit from a parenting programme, this is not a reason for the behaviour occurring, and parenting programmes should not be ordered for parents that are deemed to be 'safe'. In addition, there were no repercussions for Federica's ex-partner's absence from the parenting programme, furthering messages that his behaviour was acceptable and that he could ignore court orders without consequence. Beyond this, the financial consequences of mandating a parenting programme and then not enforcing this should be considered - parenting programmes come at a cost to the State.

The control experienced as part of the child contact system extended to the parenting programmes offered. When requested to do an evaluation of the parenting programme, Federica felt she was placed in a difficult position whereby she was mandated to undertake this programme by the courts and could not be truthful in case the courts used this against her.

> "We had a specific code and we had to write our code on the evaluation sheet before we submitted it so again you've got this feeling that you're under scrutiny and you think what can I write on my evaluation? Can I write you shouldn't be doing blah blah de blah and then it comes back and oh this person isn't taking it seriously and it goes back to the courts, or should I just tick it and go yeah great?" (Federica, line 568-572, p. 22).

Evaluations should be anonymous, clearly stating that they cannot be used in court so that survivors do not feel under further scrutiny, and the evaluations are not biased. This questions

evaluations of parenting programmes that have taken place so far, suggesting that positive evaluations should be considered with caution.

He is Just Expressing His Anger.

For both Meredith and Federica, angry 'outbursts' in court or at home were labelled by the courts as expressive reactions to the situation rather than a cause for concern, incorrectly identifying the anger as expressive rather than instrumental: *"they'd just think he was frustrated and, you know, emotions were high and whatever."* (Meredith, line 650-653, p. 24-25) … *"the professionals would say, 'oh it's just the sight of you makes him cross'" (*Meredith, line 318-320, p. 12).

Anger programmes are not suggested as suitable for IPVA perpetrators (Iwi & Newman; 2015), and anger should be viewed as instrumental whenever abuse is alleged. One explanation for use of these programmes by the courts is provided by Barnett (2014) as a resource issue. Barnett (2014) identified that judges were against making orders for domestic violence perpetrator programme's (DVPP) because of the length of time required to complete the programme, and the wait for programmes to begin. Instead anger management or parenting programmes are viewed as the preferred option (Iwi & Newman, 2015).

It should be noted here that it was not only the courts that considered the anger to be expressive rather than instrumental, but survivors themselves. When interviewed, Kelly explained that her ex-partner's anger was "*normally in frustration*" (line 157, p. 7). Kelly described how her ex-partner would display his anger, stating that "*he'd hit walls or doors and furniture and break them*" (line 157, p. 7). Kelly did not perceive these actions as directed at her until the violence escalated and the police intervened.

The above illustrates misunderstanding around use of anger as an instrumental tool to maintain control in the relationship (Stark, 2007), instead considering it to be expressive and linked to a lack of control.

This is important because of its impact on help-seeking and how survivors process abuse. Professionals are the 'experts', survivors place importance on their narratives and their support can develop awareness and understanding. Martine and Federica discussed how they came to the realisation they were experiencing IPVA while accessing support services. However not all survivors will have accessed support via a service prior to accessing family courts. The professionals working within the contact system may inadvertently build on misconceptions of abuse, furthering its internalisation.

For example, incorrectly explaining away anger minimises abuse (Thiara & Harrison, 2016). Men who abuse their partners may have also engaged in minimising the abuse or blaming it on external factors (Weldon, 2016; Weldon & Gilchrist, 2012). The courts contributing to this narrative may create further harm and suggests the survivor is to blame, or the father's behaviour is out of his control. It also reinforces this message for fathers who abuse. The anger presented as part of IPVA is instrumental, rather than uncontrolled reactions to survivors, and this message should be reinforced by professionals working in the contact system.

What Risk?

All survivors outlined a lack of risk assessment by professionals involved at every stage of the process – from police officers, to CS, and the courts.

After Kelly's ex-partner threatened to sexually assault her, the police referred the family to Children's Services (CS). Kelly did not view CS intervention as helpful, stating "*I can't say social services did anything well*." (Line 311, p. 14). CS visited the family home and visited Kelly's ex-partner, however they did not undertake any risk assessments. Kelly mentioned her predominant concern was lack of communication; CS had acted but had not communicated this.

"they put a warning on all the doctor's surgery and hospitals to refuse him to allow, um, signing of care for my children (lines 249-250, p. 11)…I only found out because [son] had had an accident at [ex-partner]'s house and [ex-partner] had taken him to the out of hours doctors who then called me and said your ex-husband, well, your husband's here with the children and it says on the file that he can't be responsible for their care so we're waiting for you to arrive." (Kelly, lines 256-260, p. 12).

In Meredith's case, the final court decisions included an undertaking to not use or threaten violence against the children, and not to abduct them.

"I think they thought it was really clear that if you gave an undertaking not to abduct the children and not to use or threaten violence that he'd stick to that, and they didn't have any understanding that men like that don't care about anything like that. They're not going to stick to any little bit of paper, or an undertaking, you know, that, that, that seems really absurd that, well, he's given the court an undertaking. I just thought well who cares about that!" (Meredith, line 350-355, p. 13).

The above quote highlights structural difficulties in dealing with abusive behaviour rather than a lapse in judgement. It may be that this was the only option available to the courts in the circumstances. However, risk was not considered. Previous orders had not been followed and stating that the father should not abduct the children is insufficient. The role of the courts is to ensure the safety and well-being of the children; therefore, a risk assessment should have been undertaken and a safety plan implemented. Abduction of children during child contact can and does happen (Harrison, 2008). If a child is taken to another country, the Hague Convention (1980) may be used to request the child be returned, however the mother would have to prove: that the child previously resided in the country they were taken from; that the removal of the child breached custody arrangements; and that the custody rights of the mother were in place when the child was removed (Puckett, 2017). There are five defences that can be used by the father to stop the child being returned to the mother and country of origin. The father would need to prove that: the child is now settled; the child does not want to return (if the child is mature enough to consider this); the mother consented to the removal; removal of the child is in breach of public policy; or that there is a 'grave risk' to the child should they be returned (Puckett, 2017).

Lack of consideration of risk extended to legal professionals. Kelly discussed exploring child contact possibilities with her solicitor. The solicitor advised Kelly to write an agreement for her partner to sign and they used the rest of the one-hour consultation to discuss what to include. Kelly provided the solicitor with a copy of the police report outlining the abuse. When asked about whether the solicitor considered the abuse Kelly had experienced or to what extent this informal arrangement would protect Kelly and the children, Kelly responded "*no*" (line 63, p. 3). This signed agreement would offer little protection for Kelly and the children if the children were taken or kept 'without consent' as both parents had PR. A signed informal letter would not be legally enforceable.

However, Kelly was pleased the solicitor took the time to listen to her needs and explain how Kelly could best meet these given financial constraints.

> "I think she was just trying to give me the best advice to get exactly what he wanted, and I wanted exactly with regards to the contact for the kids and not really thinking that he would take it any further" (Kelly, lines 331-333, p. 15).

Meredith stated she did not feel all solicitors understood IPVA and the dynamics involved, explaining that sometimes contact negotiations were undertaken without considering how unreasonable the other party could be.

"To try and negotiate contact arrangements which if it's with reasonable people must be, it must be a good thing to not go to court and all the rest of it but, um, I, maybe solicitors aren't quite aware of the dynamics involved in domestic violence and, and, um, so yeah, so these, there needs to be, maybe some of these solicitors need to understand that, um, you know, that's not always the right way" (Meredith, line 677-681, p. 25-26).

This highlights findings from study one where women felt that risk was not being considered and that their needs were ignored. Meredith depicts a rigid, one size fits all approach that her circumstances didn't fit neatly within.

What a 'Charmer'!

The women in this study indicated that they did not think professionals understood how abusive men think or behave: *"I think they assume that with these violent men that they love their children in the way that they think they should, and I don't think that's the case."* (Meredith, line 720-721, p. 27), instead falling for a 'charming exterior' not indicative of their behaviour towards their partner and/or children. For example, Meredith claimed the courts could not see through her ex-partner's charm, effectively resulting in a lack of acknowledgement of her concern for the safety of her children. It was not until professionals witnessed or experienced this behaviour first-hand that they considered risk and acted.

Meredith explained that during one of the court cases, the court welfare officer was required to observe her ex-partner parenting and make recommendations. During this observation, Meredith's ex-partner was abusive towards the court welfare officer: *"He lost his temper in front of the court welfare officer and at them as well I believe, and he did get barred from that contact centre (laugh) after that."* (Meredith, line 131-137, p. 5). Meredith considered the abuse experienced by the court welfare officer to cause a shift in the final court case, alongside the judge witnessing her ex-partner's behaviour in court: *"When we went back to court, he represented himself and he cross-examined me in a very very aggressive way"* (Meredith, line 140-144, p. 5).

Meredith recounts that it took this chain of events, with professionals experiencing the abusive behaviour directly themselves, for them to take action to prevent contact between her children and ex-partner. Meredith described how difficult it was to wait for someone to experience his behaviour before being believed: *"It was really horrible that they had to wait and see what he would, you know, they had to see for themselves, to experience it for themselves, that, I think, was really awful."* (Meredith, line 325-327, p. 12). This was even though she had been informing the professionals involved of her ex-partner's

abuse without success for the duration of the investigation which was extremely frustrating and disempowering for her.

> "No matter how much I told them about what he'd done, I mean he did, he did so many really crazy things, well, crazy, I mean I don't know another word for it really (line 293-295, p. 11) … I'd tell them things like that and think surely you don't think these children are going to be safe with him, and yet they were still saying, it's better that they know their father, it's better for them to know their father." (Meredith, line 315-318, p. 12).

This quote touches on three key considerations raised by Meredith and Federica: women are not believed when discussing their experiences, there are a distinct lack of resources to help safeguard women, and there is a firm belief that contact should continue at all costs.

Contact Must Go On!

For the two women undertaking the court process, they felt as though continuation of contact would have occurred regardless of how smoothly it progressed.

> "I think they just had this idea that it was just sort of a process regardless of how it was happening, it was going to move on, you know, even though it was disastrous often, it was going to move on." (Meredith, line 97-99, p. 4).

This is a sentiment shared by other survivors, both in study one and in the literature (Hunter, Burton & Trinder, 2020). Meredith perceived this to be because the professionals involved were determined to offer contact. Meredith acknowledges the wider system with regards to this, perceiving that a) they may have genuinely believed at the time that contact was best for the children and b) that the court welfare officers were operating according to the system in place.

> "I think the welfare officer did have a lot of power and, and they did take a lot of advice from the welfare officer, but I think the welfare officer had been told by whoever it is feeding down, the government or whoever, the courts, that it is always in children's best interests to see their father no matter what and you just could not get past that. Of course, she's threatened herself (laughs)." (Line 612-616, p. 23).

Federica was left feeling as though she could not protect her children, a sentiment shared by Meredith: *"It was this sort of feeling that, you know, you just couldn't protect your children. If it, it was all*

set and it was all going to happen." (Meredith, line 636-639, p. 24). Meredith explained that despite the judge witnessing her ex-partner's behaviour and the court welfare officer not recommending contact, the judge appeared to be confused as to how to proceed: *"The judge sort of said, well I don't know what to do with this now, you know, where do we go with this cause it did seem impossible."* (Line 145-146, p. 6).

Discussions around a culture of contact at all costs has been present in the literature for considerable time (Barnett, 2020a; Hunter, Burton & Trinder, 2020) and may stem from previous policy stating that it is always in the best interests of the child to have contact with both parents (Barnett, 2020a; Hunter, Burton & Trinder, 2020). Gender and child contact myths influence this inconsistency, with women not believed about their experiences of IPVA or their parenting being judged based on the 'ideal mother'. This may contribute to those in the contact system genuinely thinking that contact with the father should take place, as the mother is being hostile, employing delay tactics, and/or exaggerating claims made (Barnett, 2015).

It is a Man's System.

This sub-theme explores gender expectations within the contact system, placed in context of IPVA and gendered expectations. Gender was a key consideration throughout women's accounts, both within their previous relationship (Morris, 2009; Stark, 2007; Stark, 2013) as well as the contact system (Dragiewicz, 2010; Meier, 2020). Gender expectations were reflected as twofold: ex-partners had gendered expectations of caring responsibilities; and the contact system had gendered expectations of what it means to be a mother. For example, all survivors discussed a gendered parenting regime whereby mothers took on the responsibility of childcare: *"can't say that he was really around to sort of be there with them. He was very lazy parenting wise, and he spent the majority of his life at work."* (Kelly, lines 126-127, p. 6).

Gendered roles were enforced within relationships with women expected to take on most of the parenting work, housework and stay within set behavioural boundaries (Morris; 2009; Pornari et al., 2013; Stark, 2007). Men controlled finances, freedom of movement, free time, and their relationships with others, typically requiring permission from their partner if they were to undertake extracurricular activities (Stark, 2007).

In some cases, this lack of contribution to parenting posed issues for future contact. Martine discussed how it required a transition period for both parties to reach a steady informal contact arrangement post-separation, explaining that her ex-partner was initially unable to take care of their son because of his previous parenting approach.

"The first 6 months of when we first split up [son] was quite little and dad didn't know how to look after him. He didn't even know that he was eating solid food for example., he bought a load of milk." (Martine, line 54-61, p. 3)

Federica provided an example of how gendered thinking can be problematic and pose dangers for children and contact, in particular where fathers feel a sense of ownership over their children: "*He lent over her one night, um, when she was in bed, and he said, 'where's your smile?' and he put his hands round her neck and shook her neck and started laughing*" (line 206-208, p. 8).

Federica tried to speak to her ex-partner about the incident after taking advice from a friend working in the women's sector: *"He said 'yes, I put, I put my hands on [name] neck' and I said, 'why did you do that?' and he said, 'I have the right to put my hands on [name]'s neck because I am her father'."* (line 217-223, p. 9). Federica felt that her ex-partner did this because he *"wanted to frighten her and he wanted to intimidate her"* (line 230-231, p. 9), however it may reflect the father's implicit beliefs around viewing children as property and wider societal gendered patterns of thinking (Stark, 2007). Children were viewed as belonging to fathers, with mothers offering a service rather an equal part of the relationship (Pornari et al., 2014).

The gendered expectations discussed above were not recognised in the child contact system. Gendered child contact myths were perpetuated by the family court system and professionals within it, impacting on mothers' experiences. This included ensuring to appear compliant,

"I'd taken legal advice and they said you can just stop the contact and he can take you back or cause of the history I felt it was important that I should take him back because, um, I wanted to demonstrate to the courts that I respect the court, that I'm not a lawbreaker" (Federica, line 258-260, p. 10).

and taking care to not appear hostile,

"I did find I had to be really careful about was not, um, not looking as if I was hostile to contact...it was a terribly difficult, um, situation to negotiate in trying to protect your children...you couldn't be opposed to it [contact], despite what he was being like, cause...they were putting women in prison for not following the contact arrangements." (Meredith, line 593-598, p. 22).

Men, however, were not perceived to be held to the same standards, expectations and, as a result, treatment in court.

"They're really like trying hard to find this evidence about you and the whole parental alienation kind of theme, um, but they're not trying as hard in the other direction, they're accepting at face value anything that's presented on the other side because contact's good for children, contact's good for children, that may or may not have happened, it's still going to be beneficial for them so" (Federica, line 628-632, p. 24).

Federica described feeling particularly unsupported when presenting as a litigant in person, and as though the court case was one sided in favour of her ex-partner.

"Um, his barrister, fair enough it's his barrister, but repeated twice that in the previous set of proceedings the judge was so concerned that he suggested that Mr. [name] could relocate to the UK and that we could have a transfer of residence and it was so one-sided" (Federica, line 689-691, p. 26).

Federica thought this treatment was unique to her. In a previous set of proceedings, her ex-partner had represented himself in front of the same judge: *"The horrible judge, um, could not have been nicer to him, so, was just absolutely bending over backwards"* (Federica, line 701-703, p. 27).

However, Federica did not feel she had the same experience when she represented herself, stating that *"she [the judge] just spoke to me as if I was a barrister and erm (laughs) and erm yeah very very one-sided, very very difficult to be in that situation."* (Line 708-710, p. 27). Federica found "*the idea of representing myself again was unbearable*" (line 713, p. 27), and made the decision to hire a barrister, furthering her own financial strain.

Meredith described a similar lack of support, describing a stressful cross-examination by her ex-partner as litigant-in-person: *"I mean at the time I thought why is the judge letting this continue?"* (Meredith, line 140-144, p. 5).

This behaviour was not limited to the family courts. When going back to court, Federica was able to obtain the original police reports regarding an alleged incident of father to child sexual abuse. Federica stated that there were discrepancies between the way the police interacted with her originally and what was filed in the report.

"so and then going through the courts then we had, were able to obtain the police reports, see a core assessment, um, and and then things, you get a different perspective then, you know, that mum hadn't revealed that there was an incident in 2009, you know, almost as if mum was being

manipulative here, the emphasis is on mum's not doing and what mum's doing wrong" (Federica, line 87-91, p. 4)

Federica perceived the police report to have been written in a way suggesting non-compliance and discussed the level of scrutiny placed on the mother, something she followed up on when talking about her court experience. Federica felt this level of scrutiny was one-sided, focussed on her as a mother, rather than balanced between both parties. Meredith concurred with this viewpoint, suggesting that fathers are held to a different standard than mothers: "*I don't know what the bar was set at so the court, you know, I think just not being totally abusive*" (Meredith, line 548-551, p. 21).

Survivors felt that in prioritising the needs of fathers, the courts failed to consider the impact on the mother as the primary caregiver, and whether those consequences were in the best interests of the children:

"Whilst they are so busy trying to make sure that these violent men are able to see their children, they're not thinking of what it's doing to the mother and the caregiver and, and, so when I had a breakdown my children were only about 7 or 8. And I could hardly get out of bed for a year." (Meredith, line 577-582, p. 22).

By failing to recognise the experiences of mothers and children as valid, survivors felt the courts were failing to consider the message sent to children:

"I'd like for the courts to start taking into account how damaging this is to the children if all they're seeing is their dad carrying on the abuse of their mum and and the system facilitating it (line 793-395, p. 30)…that's what really seems awful (line 797, p. 30)…you know, because that sort of makes it in in a little child's mind it does kind of make it ok if you've got you know social workers taking children from mothers when the father is shouting abusively at them that that can't be right" (Meredith, line 799-801, p. 30).

The message sent by the contact system to children should be explored further. It questions whether it contributes to future victimisation or IPVA offending, as well as poorer outcomes in wellbeing. Whilst intergenerational transmission of abuse is disputed (see Chapter 3), experiencing IPVA has an impact on attitudes and beliefs (Russell, Chapleau & Kraus, 2015). If the contact system is effectively communicating that IPVA is ok, and that it is in children's best interests to be treated this way during contact, this may reinforce the abuse, feelings of powerlessness (Spruin, Baker, Papadaki, Franz & Alleyne, 2017), and contribute to maladaptive beliefs. For example, they may internalise self-blame

(Street & Arias, 2001) and/or develop anti-social attitudes (Geffner, Igelman & Zellner, 2003; Spruin et al., 2017), particularly if they feel there are no consequences for abuse (Dragiewicz, 2010; Jackson & Mannix, 2004; Meier, 2020; Stark, 2007). In addition, they may develop negative thinking about the justice system (Spruin et al., 2017; Stalans & Finn, 2006), decreasing their trust and limiting their options for support in the future (Spruin et al., 2017).

Negotiating Child Contact

Three of the women experienced informal contact, with Kelly having a written agreement in place and Meredith then going on to pursue formal contact because of the way the informal contact progressed. Federica, on the other hand, pursued formal contact from the outset.

All survivors described the effort, skill and emotional labour required to negotiate contact with an abusive ex-partner, explaining their ex-partner's behaviour as an extension of the coercive control experienced in the relationship.

"it's still tricky to navigate, it's still, he still tries to control stuff, um, by not, I think by not responding to me, um, not responding to my requests around childcare and just not looking after [son] in the holidays and stuff like that, that's his way of controlling things." (Martine, line 418-421, p. 23)

Martine elaborated on some of the difficulties faced as a working mother trying to co-parent with her ex-partner, *"he didn't even have him for the days that he was going to take him away for. So that effects, effects, has a big impact on my plans and what I can do and work and everything."* (Martine, line 31-34, p. 2). Martine explained the impact of her ex-partner's behaviour on her as a mother and an employee.

"that's an extremely difficult position to be in, you know, I'm upset for [son], I'm let down personally, it causes stress for me because I haven't got childcare on the days that I thought I might have had childcare, so it makes it difficult to work, it just impacts on everything really." (Martine, line 40-43, p. 3)

Fathers created barriers with little consequences, by creating negative contact experiences, ignoring contact requests that would alleviate work pressures (e.g., summer holiday requests) and expecting mothers to travel extended distances with the children to facilitate contact (Zeoli, Rivera, Sullivan & Kubiak, 2013). This illustrates the difficulties faced by survivors in balancing multiple responsibilities whilst navigating their own emotional responses and the feelings of their children.

Planning, Preparation, and Effort.

Despite these challenges, mothers went to great lengths to facilitate child contact between father and children, often with a great deal of planning, preparation, and sacrifice on their part – effort that was not perceived as reciprocated by the fathers.

Meredith explained how the onus was on her to bring the children to her ex-partner, and the courts were perceived as replicating this onus of responsibility. During one of the court cases, Meredith's ex-partner moved away from the area and requested the contact be changed to every other week for two hours spread across two contact centres. This required Meredith to bring the children to two different contact centres because of location change of the father, rather than have the father travel and mitigate disruption to the children.

This preparation and planning continued throughout child contact. When the courts awarded Meredith's ex-partner unsupervised contact, Meredith sought support from an organisation called Reunite who specialised in the movement of children across borders and supported parents during child contact and abduction cases.

"They tell you to, um, prepare a booklet of any, any information you know and pictures and a little bit of the children's hair, and they also, you know, addresses of people abroad and whatever and family members and I did one for both the children and I did a copy that I lodged at the local police station for ages." (Meredith, line 818-823, p. 31)

Whilst this did not ease her fears, it helped Meredith prepare for further issues, resulting in feeling more in control of the situation. This planning and preparation went beyond general advance planning for contact to negotiating specific incidents and thinking about the best possible ways to stay safe. At times contact escalated to dangerous levels (Jaffe, Johnston, Crooks & Bala, 2008) with mothers having to go to extreme lengths to mediate these risks at cost to themselves. When Meredith's ex-partner locked her in the garden and the children in a room upstairs, she felt she could not contact the police. Meredith did not want to be perceived as unable to protect her children (Saunders & Ogleby, 2016; Watson & Ancis, 2013), or for the situation to escalate further. Instead, she dealt with it alone, eventually negotiating for the children to be released.

In addition, after an incident in which her ex-partner strangled one of the children, Federica did not feel as though she could stop the contact because of previous experiences in court and therefore

contact continued: *"I felt that I couldn't go back to court because of my previous experiences that I felt that nothing would happen, and they would just say that it was rough play"* (Federica, line 233-236, p. 9).

These examples highlight how the contact systems in place (policing and the courts) can hinder the safety of children. Inability to seek support via the police or the courts caused emotional distress to mothers and children, with mothers often finding themselves unable to protect their children but being required to pick up the pieces. This powerlessness was enhanced by the courts (Harrison, 2008) and used by fathers to continue control and abuse (Miller & Smolter, 2011).

Mothers were left in the difficult position of having to enforce contact, despite it causing harm and distress to the children:

"My daughter was absolutely terrified, and she's started having, um, panic attacks" (Federica, line 225-226, p. 9) ..." She'd also, um, self-harmed. She'd injured her own hand, um, because she was so distressed about what was happening and she didn't want to go" (Federica, line 270-271, p. 11).

This raises another important consideration – the emotional labour involved in women mediating the relationship between father and children and responding to distress. Some of the children returned from contact emotional, displaying behavioural issues and not wanting to spend further time with their fathers. Mothers tried to support their children as best they could but at times felt that they could not, having to defend or explain away the father's behaviour.

"I mean [son]'s quite good at accepting it. He really loves his dad, his dad's his hero so he's quite accepting of it and I, but it, you know, I have to, I feel like I have to defend a man I don't want to defend." (Martine, line 36-38, p. 2)

At times, Martine struggled to maintain this balance and the positive relationship between father and son. Martine explained that mostly she can keep her emotions hidden from her son to ensure that she does not cause any damage to his relationship with his father. At no point did mothers want to stop contact, instead they sought safer experiences and interactions for their children (Coy et al., 2012). However, this was at an emotional cost. Martine explained that whilst she felt physically safe from her ex-partner, the current situation impacted her feelings of emotional safety.

The context of the previous abuse is important – mothers come into contact arrangements already depleted, afraid of their abuser and recovering from its affects. Children enter contact

arrangements in a similar position, having experienced the abuse alongside their mothers (Callaghan et al, 2018). The responsibility is on women to promote and negotiate contact, and on children to attend. It is unclear from this study what responsibility is placed on fathers other than to be in the presence of their children. This is problematic given that the women and children in this study are not at fault for the situation, yet still having to face consequences for being abused.

Communication Between Parents.

All survivors discussed how difficult it was to communicate with their ex-partner. This included dealing with abusive communication from their ex-partner and managing communication for the purposes of child contact.

> "Sometimes I feel like I can tell, if I'm really clear then I can just tell him what to do but I have to be really careful about how I word things and how I like say things to him, how I like send messages and emails and stuff." (Martine, line 436-440, p. 23-24)

Federica described being careful when it came to communicating with her ex-partner to avoid abusive responses or consequences. Federica discussed her attempts to counter-act negative behaviour and facilitate positive contact whilst ensuring that the children were getting the most that they could from the time spent with their father:

> "So yeah, I could see that the children were unhappy about going and they didn't want go, they didn't want to spend with him and I, I, I did try to, um, to help him really because you want things to run as smoothly as possible so, at, but it was just so difficult, it was impossible to negotiate with somebody who is unreasonable and controlling." (Federica, line 183-186, p. 7-8).

Mothers found themselves having to tread carefully with what they said to children after negative contact experiences, trying to play the role of mediator and counteract negative behaviour, not only to promote the welfare of their children (Zeoli et al., 2013) but also to ensure that they followed court orders (Saunders & Ogleby, 2016).

Paired with abusive communication, lack of communication was highlighted by all. Mothers were not kept apprised of their children's wellbeing while they were with fathers. Messages or phone calls were ignored, and requests to ensure positive experiences for both father and child were challenged.

> "We don't communicate, he doesn't respond to me, he doesn't respond to my text messages or phone calls and stuff, um, and I, for a long time I tried to change that and I, nothing I, everything I

tried just didn't make a difference, so I stopped trying and just accepted it. Sometimes it's easier to just accept that's how it is rather than try to fight it." (Martine, line 132-136, p. 7)

It is interesting that Martine stated, "we don't communicate" and then provides examples of how she tried to communicate. Zeoli et al. (2013) explain this behaviour as another method of control – controlling the daily activities and time of the mother. Kelly mentioned finding the lack of communication challenging on a personal level, commenting on the stress that she experienced because of her ex-partner being difficult to contact when the children were visiting him: "*I hate being in the dark when they're with him cause he's very hard to get hold of"* (Kelly, line 354, p. 16).

Martine has learnt to accept this behaviour, possibly to avoid expending energy on something that cannot be changed, or because she sees the benefits in continued contact between father and child. The way Martine appeared to manage this was to set clear boundaries. For example, whilst Martine was happy with the arrangement in place, she described a double standard in relation to her ex-partner accommodating her needs when it came to altering the contact arrangement. Martine became aware that she needed to set boundaries to manage this behaviour:

"that's the kind of the last time it had a really big impact on me and that was 18 months ago. But I managed then to just set some boundaries and just say I'm never doing that again, don't ever, don't ever speak to me like that again, you know, I'll meet you at [halfway location] and that's it, if that's not good enough then it's up to you, you know." (Line 431-434, p. 23)

This demonstrates the learning involved to manage the behaviour whilst also supporting one's own needs. This illustrates strength building and confidence not demonstrated earlier in the relationship.

Progression of Contact Over Time

Out of the four women, two had informal and two had formal contact arrangements. The informal arrangements were considered more stable, with the level of contact remaining consistent for several years. Formal contact however was fraught with difficulties until contact ceased entirely.

Informal Contact.

The most stable contact over time was for the two women that had informal arrangements in place. After an initial six-month period, Martine and her ex-partner reached an agreement for informal contact, which has been in place ever since. Contact was slowly increased, allowing Martine to feel more comfortable that her ex-partner could take care of their son and helping him learn more about their son's

needs. For Kelly, the current informal contact arrangement had been in place for over three and half years and consisted of an informal written agreement initially drafted by Kelly and signed by both parties: *"So, he has them every other weekend and he speaks to them on a Wednesday evening at 6:30 before they go to bed"* (line 35-36, p. 2).

Kelly stated that her ex-partner's threatening behaviour stopped once the agreement was in place and considered the contact consistent since then. Kelly believed this to be because of the agreement itself. At the time, Kelly would rather have had a formal arrangement in place via the courts to offer her more protection and enable her to feel safer. However, Kelly's opinion changed over time. Kelly commented that her ex-partner is in a new relationship, and she felt that this served as an incentive for him to discontinue past behaviour: *"Yeah, now I think it's um I don't think he's stupid enough to do anything especially cause I know it would probably impact his relationship and new property with his uh girlfriend."* (Line 302-303, p. 14).

However, whilst Kelly found the contact arrangement difficult at times, particularly at its onset, she appreciated the break from parenting. Over time the contact arrangement became easier, offering her peace of mind: *"Um, back then it didn't cause, um, cause I didn't want him to have them but now it's a lot, a lot easier and it's nice that I get a break if that makes sense?"* (Lines 114-115, p. 6). When discussing the contact that took place between father and children, she stated the agreement worked well as it provided consistency.

Kelly described the benefits of the children having a relationship with their father as *"hit and miss"* (line 109, p. 5). Whilst she felt she would have preferred that her ex-partner *"left us alone"* (line 109, p. 5), she believed it should be the children's choice once they are older.

The children appeared to be happy with the arrangement in place, although Kelly saw a difference in their behaviour when they returned from contact. She did not perceive this behavioural change to be because of the contact with their father, but because of differing routines and parenting styles.

"I know [son] sometimes finds it very difficult to sort of be there and deal with his emotions but I don't think that's because he's with his dad, I think that's because it's a complete different set up with how they handle things and how they discipline or don't discipline in their case." (Lines 357-363, p. 16).

Kelly perceived the lack of discipline offered and the changes in routine to have an emotional impact on her son in particular because of his ability to cope with his emotions, although the contact overall had been of good quality in recent times.

"Um, sometimes it can be really fucking emotionally difficult with like [son] when he uh comes back cause he's not always the best at dealing with his emotions but other than that it's been alright recently." (Lines 114-119, p. 6).

Despite the contact arrangement remaining complex, Martine demonstrated resilience and the ability to make the most out of every situation. She was able to move out of rented accommodation and purchase a home for her and her son. Martine explained how this arose from a challenging period when her ex-partner was not able to support her son financially.

"That was actually created by his dad was out of work for a while and he didn't give me any maintenance for about 10 months and I just got more and more into debt cause I used to use his money to pay my rent, um, and then I just thought I need to do something about this and not rely on him anymore, and then just forged through, got some more hours at work, got a mortgage, got a flat." (Line 332-336, p. 18)

Martine explained that she now had a new partner who was *"really supportive and like that's really helpful"* (line 444-445, p. 24). Her ex-partner had also had several partners since the relationship ended. This was initially a concern for Martine as she worried about what her son would see, however Martine was less concerned about this at the time of interview. Martine asked her son regularly about whether he heard any arguing when he was with his father but was satisfied with his responses that he was not experiencing any further IPVA.

Formal Contact.

For the two women with formal contact arrangements, contact was disorganised, inconsistent and hindered the healing process for both mothers and children (Zeoli et al., 2013). Both Meredith and Federica experienced numerous court proceedings between them, with their partners taking them back to court repeatedly.

Despite the difficulties faced, Federica felt the court proceedings worked in her favour, mostly because of the helpful advice she received from a solicitor.

"I think in terms of the court proceedings this time, it, it, I think it did work in my favour because the advice that I got this…not to include anything that was more than 3 months old so when I sort of brought up certain emails she was like no, unless it's absolute dynamite don't put it in, don't sling, don't sling mud…my statement sort of focussed on the issues and only had a couple of attachments at the end. And his, his really focussed on me and, and had like 20 pages of attachments including, including a lot of his own emails that, that demonstrated his own personality." (Line 494-506, p. 19).

The advice from the solicitor helped Federica stay focussed on the issues surrounding the contact arrangements, whereas Federica felt that her ex-partner's focus on her rose awareness within the courts about what he was like.

The final order in place due to the third set of proceedings was a reasonable indirect contact order. The father of the children can send birthday and Christmas cards or gifts. The children can respond to this if they wish, and mum encourages the children to respond and send thank you cards. Federica experienced a huge sense of relief.

As for Meredith, when the children were seven, their father reappeared and contacted them via email. Meredith reflected on this, saying "*for some reason I thought that this was ok (laughs)*" (line 189-190, p. 7). Meredith explained that "*now looking back and knowing more, I know he's done it to others since, erm, I think, I think, oh my god, I wish I hadn't*" (line 197-198, p. 8). Meredith discussed why she felt this was reasonable at the time:

"I mean, after that you'd think I'd never let them anywhere near him but I suppose, in this in this court they are saying things where you are told the whole time that they've got to see their parents, that's it's in their best interests (line 188-192, p. 7)…somehow you think maybe that's true, maybe they have got to, how can I do it safely how can I keep the connection with the family" (line 194-195, p. 7).

The informal contact, like the formal contact, was inconsistent, however Meredith and the twins would also use this time to meet with their father's family. Meredith mentioned the importance of her children maintaining and learning about their heritage from their father's family and named this as one of the reasons why she wanted to maintain child contact safely.

On the surface, informal contact arrangements offer little protection compared to a court order. It would appear the formal arrangements offered the same level of protection, if not increasing risk and

instability (Beeble et al., 2007), particularly if IPVA was discounted or ignored (Araji & Bosek, 2010). It took longer for formal contact arrangements to settle, if at all, partly because fathers kept taking mothers back to court (Sturge & Glaser, 2000), and because of the way fathers treated their children during contact (Coy et al., 2015). To be clear – this thesis does not seek to suggest that informal contact is the best outcome for survivors, simply that this was experienced more positively by two of the survivors in this study. The findings highlight failings of the family court process, rather than the benefits of informal contact. Hunter, Burton and Trinder (2020) strongly recommend shifting the approach of the courts from an adversarial to an inquisitorial approach (one that is based on problem-saving), and the findings of this thesis suggest that this may be the most beneficial approach for women and children in the context of IPVA. As a result of the report by Hunter et al. (2020), the Ministry of Justice have recently piloted Integrated Domestic Abuse Courts (IDAC; 2020) however it is too soon to be able to see how effective these might be.

Despite this, survivors in the study were happy with the final outcomes in place, namely: informal contact for Martine and Kelly, child-led informal contact for Meredith, and no contact for Federica. All appeared to have come through the process showing a great deal of strength and resilience.

It is important to note that the women in this study have chosen to discuss their experiences with the researcher, and that this may not be representative of survivor experiences outside of this thesis.

Discussion

Study two built on study one by taking an in-depth exploration of four women's experiences of IPVA and the child contact system. The aim was to further explore the themes raised in study one, with the added question of whether time had an impact on women's perceptions or on the contact arrangement. As such, the study explored experiences and the perceived impact of the relationship, of the child contact system, and progression of contact over time.

Research Question 1: What are the Experiences of Survivors Who Have Experienced IPVA and Child Contact in England and Wales?

Coercive control was a key feature of women's accounts, both in terms of feeling controlled in the home (Stark, 2007) and by the child contact system (Khaw, Bermea, Hardesty, Saunders & Whittaker, 2021). The women in this study found that the relationship was intense, progressing quickly and not allowing them the time to realise what was happening before limiting their options to exit (Stark, 2007). They experienced isolation, financial control, fear, and emotional harm (Pence & Paymar, 1990), however

their awareness and understanding of this came later, often after seeking support (Bradbury-Jones, Taylor, Kroll & Duncan, 2014). Gagnon, Seulki Lee and DePrince (2017) apply Betrayal Trauma Theory (BTT) to explain this dependency on the abusive partner – to survive, the survivor minimises the abuse. Cognitive function and emotional processing may be impacted in a way that allows the survivor to cope with the dependency and abuse. This may include memory loss, dissociation, and the numbing of emotions (Gagnon et al., 2017). Whilst this may be one explanation, societal misunderstandings of abusive behaviour also contribute (Little, 2021). One survivor explained their ex-partner's behaviour as anger, illustrating how difficult it can be to acknowledge abuse, and to understand the behaviour as a tool to control, rather than evidence of 'passion' and/or the strength of emotion (Donovan & Hester, 2011; Hayes, 2012; Little, 2021). This may highlight a coping mechanism, denial, lack of formal support or internalised myth acceptance. Survivors need professional judgement, engagement, and support (Harne, 2011).

Survivor's views of professionals (Evans & Feder, 2014) had a role in their own awareness of the abuse. It is important to recognise that many survivors may have a limited social support network because of the isolation used in abusive relationships (Sylaska & Edwards, 2014), and that those offering informal support may be uninformed when it comes to IPVA, leaving survivors to rely on professionals to support them in recognising IPVA. Professional views can have an impact on the survivor and their own understanding of what is taking place.

Victim blame and/or self-blame (Evans & Feder, 2014) and beliefs about IPVA being mostly physical (Hill, 2020; Westbrook, 2009) hindered support seeking by the women, identifying the abuse, and leaving the relationship. For example, Federica discusses how she thought the problem must be her and how she had internalised her partner's messages of blame, and Meredith explains that it took her time to recognise the abuse because it was not physical – a view also held by the courts (Barnett, 2014; 2016). Interaction with other survivors had the opposite effect and allowed women to share their stories and identify abuse. Evans and Feder (2014) suggest this is about disclosing to those with similar experiences and gaining a deeper understanding of IPVA. In addition, survivors felt freer to disclose to DVA services as they felt they were not burdening anyone with their troubles. Evans and Feder (2014) name DVA agencies as the preferred option for disclosure due to the lack of reprisal and informed approach.

Awareness was key when it came to making the decision to leave, with physical or 'severe' incidents sometimes acting as a catalyst for action (Storer, Rodriguez & Franklin, 2018) – possibly because of the need to seek support (Evans & Feder, 2014) – for Kelly this was attempted rape, and for Meredith

this was a whole night of fear and intimidation. Martine and Federica both highlight how awareness came from others naming the situation as IPVA – allowing them to view their experiences as such. This highlights the importance of informed bystanders and professionals in the provision and facilitation of support (Spruin et al., 2017).

Women's accounts highlight how partners used the children to create fear and further control mothers by threatening to take them away, absolving themselves of parenting duties and/or creating fear of harm (Coy et al, 2012). This continued post-separation, with mothers effectively trying to perform 'damage control' to safeguard their children (Coy et al, 2012). Despite the experiences that all four women had, they still made efforts to facilitate child contact post-separation. Informal contact placed them and their children in danger, both physically and emotionally. Women in the study had to assess risk and mediate the effects of their ex-partner's actions regularly – for example, Kelly sought legal advice when her ex-partner threatened to take the children from her, and Federica spent time trying to undo her ex-partner's attempts to make the children choose between parents. The emotional labour required should not be under-estimated (Coy et al., 2012) and continued throughout the contact process.

Research Question 2: What are Women's Experiences and Perceptions of Professionals in the Child Contact System in England and Wales?

When it came to contact systems and its professionals, often the onus was placed on women to keep themselves and their children safe, to understand the abuse that was taking place and to put a stop to it (e.g., failure to protect legislation; Saunders & Ogleby, 2016). This is a high expectation, and one that is not placed on perpetrators to stop their behaviour. Federica and Meredith both detailed the impact of professionals believing their ex-partners over them and explaining away their behaviour as based on the 'situation', minimising the abuse (Thiara & Harrison, 2016). This gender discrepancy, particularly around expectations and behaviour, can be identified throughout all four case studies and the wider literature (Dragiewicz, 2010; Meier, 2020). Women are expected to protect their children (Saunders & Oglesby, 2016), but labelled as hostile when trying to do so (Saunders & Oglesby, 2016), or highlighted as part of the problem. Men's anger is explained away as emotionality, while women showing emotion in court is deemed to show weakness. Women in this study actively worked with these myths, ensuring that their behaviour was 'acceptable' for the courts and its professionals, for example by ensuring they appeared amenable, and did not appear hostile. As in their previous intimate relationships, the women felt as though they had to behave in a certain way or risk harm to their children.

Negotiating child contact initially and during arrangements was a challenge. Negotiating communication difficulties because of the continued abuse, attempting to protect children from negative impacts, balancing the expectations of the courts and managing risk for both children and themselves were ongoing and simultaneous processes. The onus of responsibility for positive contact experiences was placed with mothers, both by fathers and the courts. Mothers' efforts were not recognised by the courts, instead this responsibility was added to by the system because of the high expectations placed on them.

Contact progressed in this manner throughout. Out of the four women, two had informal arrangements and two had formal contact arrangements. Contact itself was fraught with challenges. From father to child abuse (Hamby et al., 2012), to economic considerations (Anitha, 2019), the difficulties faced involved emotional labour and harm. Constant court appearances (often instigated by fathers; Sturge & Glaser 2000; Watson & Ancis, 2013), travelling to take children back and forth, ongoing assessments (instigated by fathers; Sturge & Glaser, 2000), and worry over what the courts and professionals would think or say about their parenting created tensions and exacerbated trauma (Saunders & Ogleby, 2016).

Research Question 3: What are Women's Experiences of Contact One Year or More After an Arrangement Has Been Implemented in England and Wales?

The informal arrangements were considered more stable, with the level of contact remaining consistent for several years. This is not to say that there were no challenges, but rather that mothers knew more about what to expect and how to manage these situations. For example, acknowledging that contact would benefit father's schedules over their own, or that children would come back from contact exhibiting more difficult behaviour. Equally it is important to acknowledge that this may have taken place whether it was an informal or formal arrangement – the number of participants and methodology adopted do not allow for generalisations. However, this is an important finding and one that is unique to this study. It warrants further attention and research. It is likely to be the sense of autonomy women had to make their own decisions, coupled with their skills in negotiating their partner's behaviour that aided the informal contact to become smoother over time. Autonomy is an important aspect to consider in the context of IPVA. Autonomy during IPVA is said to increase incidents of IPVA (Fakir, Anjum, Bushra, Nawar, 2016), so as to mould the survivor to fit the expectations and rules of the abuser (Nolet, Morselli & Cousineau, 2021). The implications of this are that women experiencing IPVA have had their sense of autonomy removed. Re-establishing autonomy is a vital part of recovery post-separation (Allen &

Wozniak, 2010). It symbolises freedom and choice that has previously been stripped. As Nolet et al. (2021) state:

> For a person to enjoy autonomy, it is not so much a matter of having a network that is free of constraints and control, but rather of having other options to turn to when needed. (p. 1635).

This is not to say that informal contact is more beneficial than a formal arrangement, but that formal arrangements, in removing autonomy from women and imposing rules or conduct that do not indicate awareness and understanding of IPVA is hindering what could be a much more positive outcome for mother and child. Informal contact was not identified as a smooth process for mother or children in this thesis, and a distinct lack of professional support exacerbated this. Outcomes were still not that of a healthy child contact arrangement between two parents that are divorcing, for example. That is not the argument being made and caution should be taken in suggesting this as anything other than an indication that formal contact, which should be providing more protection than informal contact, requires significant improvement. Previous research by Thiara and Gill (2012) identified that women in the South-Asian community sought informal contact because formal contact was not an option for them, highlighting how informal contact can result from limited autonomy. Instead, the family courts should increase autonomy, respect and input from mothers in order to support positive contact. The take-away message here is that mothers in this study did a better job of protecting themselves and their children than the formal child contact system did, and this is likely to be because they felt more in control of their own decisions – they re-gained a sense of autonomy.

For those experiencing the court process, difficulties were amplified, with the courts and the professionals involved exacerbating the challenges faced and adding additional perceived barriers to overcome. Rather than removing power from the perpetrator, women felt that the courts gave their ex-partners more power and removed their autonomy to make decisions and set boundaries – an important part of the recovery process from trauma (Wuest & Merrit-Gray, 2016). For example, Martine was able to say no to unreasonable travel requests and set clear expectations in terms of responsibility. This was impossible for both Federica and Meredith as these arrangements were court ordered, resulting in Federica having to fly to a European country and Meredith travelling hours across locations to bring two very young children to see their father. This can have a significant impact on sense of self and identity rebuilding post-separation, slowing down recovery and impeding mental wellbeing (Wuest & Merrit-Gray, 2016). In addition, it provides women and children with little time to process the abuse that has taken place before having to negotiate further trauma and removes 'space for action' (Jeffner, 2000), creating a feeling of powerlessness (Harrison, 2008).

From the current and previous studies of this thesis, it is clear that conduct of professionals working within the court system contributes to discord and reinforces abusive behaviours making formal contact more difficult for mothers and children. Cultural change has been requested in the past (Ryder, 2012), yet progress has not been made (Hunter & Barnett, 2013; Rights of Women, 2021). A key point for future research is research with judges themselves, focussing on beliefs they may hold, and developing further understanding of the challenges they face when making contact decisions. We are yet to see research that develops our understanding of their role and how they make contact decisions.

As discussed in the findings, professionals in the contact system have a great deal of power and as such, responsibility to develop their knowledge and understanding of IPVA as continued professional development. However, it is also possible that the system contributes to professional actions, for example policies and guidance sending a message that contact should take place at all costs (Hunt & Macleod, 2008), or that fails to take IPVA into account (e.g., Cafcass guidance), creating a gap filled using professional judgement. If professional judgement needs to be applied in this way – for example when considering fact-finding hearings – then training should be compulsory and support professionals in their roles. However, training should do more than focus on knowledge of IPVA, it should incorporate reflexive practice, allowing professionals to consider their own belief systems and how this might impact decisions.

Whilst the findings from this study cannot be generalised, they are evident in both studies one and two. Further understanding is required, with scope for quantitative research to ascertain figures, as well as qualitative research, in particular with harder to reach women who may be more likely to have informal contact arrangements in place because of lack of access to the court (Miller & Smolter, 2011) and judicial system. It is evident that neither informal or formal contact arrangements are risk-free, however stripping power and autonomy from mothers leaves them in a more detrimental position than before, with further trauma to heal from, and it appears that formal processes are more likely to do this. Perhaps a middle ground may be beneficial here – an arrangement that both parties can agree to with a solicitor but is enforceable by law and therefore offers more protection than an informal arrangement alone. Adversarial family courts, simply because of the way they operate, are not the ideal setting for parties where one member has been controlled by the other, and simply do not offer a fair process when considering the balance of power (Hunter, Burton & Trinder, 2020).

Chapter 8: "After Everything They've Been Through, How Much Fight Have They Got Left in Them?": Findings from a Training Workshop with Professionals.

This chapter presents findings from a training workshop with professionals (including those working within; children's services; female and male domestic abuse support services; legal services; and court report writing). The views of those attending the workshop may not be representative of the professions as a whole, or generalisable, however they provide some insight into professional perspectives. The workshop presented findings from the study one analysis of online survivor posts. A dialogue was initiated with attendees discussing how the findings fit with their own professional practice and experiences. The workshop adopted an active learning approach, using ecograms and group discussions to share knowledge and learn from others. The workshop included 18 individuals across professions (e.g., child protection, third sector support services, and professionals that undertake reports for the court service), allowing individuals to explore the topic from a multi-agency perspective. The aim was to identify discrepancies or gaps in knowledge and understanding, and identify professional experiences of the contact process. The research question to be explored was: what do professional's know and understand about survivor experiences and the contact system in relation to IPVA. The workshop served as both research and training. The aim was for professionals attending to come away with a better understanding of how women experience the contact process, what works when supporting survivors and areas for improvement for practice.

A transcript of the workshop discussion has been included in Appendix U but only for consenting individuals (n=11, total participants = 18). Quotes have only been used for those that completed a consent form. This does mean that there is an over-reliance on use of quotes for specific participants (for example, Participant 17), however the quotes presented are representative of the viewpoints shared across the workshop and/or within smaller group work. For others who attended the workshop but who did not give consent for quotes to be used, discussion points have been summarised.

Analysis

As part of the workshop, professionals worked in small groups and developed seven ecograms depicting relationships a survivor might navigate when experiencing IPVA and negotiating child contact. The ecograms can be found in Appendix T. Please see chapter four for a description of ecograms and what they entail. Only relevant visual summaries of the ecograms have been provided in the text. Attendees considered micro, macro, meso and exo system relationships, in line with Bronfenbrenner's system theory (1979). Instructions for participants can be found in Appendix P.

The ecograms were based on professionals' own experiences. They could use survivor quotes presented from study one as examples. The ecograms were analysed by exploring the text, types of lines, direction of arrows, colours, and use of space (see Table 4).

Table 4
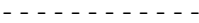
*Visual Representations of Relationships in an Ecogram*

Relationship type	Visualisation
A straight line indicates strong connections. The thicker the line, the stronger the connection.	
Dotted lines indicate a tenuous connection.	
A zig-zag line indicates a conflicted relationship.	
A straight line with two dashes at the centre indicates a broken connection.	
You can also use distance to show the importance of the connection. Connections closer to the circle are those that are most important or might be more heavily used. Those further away may be less used or less likely to be involved.	Less important Important
Use arrows to indicate directionality or flow. For example, if the relationship is reciprocal, then the arrow may point towards both parties.	

Figure 5 summarises the topics which were identified through analysis of the ecograms.

Figure 5

An Overview of Topics Presented for the Analysis
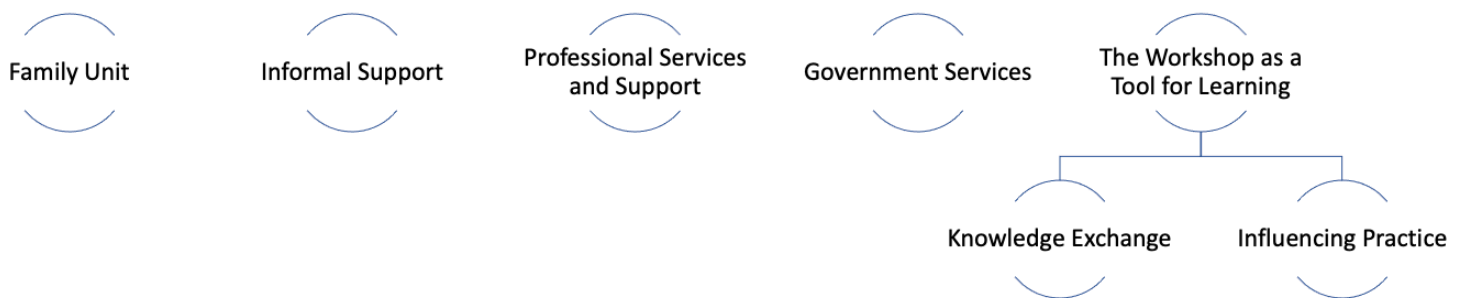
Family Unit

All ecograms depicted a circle at the centre from which other connections radiated (see Figure 6). In all ecograms this inner circle contained the children and mother. Mostly, the ecograms placed the father within the circle alongside the survivor and children. The ecograms used a range of words to describe the mother, from 'survivor' to using a pseudonym. None of the ecograms referred to 'mother'. However, fathers were referred to as 'father', 'dad' or by a pseudonym in all the ecograms. Children were placed in the middle edges of the circle, equidistant between mother and father. This reflects the notion that children can be 'stuck in the middle'.

In all ecograms the mother had a strong reciprocal connection with the children. This was not the case for fathers. Relationships with fathers were depicted equally as strong, or conflicted and broken. When depicting strong relationships, directionality of this relationship was not specified. This was for a variety of reasons. For example, attendees simply wanted to highlight a connection and did not want to speculate on the direction of the relationship as all are different, or because this relationship is less certain and more complicated than the relationship between mother and children (or indeed other people depicted). Only one of the ecograms noted the relationship between siblings (showing a strong two-way relationship), highlighting some thought around other connections impacted by ongoing violence and abuse in the home.

Figure 6

Inner Circle Depicting the Family Unit
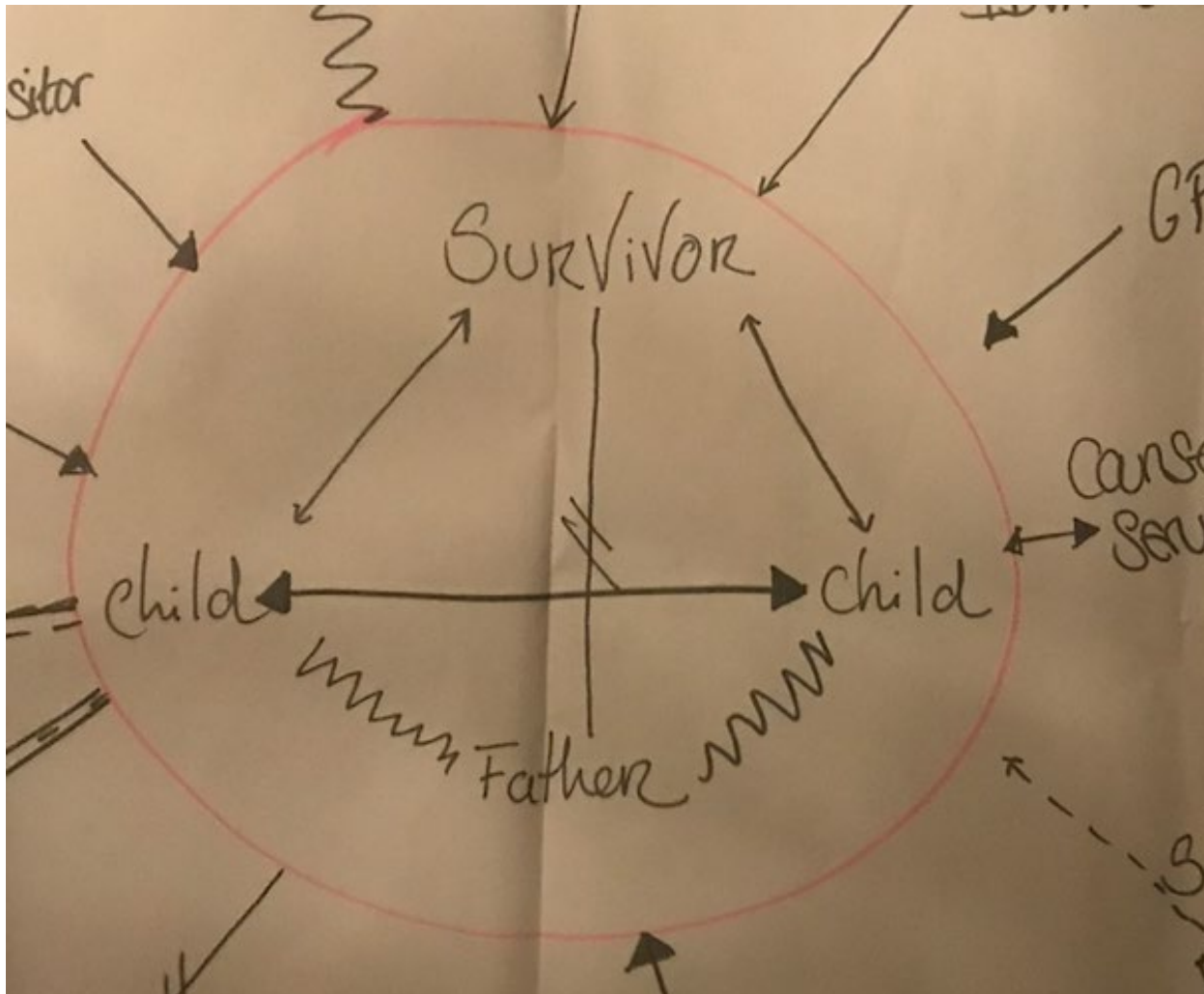
When discussing the relationship between father and children, professionals acknowledged this as strained, not because of interference by the mother, but because of the behaviour of the father:

> *"I work with a lot of key people that are based in schools and they see those behaviour issues when it comes up to contact even leading up to the weekend dad's going to be picking them up...and the reaction on the Monday when they come back. They are seeing those patterns, so it isn't just the mum's gut feeling or manipulating it."* (Participant 16, workshop discussion).

This reflects discussions in study two whereby mothers felt they were under scrutiny and their children's behaviour explained away as consequences of the relationship breakdown rather than the IPVA experienced. It is clear in at least some cases schools are aware of the consequences of IPVA for the child,

noticing the effects of IPVA when contact with the father is taking place. However, it does not appear from the professionals in this workshop that this is being considered, instead child contact myths are taking precedence (it's a relationship problem or it's a parenting problem). This also reflects a lack of multi-agency working, with schools not always being considered during child welfare evaluations for court report writing. This is raised in study one whereby survivors felt that court reports were rushed and relied on little information, with some discussing minimal observations of the child during contact with the father forming the basis of the court report, rather than an exhaustive evaluation with evidence from those involved in the child's day to day life.

Whilst the ecograms illustrated a typical mother-child relationship being strong, some professionals suggested scenarios where this relationship may have been conflicted and broken due to fathers' interference and manipulation:

"We've had it a few times, where, you know, they've got to see both parents, and mum has continued to be repeatedly abused by dad and the children, who every time they go for contact change their story about who they want to be with, which parent they want to live with, which is understandable, I mean eventually the children that have done that have ended up residing with the perpetrator fully." (Participant 15, workshop discussion)

Some of the professionals felt differently, providing an alternative view on the potential impact on children 'witnessing' abuse:

"Children often have a strong relationship with both parents, and they feel they need to take sides because they are witnessing these feuds between parents and that makes it quite difficult for us, especially as we need submit reports to the court about contact and arrangement orders. In some cases, we have children who are clearly on mum's side, they are mimicking mum's behaviour and attitude" (Group 7, ecogram discussions)

This perspective suggests a degree of myth acceptance by professionals. For example, when considering children's behaviour as replication or 'mimicking' of their mother's behaviour. This suggests that children may have not been impacted by the abuse, or that they are being 'led astray' by their mother – akin to parental alienation (Saunders & Oglesby, 2016). Whilst this observation may reflect attendees practice experience, the research would suggest that this is about how the behaviour is being perceived by those professionals rather than an accurate representation of what is taking place (Saunders & Oglesby, 2016). That is not to say that this 'mimicking' behaviour never happens – whether led by

parental influence or not, but that it is a far less likely scenario than children displaying the impact of living in an abusive home (Callaghan et al., 2018).

The relationship between the mother and father was mostly noted as broken, however some did not use any lines to indicate a relationship between the parents. This was for a variety of reasons: they wanted to indicate that there was no relationship at all; they didn't know how to categorise this relationship; or they didn't want to speculate on the status of this connection.

When discussing this as part of the workshop, participants came from a position that the relationship would be broken because of the abusive behaviour experienced by the mother, and they discussed the ongoing impact that this relationship may have on the survivor when co-parenting. This is reflected in studies one and two. For example:

> *"The impact on mum's mental health is just, it's enormous…he is to have contact with his child, but there's still that control there in that, you know, he has to message, she has to go and meet him, she's faced with him on a regular basis, and he can control that time."* (Participant 17, workshop discussion)

Participant 17 goes on to address the impact that this might have on the relationship between mother and child because of both the ongoing abuse from the father, and the pressure and overwhelming nature of the systems.

> *"She just feels so stuck because she's just gone through that whole court process, it's come to an end, to take it back is going to cost her a lot of money… it's now got to the point where I'm even more worried about her mental health which is ultimately going to have a huge impact on her child and her parenting and agh. It's really difficult. Really really difficult."* (Participant 17, workshop discussion)

Both these quotes are reflective of the issues raised by survivors in studies one and two – however survivors in those studies showed a great deal of resilience when it came to taking care of their children. Despite this, the courts were discussed as quick to point out any consequences of IPVA as concerns about the mother's ability to take care of the children.

Participant 17 goes on to discuss how behaviour towards the mother is viewed by some professionals – with the courts coming from one position but those working with children and survivors potentially another.

"She was told exactly that in court, well I know he was abusive towards you but that doesn't make him a bad father. It does. In my personal opinion, it does. If someone went to prison for assault on another human being, you wouldn't let them come out and look after your children." (Participant 17, workshop discussion)

This reflects Hester's (2011) three planet model[5], and the differing goals of each of the systems involved. This places the mother in a difficult position, receiving differing messages from each system and having to act accordingly to satisfy each. This requires a great deal of labour, posing unique challenges for survivors dealing with multiple systems. In addition, this poses difficulties for professionals, particularly third sector and voluntary organisations, as no doubt they must take this into account when advising survivors. The key concern here is a lack of working together for one goal – to protect the survivor, protect the children and hold the perpetrator accountable. Instead, these elements are viewed as individual goals for each system, highlighting a lack of multi-agency thinking and systems working in silos. Ultimately this leaves families unprotected and confused.

Some professionals in this study were mindful of the journey survivors faced when leaving a relationship with children. As participant 17 states, *"After everything they've been through, how much fight have they got left in them?"*.

However, others were less so and had a more idealistic view of parenting post-separation. For example, Group 7 discussed how "*mum has a part time job, which works well*" and is "*exhausted when doesn't get naps*". Mum would also smoke.

Whilst having a part-time job might be ideal for children, demonstrating a desire to focus on the child's best interests, this may not be possible financially – especially if one considers the cost of the court process. In addition, employment might not be possible at all if children are below school age, and one considers the cost of childcare. When this is factored in with the challenges of universal credit (Howard & Skipp, 2008), working part-time may not be a realistic option. This should be considered alongside employment issues explored on p. 168.

Focussing on mum's exhaustion when she does not get naps suggests that the exhaustion is sleep related and that this loss of sleep is an occasional occurrence. It is unclear if this group have factored in the exhaustion that comes from experiencing abuse, being a single parent, and co-parenting with

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[5] The three planets as explained by Hester (2011) are the child protection planet, the policing planet, and the child contact planet.

someone that continues to abuse them, as suggested by studies one and two. Smoking may reflect stereotypical views of who experiences IPVA in the home, however it was also discussed as a coping strategy, alongside substance use – Gilchrist et al. (2012), using 200,000 case reports from the Strathclyde vulnerable person's database in Scotland, determined that just over 35% of police call outs identified survivors as under the influence of alcohol. Of importance here is the fact that alcohol use by survivors has an impact on police decision-making when it comes to charging a suspected offender, with police officers less likely to pursue charges if the survivor has been drinking (Schuller & Stewart, 2000).

Group 7 went on to state that the children would "*see a school counsellor every week*", mum would be "*accessing support from the hospital*" and the GP would be "*very much involved*". Whilst this is entirely possible, it is estimated that 62% of schools in England and Wales offer counselling services. Just under half of primary schools do not have a counsellor available (Harland, Dawson, Rabiasz & Sims, 2015). The waiting list for support services such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) can be months (Care Quality Commission, 2019), and the number of counselling services specialising in IPVA recently decreased nationwide (Women's Aid, 2021). Adult IPVA services may not be able to support those with substance use or mental health difficulties (Women's, Aid, 2021), and GPs, because of limited multi-agency working and training related to IPVA, are likely to be uninformed about how to best support survivors (Kirk & Bezzant, 2020). This paints a much bleaker picture than that presented by workshop attendees.

Informal Support

Attendees highlighted a range of informal support sources, including: maternal family; paternal family; neighbours; friends; grandparents; and, in one ecogram, work colleagues (although the flow of the relationship was not depicted; see Figure 7).

Extended families were typically located closer to the inner circle than other types of connections and described in a multitude of ways. Some of the ecograms placed friends and family together, some specified specific family members such as grandparents, and a limited minority depicted aunties and cousins. This suggests that extended family are viewed as important by professionals. Just over half of the ecograms broke family down further by distinguishing between maternal and paternal families (for example maternal parents, paternal extended family or, in one case, maternal/paternal extended family together).

Figure 7

Informal Support Sources
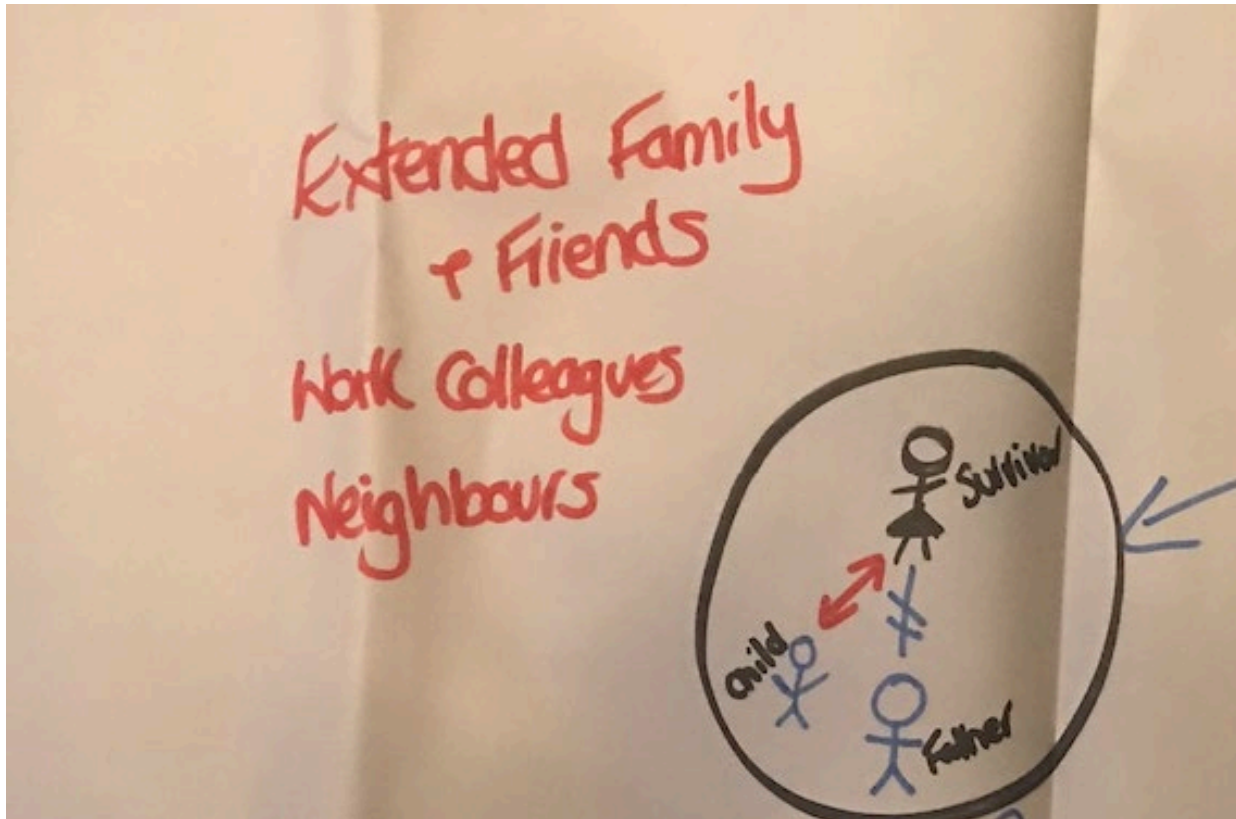
Relationships with the paternal family were typically depicted as broken or conflicted. For example, over half of the ecograms showed relationships with the paternal family as being broken or conflicted, and only one of the ecograms specified family in general (e.g., 'extended family') as being conflicted. In some of the ecograms, no relationship was indicated, however the spacing of the circles near the inner circle emphasised these.

Where strong reciprocal relationships were indicated, these were with the maternal family, including grandparents. In one case, whether the grandparents were maternal or paternal was not specified however the position of the wording closest to the survivor would suggest these are maternal grandparents.

Workshop attendees discussed the role of both maternal and paternal grandparents, however. When discussing the ecograms, the consensus was that relationships with the paternal family might be considered fragile or negative (as identified in study one). However, this was not necessarily associated

with a lack of paternal family support. Paternal grandparents were viewed as a potential source of support regardless of the status of the relationship.

There is a distinct absence of research related to grandparents, contact, and IPVA in England and Wales. Kaganas and Piper (2020) are one of the few authors to address this topic. They highlight the difficulties in relation to paternal grandparents in particular, addressing the challenges involved in keeping the father away when the paternal grandparents are looking after the children, and in determining whether there is hostility present towards the mother as a result of child arrangements. For example, in Re CW (cited by Kaganas & Piper, 2020, p. 182), a judge notes:

On the one hand there is a powerful case for saying that the children should be in touch with the paternal side of their family. On the other is the fact that – as they presented to me – the grandparents are entirely in the father's camp. They are bitterly hostile to the children's mother, and as recently as December 2009 referred in terms to their son's "everlasting ordeal"; the "onslaught of false allegations against him", and of his "torture" by the police. They accused the children's mother of "cruelty" and of the intention to stop their son's contact with his daughters. How could contact with such grandparents be in the interests of the children?

In addition, enforcing grandparent visitation where the relationship between the mother and the grandparents is conflicted may be more damaging than positive to the children (research from USA, Cowan, 2007), particularly given the relationship asymmetry noted by Ferguson, Douglas, Lowe, Murch and Robinson (2004). Ferguson et al. (2004) note that grandparents often find the relationship with grandchildren far more important and beneficial than grandchildren do. Kaganas and Piper (2020) conclude their article by addressing the current initiatives to provide automatic rights to grandparents, noting that they cannot support the notion that grandparents should be given automatic rights based on the evidence available.

More research is needed to ascertain the role they play post-separation, and the impact of such a relationship on children. Gotzzen and Sandberg (2019) interviewed ten young people in Sweden about how their grandparents responded to the abuse they experienced. Gotzzen and Sandberg (2019) outline the importance of grandparents in providing spatial and relational support. Spatial support is provided by grandparents providing respite from the abuse, with their homes considered a safe space for visits. Relational support refers to children feeling as though the grandparent was on their side and believed them. Where this didn't take place, vulnerability increased, and detrimental consequences were noted for children's mental wellbeing. Gotzzen and Sandberg (2019) stress that it is the practical elements the

children valued – a safe home, a safe atmosphere, and open arms to welcome children in times of need. The study did not distinguish between paternal and maternal grandparents other than to note that it was mostly maternal grandparents that children relied on, possibly because most of the children resided with the mother and experienced violence by the father.

Maternal families were discussed as being both positive and negative. One group gave an example of why the relationship might not be at its strongest: *"Mum might not have a very good relationship with her friends and family now, especially if they understand what was going at home and saying you need to leave him"* (Group 5, ecogram discussions). Similarly, whilst over half of the ecograms suggested a strong relationship with friends (with many depicting these as reciprocal relationships), some of the ecograms depicted such relationships as conflicted. Some groups presented the relationship between survivor and friend as conflicted for a variety of reasons, including previous interference by the ex-partner or because of unwanted advice/opinion.

Other relationships discussed included neighbours, and to a much lesser extent, work colleagues. For example, neighbours were depicted as having a strong relationship with the family unit in a small number of the ecograms, but over half of the ecograms described this relationship as being tenuous, conflicted or broken. When discussing the ecograms, one group alluded to some of the challenges a survivor might face when it comes to developing a relationship with neighbours: *"Not great relationships with neighbours, if they're hearing noise, lots of disputes, dad's getting annoyed, not a lot mum can do"* (Group 5, ecogram discussions).

Work colleagues were poorly represented across the ecograms, with only one group mentioning these as a possibility. The ecogram did not use arrows to indicate a relationship however the spacing of the wording close to the inner circle suggested a strong connection. Group discussion did not highlight why work colleagues might be missing as a source of support; however, employment was represented in under half of the ecograms, with most of these groups suggesting that the relationship would be negative. Relationships with employers were generally presented as either tenuous or broken. Absence from work was highlighted as another potential challenge for survivors.

The two visualisations (lack of consideration of employment and lack of work colleagues) would obviously go hand in hand, explaining why work colleagues were not considered. The important point to note here is that the absence of employment itself is a recurring theme in the ecograms. One of the reasons highlighted for this was that mothers may have to give up their employment when entering a refuge. The role of refuge is considered further on p. 169.

Another reason could be that *'domestic abuse is rarely considered as a workplace issue'* (Bennett, Wibberley & Paterson, 2021, p. 2). One group highlighted the positive impact a supportive employer can make, discussing examples where employers have paid for survivors to attend a refuge or even a hotel to ensure their safety. However, the lack of representation of this across ecograms and attendees suggests that this is the exception rather than the norm. The literature highlights best practice as including multi-agency working (for example working with Refuge – highlighted above), IPVA policies in the workplace, flexible working hours and implementation of Domestic Abuse Champions (Bennett, Wibberley & Paterson, 2021). Survivor perspectives on 'what works' should be a specific focus of research given that the estimated economic cost of IPVA due to employment related issues in England and Wales is £14 billion (Oliver, Alexander, Roe & Wlasny, 2019).

Professional Services and Support

Workshop attendees provided a range of advice, information and support that survivors might access or find useful. Third sector organisations, community organisations, legal representation and religious services were well represented within the ecograms, with third sector organisations having the greatest presence.

Mental health services were represented across nearly all ecograms. The focus on mental health and, to a lesser extent, learning disabilities, shows that professionals are considering multiple needs and adjusting these to the child and family. Autism services were mentioned specifically in just under half of the ecograms. This focus of support is interesting and warrants further investigation. King (2010) for example notes that autism spectrum disorder (ASD) increases vulnerability to repeat trauma, however clinical support systems are not necessarily equipped to support them, and the DSM-IV criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder does not adequately capture the way that trauma manifests in those with ASD. It is possible that specialist support services have been highlighted as the best route from practice experience, and the focus on this is positive.

Some of the services mentioned were not identified in studies one and two, perhaps indicating that survivors might not be aware of them (for example, respite services). Further research is needed to see to what extent survivors are aware of and using services.

A range of the services offered were local to where the professional worked rather than national services, showing good knowledge of services accessible to the survivor. These have been anonymised to preserve the identity of attendees however over half of the ecograms included local services. This may be due to the governmental shift in policy to localised support and services, for example the implementation

of Police and Crime Commissioner's (Davies, 2018). Some of the local services were satellites of the national brand, however others were bespoke to the area. This means that services can adapt to meet the local needs of survivors, however it may pose implications for funding, visibility, and signposting.

Relationships between the family and professional services were mostly strong (see Figure 7 for a visual example). Reciprocal relationships were equally represented compared to relationships benefitting the family unit. This shows a positive dialogue with survivors, even where typically the survivor would be deemed to benefit most from the service (e.g., intimate partner violence and abuse services).

Many of the ecograms discussed sanctuary or refuge, with most depicting the relationship between refuge services and survivors as strong. One group discussed this link as tenuous – this is important to consider given the discussions outlined on page 168 around loss of employment when using refuge services. One should also consider the current challenges faced by survivors in accessing refuge services because of housing benefit policy (Howard & Skipp, 2008) and/or challenges with universal credit (Howard & Skipp, 2008). Survivor perceptions should be considered here as well – for example across the studies in this thesis, refuge was noted as somewhere to go when you have experienced what survivors consider to be physical or severe IPVA – a position they rarely saw themselves in (for example, Martine not wanting to go to a refuge because her partner didn't hit her). Whilst Refuge and other sanctuary services provide a vital source of support for survivors and their children, further research is needed to ascertain the complexities involved when considering these, and how the challenges could be mitigated.

Figure 8

Advice, Information and Support Services

rens
vices

Counselling

Sanctuary

IDVA

w
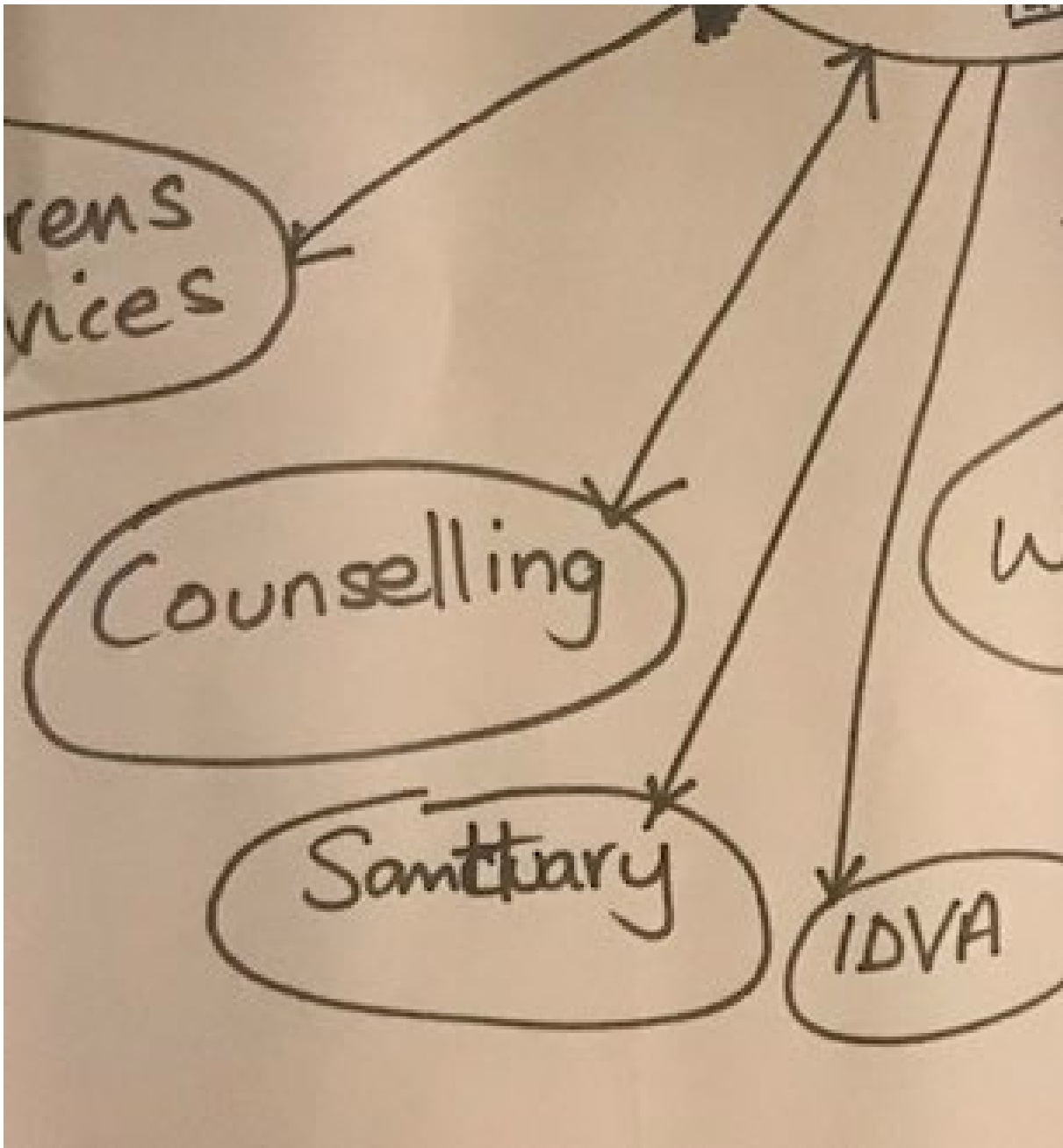
Services were described for the father as well. These centred around domestic abuse intervention programmes (DVPP), however in one case included employment support (although this was listed under government services). Behaviour change programmes were highlighted as a specific gap in services, with one group stating that they were 'lucky' when it came to these types of services in their area, a finding also identified in study two of this thesis. This is also evident in the literature (Coy, Kelly & Foord, 2009), and explained as one of the reasons that family court judges do not refer fathers to DVPPs (Barnett, 2014).

Not all professional services relationships were depicted as being strong. In the case of solicitors and barristers, views were mixed, with relationships represented as either strong (reciprocal) relationships or tenuous/conflicted. Study one raised similar relationships with legal representatives, with more being highlighted as tenuous/broken than strong. These findings highlight the challenges that some professionals see in relationships between survivors and services, some of which may have long term consequences for the survivor. These relationships are important - a poor relationship with services can have a cascade effect for survivors. For example, a poor relationship with legal representatives could result in negative outcomes in court, poor relationships with employers can result in loss of employment, and/or not meeting survivor needs can affect mental wellbeing. These findings echo those of the previous two survivor led studies that form part of this thesis. One group summed this up, stating:

> *"From my understanding of working with survivors, a lot of the pressure of the work that we ask them to do is situations that they've not put themselves in, they've been put in, and now we're asking them to do the work to keep their children safe, it's a catch 22."* (Group 5)

This mirrors survivor perspectives from study two who also illustrated the emotional labour required when engaging with not only support services, but government services as well.

Some formal services available to survivors were missing from the ecograms. For example, knowledge of Mackenzie friends and guardian *ad litum*. More awareness needs to be raised here as they were described as vital services by some survivors in the previous two studies, although Federica (study two) highlighted that her experience of having a guardian *ad litum* to support the children was poor. In this case, Federica felt that the wrong individual had been allocated to their case, highlighting the importance of acknowledging IPVA and ensuring professional practice takes trauma into account. Rights of Women (2019a) discuss how Mackenzie friends – previously just family and friends who provided informal support to litigants-in-person – are now being offered as paid-for services and should be approached with caution by survivors, potentially making this an even more pertinent issue and one for IPVA services to be aware of (Barry, 2019).

Government Services

Government services were represented across the ecograms with quite detailed and complex relationships depicted (see Figure 9 for a visual example). Relationships with government services were mostly depicted as tenuous, conflicted, or broken, with tenuous relationships being the most represented type of relationship. Some of these relationships were depicted as strong and benefitting the family unit.

Figure 9

Government Services

The most positive relationships highlighted were those between Cafcass and the family, and views were still mixed (mostly strong, but some tenuous/conflicted). This contrasts with findings from the previous two studies where Cafcass were almost wholly viewed in a negative light. This may be because professionals had a deeper knowledge of the system and the extent to which Cafcass are bound by procedure or pressure from the courts (Hunter, Barnett & Kaganas, 2018), or because the survivors that are posting online are qualitatively different to those working with the workshop attendees and therefore have different experiences.

The ecograms presented the relationship between the courts and survivors as tenuous or conflicted, with some showing a strong one-way relationship benefitting the family. However, this was not reflected throughout discussions. Attendees discussed issues with court assessments, presenting this as a problem within the courts rather than as a Cafcass related issue. It may be that attendees were confounding the roles of Cafcass and the courts, or it may reflect those attendees felt the culture of the courts impacted on court assessments undertaken by Cafcass. For example, study two raised that Cafcass may be under scrutiny themselves or feel as though they need to write reports in a certain way to fit the culture of the family courts. Some attendees elaborated, discussing expectations of the courts and how this can impact on the content of an assessment: *"And you can mention, you know, research, this and that, but then that's often disputed saying, so that's not revenge, so that's, you know, and you're taking mum's side, so it's quite difficult for us."* (Participant 6, workshop discussion).

Participant 6 raised the challenge of lack of available evidence when it comes to domestic abuse (both IPVA and towards the child), and this was acknowledged by other professionals attending the workshop:

"it's quite difficult, it's actually said that we have to wait for some consequence and some results of, of, broken relationship to be able to prove, you see so that's, that's the damage, this, this has on the child. We find it quite difficult when it comes down to emotions and instincts and even our professional instinct when we don't have anything to support." (Participant 6, workshop discussion)

This poses difficulties for those developing written reports. The expectation that assessment officers should wait for visible consequence before they can use this as part of a report means they may have to exclude content they deem important, particularly given workshop discussions around delayed impact: *"Some of the consequences are very hard to prove for they may not be persistent currently, but they may come at a later stage, um, on the child"* (Participant 4, workshop discussion), And the importance of a thorough assessment exploring non-verbal cues: *"And pick up on those cues that aren't necessarily I don't want to go, them saying it"* (Participant 16, workshop discussion).

However, non-verbal cues from children were somewhat dismissed by others – particularly professionals undertaking assessments (Caffrey, 2013; Mullender et al., 2002). This was partly because of being 'unable' to evidence this behaviour, and partly because of expecting children to be able to clearly verbalise what has been happening to them in the home and emotionally. By ignoring non-verbal cues, professionals are silencing children, particularly if this is their preferred method of communication due to

age or disability (Caffrey, 2013). It is unrealistic to expect children to be able to clearly articulate their needs in the way that an adult might do so. It can take a great deal of therapeutic work to recognise trauma, triggers, and the extent of the impact that IPVA has had on an individual's life, however professionals should be able to communicate with a child on their level (Caffrey, 2013).

The court environment was offered as an additional reason for the relationship between the courts and survivors being tenuous or conflicted. For example, attendees discussed expectations of the courts when it comes to the mother's appearance:

"The court, the court process, women are constantly told, you can't put emotion in, you can't be emotional, it's got to be, it's stripped out, but it is emotional, it is, it's huge part of the woman's mental health, you know, she's been emotionally, she's been emotionally abused, always controlled." (Participant 14, workshop discussion)

And the lack of safety provisions for survivors in courts:

"And there's no special measures as in criminal court when you go to family court. They've got very small informal rooms where you are faced with the perpetrator and that look, yeah, is all it takes in that room, and even hearing him breathing can make you scared and terrified, so, yeah." (Participant 4, workshop discussion)

These points raise concerns around survivor wellbeing and suggest a lack of consideration by the courts of both fear, and the emotional toll IPVA and the court process can take, as raised in studies one and two. In particular, special measures in the family courts must be examined. Whilst survivors are now automatically eligible for special measures, it is up to the courts to decide whether these are necessary to protect the survivor based on their 'vulnerability' (Home Office, 2021b). Special measures can include giving evidence from behind a screen, using a video link or the judge providing directions to those acting as litigants-in-person (3A Family Procedure Rules, 2010, and Practice Direction 3AA). However, Hunter, Burton and Trinder (2020) note that survivors are rarely offered special measures in the family courts. Based on the three studies conducted, this thesis argues that survivors should be able to decide whether they need special measures, based on their own assessments of safety and risk.

The police and children's services (CS) were represented across all ecograms, just under half of attendees illustrating these relationships as strong, and just over half depicting them as tenuous, conflicted or broken. Workshop attendees did not elaborate on the role of police officers but did discuss CS. Some attendees felt that mothers would not have the best relationship with CS: *"They are being put*

in that situation and now they are having to respond to children's services" (Group 5, ecogram discussions).

Attendees highlighted the emotional labour required from the mother to convince services that the children's safety was of paramount importance. Professionals highlighted best practice as CS supporting the whole family. With best practice, the relationship would be a strong one. Where there was a broken relationship, it was said to be because of the lack of emphasis on the father's behaviour and him being held accountable. Attendees emphasised that CS should not be placing emphasis on the survivor to keep children safe, or police the behaviour of the perpetrator (a point raised elsewhere in this thesis).

The lack of accountability and responsibilisation of perpetrators is an important consideration, one that may be explained by exploring multi-agency working and professional practice. Holding perpetrators to account is seen by support services as the role of police officers, rather than that of CS or third-sector organisations (Davies, 2018). One reason for this is safety of both frontline workers and survivors (Davies, 2018). Approaching a perpetrator may be unsafe for those working with survivors, and it may be unsafe for survivors if perpetrators are approached without first informing or supporting the survivor (Davies, 2018). However, police officers will not always be the ones referring someone to a DVPP or know of the case, leaving those unwilling to disclose outside of third sector organisations unprotected and more likely to have to perform the accountability work themselves. This is an important survivor safety issue.

Part of the discrepancy here may be around how agencies view accountability – whether they understand this to mean being held accountable by the state, or whether they are considering this in terms of fathers taking responsibility for their own behaviour (Devaney, 2014). A combination of both is necessary and this requires multi-agency working. One example of this is the recently piloted multi-agency tasking and coordination (MATAC) approach, whereby different agencies across the sector work together to support survivors and perpetrators ensuring safety, responsibilisation and accountability (Davies, 2018). This level of multi-agency working is not reflected in participant discussions, with services seemingly working in silos. Crucially, MATAC is offender focussed, ensuring that DVPPs are available at a local level for those that need them (Davies, 2018). This is opposed to multi-agency risk assessment conferences (MARAC) that take a victim focus, although they can be used simultaneously (Davies, 2018).

Schools and medical services were represented marginally more evenly as either strong relationships or tenuous, conflicted, and broken relationships. Participants discussed the importance of schools throughout the workshop, including the role of schools in providing pastoral support as well as identifying concerns. They noted that this role may create friction with survivors if schools are reporting abuse.

However, it should be noted that young people may fear disclosing abuse to teachers due to limitations in confidentiality (Stanley, Ellis, Farrelly, Hollinghurst & Downe, 2015) and teachers may feel uncomfortable in dealing with disclosures given their lack of expertise in this area (Stanley et al., 2015). This raises further challenges for relationships between survivors and children.

Similar confidentiality issues were raised for Hospitals and A+E who were said to have a difficult relationship with survivors as they were likely to ask lots of questions about injuries and involve police. However, Bradbury-Jones et al. (2014) raise another potential reason for the relationship being difficult. They argue that health care professionals feel uncomfortable asking questions about IPVA and are not equipped to deal with disclosures when they do take place. In 2014, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) emphasised the importance of health care services when it came to IPVA, providing a series of recommendations to improve identification, support and multi-agency working for all health professionals. In 2016, NICE developed a quality standard based on their 2014 report. The quality standard includes recommendations for training around disclosures, how to ask about IPVA, and the referral of perpetrators to DVPPs. It is unclear to what extent these recommendations have been implemented across the National Health Service in England and Wales, however workshop attendees deemed the relationship between hospitals and survivors to be important.

The most challenging relationships represented were those with housing and welfare services (DWP and benefit agencies). Over half of the ecograms described this relationship as tenuous. Henderson (2018) notes that often IPVA is dealt with as anti-social behaviour by housing agencies. This can have repercussions for survivor safety, and places responsibility on the survivor to stop the abuse to not lose their home or experience other housing related consequences (Henderson, 2018). Housing is of particular importance for both survivors and perpetrators, with some stating it is even more important than criminal sanctions (Henderson, 2018; Walby & Towers, 2018). Henderson (2018) outlines the importance of including social housing in a community wide response to IPVA, with housing services offering support for perpetrators as well as survivors. Welfare services were also depicted as having a tenuous relationship with survivors. Housing benefit and Universal credit have been noted elsewhere in this report as a challenge for survivors, in particular when it comes to seeking refuge. This highlights the complexities involved, with housing being a particular challenge from both an economic and welfare perspective.

Overall, relationships were not described as being overly positive across the government services and this warrants further investigation and intervention from those making decisions about these services, particularly considering the findings from the previous survivor-led studies in this thesis. Government

services need to be revisited to identify how these relationships can be improved, especially the family courts.

Relationships with probation, legal aid and immigration services were under-represented across the ecograms, all of which were depicted as tenuous, conflicted, or broken. Similarly, MARAC services were under-represented, although the relationship between MARAC and the family was described as a strong beneficial relationship to the family by some. Lack of representation for these services is concerning, particularly considering immigration and the challenges faced by BAME survivors when disclosing IPVA (as raised by group 2).

The lack of legal aid representation is concerning and warrants further research. The lack of representation of such services may go hand in hand with the reason behind the lack of MARAC representation – perhaps a lack of multi-agency working when it comes to government services and/or knowledge about such services. Alternatively, it may reflect the current issues with survivors being able to access legal aid (Rights of Women, 2019b) because of the Legal Aid Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act (2012). Some changes have been made since LASPO (2012), for example increasing types of evidence survivors can provide for IPVA (Legal Aid Agency, 2020), and allowing survivors to access legal aid if they have a property that could not be sold or borrowed against (G.R., R (on the application of) v Director of Legal Aid Casework & Anor, 2020). However, change has been slow and piece meal. A coordinated effort is needed, both to review legal aid and implement positive change.

The Workshop as a Tool for Learning

This section explores attendee perspectives on the workshop and their learning experience, including knowledge exchange and influence on future practice. Professionals were asked to leave anonymous feedback at the end of the workshop. Quotes are provided unaltered and as written by professionals.

Lipowsky (2014) developed a model for training in professional practice. This was aimed at teachers; however important lessons can be applied regardless of the profession. They identified several factors that increased training success – namely, knowledge retention and implementing the training in practice. Of importance were characteristics of the trainer, quality of learning opportunities and utilisation of these during the training, characteristics of the participants, and finally, context. These are explored in relation to the workshop below.

1. **Characteristics of the trainer:** Characteristics of note for best practice are knowledge, enthusiasm, and strong communication skills (Lipowsky, 2014). Satisfaction with the trainer was not measured as part of the workshop however participants left feedback on this voluntarily. For example, comments included, *'Mia was really good, spoke clearly and her passion shined through'*, *'knowledgeable facilitator; good pace of delivery'.* This was positive if we consider Lipowsky's model (2014).

2. **Quality of learning opportunities and utilisation of tools:** Lipowsky (2014) highlights the importance of providing learning opportunities that are valued by participants, structured, focussed, and practiced during the training. Using survivor experiences from study one to support the ecograms was helpful for professionals, as was building the ecograms together in groups and sharing their work with other groups. The activity was perceived as a valuable tool by participants, and survivor narratives were of the utmost importance in leading the discussion.

3. **Characteristics of the participants:** Lipowsky (2014) highlighted the importance of prior knowledge to allow scaffolding of new information, motivation of the participants, and their belief systems to be of value when considering professional development. Participants were all professionals currently working in the fields of child contact and IPVA, and voluntarily chose to attend the workshop. Engagement across the group was high, although some preferred to engage with smaller groups rather than the group as a whole. Most beliefs in terms of contact and IPVA were shared across the group (that is – not holding myth acceptance), although there were some examples of myths during discussions of court report writing.

4. **Context:** Lipowsky (2014) relates this section specifically to schools in terms of coherence with school programmes, support by headteachers and placed in the context of the classroom. Relating this to IPVA, we can take this to mean that training is most effective when supported by managers, in line with the current goals of the organisation, and related to the everyday practice of the professionals attending. These conditions were met. Professionals were given leave to attend by line managers, all worked directly with survivors, and had a shared goal of supporting wellbeing of children and/or survivors.

In short, the training workshop provided strong conditions for the retention of learning and implementing practice changes where necessary (Lipowsky, 2014). It also followed best practice when considering IPVA research.

IPVA studies highlight the importance of being survivor led (Entwistle & Coates, 2021), adopting a multi-agency perspective (Hunter, Burton & Trinder, 2020), and taking a systems approach (Hester, 2011;

Hill, 2020) when working with survivors – although this is not specific to training. These conditions were met by ensuring that attendees came from a range of professional backgrounds, considered different agencies and their interactions with survivors, and used a systems framework with ecograms (derived from systems theories).

Satisfaction with the training workshop was high, with professionals requesting further workshops of longer duration. However, satisfaction is not said to be related to changes in practice or knowledge retention (Alliger, Tannenbaum, Bennett, Traver & Shotland, 1997). Lipowsky and Rzejak (2015) argue that it is necessary for participants to indicate change in their attitudes, beliefs, and levels of motivation. Therefore, two further questions were asked: *'what have you learnt that you didn't know before?'* and *'do you think your practice will change as a result of today, and if so, how?'*. Participant responses are evaluated below.

Knowledge Exchange

Attendees were asked *'what have you learnt that you didn't know before?'.* Fourteen professionals took part in this activity. Attendees gained knowledge from survivor findings, as well as each other, and developed their knowledge because of the workshop content.

This included: learning around court practice (e.g., use of non-molestation orders in court, and how victim presentation of trauma can impact proceedings); support available for mothers and children (e.g., Mackenzie friends and guardian *ad litem*); further understanding of the issues faced by women (e.g., experiences of secondary trauma): *"I found the topic of secondary victimisation, an instance of survivor experiences, new and very interesting"* (Anonymous participant), and tools to develop a narrative with survivors (e.g., using ecograms – see chapter four). Attendees identified the ecograms as a particular point of interest. Ecograms have long been used within social work as a tool to facilitate discussions with survivors about the systems around them and how a survivor interacts with them (Bonecutter & Gleeson, n.d.). Workshop attendees praised the ecograms as useful in enhancing their professional practice and to facilitate discussion with survivors. Most had not come across them in previous practice.

Importantly, professionals learned from each other, providing practice-based solutions to challenges faced by others, and challenging each other where they felt it necessary. The training was a group effort, with no one person deemed to be the expert, but all holders of knowledge in differing fields. It was a supportive environment and professionals were receptive and welcoming of other's experiences and practice knowledge. This feeds into points two and three of Lipowsky's (2014) model around participant engagement and opportunities for applied learning.

Influencing Practice

Participants were asked if their practice would change (and/or how) because of what they learnt at the workshop. Twelve participants provided responses, with eleven stating that their practice would change because of the workshop. Responses indicated that professionals developed their understanding, confidence, and awareness of child contact in the context of IPVA: *"Challenge professionals more when I know what will and will not help the victim"* (Anonymous participant). Practice changes were highlighted around assessments: *"I will incorporate non-verbal communications from women and children into my assessments in order to evidence the impact"* (Anonymous participant), support for survivors: *"Yes; listen more; hear and then act; not fit women into our service but see how we can best help them"* (Anonymous participant), and the extent to which they would challenge other professionals because of knowledge gained. Some did not disclose how their practice would change – simply that it would. Others stated that they would *"feedback what I have learnt to fellow students and colleagues"* (Anonymous participant).

Overall, these findings are positive in that they highlight professional development, including learning of new skills. Small changes can significantly impact the experience of a family experiencing child contact in the context of IPVA. In line with Lipowsky's (2014) model, we can see from the responses that participants felt more confident and motivated to implement practice changes, and that there were small shifts in attitudes and beliefs – particularly around consideration of non-verbal communication of children and ensuring that survivors feel heard when using professional services. The workshop therefore provided strong conditions for effecting practice change according to Lipowsky (2014) and Lipowsky and Rzejak (2015), however longitudinal research would be the best indicator of whether these changes persist over time.

Discussion

Study three built on the previous two studies. The study explored professional knowledge, awareness and experiences of contact and the family courts in the context of IPVA. It was also a training workshop, using findings from this thesis to offer survivor perspectives and fill any gaps that there might be in understanding.

The Ecological System of Survivors Experiencing Child Contact

The workshop itself adopted a systems-approach, making use of ecograms to support attendees when considering relationships and interactions that survivors might have. Ecograms derived from Bronfenbrenner's (1979) work on child development. Four overarching systems impact a child's development: the micro system (immediate family), the meso system (community), the exo system

(structures that hold power) and the macro system (attitudes, belief systems and overarching governance).

The various systems according to Bronfenbrenner (1979) are applied to the current study below. This allows for a deeper understanding of the complex relationships involved in a survivor's life, and how they interact to form a complete picture – their ecological system. Ecograms are a visual way of capturing this information, allowing practitioners or policymakers the ability to direct change at the various system levels, as working in one system alone will not produce the change necessary for a stronger ecological system as a whole (Zawisza, 2005). Ecograms also allows practitioners the opportunity to see where relationships are strong, and where they might need further support. Intervention can then be targeted where it is appropriate to do so.

The micro system includes the immediate family: the mother, father, and the children. Attendees considered mothers to have a strong relationship with children, however relationships with fathers where more strained, with children being viewed as 'stuck in the middle' or having a tense relationship with fathers because of the IPVA. The positive factor here is that having a strong relationship with mothers builds resilience (Pinna, 2016), however the ongoing IPVA experienced by survivors and children was said to have a toll on their mental health and wellbeing. This was compounded by broken and tenuous relationships in the meso, exo and macro systems.

The meso system relates to the community and interacts with the home (Zawisza, 2005). For example, schools, places of worship and neighbours. Overall professionals had good knowledge of services available to the survivor, mainly local services. Most were mindful of the context of IPVA and what this means for the mother and children's wellbeing. This is positive and suggests an informed 'culture of care' (Little, 2021). Little (2021) explains that *'everyday care is shaped by assumptions and expectations surrounding DVA'* (p. 3) and that understanding of IPVA comes when we foreground IPVA in emotion and reassess our own beliefs on romantic love. Little (2021) argues that IPVA is viewed as unpredictable and unruly, a self-destructive choice, going against the notion of normative romantic love. Little (2021) discusses this in relation to professional practice, arguing that we must unpick *'dominant constructions of DVA in the attitudes and practices of those with responsibility to care for and with victims and survivors'* (p. 3). Most of the professionals in the workshop were from support services (whether formal or informal), and showed understanding of IPVA as a power imbalance, affecting every facet of a survivor's life, rather than a romantic choice (although it may have been in the beginning of the relationship). This was not reflected when professionals discussed the exo and macro systems.

Community relationships were depicted as strong when it came to IPVA support services, however schools and relationships with friends or neighbours were said to be challenging for a variety of reasons: the need for schools to break confidentiality when a disclosure takes place; neighbours perceiving the IPVA as anti-social behaviour; and friends pressuring survivors to leave the relationship or showing misunderstandings of the dynamics of IPVA. Unfortunately, victim blaming responses or pressure to leave the relationship can hinder further action (O'Connor, 2002). For example, informal help-seeking is seen as a precursor to accessing formal support (Evans & Feder, 2014), highlighting the importance of responses from family, friends, and neighbours. In essence, tenuous, or broken relationships with friends, families and neighbours left survivors and children feeling isolated and disbelieved (Evans & Feder, 2014).

Services for fathers were described as lacking. Attendees considered DVPPs essential, but availability was viewed as 'luck'. This reflects the wider literature (Coy et al., 2009), and the previous two studies in this thesis. The findings also suggest that many services do not hold perpetrators to account, with women being expected to do the work that services might not be able to (example, policing the behaviour of the father). This may be due to lack of resources, particularly when it comes to DVPPs (Barnett, 2014), effectiveness of such programmes (Davies & Biddle, 2018), or lack of wrap-around care (Harris & Hodges, 2019). Wrap around care allows services to meet the demands of the survivor, rather than the other way round, easing the labour required and improving access provision (Harris & Hodges, 2019). It also allows complex needs such as mental health or substance use to be addressed, with less onus on the survivor to put this in place themselves (Harris & Hodges, 2019).

Exo system factors relate to structures that have authority or power over the family. These include hospitals, GPs, welfare services, benefit agencies, social housing, and other government services. Attendees felt this was a particular challenge for survivors. Survivors and children would have to liaise with multiple agencies, retelling their story and dealing with the differing aims of each of the subsystems. Access to welfare, legal aid and suitable housing were viewed as sub-par (Rights of Women, 2019b; Henderson, 2018), and medical professionals were perceived as lacking the skills to support survivors (Wong, Wester, Mol, Romkens, Hezemans & Lagro-Janssen, 2008). This added pressure for survivors who were already exhausted and required a great deal of labour from them. There was clear emphasis on the extent to which mothers are expected to be responsible for their own support when interacting with more formal support services.

Macro system factors include shared attitudes and beliefs, cultural practice, and legislation/policies. Macro system factors inevitably influence meso and exo systems (Zawisza, 2005), for example, by developing policies around education or health care. Attendees discussed these within the

context of attitudes in the family court system, depicting a culture that reinforced inequalities and perpetuated abuse. This 'culture' had an impact on those working within the subsystem, requiring them to conform to standards that they felt uncomfortable with. For example, taking care to not be perceived as 'siding with the mother'. However, some degree of myth acceptance was demonstrated by professionals in the workshop, particularly around the mother's role in the children's 'behaviour'. Behavioural consequences of IPVA were explained as consequences of the fall out between parents, rather than one parent having power over another. This resulted in non-verbal behaviour not being considered, effectively silencing children (Caffrey, 2013), rather than giving them a voice. The consequences of this were that survivors were held to impossible standards, disbelieved, silenced, and having to fight the system to keep children safe. Survivors were said to be further depleted as a direct result of the family court subsystem – findings identified throughout this thesis. Professionals were concerned for survivor and child wellbeing, with the impact on children deemed as inevitable if the mother was unsupported.

Where Do We Go from Here?

A whole community approach is necessary to tackle IPVA (Pence & Paymar, 1996) – the Home Office (2009) have claimed co-ordinated community responses as a policy initiative for over a decade, yet these findings suggest this has not been implemented effectively. A community approach requires perpetrators to be supported by DVPPs, and both the survivor (Little, 2021) and perpetrator (Henderson, 2018) to be provided with suitable housing. Employers should have IPVA policies in place (Bennett et al., 2021) to support the economic costs of IPVA (Anitha, 2019).

Multi-agency working should be targeted with understanding of what the survivor needs at different stages in their journey (Evans & Feder, 2014). Multi-agency work was lacking throughout the discussions, with each system and the subsystems within them working in silos. This increased the amount of work survivors had to do to keep their children safe and furthered trauma by survivors having to re-tell their story to multiple agencies, not all of which were deemed to be helpful or supportive. Meeting the goals of multiple systems is not an easy task and highlights a distinct lack of working together to achieve one overarching goal – prevent further abuse and keep those affected by IPVA safe. Lack of resources in the community (for example, DVPPs) added further strain to this, as well as a lack of co-ordinated action and joined up thinking.

The family courts in particular need a more effective strategy when it comes to supporting survivors. From lack of access to special measures, to lack of communication with other agencies

(including the criminal justice system), the system is set up to fail survivors. Agencies should be interacting with each other, asking survivors what other agencies they are involved with and information sharing (with consent from the survivor). The family courts must perform this as routine when collecting information for report writing as each system contributes to the welfare of the child (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and a whole picture cannot be gained without speaking to those working with the child. Ecograms can help with this as they provide a visual depiction of the different relationships in the child's life and can form a starting point for discussions (Zawisza, 2005). Finally, myths around IPVA, including that mother's lie about abuse or alienate children from their fathers should be dealt with, with policy guidance specifically tackling this. Judgement from professionals is used freely in the family court system – from deciding whether a survivor is 'vulnerable' enough to warrant special measures, to deciding whether IPVA should be considered in a fact-finding hearing. Beliefs and attitudes inevitably impact with this decision-making process. A co-ordinated government effort, and reflective professional training is necessary to change the culture within the family courts.

Some meso, macro and exo subsystems were deemed to be working against survivors, either because of system goals (Hester, 2011), or because of misunderstandings or lack of awareness around IPVA – this included family, friends, neighbours, and employers (Evans & Feder, 2014; O'Connor, 2002). Informal support is of the utmost importance for survivors. Evans and Feder (2014) identified that help-seeking from formal services only came when survivors disclosed to those that had previous knowledge or experience of IPVA, and that friends and family were the first point of contact for disclosures. Informal support networks can also be a protective factor for survivors, enhancing well-being and mitigating some of the consequences of IPVA (Gregory, Williamson & Feder, 2017).

One avenue for upskilling the community and informal support networks is the implementation of awareness interventions. Culturally sensitive awareness interventions for bystanders should be tested, and if effective, funded by the government. However, caution should be taken with the implementation and evaluation of such interventions. For example, Aguero (2019) found that awareness campaigns increased homicide and rates of control in Peru, and Keller, Wilkinson & Otjen (2010) identified a gender difference in receptiveness of such campaigns, with women showing positive change, but men showing the opposite or no change. Targeted preventive work in schools may be more beneficial, with Hester and Westmarland (2005) showing positive results from visual, and drama based IPVA projects incorporated into personal, social and health education.

However, if we are to rely on informal networks and services in the community such as schools, support should be put in place. Schools should ensure that they are adequately trained and comfortable

in dealing with inevitable disclosures of abuse from young people, as research suggests this is not the case currently (Stanley et al., 2015). Support and government funding should be increased to put in place support for friends, family, neighbours, and other avenues of informal support. Research has identified risk of vicarious trauma and even physical harm from supporting survivors of IPVA (Gregory, Williamson & Feder, 2017). This has been compounded and intensified by Covid-19 (Gregory & Williamson, 2021), with access to support services and safety being curtailed by lockdown restrictions (Birchall, McCarthy, Samuel & Davidge, 2021).

Much good work is being undertaken by IPVA support services, with survivors in the previous two studies echoing the findings from this study – voluntary and third sector organisations offer a lifeline for survivors and their children. Despite this, such services have been one of the most affected by austerity (Thiara & Roy, 2020). Such services rely on government funding and community donations to function. Clifford and Mohan (2020) describe the current circumstances (given Covid-19) for such services as dire, with increased demand and decreased funding having severe repercussions for the communities in which services are located. This is particularly important given the reliance on local services shown by attendees in the workshop. In short, the macro system is relying on the meso system (e.g., local third sector organisations) to pick up the work that subsystems in the micro system are not skilled to do (e.g., schools and GPs), whilst not implementing structural support to allow such services to continue performing effectively.

Chapter 9: Overall Discussion

This thesis explored women's experiences of child contact, with a focus on the family courts and relationships throughout. It acknowledged how each individual and step of the process interacted to create the system currently in place. The findings argued that this system places survivors and their children last, creating dis-satisfaction, mistrust, and distress. The current system was not perceived to work in fulfilling the interests of children and their mothers. This chapter explores the reasons why, bringing the findings of all studies together, providing recommendations for policy, research, theory, and practice.

Summary of Previous Studies

Study one was a thematic analysis on online accounts from 68 women across two parenting forums. Key findings included; the secondary victimisation women experienced as a result of the family courts; the challenges in managing the behaviour of the father during informal contact; the lack of professional support from contact services such as Cafcass; and the overarching belief that professionals and the courts were biased towards fathers, adopting a pro-contact stance. This left women managing their ex-partners, the contact process, the wellbeing of their children and their own trauma simultaneously whilst feeling unable to further protect themselves or their child.

Study two built on study one and adopted a case study design using semi-structured interviews with survivors who had been in a contact arrangement for one year or more. The case studies were analysed using narrative analysis (individual case studies) and then thematic analysis (cross-case analysis). Key findings included: the differences in experiences between those with formal and informal contact arrangements, with informal arrangements being experienced more positively over time; contact myths and beliefs present in the child contact system perceived as deleterious to the wellbeing of women and children; and the extent to which women had to prepare, negotiate and plan for contact to go smoothly.

Study three was an active learning-based training workshop with eighteen professionals, forming ecograms for visual analysis. The training content was based on survivor accounts from study one. Key findings included: the number of agencies and services women were required to engage with, often for little benefit to themselves; bias and myths present in the contact process by professionals; the lack of multi-agency working present in the system; and the need for more extensive training and acknowledgement of trauma by professionals working within the contact process.

The following discussion draws together the findings of the three studies to form a cohesive picture of the 'whole' system and its impacts on women and children.

Women's Experiences of Child Contact

This section identifies women's experiences of informal and formal child contact, including the impact on themselves and their children (research questions 1, 3 and 4).

Most of the women began the contact process with informal arrangements. Many entered informal contact arrangements because they felt they had no other choice – either because of lack of resources, ongoing partner control, or because they did not know they had other options. Informal contact arrangements were fraught with difficulties, often because of the father's behaviour during and outside of contact. This included using the children to contact the mother, being aggressive towards children, stalking and harassing mothers, threatening to kidnap children, and continuing abusive behaviour displayed in the relationship. This was consistent with the literature (Chesler, 2011; Coy et al., 2011; Coy et al., 2012; Goldstein, 2014; Hardesty & Ganong, 2006; Mullender et al., 2002; Thiara, 2010).

Gender expectations and beliefs existed, with fathers exhibiting a sense of entitlement to children coupled with a belief that mothers were responsible for the daily nurturing and caretaking of the children. This was consistent with implicit beliefs discussed in the literature (Weldon & Gilchrist, 2012). Fathers entered and exited the role at will, limiting mother's freedoms and ability to gain independence. In addition, extra pressures were faced when it came to work and managing their daily lives because of contact and discontinuous contact. This had economic implications (Anitha, 2019). Fathers failed to show up for contact at arranged times or expected contact outside of agreements, resulting in work times or plans for other activities being changed. Continuing coercive control and abuse resulted in fathers occupying women's physical and mental space, as well as their time. Women tried to ensure safe contact, wanting their children to have a relationship with their fathers, with consequences to themselves – both in terms of experiencing further abuse and managing the wellbeing of their children. Children were placed in difficult positions – they displayed fear and distress in a multitude of ways including verbally and behaviourally (Callaghan et al., 2018). Women displayed symptoms of trauma because of the previous relationship and the continuing abuse during contact arrangements.

Formal contact was overwhelmingly sought by fathers. Formal contact was viewed by women as affording less safety than informal contact and catalysing further trauma. A finding unique to this thesis, informal contact became more stable over time in comparison to formal contact, potentially as a result of

the increased autonomy of survivors negotiating informal arrangements in comparison to the lack of autonomy afforded in formal contact arrangements. Within the formal contact system, myths about gender, abuse and contact were prevalent across the three studies in this thesis (Barnett, 2020; Hunter, Barton & Trinder, 2020). Mothers felt extra pressure to conform to court requirements, despite perceptions that these placed their children in danger. Often, women described frustration, powerlessness and having no choices for good outcomes. They either followed court requirements that discounted or minimised abuse, placing their children at risk of harm, or risked being punished for not following court orders and losing their children altogether.

Professionals in the third study highlighted the levels of manipulation fathers used to turn children against their mothers, and the survivor-led studies (one and two) emphasised how far fathers would go to maintain control – including harming children and moving nearby. Continuous assessments, court hearings and requests drained finances and resilience (Jaffe, Lemon & Poisson, 2003), and women viewed the courts as facilitating this controlling behaviour. Professionals agreed, describing the courts as unfair towards mothers and unaware of IPVA and trauma.

Survivors relied on informal and formal support throughout the contact process, negotiating accompanying challenges. Whilst some informal support networks were positive (e.g., new partners), others led to feelings of blame and judgement. Some family members placed responsibility on the women for their circumstances. The third study raised issues with neighbours because of previous noise complaints, or with work because of perceived lack of reliability. In summary, women were already isolated prior to leaving the relationship and now faced additional judgement and pressure from support networks. This is particularly problematic when considering Tetlock's (2002) social functionist approach. Social functionism is the need to justify one's actions to those around them, as well as themselves. Support seeking can be impacted by the extent to which survivors feel their decisions are going to be perceived as irrational or a poor decision (Tetlock, 2002). Positive social support can therefore influence how a survivor feels about themselves, as well as providing the crucial support needed. The findings suggested that positive informal support came from other survivors, new partners, and online spaces. Online spaces in particular were highlighted in study one as being a non-judgemental and supportive place where women could anonymously share their stories and be there for each other. This empowered mothers and gave them strength.

Theoretical Understandings: Shifting the Pattern of Abusive Control

Wuest and Merritt-Gray (2018) developed a theory they name '*shifting the pattern of abusive control*'

(p. 281). Whilst intended to examine women's journeys to living without violence, the theory provides additional understanding and insight when considering women's journeys to reaching safe contact – or the barriers to this as the case may be. Wuest and Merritt-Gray theorise that women move from *'insidious oppression'* (p. 284) to *'shifting the pattern of abusive control'* (p. 284) in three ways: *'counter-acting abuse, taking control and living differently'* (p. 284). These are explored in relation to the findings of this thesis.

Counter-acting abuse consists of minimising the violence by trying to explain, provide excuses for, or avoid violent interactions. This was evident in the two survivor studies of this thesis, whereby survivors explained their partner's anger as frustration, or minimised the abuse because it wasn't physical. Fortifying is the next step of the process (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 2018). This refers to women changing how they think about themselves, taking steps to be more open with others about the abuse, or developing social connections. Where women receive blame, judgement, or negative responses, they may withdraw, however, where support is offered, this can make them stronger (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 2018).

It is evident across the studies in this thesis that negative judgements from family, friends and professionals had an impact on survivor's sense of self, resulting in them staying in the abusive relationship for longer. When survivors were able to access support that named their experiences as abuse, this helped them to become more aware and take steps to consider options for the future. Private counselling and therapeutic services were described as beneficial in helping women become aware of the abuse and manage trauma for both the women and children, however this will not have been a possibility for all survivors financially.

In addition, training was not resourced for professionals across the systems. The literature notes that schools and GPs are not comfortable dealing with disclosures of abuse, and do not have the training required to sufficiently respond (Barron, 2004; Stanley et al., 2015). This is despite survivors noting the benefits of such services in helping them to become aware they were experiencing IPVA and therefore enabled them to seek support. However, healthcare services should not be waiting for survivors to disclose abuse as they may not be able to do so (Women's Aid, 2021). Instead, training is needed to instil confidence in healthcare professionals to make sensitively asking women routine (Women's Aid, 2021). The responsibility to act lies with the whole community (Home Office, 2021). Healthcare services should then be equipped with the knowledge and confidence to refer on to specialist services (Women's Aid, 2021). However, these are lacking and under-funded. If the VAWG strategy is to improve opportunities for disclosure, it must also improve access and funding to specialist services. Consideration should be

given to what services survivors are accessing, making these more readily available as part of the VAWG strategy (Home Office, 2021).

Survivors often had to rely on third sector organisations for support, advice, and guidance (see studies one and two). Support from IPVA NGOs was seen as generally positive. Women's Aid were noted as offering spaces where survivors could interact with each other and viewed as the gold standard. Professionals in study three outlined disability-related and other NGOs as offering strong levels of support, though this was not highlighted by survivors. NGOs that understood the difficulties faced by women in or leaving abusive relationships offered the most beneficial support. However, third sector agencies are struggling with austerity (SafeLives, 2019) and cannot be expected to do the work that affords women and children basic rights. The *tackling violence against women and girls strategy* acknowledges the role of government, stating that the way the government allocate funding or commissions services creates a *'postcode lottery'* for support (Home Office, 2021, p. 75). Despite arguing that this needs to change and support needs to be increased, the strategy (Home Office, 2021) provides no clear explanation as to how they will make this happen. This is a must given that specialist IPVA services are rarely included in health budgets (Women's Aid, 2021b). In 2019-20, only 10.2% of community-based services received funding from clinical commissioning groups (Women's Aid, 2021b). Wuest and Merritt-Gray (2018) state that positive support is necessary for survivors to move on to the next part of their process, *'breaking free'* (p. 284), highlighting the importance of ensuring that support is available, accessible, and bias-free.

Breaking free consists of women considering what options are available to them to safely leave the relationship. This is an important part of the process but may take time. Wuest and Merrit-Gray (2018) found that women in their study returned to the relationship several times after short periods of living elsewhere, however this allowed them the opportunity to think and consider how their life might change without abuse. Jeffner (2000) would refer to this time away as providing 'space for action'. Once women were able to accept that they could no longer live with the *'insidious oppression'* (p. 284) of abuse, they were able to move on to the next step of the theory; taking control.

Taking control often occurs once abuse is escalating, with a specific incident acting as a catalyst (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 2018). Children experiencing the violence or attempting to intervene is one of the examples the authors give as a catalyst, alongside serious threats of injury or death, and/or an attack on the women's belief systems. This was highlighted very clearly in study two of this thesis where all the women experienced a catalyst before ending the relationship. For Meredith, this catalyst was the safety of her children. For Kelly, the catalyst was serious injury. For Federica and Martine, the catalyst was

accompanied by an opportunity. For Federica and Martine, the catalysts were depleting mental health. For Federica, the opportunity to move to a country she felt supported in brought an avenue for escape. For Martine, options increased once she became aware she was experiencing abuse and re-evaluated her options of using a women's shelter. Taking control involved taking back personal autonomy however this often resulted in increased levels of fear and acknowledgment that taking control could increase the abuse (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 2018). Indeed, the women detailed how fearful they were of their partner's upon leaving the relationship.

However, it provided women with the opportunity for personal growth and to reclaim some of their personal power, as detailed by Wuest and Merritt-Gray (2018). In Wuest and Merritt-Gray's (2018) study, the women limited their partner's abuse by ending the relationship, or threatening to do so, and being more assertive. This was most successful when women were supported by the justice system or support networks, showing their partner that abuse would no longer be accepted and that their aims would not be achieved in this way. A lack of support resulted in women returning to the relationship. Partners of the women in the study eventually learned to respect the limits set by women, or fear losing them completely (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 2018). This was evident across all three studies of this thesis. Women asserted themselves by setting boundaries for contact, accessing the justice system, and reaching out to family or friends. However, not all the women had positive social support, with some detailing judgement and blame from parents, professionals, and friends.

Only a limited number of women detailed positive support from professionals or the contact system, with the majority feeling as though the contact system was biased and limited accountability for their ex-partner's. This had an impact on their ex-partner's behaviour (for example, continuing the abuse), and the women's wellbeing (for example, trauma symptoms). The whole family needs to be supported to achieve safe contact (Cleaver, Maras, Oram & McCallum, 2019), yet DVPPs are limited in availability with significant waiting lists (Cafcass, 2021). This limits ways for fathers to be held accountable and work on their behaviour. DVPPs in the community should be resourced and made accessible to all that need it. This should be considered alongside overuse of parenting programmes for mothers that do not need it, wasting resources that could be put elsewhere. The lack of DVPPs available has implications for women's safety and men's behaviour change. This lack of accountability and bias impedes women's ability to take back control, build their personal power and begin healing through personal growth (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 2018). Limiting women from taking back control could result in women returning to the abuse, impacting the safety of them and their children (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 2018).

Positive narratives across the thesis improved women's experiences of the contact process, including the safety of themselves and their children. Positive narratives included professionals recognising risk, listening to mothers and children, and understanding the dynamics of trauma and abuse. In some cases, judges overrode decisions made by other professionals after taking these factors into account, or allocated guardian *ad litem*. Where guardian *ad litem* were allocated, survivors felt positively about their input in representing the best interests of their children. Further training and support are needed for all professionals involved in the contact supra-system, with training acknowledging the prevalent myths and beliefs placing survivors at risk. This is essential for good practice.

Impeding the vital steps of taking back control also has implications for positive contact. Wuest and Merritt-Gray (2018) discuss the reclaiming of power and setting boundaries as a precursor to renegotiating the relationship, an important step to achieve abuse-free contact. Renegotiating the relationship happened gradually and involved men respecting the limits and boundaries that women set on the relationship. Child contact is provided as an example of this, whereby women learned to set limits and boundaries for their partner's after leaving, and the contact was used as a trial period to see if fathers would adhere to the limits set over a sustained period.

This was particularly evident in study two of this thesis, with some examples of this in study one. This was the number one most important factor for positive future contact and was most seen where informal contact took place. Women learned to manage and negotiate safety and risk, putting boundaries in place. Children seemed to enjoy contact more over time and learned what to expect from fathers. Informal contact still had challenges, however women in this thesis were able to make good decisions that benefitted themselves and their children. For example, Martine had to continuously set boundaries, negotiate limits, and mediate interactions with her ex-partner. However, after some time she learned to co-exist with her partner in raising their son and ensure that her son had a positive relationship with his father. Wuest and Merritt-Gray (2018) frame this in terms of women returning to safer relationships - if men were able to sustain positive behaviour, women would consider returning to the relationship if it was on the renegotiated terms of the relationship. This was different for each survivor, with some finding it satisfactory to co-exist in the relationship without abuse, whereas others wanted further investment in the relationship by their partner's (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 2018). However, this can be applied to child contact and survivors in this thesis in that whilst survivors have ended the relationship, they are maintaining a relationship with fathers due to contact. All positive narratives in this thesis centred on the back-and-forth process of women reclaiming their control, power and assertiveness, and men learning to respect this. This rarely happened for formal contact, possibly because the women were unable to

achieve this given the loss of power and control they experienced as part of the system. Formal contact seemingly resulted in more trauma and took longer to become stable than informal contact.

The authors outline that not all survivors will seek to leave an abusive relationship but will want to work towards ending the abuse. Whilst slightly different to maintaining a romantic relationship with a partner, Wuest and Merritt-Gray's (2018) theory can be applied overall as the first two elements of their theory (counter-acting abuse and taking control) are relevant to those leaving an abusive relationship. In addition, women may return to the relationship throughout the contact process as part of their journey to breaking free (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 2018). The authors argue that the men in their study eventually changed to non-violent behaviour through the act of both parties *'living differently'* (p. 284). Living differently may shift from co-existing to reinvesting in the relationship over time and vice versa. For example, if reinvesting in the relationship does not work, women may be satisfied to co-exist safely. This was the case for women that had connections in the community and social support (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 2018). Living differently consists of *'interrupting previous patterns, securing personal power and reconfiguring the relationship'* (p. 288). This involved women being vigilant, reinforcing rules or boundaries when their partner's behaviour was abusive, defusing conflict that may trigger abuse, developing economic security and continuing their personal growth journeys.

Economic independence was vital for this. For example, being able to leave the offender if they didn't abide by the rules, being able to have employment and secure connections, being able to live independently and support their children, and being able to maintain hobbies or social interaction. This independence allowed for personal growth but also worked as a threat, ensuring that their partner understood that they had the means to leave and live independently should they wish to. If women had economic independence, and were able to support their personal growth, women could successfully reconfigure the relationship alongside their partner, rebuilding a relationship that was satisfying and safe for them to be a part of. This part of the theory is of particular importance when considering child contact and the economic costs associated with it. Fathers consistently requesting further hearings or assessments has been noted in the literature throughout this thesis as an attempt to drain women's finances and remove their independence. This directly impedes positive contact as it does not allow women the possibility to move through their journey and rebuild their sense of self (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 2016). It is an example of men pushing back against the limits set by women (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 2018). This is furthered by the challenges in accessing legal aid. This created an opportunity for fathers to use the system against mothers, as mothers had no legal recourse to funds and thus legal expertise (Rights of Women, 2019b). Survivor theory (Gondolf & Fisher, 1988) argues that survivors should be

acknowledged as 'help-seekers', going out of their way to identify resources and support for IPVA, rather than 'helpless' as suggested by Walker (2000), Gondolf and Fisher (1988) argue that it is lack of resources that impede survivor safety. Wuest and Merritt-Gray (2018) highlight availability of resources as a vital step in their theory to shift the boundaries of abusive control. Other economic costs associated with a relationship break-down included increased childcare costs and the cost of private medical care due to court scrutiny of NHS data. This has been discussed in further detail elsewhere in this thesis, alongside the limits to government funding allocations to support women's services and private care. Lack of resources available to survivors and fathers created a disadvantage for them and their children. Lack of DVPPs, limited recourse to funds, lack of access to appropriate healthcare, austerity, and under-resourced services meant that effective support was limited. This has further implications within the family courts as judges have been said to hold socioeconomic implicit bias (Neitz, 2013; Maldonado, 2017), amongst other bias. Bias and other systemic barriers impeding safe contact are discussed next.

Discord in the System

This section addresses research questions 2 and 4, exploring women and professional experiences and awareness of the child contact system in England and Wales.

Women entering the child contact system came with their own lived experiences. This thesis noted the trauma survivors faced pre and post relationship. This trauma left survivors in vulnerable positions, exhausted, with inner resources depleted (Women's Aid, 2021). Whilst trying to repair their own *'system disturbance'* (Bertalanffy, 1967, p. 127) and facilitate their children's healing, women were required to negotiate abusive contact alongside multiple complex systems. This required a great deal of emotional and practical labour. Each system had its own goals, rules, and requirements. Some of the systems negotiated by survivors were perceived as irrational, with shifting boundaries and rules (for example, contact with fathers, or family court practice).

Individually exploring the systems involved in IPVA and child contact allowed visibility of good working practice. This was considered in the individual study discussions (see chapters six, seven and eight). However, this thesis argues that working on one individual system alone will do little to resolve the challenges faced by women. Instead, the whole, and how the various systems interact with each other merit attention. When considering the various systems throughout the child contact process, it becomes clear how the overarching supra-system is laced with systems that may be more suited to dealing with simpler 'healthy' relationships, and the systemic barriers in IPVA cases. Systemic barriers for survivors

throughout the supra-system meant there were continuous impediments, adding strain, confusion, and lack of access to safe contact.

Systemic Barriers

Several systemic barriers for survivors were identified throughout this thesis, including: system goals within and between systems; attitudes, beliefs and system culture; and working in silos. These are explained next.

Working in Silos.

The various systems that make up the supra-system worked in silos to meet their own system goals with little consideration of the goals of the supra-system or sub-systems (also highlighted in Hunter, Burton & Trinder, 2020 – see p. 26). This left survivors to perform the labour of bringing these services together or work with each one individually. Multi-agency working and co-ordinated action is required to tackle IPVA (Shepard, 2005). For example, the Duluth model (USA; Pence & Shepard, 1999) is a co-ordinated community wide approach to tackling IPVA, noted in the literature as producing promising results (Shepard, 2005). The model is mostly applied to the criminal justice system, however there is scope to expand this (Shepard, 2005).

A lack of multi-agency working was highlighted throughout, particularly in study three of this thesis. Sharing of information between services was minimal. Where information was shared this wasn't always used, for example in court reports. This was particularly the case for Cafcass. Part of the issue here was highlighted as lack of time. Reports were often perceived as rushed, with Cafcass officers giving little time when undertaking assessments and reports before coming to a decision. Professionals in the study felt that reports should consider all agencies and professionals involved with the child, including speaking to schools. In some cases, survivors stated that other professionals they were involved with raised concerns about reports and court decisions. These concerns centred around risk and wellbeing.

In terms of policy, the *Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy* (Home Office, 2021) in England and Wales clearly states, *'We will not prevent and tackle violence against women and girls without a truly cross-system approach'* (p. 74), arguing for a *'stronger system'* (p. 74) that works together. The strategy highlights extra funding provided for probation services, local authorities and police crime commissioners. The Tampon Tax Fund provides funding for third sector organisations, effectively meaning that women are funding women's services (Home Office, 2021). However, there is no mention of the family courts, and the support women require to navigate this. In addition, NHS provision is being

developed for trauma-informed mental health services, with little acknowledgement of the barriers to using this service. Survivors struggle to access NHS mental health services prior to contact proceedings out of fear of losing children or being stigmatised (Women's Aid, 2021) and this thesis has outlined how survivors were fearful of accessing services during contact proceedings for similar reasons. Increasing funding for such services (Home Office, 2021) will limit impact unless barriers are removed. There are gaps in the policy. Government services were highlighted as fractured across the studies with discrepancies in terms of which services survivors used. For example, study one highlighted issues with accessing legal aid and the added distress of being a litigant in person. This created an opportunity for fathers to use the system against mothers, as mothers had no legal recourse to funds and thus legal expertise (Rights of Women, 2019b). Taking an ecological systems approach to IPVA may help to fill these gaps, identifying key services outside of criminal and civil justice and within the third sector. This would also help to identify key challenges at each level of the supra-system.

The lack of action and recognition when it came to challenges women faced for child contact had repercussions for survivors. A predominant theme across the studies was the emotional labour required for survivors to engage with services, informal and formal, and the number of times women had to re-tell their story to different agencies – often for limited benefit. Multi-agency working in England and Wales is highlighted in the literature as a concern for IPVA. For example, Peckover and Golding (2015) highlight multi-agency working as requiring improvement when it comes to IPVA and safeguarding children, noting that differing priorities and levels of expertise resulted in variable understanding, uncoordinated practice, and poor resourcing. This practice is contrary to policy (Home Office, 2021) and best practice noted in research. This had an impact on survivors. For example, whilst dealing with their own mental wellbeing and managing symptoms of trauma for both themselves and their children, survivors spent considerable time engaging with multiple agencies by telephone, online or in person. A survivor might need to speak to government agencies for financial or beneficial reasons such as tax credits. They might also be engaged with children's services, police services, GPs, and therapeutic services. Alongside this, they may need to engage with solicitors, schools, NGOs (separate for IPVA services and autism services for example), and financial services such as banks. If going through a formal contact process, this would be increased to perhaps a barrister, psychologists for assessments, guardian *ad litem*, Cafcass and/or independent experts. We can see that even systems focussed on the father require some labour from the mother – for example, DVPPs routinely include a professional focussed on the survivor and their safety (as is good practice). Despite this, professionals in study three noted a lack of multi-agency working, whilst noting this as preferable and resulting in better outcomes (Bostock, Lynch, Newlands & Forrester, 2018).

System Goals Within and Between Systems.

Goals within each system were not always aligned, creating confusion and frustration amongst survivors. This section discusses the system goals of children's services, policing, and the family courts.

Children's services (CS) were mentioned across the studies. There was a paradox of being labelled an unfit mother for staying in an abusive relationship versus being an unfit mother for not safeguarding the children when leaving an abusive relationship (Hester, 2011). This was coupled with CS being perceived as uninformed, judgemental, and biased when it came to enforcing accountability. Professional participants in study three acknowledged the fight women faced, and the lack of accountability for fathers, despite noting it was fathers that were in the wrong and who continued to exacerbate difficulties. This meant that children's services were viewed as unhelpful by professionals and survivors in studies two and three.

The heavy responsibilisation of survivors to protect their children whilst simultaneously expecting them to police the behaviour of fathers could be considered a form of victim-blame. Women are blamed for staying, blamed for leaving and then blamed when their partners are abusive. If the main goal of CS is to safeguard children, then fathers must be held accountable for their behaviour and women supported to be safe, creating a stronger environment for the child. These actions are a paradox in and of themselves – for example, removing a child from the mother due to the father's behaviour does not increase child welfare (the overarching goal), but reduces support and increases vulnerability (Pinna, 2016). This is not to say that all mothers that have experienced IPVA will be 'fit' mothers, but that the primary action should be safeguarding from further abuse and giving the mother time to recover. A clear focus on supporting the mother and understanding the consequences of trauma, particularly whereby mothers exhibit maladaptive coping methods such as substance use, would be more beneficial, as well as acknowledging that recovery takes time.

Similarly, police officers were viewed as unhelpful throughout the process by both mothers and professionals, mostly because of the lack of focus or initiative to safeguard mothers, and in turn children. From refusing support to collect children, to conducting interviews with children in a way that made them inadmissible in court, police action was often viewed negatively by survivors. This may be due to the misclassification of incidents as 'family disputes' rather than a pattern of IPVA or dismissing IPVA altogether to focus on specific incidents directed at children (Myhill & Johnson, 2016). For example, refusing support to collect children when the father has taken them might be because police viewed the incident as a simple family dispute, or because there was no court order and therefore, they could not take the child from a father with PR. However, this dismissed IPVA, and the risk to both mother and child

(Myhill & Johnson, 2016). Adopting a safeguarding approach that considered IPVA may have resulted in a different course of action.

Police action may be viewed as more supportive if a victim empowerment approach is adopted (Birdsall, 2018). This approach takes into consideration the wants and needs of the survivor on a case-by-case basis, increasing confidence, trust in policing, and managing expectations (Wilson & Jasinski, 2004). Often, police adopt a 'victim choice' or 'pro-prosecution approach' (Hoyle & Sanders, 2000), aligning this with positive policing action (Birdsall, 2018). However, both approaches come with consequences. Victim choice approaches can result in survivors withdrawing statements and support for subsequent prosecution, sending a wider message to perpetrators that abuse is acceptable (Birdsall, 2018). Withdrawal also has a perceived impact on police attitudes to IPVA cases, viewing survivors as lacking co-operation (Myhill & Johnson, 2016). Pro-prosecution approaches remove survivor control, placing emphasis on the survivor to be the primary form of evidence in a case (Barrett & Hamilton-Giachristsis, 2013), and treating survivor welfare as secondary to the investigation (Birdsall, 2018). The policing goal should be to secure a successful case, but this may not align with the goals of the survivor which are simply to cease the IPVA (Harris-Short & Miles, 2011).

In addition, goals between systems were unaligned, adding complexity for the survivor. For example, the criminal courts include different laws, rights, rules, and responsibilities than civil courts. A criminal court may have found a perpetrator guilty of assault or another criminal act, yet the survivor would still have to prove abuse in family courts (Practice Direction 12J). Protections offered by law enforcement and criminal courts were said to be ignored or discounted in the civil courts by survivors in this thesis (e.g., non-molestation orders). Receiving special measures in the criminal courts will not automatically grant special measures in the family courts. Lack of access to special measures in the family courts had a negative impact on survivors in court (Hunter, Burton & Trinder, 2020). This included physical access requirements such as a separate waiting room and entering the court through separate areas. This meant that survivors were often faced with their abuser before they entered the court room and were often subjected to IPVA during this time. This was similar for contact centres, whereby women often encountered fathers outside the space, heightening risk. These are government and policy level issues that need immediate action. The Victim's Code (MoJ, 2020) highlights special measures as rights within the criminal justice system, yet the same rights are not afforded to women in the family courts. The two systems do not work together, duplicating tasks and burdening survivors. This duplication also dismisses the effort taken to achieve a prosecution or protection order in the criminal courts. Criminal justice prosecution rates for IPVA are low. Out of 253, 546 arrests in England and Wales between April

2020 and March 2021, only 8% of these resulted in police charging the suspect (ONS, 2021). Over the 6 years between March 2015 and April 2021, 79, 053 cases were brought to the CPS, of which 50, 838 incidents resulted in suspects being charged, and 42, 574 cases resulting in a conviction (ONS, 2021). Cross-collaborative sharing of best practice between the criminal and family courts would benefit survivors, and as highlighted by the Victim's Code (MoJ, 2020), help them to feel safer, improving evidence, court outcomes and experiences. The Domestic Abuse Act (2021) does attempt to fill this gap, improving access to special measures in the family courts however this is not yet in force.

Consideration to the opposing goals and actions between children's services and the family courts is also merited. Survivors were told by one system to remove their child from the father (children's services), and then accused of alienating their children in another system (family courts). This left survivors with no options. They were essentially blamed for remaining in an abusive relationship and blamed for leaving. Little consideration was given to the risk, welfare and experiences of the mother and child, dismissing the consequences of IPVA whilst simultaneously holding the mother accountable. Children's services and the family courts must unify their approach and work together (Hester, 2011).

The family court system also needs to consider how their processes impact other systems. For example, survivors described thinking carefully about whether who they were contacting could be used against them in a court setting. One consequence of this was GPs, hospitals and mental health services were perceived as being unavailable. This was out of fear of records being used in court against the mother (The National Commission on Domestic and Sexual Violence and Multiple Disadvantage, 2019). This practice was noted as taking place in survivor accounts in this thesis. This limited women's access to healthcare they needed to recover from trauma (Women's Aid, 2021). This highlights a further need to work between systems, particularly children's services and the family courts, and take a trauma-informed approach, acknowledging any mental health issues as because of the abuse rather than as something 'wrong' with the survivor (Women's Aid, 2021).

Societal views, political standpoints and government values that made up the macro-system inevitably had an impact on the maintenance of these opposing goals. Critical social theory, for example, argues that one's actions manifest from power, both societal and historical (Birdsall, 2018). The systems themselves, and the actions of those working within each system are rooted in the power they hold and are formed from the power afforded to them by society (Birdsall, 2018). Conversely, survivor actions need to be considered in light of the lack of societal power they hold (macro level; Dobash & Dobash, 1979) and the additional loss of power that comes with IPVA (micro level; Stark, 2007). Feminist positioning of trauma argues that we must consider the socio-political context for women and trauma,

taking this into account for therapeutic work and in trauma-informed approaches (macro level; Tseris, 2013). Structural oppression such as gendered inequalities inevitably have an impact on trauma experiences and must be considered (Women's Aid, 2021).

Attitudes, Beliefs and System Culture.

Professionals within the system took little account of risk, misunderstood the dynamics of IPVA, and failed to take trauma into account. The attitudes and beliefs of professionals working within the contact system created a culture reflective of these beliefs, and this impacted professional action. The primary goal of the family court, for example, is to act in the best interests of the child (the Children Act, 1989) – however, the perceived culture of the family court lacked patience, understanding and training in relation to IPVA. The result was that neither the mother nor the children were protected in the same way all parties might be in a divorce where there was no IPVA. Professional challenges in cases involving IPVA do exist. For example, the balance of evidence required is very difficult, if ever, for a survivor to achieve given the dynamics of IPVA, inevitably making the process more difficult for professionals. However, this thesis argues that the laws and policies are not the most significant problem within the system. It is how they are applied to IPVA cases and professional decision-making. One of the key factors causing this is the persistence of myths and false beliefs.

Prevalent myths and beliefs identified across this thesis highlighted gender inequality, perceiving IPVA as a relationship or parenting problem, misunderstanding anger in IPVA, and lack of clarity on risk. These inter-relate in that gender perceptions can have an impact on how survivors and fathers are viewed within the systems by professionals and the system itself. For example, women being viewed as 'hostile' was likely to reflect social constructions of motherhood (see chapter three), and this had a perceived impact on the way women were treated by professionals (Miller & Manzer, 2021). Equally, fathers applying for contact appeared to be viewed as going above and beyond for their children, perhaps affecting the way they were viewed by the court system as charming but frustrated. It may be beneficial for professionals working in contact systems to adopt a social agency approach. Social agency theory argues that professionals should focus on the situation and not on the characteristics of the survivor (Schuller et al, 2004). Survivor characteristics can be misinterpreted by professionals in the system, either because of beliefs held or lack of understanding of trauma.

Another myth or belief was that contact with both parents is always in the best interests of the child. This is not always the case, particularly with IPVA, and dismisses the risk and consequences for mother and child (Hunter, Burton and Trinder, 2020). However, when this risk was raised in a contact

setting, with mothers outlining how their children were or felt unsafe, this was interpreted as mothers manipulating children or interfering with the father's right to see the child. This not only reflected gendered beliefs and acceptance of contact related myths, but a lack of training and understanding of IPVA. From referrals to anger management, to undervaluing risk, this lack of knowledge was perceived to impact on the decisions made by professionals. For example, perceiving IPVA as a relationship or parenting problem inevitably had an influence on what programmes parents were mandated to, whether judges chose to apply a fact-finding hearing, and/or considered a survivor vulnerable enough to warrant special measures. The decisions currently being made heighten risk for mothers and children, exacerbating trauma.

Trauma has a significant role to play when we consider survivor interactions (micro-system) within the child contact system (exo-system). The psychological impact of continuously reliving their experiences whilst negotiating trauma and abuse should not be under-estimated. Inevitably, trauma will have affected how survivors interacted with, and interpreted, the actions of others (Westera & Powell, 2017) - for example, how women experienced power dynamics within the family courts. The impact of the power differential on an individual who has been previously stripped of any power can be akin to the abusive relationship itself, resulting in secondary trauma. When considering the family courts, acknowledging the balance of power, and how the adversarial approach exacerbates this is important (Edwards, Baron & Ferrick, 2008). For example, when a powerless individual is confronted with someone in a position of power telling them that it is in their children's best interests to spend time with their father, despite the children showing verbal and non-verbal signs they are afraid or distressed, it may create further trauma through re-experiencing the loss of power and control they experienced because of IPVA (Stark, 2007). When disbelieved, this may recreate the emotions and distress felt when those around them did not believe them upon disclosure of IPVA. It undermines the experiences of survivors and their children. Ultimately women viewed the family court as working against them and their children, despite the family courts and women sharing the same goal: safe contact with fathers.

In addition, professional beliefs and system culture had an impact on the practice of others within and between systems. For example, professionals in study three discussed concerns about pressure to meet system beliefs or alter their practice to reflect what other professionals wanted to hear. This pressure was alluded to across the survivor studies, particularly in relation to Cafcass and court reports. However, legal representatives were also highlighted as tailoring their advice to address the most likely outcome in a case, rather than what survivors needed or what the law might allow. This was an issue when it came to

survivors being advised to undertake mediation or pressured to allow more contact than what they felt was best for their children.

Theoretical Understandings: Implicit Social Cognition Theory

Some of the attitudes, myth acceptance and beliefs detailed throughout this thesis may be explained by exploring Implicit Social Cognition Theory (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Struffolino, 2018), and the notion of implicit bias. Implicit bias can involve preconceived notions about gender, race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status, all factors which have been shown to impact the outcome of child contact cases[6] (Beniwal, 2017; Breger, 2019; Mandonaldo, 2017; Neitz, 2013; Struffolino, 2018). Implicit beliefs affect attitude, in turn impacting behaviour (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). Implicit beliefs are automatic and reflexive, not built on experience but affect, with the mind filling in gaps in cognition with preconceived notions of what traits or behaviours we associate with an individual or group (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). Whilst judges are said to be trained to consider and 'shield' their own bias, implicit bias consists of thoughts and beliefs that are subconscious, and often developed in childhood (Breger, 2019). This can therefore influence decision-making due to its 'hidden' nature (Breger, 2019; Struffolino, 2018). Struffolino (2018) argues that implicit bias stems from explicit bias or prejudice that is no longer tolerated, shifting *'explicit expressions of discrimination'* to more accepted implicit forms of bias (p. 261). Those within the child contact system can appear to be fair, just, and explicitly promote equality whilst implicitly holding gender bias, for example (Struffolino, 2018). Breger (2019) argues that implicit bias is not necessarily intended to be deleterious, malevolent, or purposeful, and can at times be positively framed, however it impacts decision-making nonetheless. For example, implicit bias on the notions of motherhood are not in and of themselves harmful, however when applied to a family court setting this can result in mothers being perceived as harmful or 'bad mothers' simply for not upholding the stereotype of the nurturing, virtuous and selfless mother (Breger, 2012). This can have a deleterious impact on the outcome of a case.

Family courts are said to encounter some unique challenges when considering implicit bias. For example, a judge may hear multiple cases from the same families affecting their level of bias through repeated exposure and court cases may be emotionally intense resulting in judges becoming *'jaded or sceptical'* (Breger, 2019, p. 1062). Of particular concern is the argument that high stress environments,

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[6] It should be noted that these studies are based on findings from the USA.

such as the family courts, may increase levels of implicit bias (Casey, Warren, Cheesman & Elek, 2013). Implicit motherhood bias and implicit socioeconomic bias may be most prevalent in these settings given that parenting is being judged, and the cost of the court process may impact the socioeconomic status of those attending. For example, Individuals with lower socioeconomic status have been argued to be treated unfavourably in the family courts due to implicit socioeconomic bias (Neitz, 2013; Mandonaldo, 2017), with judges failing to acknowledge the experiences of those that are deemed to be 'poor' due to the gap in wealth between themselves and those individuals (Neitz, 2013). Judges are said to favour middle-class parenting styles in comparison to parenting styles adopted by those from lower incomes (Mandonaldo, 2017). With survivors in this thesis having contended with economic challenges associated with child contact, and having experienced economic abuse, this becomes extremely relevant.

These factors inevitably inter-relate when considered from an intersectional lens, exacerbating structural disadvantage (Crenshaw, 1990). For example, Black women perceived to be of low socioeconomic status are more likely to experience an unfavourable outcome for contact than Black women from a middle-class background (Mandonaldo, 2017; Beniwal, 2017). Bias around economic status inadvertently impacts those from minority backgrounds (Maldonado, 2017; Beniwal, 2017). For example, immigration status is said to unfavourably impact the likelihood of parents being perceived as fit to parent (Mandonaldo, 2017). Further explicit and implicit bias on race and ethnicity exacerbate this. For example, Black women expressing themselves in court are more likely to be labelled as aggressive when they are being forthright or expressing themselves freely (Mandonaldo, 2017). In addition, assessments can disadvantage minority individuals. For example, personality testing is said to fail to acknowledge cultural variation, skewing the results, yet court assessments do not traditionally take this into account (Mandonaldo, 2017). Beniwal (2017) argues that this directly contradicts the fundamental rights of those affected – specifically the right to raise one's child - and by failing to acknowledge this it *'has the unintended effect of endorsing'* racial inequality (p. 1021).

In addition, implicit socioeconomic bias and implicit motherhood bias are related. Society, thinking that the workplace is equal for all, reinforces the notion that women should become financially stable and no longer rely on their partner's support (Struffolino, 2018). This is despite women being more likely to maintain their role as primary caregiver, disadvantaging mothers in the workplace (Dinner, 2016). For example, inability to work long hours or high costs associated with childcare (Dinner, 2016). Often, this imbalance in parental responsibilities is ignored in the family courts, awarding both parties equal rights despite the father not having shared equal parenting when in the relationship (Struffolino, 2015). This was noted by survivors in studies two and three of this thesis.

Implicit motherhood bias is most identified as affecting survivors and children throughout this thesis. Given that participant race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status could not be isolated in study one, this is perhaps unsurprising. Implicit motherhood bias is said to negatively impact child contact outcomes in the family courts (Breger, 2012; Casey et al., 2013; Struffolino, 2018) and to be supported by societal inequality (macro-system) reinforcing the bias (Struffolino, 2018). This is compounded further by the false notion that we have achieved gender equality in the justice system (Struffolino, 2018). Struffolino (2018) argues that women are disadvantaged most when they have engaged in stereotypical motherhood, such as staying home to be the primary caregiver, as their role is undervalued upon separation by the courts. However, men are praised for wanting to take on a parenting role post-separation and are viewed as going above and beyond what is expected of them (Struffolino, 2018). Breger (2012) argues that mothers are disadvantaged the moment they enter the family court, as a 'good mother' would not be in that position. Mothers are unconsciously expected to be *a "good" mother being selfless and subjugating her own needs to those of her children, and a "bad" mother as one who is putting some other need before her children's needs'* (Breger, 2012, p. 565). The stereotype of the 'ideal mother' reflects someone who is nurturing, kind, flawless, and ultimately perfect – an unattainable ideal, yet unconsciously expected nonetheless (Breger, 2012). This can be seen throughout this thesis in the acceptance of myths around parenting, and 'hostile' mothers.

The notion of motherhood is distinct from gender but ultimately intersects with it, with gender-based inequalities reinforcing societal constructions of motherhood and fatherhood (Breger, 2012; see chapter three for a further discussion of societal constructions of parenthood). In fact, even speculation of men's roles impact judgements of mothers – if the father has contributed to the housework he is perceived as helpful (suggesting this is the responsibility of the mother), and therefore the mother has had extra support with her 'tasks' (Swift, 1998). In short, the role of the mother is romanticised and unrealistic, holding women to exacting standards, yet fathers are romanticised just for contributing to the household or wanting to see their children (Breger, 2012; Swift, 1998). Implicit motherhood bias therefore *'continues to place women at a systemic disadvantage'* (Struffolino, 2018, p. 265), with no solutions having yet been identified that lead to long-term change in beliefs (Breger, 2012).

The American Bar Association (ABA) acknowledge the harm of implicit bias in the courtroom, implementing education programmes across some states in the USA (Bassett, 2013). The ABA argue that awareness can reduce bias (Bassett, 2013). Implicit bias testing such as making use of the Implicit Association Test has been shown to accurately identify biases one may hold (Kang, 2021). However, judgements made about one's own bias can impact test results. For example, Kang (2021) states that

thinking oneself to be fair and objective results in worse performance on implicit bias assessments. Kang (2021) argues that this is because the individuals consider themselves to be bias free and therefore take less time to consider the impact of bias on their own decision-making. Education and awareness alone do not necessarily lead to behaviour change (Kang, 2021). Instead, an individual must be motivated to change biased behaviour and this motivation must be internal (Kang, 2021; Rachlinski, Johnson, Wistrich & Guthrie, 2008). Internal motivation means *'striving to achieve our personal values, consistent with our genuine ethical commitments. It's how we behave even when no one is watching, as we strive toward our ideal selves.'* (Kang, 2018, p. 81). External motivation, such as pressure from society or an employer, is not said to influence or shape implicit bias, and therefore behaviour based on such bias (Kang, 2021). Shifting implicit bias can take a considerable time, however Dasgupta and Asgari (2004) argue that long-lasting change can result from increasing social interactions with those that challenge preconceived notions. For example, women being surrounded by successful women can undo implicit bias that men are more successful than women. This suggests that a more diverse judiciary may be beneficial in reducing implicit bias, particularly in a family court setting where one person effectively makes all the decisions (Breger, 2019).

Conclusions, Limitations and Contribution to the Field

In short, the systems within the supra-system do not effectively work together to achieve a healthy outcome for individuals involved. System barriers create challenges and effectively hinder women's healing processes, including the ability to develop safe and positive contact with fathers. There is clear discord between systems and within systems. The supra-system and its components may work well for some cases, but do not work effectively for those experiencing IPVA. Goals are not aligned; implicit bias impedes positive action; and both IPVA and trauma are afterthoughts when they should be at the forefront of decision-making. This has a direct impact on child contact and women's journeys to an abuse-free and empowered life (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 2018). A more holistic and ecological approach is necessary when considering cases of IPVA and child contact. This should consider how the macro system influences policy, practice and judgements made by professionals. Action needs to take place at every level of the ecological model, with consideration of how to align the goals of multiple systems when it comes to keeping women and children safe, with implicit bias being a central focus for professionals working in the child contact system. The theories applied throughout this thesis help to provide understanding on a complex and multi-faceted issue, from considering the steps to safe contact, to bias in the courts, and finally how the systems in place can be better understood to enhance effective practice. As such, several recommendations have been developed for policy, practice and research. These are explored after consideration of the limitations of this thesis.

Limitations

The thesis overall comes with several limitations, some discussed throughout. It focusses exclusively on heterosexual female survivors of IPVA and includes a lack of representation of BAME individuals or harder to reach survivors (Thiara & Gill, 2012). This was unavoidable given the method adopted in the first study, and the second study included participants that had self-selected to take part. Further research is needed with a focus on BAME survivors, including making use of translators for those that are not fluent in English. Equally, disability was not given the consideration that the researcher would have liked, and future research could focus on this (Women's Aid, 2021). The participant size across the PhD is small, with the aim of the PhD being to provide depth over numbers, however it is important to understand the scale of the issues highlighted throughout. In addition, qualitative research allows for deeper insight and further understanding of experiences (Bryman, 2008), making this a useful method for the current study. Future research adopting a mixed-methods approach is vital to amalgamate findings in the field, and preferably with a wider range of participants and professionals.

A final point to note here is that this thesis intended to explore women's experiences. It is inevitable that in discussing women, the contentious debates around father's rights will be highlighted as a limitation of this study. However, father's rights are not excluded within this thesis. Fathers who abuse their partners and children should have access to rehabilitation programmes and should be supported to make change. This has been addressed throughout. The notion of women alienating their children from fathers will also be an additional point of debate for father's rights groups. There is no rigorous and good quality evidence to support the case that women alienate children from their fathers (Meier, 2021), however it is clear that father's claiming alienation has a significant detrimental impact on the experiences of women (Birchall & Choudry, 2022). Father's rights are not excluded from the perspective of this thesis. One could argue from the findings that father's rights are clearly given an advantage over the rights of women and children in the family court arena making this research vital. Debates around 'what about the men' or 'what about the rights of the father' are destructive to the wider initiative and take attention away from key findings that could be used to support families as a whole. This thesis provides a critical overview of women's experiences, and it is clear from the findings that much work is needed here to make improvements. The thesis is clear in its approach. Neutrality was never argued, and a strength of this thesis is in the clarity of the stance taken from the outset.

Contribution to the Field

This thesis expands on a relatively limited area of research when considering the literature from England and Wales. It develops the field by providing theory-based explanations of the findings, helping

understanding, and driving change. The crucial contribution is bringing together the findings and literature using systems theories. This has taken place for specific aspects of child contact (for example, parental alienation; Barnett, 2020) but literature examining the wider range of issues together has not been identified. In addition, the methodology adopted within this thesis is unique in its approach, making use of innovative designs that capture the perspectives of survivors and professionals in a way that more traditional studies might not be able to. For example, making use of online survivor posts allows for the reduction of trauma and re-telling of one's story, whilst increasing the opportunity to capture the viewpoints of those that are considered harder to reach populations. In addition, using active learning methods such as ecograms has the benefits of providing participants with future tools when working with survivors, as well as allowing them to communicate their perspectives in visual ways. The findings from this thesis raise several practice, policy, and research implications. These are provided below, including recommendations provided by survivors.

Recommendations

In total, 26 recommendations have been made considering practice, policy, and research. The first six recommendations were provided by survivors in study two of this thesis and therefore should take priority. The final recommendations are based on the findings in this thesis.

1. Government should make legal aid more accessible for a variety of survivors by both increasing signposting through a campaign and third sector conduits. The Victim's Compensation scheme could be considered in improving this function.

   > "Clear sort of direction cause there wasn't any I was like speaking to different people who had different ideas about what you should be doing and how you go about it and I think that maybe legal aid shouldn't be based on the amount of money you've got coming in but should be based on the amount of money you've got after supporting that household of two children" (Kelly, lines 400-406, p18).

2. Child contact processes should consider the time it takes for women to recover from the abuse experienced and factor this into contact decisions.

   > "When he started up wanting contact, I was already reeling from having gone through everything with him. So really I could have done with a bit of support and calmness just to sort of gather myself and try and bring them up because you know the the lead up to leaving was hideous." (Meredith, line 729-732, p28).

3. Contact should not be presumed for IPVA, and the culture of contact at all costs (Barnett, 2017) should be reviewed, with specific directions placed in PD12J to articulate that supervised contact can remain indefinitely, acknowledging that contact does not need to progress to unsupervised contact if unsafe, and that it may remain static should that be the need. This recommendation is based on views from women in this thesis. To clarify – none of the women were seeking to have no contact between children and their fathers.

> "Why can it not be that it can just tick over? If they just had to have contact in a contact centre, why can it not tick over that they just retain some kind of contact that they could pick up more when the kids are grown up or you know when it's all a bit safer and you know all the rest of it rather than um this constant trying to move it on which is absolutely terrifying." (Meredith, line 708-712, p27).

4. Related to this, quality of contact should be taken into account when considering the progression of contact and contact arrangements.

> "And actually, what kind of quality of contact are they having? If he's just shouting at me for most of the contact and not playing with the children, what is the point? (Laughs). You know, that's not good for them, that's not forming a relationship, you know, what, what sort of relationship do they want these children to have? Is anything better than nothing?" (Line 586-589, p22).

5. Survivors should have access to information about their rights and the contact options available to them.

> "I should obviously have had better contact from social services cause that may have impacted on and lessened that amount of things that he was allowed to have, and it could have made my life a little bit easier than having to send agreements backwards and forwards, getting it checked and changed to suit, cause I didn't actually have that back up to know what I could and couldn't get away with." (Lines 420-424, p19).

6. Communication from exo-system services should be regular, and include information about options and rights, guiding the survivor to make safe contact decisions.

> "If I could have forced him to do anger management classes and maybe taken a slower rate of before I allowed him to have them over to stay" (Kelly, lines 427-428, p19).

7. Evidence-based training is needed for family law professionals, medical professionals such as GPs, Judges, Cafcass, independent report writers, schools, counselling services, and children's services. This should be led by survivor voices and could be offered by academics and support services specialising in IPVA.

   a. Academics and specialist services could assist with better education in understanding of IPVA including: the impact of IPVA on women and children; the continuing risk; the manipulation and false outward appearance of perpetrators; and how the family court can be used against survivors. This knowledge is lacking throughout the system leaving professionals without the tools and applied skills they need to support survivors.

   b. Academic psychologists should be included in training delivery that considers implicit bias of professionals, highlighting common myths identified in this thesis and allowing professionals the space to reflect on their own bias and how this affects their practice. Use of assessments such as the Implicit Association Test to measure this is vital, however motivation to change cannot be enforced and this should be considered.

   c. IPVA Training should become mandatory for family law, judges, Cafcass and others directly involved with child contact as part of their professional standards. This direction should be led by the bodies that oversee such professionals. Training should be provided as ongoing CPD, rather than as a one-off event.

8. Professionals undertaking risk assessment tools should use these in conjunction with survivors, allowing them the time to expand and include anything they view as important. Survivors know what places them at risk – it isn't always the big things but the insidious continuous abuse that has an impact. Professionals should take care to consider patterns, acknowledging what makes survivors feel unsafe.

9. Practitioners should consider non-verbal communication of children as a clear communication of their needs and their feelings (Caffrey, 2013). Where children can express themselves verbally, this communication should be considered and form part of the process consistently, rather than on a discretionary basis (Holt, 2018).

10. Where IPVA is alleged, trauma-informed practice should be the starting point for professionals directly involved in the contact process.

    a. Child contact professionals should acknowledge the journey of the survivor and understand the impact of trauma on the brain, body, and mind. For example, memory loss as a symptom of trauma.

b. In particular, the appearance or actions of a survivor should be understood from the perspective as trauma, for example, viewing women as hostile, or withdrawn should not be understood as women being 'challenging' or 'disruptive'.

11. Acknowledging relationships between survivors and professionals/the courts as unequal in terms of power is a must and this should be factored into the court process. Based on the Victim's Code (MoJ, 2020), this should entitle survivors to special measures as it will inevitably impact their evidence and experiencing fear and/or distress in court.

a. HMCTS should ensure that special measures in the family courts are standard practice, asking survivors what they need as opposed to if they need any.

b. This should take place as soon as the survivor discloses abuse and whether or not it is proven in a fact-finding hearing.

c. It should be mandatory for professionals to ask survivors what special measures they need, and this should be documented. The Victim's Code (MoJ, 2020) clearly states this as a requirement for the Criminal Justice System, highlighting good practice.

12. Linked to survivor safety, the family courts and child contact centres should consider survivor safety and fear when negotiating physical spaces. Staggered waiting times, or separate spaces should be available in all family courts. Routes in and out of the building should be evaluated, with contact between the survivor and perpetrator being limited as much as is feasible.

13. Mother's accounts of impact on the child should be considered and included in reports. Trusting mothers should not be perceived as being manipulated. The same is not happening with father's accounts.

14. Agencies should work together to support survivors. Services must stop working in silos and communicate with each other.

a. They should share best practice, with IPVA services leading the way

b. They should effectively communicate what they are each doing to ensure the safety of mother and child – sharing risk assessments for example means the survivor does not have to do this multiple times, and potentially reduces the number of times a survivor must re-tell her story. This has benefits when it comes to trauma. The mode and delivery of this should be explored considering best practice research.

c. System goals are misaligned. Those leading the systems involved in child contact should work together to negotiate these, ensuring it is not the survivor doing the work to negotiate these system discrepancies.

   i. For example: HMCTS and the CJS must work together – too often women discuss having protection orders in place and these being discounted by the family courts.

These must be adhered to and respected, sending a clear message to men who abuse. A criminal conviction for IPVA should be enough evidence of IPVA and considered by HMCTS. The two systems work separately, and this is not protecting survivors and children.

15. PD12J should include specific instructions when it comes to choosing whether to consider IPVA or not. IPVA should always be considered in full where it is alleged, with fact-finding hearings being considered the norm rather than the exception. Professionals are applying judgement to vague instructions and placing women and children in danger.

16. All cases alleging IPVA should have this considered by Cafcass and judges as part of contact arrangements. A clear statement should be provided by judges on how they have considered this, and this should be provided in writing so that future evaluation of judgements can take place.

17. PD12J and professionals working in the child contact system should recognise how the family court is used as a tool by abusive fathers. PD12J should specifically discuss this, ensuring that assessments and court hearings are not repeatedly scheduled without good reason.

    a. Judicial continuity (as highlighted by survivors in this thesis) may be beneficial in recognising patterns of behaviour and is perceived as helpful by survivors in doing so. However, this could potentially increase waiting times, or decrease satisfaction is survivors are unhappy with the practice of a specific judge. Therefore, further research should explore this in depth.

18. A clear IPVA policy should be put in place for Cafcass that is far more exhaustive than the current toolkit, and steps should be put in place to ensure staff attend bias training.

19. The barriers to accessing legal aid should be explored and rectified, including the ongoing impact of expecting survivors to fund cases that they themselves have not requested.

20. DVPPs need to be better resourced and the main source of rehabilitation for men who abuse. We should not be relying on anger management and parenting programmes to do the work that is needed. This is not cost-effective and is not safe. The government need to action this as a matter of urgency.

21. Adversarial court processes for IPVA should be stopped, and other approaches (e.g., inquisitorial) piloted to see what works best. One cannot cater to the unequal power distribution without getting rid of this.

22. Research should be survivor-led and trauma-informed to ensure that the impact of trauma stays at the forefront of academic discussions.

23. Further research should be conducted that explores beliefs and myth acceptance within the Judiciary. This was attempted as part of this thesis, but permission was not granted by HMCTS. It is vital that we understand the extent of the problem if we are to create effective change.

24. Further research should be conducted that explores beliefs and myth acceptance within Cafcass. This was attempted as part of this thesis, but permission was not granted by Cafcass. It is vital that we understand the extent of the problem if we are to create effective change.

25. Research should be conducted exploring the impact of the recent legislative changes such as the Domestic Abuse Act (2021), focussing on cross-examination, litigants-in-person, and the presumption of contact. Many changes have recently taken place and change should be monitored.

26. Finally, further research should take place with harder to reach and minority individuals. This should be led by academics and IPVA services in the community.

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