



'IT'S JUST A GIRL THING, THEY'RE LIKE THAT'.

**AN EXPLORATION INTO MEN'S EXPERIENCES OF DIFFICULT
RELATIONSHIPS WITH WOMEN: A QUALITATIVE STUDY**

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study interviewed heterosexual men (n=12) who had experienced a difficult relationship with a woman, one defined as 'emotionally difficult, but without the presence of physical abuse'. The paper's thematic analysis describes three main themes (the meaning of difficult relationships; the immediate impact; the longer-term impact) and two higher order themes (gendered standards and power imbalance). The men experienced controlling, shouting and blocking behaviours which had immediate and longer-term negative effects. Their relationships were underpinned by double standards of behaviour and a power imbalance. They tended to normalise these experiences, reducing their victim status and making their partner's behaviour more acceptable. Accordingly, as the literature has been reluctant to accept men as victims, so are the men themselves.

Keywords: relationships, abuse, masculinity, shame, qualitative

INTRODUCTION

All romantic relationships can have their problems (McMillan, 2011), yet when a relationship impacts a person's life in a predominantly negative way it may be defined as difficult. Previous studies have used different terms to describe such relationships: 'abusive' (Lehmann et al 2012), 'difficult' (Lischick, 1999), 'unhealthy' (Mumford et al 2018) and 'toxic' (Motz, 2014). The current study uses the term *difficult* throughout this paper.

In the UK, abusive relationships are defined as involving physical, emotional or sexual abuse (NHS, 2019) and according to the 'ManKind Initiative', 2.8% of heterosexual men, and 5.6% of heterosexual women, were victims of partner abuse in 2018-2019 (Brooks, 2020). In line with this gender difference, most research has focused on men as the perpetrators, and women as the victims (Johnson, 2008). Over recent years, whilst the gender difference for partner abuse has been at its lowest (Brooks, 2020), there remains a gender bias within the literature, with less research into the experience of difficult relationships from the male perspective (Swan et al 2008). The focus of the present study is on men's experiences of being in a difficult heterosexual relationship. The relevant research will now be described, focusing on both women's and men's experiences of difficult relationships.

Much research has addressed women as the victim in difficult relationships, with an emphasis on the impact of physical abuse (Golding, 1999). For example, research indicates that women who have been physically abused by their male partner are more likely to experience mental health problems such as depression (Campbell, 2002), anxiety (Coker et al 2002), and posttraumatic stress disorder (Pico-Alfonso et al 2006). Likewise, research indicates that emotional abuse by men often results in self-blame for women (Ullman et al 2007), decreased self-esteem (Bowman, 1999) and increased feelings of loneliness and abandonment (Orzeck et al 2010). Further, evidence also indicates that women can self-isolate as a result of physical and emotional abuse in an attempt to cease violence (Flitcraft, 1995) or due to being coerced into restricting contact with family and friends (Goetting, 1991). Women also report problems with trusting new partners (Berger, 1998) and experience difficulties in being emotionally and physically intimate (Orzeck et al, 2009). Despite these negative impacts, however, women often stay with their abusive male partner for many reasons (Pugh et al, 2018), including economic

concerns (Anderson & Saunders, 2003), presence of children (Estrellado & Loh, 2013) or having no other place to go (Velonis et al, 2015). Research has therefore explored women's experiences of difficult relationships, with a focus on their first-hand accounts of being a victim, as well as reasons for remaining with their partner. In contrast, less research has explored the experiences of men.

The subject of men as victims in difficult relationships is controversial (Hines et al, 2007). Steinmetz (1977) was one of the first academics to highlight the existence of male victims and defined female abuse against men as 'battered husband syndrome'. Although this was found to be relatively common, it was often ignored, dismissed and deemed to be a myth (Steinmetz, 1977). Therefore, when incidents of male abuse are reported, research indicates that time is often dedicated to deciding whether men are 'legitimate victims', as opposed to deciding on the appropriate action for the female abuser (Robinson & Rowlands, 2009). Further, the construction of difficult and abusive relationships has often been stereotyped as involving physical attacks. This has resulted in the marginalisation of male victims (Donovan & Hester, 2010) as physical partner abuse is more often carried out by men against women (Devries et al 2013), and the literature characterises men as being more physically violent (Myhill, 2015). Therefore, as partner abuse is often presented as physical violence, male victims are disregarded as within this framework they are outnumbered by the female victims (George, 1994). Further, whilst there are support services for male victims, research indicates that these are rarely exclusively orientated towards the needs of men (Watson & Parsons, 2005).

One study in 1998 did include male victims in their exploration of physical abuse with 100 heterosexual men completing a questionnaire either over the telephone or in person. (Dispatches Survey, 1998). The results showed a high prevalence of female physical aggression committed against men, with a large proportion reporting being kicked, punched or bitten. Of these, however, 49% never sought police help due to fear of being disbelieved, or feeling embarrassed that they had experienced abuse from a woman (Dispatches Survey, 1998). The study concluded that women can be equally as violent as men (George & Yarwood, 2004). Despite these findings, female physical violence in relationships is often portrayed as self-defence, or as retaliation for being hurt by their partner (Swan et al 2008; Straus et al, 1990) whereas as male physical relationship violence is often seen as an expression of patriarchal

oppression against women (Lammers et al, 2005).

More research has addressed emotional abuse by women in heterosexual relationships. For example, the prevalence of emotional abuse against males is high, with research suggesting comparable levels for both men and women (Straus et al, 1992). Further, one study reported that 90% of male participants had received verbal aggression or other emotional abuse from their female partner within the past year (Simonelli & Ingram, 1998) with this being particularly apparent when men are younger (Karakurt et al, 2013). Research has also addressed the consequences of emotional abuse and evidence suggests that men do not often discuss their experiences of emotional abuse (Karakurt & Silver, 2013) or view themselves as victims (Taylor et al, 1983). They do, however, show negative effects of this emotional abuse, including psychological distress and depression (Simonelli et al, 1998). To date, however, research into male victims of emotional abuse is limited (Heise et al, 2019), despite it being the most common form of abuse against men (ONS, 2019).

In summary, whilst it is now increasingly accepted that men can be victims, their experiences of difficult relationships with women remains neglected in the literature with a greater focus on physical violence, rather than emotional abuse (ONS, 2019). Further, a stereotype persists, in which men are not considered to be victims as freely as women (Karakurt et al, 2013) and men's accounts of such relationships have often been poorly recorded, with little detail on the duration, frequency or type of abuse experienced (Huntley et al, 2019). In order to expand and deepen our understanding of men's experiences of more subtle forms of abuse, the present qualitative study explores the accounts of men who had experienced a difficult heterosexual relationship. For this study *difficult* relationships are defined as 'emotionally difficult, but without the presence of physical abuse'.

METHODS

Design

A qualitative design was used to gain a rich understanding of men's experiences of difficult heterosexual relationships (Padgett, 2012). Data were collected using either face to face or telephone semi-structured interviews analysed using Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Participants

Participants were recruited using a snowballing sampling method (Coleman, 1958). Researchers used their own personal and professional networks to identify men who they thought would be suitable for the study and contacted them through email or telephone. The researchers' contacts also acted as gatekeepers and considered if they knew of men who had been in difficult heterosexual relationships. The gate keepers asked the men to email the researchers if they were interested in taking part. The final data set involved 12 white, heterosexual males, aged 20-30 years old, who perceived a previous relationship with a woman as difficult. Males were over 18 when the relationship began and had been out of the relationship for at least 6 months. Exclusion criteria meant that no male experienced physical abuse in the relationship or sought professional support during or after the experience. Participants were given pseudonyms (see Table 1 for participant demographics).

Participant Pseudonym	Participant current age	Participant Ethnicity	Length of difficult relationship	Relationship status at time of interview
Ryan	22	White	3 years	Single
Tim	25	White	2 years	Single
David	30	White	8 months	In a relationship
Joe	21	White	7 months	Single
Toby	22	White	8 months	Single
Will	22	White	3 years	Single
Liam	26	White	1 year	In a relationship
Alfie	22	White	9 months	Single
Cameron	22	White	6 months	In a relationship
Curtis	25	White	1 year	Single
Mike	21	White	3 years	Single
Samuel	22	White	2 years	Single

Table 1 - Participant demographics

Interview schedule

Semi-structured interviews were used. Questions began with an overview of the relationship, such as when and how they met, when it went wrong, how long it lasted and how it ended. Questions were then asked around the difficult aspects, including what men would describe as *difficult*, examples of difficult times, how their partner acted, how it made them feel, as well as their coping strategies. The final part of the interview asked about men's retrospective

thoughts on the relationship and their partner, as well as their views on women and future relationships. This structure ensured a chronological account, which helped the researchers to gain a clear insight into how, when and why the relationship became difficult. The interviews lasted between 30-45 minutes.

Procedure

After recruitment, a mutually convenient interview time was arranged with each participant. Prior to each interview, participants received an information sheet and consent form which was given either in person or via email. Interviews were completed by one of two researchers. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The University Research Integrity and Governance Office (RIGO) granted ethical approval for this project.

Data analysis

Thematic Analysis (TA; Braun et al, 2006) was used to analyse the data as it is suitable to analyse large qualitative data sets and encourages a structured approach to data handling (Nowell et al, 2017). TA is also better suited at identifying patterns within the data and for highlighting similarities and differences between participants (King, 2004) compared to other approaches (Smith et al, 2013). The epistemological perspective was a critical realist stance (Bhaskar, 1975). This allowed the analysis to accept the data for what it was and recognize that it represented reality for participants. This stance also acknowledged that people construct their understanding of the world through their own experiences, and that reality is shaped by social, contextual and historical factors. The advantage of this is that the analysis could include the relationship between people's lives and society (Sims-Schouten et al 2007).

To begin the inductive analytic procedure, transcripts were read multiple times to ensure familiarisation with the content. Sections were highlighted if relevant to the aim of understanding men's experiences of difficult relationships and given a 'code' to describe the content (Braun et al, 2006). Patterns were identified amongst the codes; those that were describing similar things were grouped together, and given a short self-explanatory sentence, to generate themes which were further grouped into sub-themes to create a thematic hierarchy. To ensure credibility, the codes and themes were discussed within the research team and refined to ensure that they were distinct, and had enough supporting evidence, in order to present a clear narrative. Themes and sub-themes were then illustrated with relevant extracts from the

transcripts to develop a thematic story.

RESULTS

Following analysis of the data set, themes and subthemes were described from the twelve transcripts. The themes were separated into different levels: three main themes with subthemes, two higher order themes, and a transcending theme. The thematic map is shown in Figure 1 and described below with exemplar quotes.

Main Theme 1: the meaning of a difficult relationship

This theme describes what men classify as difficult, and how women engaged in these behaviours which led men to realise, either during or afterwards, that they were in a difficult relationship. These behaviours are separated into the following three inter-related subthemes.

Controlling behaviour

This sub-theme reflects how females controlled their male partner, which was most commonly demonstrated in the control over men's friendships.

'she was very funny about me going out with my mates, even for a short time. She'd basically not allow me to hang out with them or chat to them when she was around' (Alfie)

The quotation illustrates how the woman would not allow her boyfriend to speak with his friends whilst she was present and expected him to pay all of his attention to his girlfriend. The phrase 'even for a short time' highlights the degree of control that this woman had over her boyfriend.

Control of friendships was also seen in Joe's and Cameron's interviews:

'She made that explicitly clear that I couldn't be friends with girls, so I kind of closed myself off to girls who could be friends' (Joe)

'told me who to talk to and said that I couldn't be mates with girls' (Cameron)

Therefore, whilst Alfie felt that his contact with his 'mates' was controlled, other men described control over potential friends, particularly with girls, even before these friendships had been formed. Further, by 'closing himself off' Joe's quote illustrates how attempts at control were successful.

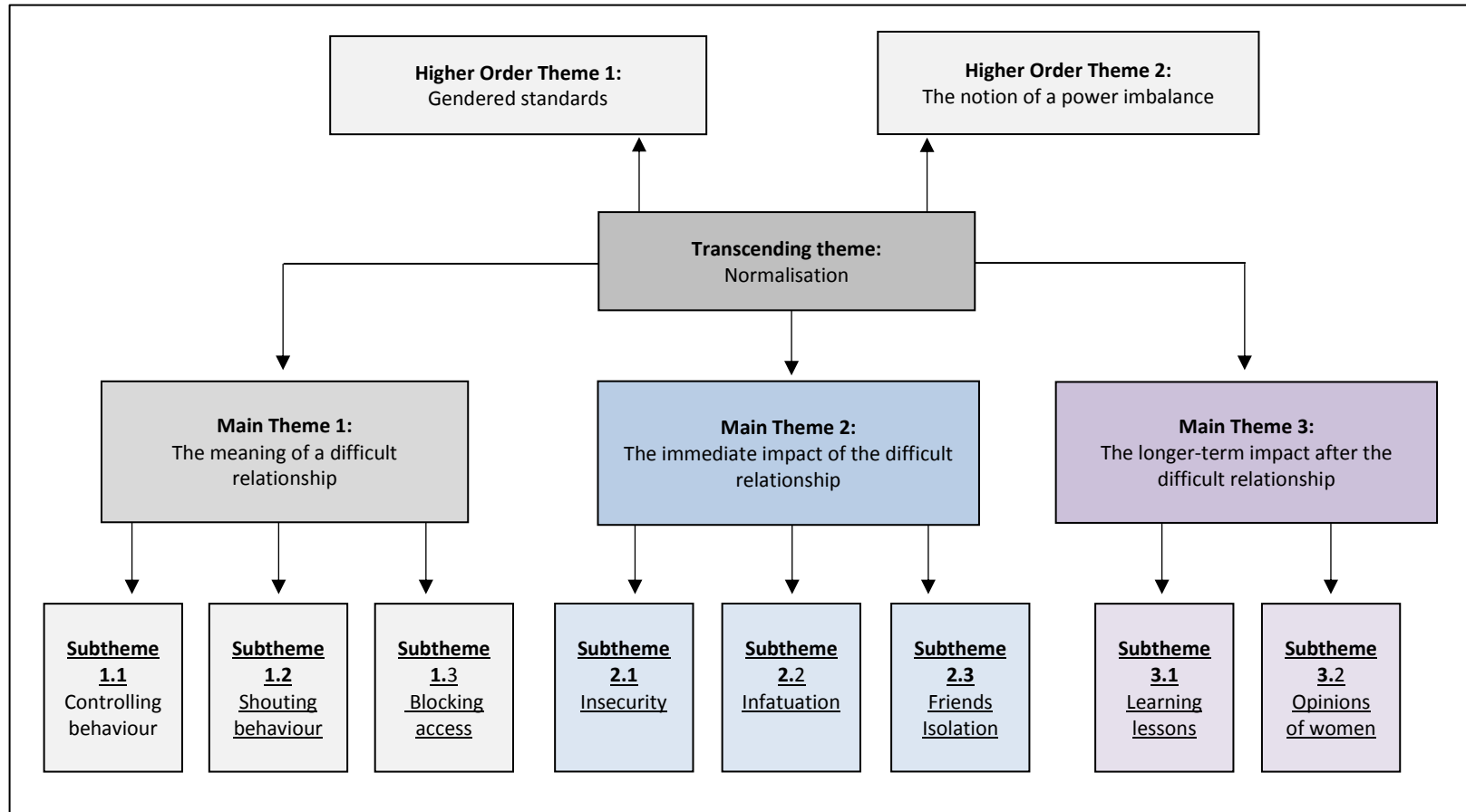


Figure 1 - Thematic map, with the three main themes and related sub-themes, and two higher order themes, centred around the transcending theme.

Shouting behaviour

The notion of *difficult* was also reflected in women's verbal attacks on men, which made the dynamic of the relationship difficult. Shouting behaviour is seen in Luke's interview:

'she went mental and psycho like so suddenly. Like she was screaming down the phone, shouting and swearing, calling me disgusting names which made me feel shit' (Luke)

This illustrates how the shouting was extreme, and beyond the extent of what Luke thought was 'normal', as seen by his choice of words: 'mental' and 'psycho'. The emotive language, such as, 'disgusting' and 'made me feel shit', also demonstrates how this shouting behaviour had a significantly negative impact on how Luke felt about himself.

Similarly, shouting behaviour is portrayed in Mike's interview:

'she'd just erupt out of nowhere and start screaming'. (Mike)

For both Luke and Mike, the shouting arose quickly, almost without any warning and 'out of nowhere'. Shouting behaviour may have had an impact on how men felt, because it was so unexpected. This is a common trend throughout the transcripts:

'She was a pocket rocket who'd go off at any moment so I'd tread carefully' (Luke)

The comparison to a 'rocket' suggests that when the girl did 'go off', it was explosive and loud. The fact that he had to 'tread carefully', suggests that the experience was unpleasant and unwanted, as he tried to prevent it. This subtheme is closely related to *Controlling behaviour* as the men's behaviour was dependent on the women's mood, and seemed to be controlled by the fear of the woman exploding into shouting behaviour.

Blocking access

The third component to the meaning of a difficult relationship focuses on women's tendency to block their partner's phone number or social media access, usually as a result of an argument.

'she often blocked and deleted me after arguments...so I couldn't message her to sort it out...it would make me panic so I would grovel regardless of who was wrong' (Tim)

Blocking clearly had a negative impact on Tim, as he would 'panic', perhaps about the thought of a 'break up', and the inability to communicate in order to resolve the conflict. This

sub-theme, again, links to *Controlling behaviour* as blocking seemed to be used as a form of control and emotional manipulation by the woman, to make the man feel anxious, in order to make him apologise and ‘grovel’.

Blocking was not, however, always seen as negative. As Will described:

‘I’d loved if she’d block in fights instead of threats...remove the hassle’ (Will)

Blocking therefore seemed to occur quite frequently but was seen differently amongst the men. For some, like Tim, it was seen as negative and concerning, whereas those like Will believed that it helped to escape confrontation. This is linked further to the sub-theme of *Shouting behaviour*, as it suggests that arguments and consequent shouting, were seen as ‘hassle’, and situations that men wanted to avoid.

Accordingly, men described difficult relationships as controlling behaviour, shouting and blocking which reflect inter-connected ways that women behaved within these relationships.

Main Theme 2: the immediate impact of the difficult relationship

This main theme focuses on the way in which men were affected by women’s behaviours, whilst in the relationship, which has been separated into three subthemes.

Insecurity

This sub-theme demonstrates how difficult relationships can change the way men feel about themselves.

‘in the relationship, I felt insecure. It hit my self-esteem, lost my confidence – I was confident before her, outgoing, extrovert – wow, thinking about it, it was pretty bad’ (Tim)

The women’s behaviour was therefore seen as damaging to men’s confidence and could alter men’s personality; Tim changed from ‘confident’ and an ‘extrovert’, to ‘insecure’. The closing remark, ‘thinking about it, it was pretty bad’, suggests that he had this realisation during the interview, and only just recognized how insecure he felt whilst with his girlfriend. There is a cycle in these relationships: they cause men to feel insecure and lower their confidence which stops them from recognizing the harmful issues. This is also seen by Samuel:

‘honestly questioned what I’d done to fucking deserve it to be honest and it took me ages to get my head around that it wasn’t me who was a shit person --- it was her’ (Samuel)

This quotation further illustrates how these relationships can cause insecurity, as for a while, Samuel believed that he was a ‘shit’ person. The swear words suggest a level of anger, which may be directed at himself for not realising, to his ex-girlfriend for making him feel this way, or both. The phrase, ‘took me ages’, also shows that the woman is not immediately viewed as a ‘shit person’ which again, suggests that his lack of self-confidence blinded him to the problem, and prolonged the process of recognising that the issues were not his fault.

This subtheme is also linked to *Shouting behaviour* as shouting often caused feelings of insecurity as seen in Toby’s interview:

‘she’d just start shouting and swearing at me.... make me feel shit about myself’

The power of verbal abuse is demonstrated by the remark, ‘feel shit about myself’ and reveals the immediate negative effect that it may have on men’s confidence.

Infatuation with girlfriend

The immediate impact of the difficult relationship was also described with a focus on men’s intense passion and infatuation with their girlfriend. This is clearly portrayed in Tim’s interview:

‘I would do anything for the girl. I would literally pine for her.... the more fucked up things she did, the more I would pine...I was pretty much blinded by my love for her’. (Tim)

The word ‘pine’ shows how he placed the girl on a pedestal, despite the ‘fucked up things she did’, possibly due to a loss of self-identity or self-respect. As a result of their infatuation several men seemed to view themselves as a boyfriend, and not as their own person, and with the same low level of respect with which they were treated. This notion of infatuation is linked to *Controlling behaviour* and *Insecurity*; being infatuated may have made men more susceptible to being controlled and to losing confidence, as their focus was wholly on their girlfriend, and seeing her in an overly positive light, whilst viewing themselves negatively.

Infatuation was not, however, shown to the same intensity in all participants:

‘the way she manipulated situations did blind me because I loved her, but sometimes I’d have to tell myself that just because I love her, this isn’t ok...’ (Ryan)

This shows a less powerful version of infatuation, as he recognized that ‘love’ did not

justify wrong actions. However, the phrase, 'have to tell myself', suggests that infatuation was hard to resist, and may require self-talk, in order to avoid being 'blinded' by love.

Isolation from friends

The third immediate impact of these difficult relationships was the tendency for men to withdraw from their friends and become isolated. At times this was an indirect result of being in a difficult relationship.

'I kinda closed myself off from my friends...I was like pushing them away because I was so engrossed in this relationship with this girl that was so toxic' (Joe)

This shows how the relationship made Joe focus more attention on his girlfriend, whilst ignoring his friends. It suggests that the isolation from friends was through Joe's own behaviour, as opposed to his girlfriend's request. This relates to the subtheme of *Infatuation*, as it illustrates how being 'engrossed' with his girlfriend resulted in him neglecting the other relationships in his life.

In contrast, this isolation was sometimes due to a direct request from their girlfriend as seen in Tim's interview:

'I wasn't seeing my friends as much...if I wasn't with her I would get into trouble.'

Tim was therefore isolated from friends due to his girlfriend, as he could not socialise without her criticising him, suggesting a conflict between seeing friends or his girlfriend. His statement that he admits to 'not seeing my friends', shows that he accepted his girlfriend's wishes, over his desire to see friends, which may have been due to *Infatuation*. This is linked to *Controlling behaviour* and *Shouting behaviour*; the girl dictated how often Tim saw his friends, by threatening consequences ('get into trouble') if he spent time with them, instead of with her.

Participants therefore described several immediate negative consequences of being in a difficult relationship with a focus on the inter-related issues of insecurity, infatuation and isolation. Further, these consequences in turn can be seen as related to the very core of a difficult relationship reflecting aspects of controlling and shouting behaviour.

Main Theme 3: The longer-term impact after the difficult relationship

This third main theme explores how men felt about the relationship, and their ex-girlfriend, in retrospect, which can be categorised into two subthemes.

Learning lessons

With retrospect, participants described how these difficult relationships could be considered opportunities to learn, especially when choosing future partners. This is seen in Curtis' interview:

'I cut this new girl off...seeing the same signs, like jealousy and controlling ... gosh, if I hadn't had this previous learning experience, I wouldn't have cut this one out' (Curtis)

Therefore, the primary difficult relationship enabled him to gain awareness and insight to recognize similar patterns of warning behaviour in other women, such as jealousy and control. On reflection Curtis can draw benefit from his past experience: by remarking 'if I hadn't had this', he suggests that the experience has its benefits due to the lessons that have been learned.

This is also demonstrated in Liam's interview:

'It's a learning curve. I learnt I'm resilient enough to handle these situations' (Liam)

He demonstrates a positive portrayal of these experiences, in terms of character building, and learning about personal qualities, despite experiencing difficulties. Further, this short sentence also suggests that men may not want to see themselves as victims, but as 'resilient' men, who can overcome these experiences.

Opinions of women

The longer-term impact of these relationships was also described in terms of changes in men's views on women in general and in particular highlights the language used to describe their thoughts. Some men were keen to express that their past difficult relationships hadn't coloured their views of all women. As Toby said:

'I don't think all girls are psycho or bad, I think that's generalising it too much...just because you have one or two bad experiences, doesn't mean every bird is like that' (Toby)

Toby seems to have healed from the relationship in a healthy way, as he does not seem to have a deep-rooted dislike for all women or view them all as 'psycho'. The colloquial tone, of 'bird', in place of 'woman', however, could be interpreted as chauvinistic, suggesting that he is not as positive about women as he wants us to believe and now views women in a more negative way. Some men, however, were clear that their views had been changed for the worse by their past relationships. For example, Tim said:

'all women are psycho, and are controlling...that's what you have to deal with' (Tim)

This highlights how the experience had tainted his view of girls, as he now sees them all as 'psycho'. The remark, 'that's what you have to deal with', is matter-of-fact, and suggests that such behaviour is intrinsic within women, which men have to accept. The effect of this approach is to downplay the negative impact of women's behaviour, suggest that it is not to be taken too seriously and to normalise it as part of heterosexual life.

Therefore, the longer-term impact of difficult relationships was described in terms of a learning lessons and subsequent changes in their views about women.

Main themes: Overall summary

The men in this study, therefore, described their experiences of such difficult relationships in terms of experiencing controlling, shouting and blocking behaviour, which resulted in immediate feelings of insecurity, infatuation and isolation. These men also described the longer-term impact of their experiences in terms of the lessons learned and how their views of women had changed. Two higher order themes are apparent across these three main themes: gendered standards and the notion of a power imbalance.

Higher order theme 1: Gendered standards

The first higher order theme that was apparent across the main themes was gendered standards and the implicit difference in what was considered acceptable for men and women. For example, Joe describes gendered standards as follows:

'when I went out, she'd be like, 'oh why did you go out', and make me feel guilty...if it worked the other way round, she'd be like, 'why you intruding on my life'. (Joe)

Accordingly, participant's accounts suggest differences in what women consider acceptable for themselves compared to their boyfriend. This reflects aspects of the main themes such as *Controlling* and *Shouting behaviour* and *Isolation* and how what is acceptable differs between men and women. This level of double standards may be particularly damaging as, when still in the relationship, men seem to believe that women's behaviour is acceptable which could explain why they do not leave the relationship straight away.

The idea of 'double standards' is also illustrated in Will's interview in the context of social media:

'she made a fucking massive deal about me liking girl's Insta photos--- if she did it to boys, suddenly it's fine. Ridiculous LOL, just gotta get on with it haven't you' (Will)

The use of swear words ('fucking massive deal'), as well as the sarcastic tone ('suddenly it's fine'), suggests that this 'double standard' upset Will. The closing remark, 'just gotta get on with it', however, suggests a level of acceptance and endurance either to avoid conflict or because this gendered standard was becoming normalised.

Higher order theme 2: The notion of a power imbalance

The second higher order theme to cut across the main themes was the notion of a power imbalance illustrating how the men interviewed felt that women held more of the power in these relationships. An example of this is given by David:

'the dynamic of the relationship was defo in her power...I'd be treading carefully until I figured out the mood she was in...then I'd know the day I was in for' (David).

From David's perspective, his girlfriend was perceived as dominating the relationship as she had the power to alter how he behaved, until he was certain of her mood. This power imbalance relates to aspects of the main themes such as *Shouting behaviour* and *Insecurity*. This dynamic may also have been exacerbated by *Infatuation* resulting in men allowing the woman to have more of the power. A different view, however, was proposed by Will:

'she'd try to take the power. I'd really try to not listen to what she told me to do' (Will)

The words 'she'd try' and 'I'd really try' clearly illustrate the ongoing struggle for power occurring in the relationship. Further, whilst some men may be more accepting of this power imbalance, others such as Will find ways to try to regain control.

Transcending theme: Normalisation

Experience of difficult relationships, therefore, highlighted higher order themes of gendered standards and an imbalance of power which in turn encapsulate many of the main themes and subthemes such as *Shouting* and *Controlling Behaviour*, *Insecurity* and *Infatuation*. Permeating all themes and cutting across the transcripts was the concept of normalisation reflecting how the women's behaviour seems to be sanctioned, accepted and normalised. For some, this process of normalisation happened at an individual level with men describing how they were happy to give their girlfriend the benefit of the doubt and convince themselves that

they had good intentions. As Toby said:

'I thought it was normal that she didn't let me see my friends...I just thought it was her wanting to spend time with me, which at the time, I thought was understandable' (Toby)

In this quote, Toby makes an excuse for her controlling behaviour and describes it as 'understandable'. This shows how he rationalised her unreasonable behaviour, perhaps as a result of feeling flattered that she 'wanted' him which may have been driven by a desire to feel attractive and preserve his sense of masculinity.

For others, this process of normalisation seemed to occur at a more group level and drew upon generalisations of gender either due to biology or the way we have all been socialised to behave. For example, David said:

'girls naturally just wanna control your life...they're a lot more creative in their mind games with guys...I think it's just a girl thing, they're just like that' (David)

From this quote it can be seen that David accepts 'control' and 'mind games' by arguing that it is inevitable ('They're just like that'; 'it's just a girl thing'). Further, by drawing upon both biological and socialisation narratives using the phrases 'naturally' and 'they're just like that', these behaviours become normal. Therefore, whilst acknowledging gendered standards and power imbalances in these difficult relationships, and describing controlling behaviours and shouting and blocking, which have both immediate and longer terms impacts upon how the men feel about themselves, these behaviours are normalised at both the individual and group level to justify how women behave and to make it easier for them to be tolerated and accepted.

DISCUSSION

The present study explored men's experiences of difficult relationships with women. Previous research has suggested that difficult and abusive relationships are mainly characterized by physical attacks (Donovan et al, 2010). The findings from this study illustrate that heterosexual relationships do not require a physical component to be considered difficult for men and can involve other forms of attack such as control, shouting and blocking access. These findings reflect the work of Simonelli and Ingram (1998) who identified verbal aggression and emotional abuse as characterising the ways in which women can abuse men. The present study suggests, however, that there are also other more subtle forms of attack often involving control

which may be particularly apparent in contemporary times of phone technology and social media. The findings from the current study also show that these relationships have immediate negative impacts on men, and can cause insecurity, feelings of infatuation and isolation. These findings reflect previous literature for both women (Goetting, 1991; Bowman, 1999; Orzeck et al, 2009) and men (Simonelli et al, 1998) indicating that emotional abuse in difficult relationships negatively effects psychological well-being, regardless of gender. The men in the present study also described consequences into the longer term. For some, this involved having more negative opinions of women, which reflects the ways women who have been abused describe their feelings about future partners, and a lack of trust (eg. Berger, 1998; Orzeck et al, 2009). Some men, however, described lessons learned and how their experiences had made them more resilient. This process of benefit finding may reflect an ability to reframe their experiences in a positive way. It may also reflect a reluctance to be framed as a victim and a need to minimise the severity of their experiences (Karakurt & Silver, 2013; Taylor et al, 1983).

The results from the present study also illustrated gendered standards with men reporting that women accepted certain behaviours for themselves but not for their male partners. This is a novel research finding but does find reflection in gender differences in general concerning all aspects of behaviour together with the ongoing stereotypes of men as more physically violent and less emotionally expressive (Myhill, 2015). Accordingly, the gender differences reported in the literature are paralleled in the gendered standards as to what is deemed acceptable practice within a relationship. These differences were further illustrated by a notion of power imbalance with the relationships often compounded by behaviours such as shouting, controlling or blocking. For some, this resulted in negative emotions such as insecurity often fuelled by infatuation. For others it resulted in a battle for power and a determination not to give in.

The results therefore show that men experienced difficult relationships as involving behaviours which had both immediate and longer-term consequences. Further these relationships were characterised by gendered standards and an imbalance of power. Transcending these findings was the process of normalisation. In particular, the results indicate that through justification at both the individual and group level, women's difficult behaviour was accepted by considering it *understandable* due to either the attractiveness of the man himself or the inevitability of being a woman due to her biology or socialisation. Existing literature

indicates that abuse by females, against males, is often overlooked (Steinmetz, 1977). Further, the gendered debates surrounding men as victims of abuse illustrate a tendency to ignore or dismiss accounts of abuse by women (eg. Steinmetz, 1977; Robinson & Rowlands, 2009). The results from the present study suggest, however, that such difficult behaviour is also overlooked, ignored or dismissed by the male victims themselves as they strive to normalise their experiences and downplay what they are going through. Accordingly, as the literature has been reluctant to accept men as victims, so are the men themselves.

The results from the present study therefore provide insights into the experiences of men in difficult relationships and highlight the process of normalisation which reduces their status as a victim and makes their partner's behaviour more acceptable. There are, however, some problems with this study which need to be considered. Primarily, those men agreeing to be interviewed may not reflect the experiences of those not captured by this study. The recruitment process involved identifying men, who were thought by the research team and their contacts to have been in a difficult relationship. This requires a man to have reflected on their relationship, identify what they have gone through as difficult in some way and share this with someone in contact with the research team. This clearly excludes those who are still in denial; those who haven't processed their experiences yet; those who haven't labelled their experiences as difficult; and those who haven't shared their experiences. It also excludes those who may have accepted their experiences but don't want to talk about them in an interview. The recruited men, and the obtained data, therefore, only represents a specific sample of participants. Future research could try to expand upon this sampling procedure perhaps by using alternative words such as 'survivor' and by recruiting from a larger pool of people. Second, both interviewers were women which may have changed the dynamic of the interviews. Whilst reflective and mindful of their impact on the openness of the interviewees, future research could include both male and female interviewers to create a more balanced approach. Finally, the qualitative approach requires a degree of insight, reflexivity and emotional expression for the generation of in-depth data. The participants, the topic matter and the expectations of masculinity together with the presence of a female interviewers may each have limited the openness of the interviewee's accounts.

To conclude, whilst previous literature has tended to neglect the experiences of men due to assumptions about the notion of abuse and a reluctance to see men as victims, the present study focused on the experiences of men in difficult relationships with women. The results showed that difficult relationships are characterised by controlling, shouting and blocking behaviours which have both immediate and longer-term consequences and that these relationships are underpinned by gendered standards and a power imbalance. Furthermore, the results indicate a tendency for men to normalise women's difficult behaviour through a sense of acceptance and inevitability. Accordingly, it may not only be the literature which neglects the experiences of the male victim or is biased against men as victims of abuse. It may also be the men themselves as they downplay their experiences in order to protect their sense of self. Both the literature and society need to become more accepting of men as victims in heterosexual relationships to prevent the normalisation of women's difficult behaviour.

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