

NEIGHBOURS, FRIENDS & FAMILIES

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Neighbours, Friends & Families

DEFINING COERCIVE CONTROL IN COMPARISON TO SITUATIONAL COUPLE VIOLENCE

Intimate partner violence has historically been viewed as the perpetration of physically aggressive acts by one intimate partner against another. These acts of violence are often interpreted in isolation from the broader context of the relationship, in which non-physically violent acts might serve as the foundation upon which the physical incident depends. This view is mistaken as some violence occurs within a broader pattern of controlling behaviour that is missed when focusing exclusively on isolated physical violence. Literature on intimate partner violence has sought to correct this view by revealing distinct patterns of violence within relationships. For our purposes, we will focus on situational couple violence and coercive control (Arnold 2009; Stark 2007).

In this Research Brief, we will define coercive control in comparison to situational couple violence, explore how violence is used in coercive control, and share how coercive control impacts survivors.

DEFINING SITUATIONAL COUPLE VIOLENCE AND COERCIVE CONTROL

Situational Couple Violence: Violence without the intent to control the person experiencing the violence (Graham-Kevan & Archer 2003; Johnson et al. 2000; Leone et al. 2004). Usually this form of violence occurs out of anger and frustration, and it is sometimes likened to violence “in the heat of the moment.”

Coercive Control: Violence that includes both coercion (using force and/or threats to alter the behaviour of the recipient of the behaviour) and control (compelling obedience indirectly by monopolizing vital resources, dictating preferred choices, micro-regulating a partner’s behaviour, limiting a partner’s options, and depriving a partner of supports needed to exercise independent judgement) (Stark 2007, p. 229).

Men and women are equally likely to use situational couple violence, but men are more likely to use coercive control than women (Cascardi, O’Leary, Lawrence, & Schlee, 1995; Swan, Gambone, Caldwell, Sullivan, & Snow, 2008; Robertson & Murachver, 2011).

	Situational couple violence	Intimate terrorism
Prevalence in heterosexual relationships	12-18% (Johnson, 2014)	2-4% (Johnson, 2014)
Prevalence in same-sex relationships	‘Common’ (Bartholomew, 2008) (Stanley, 2006)	‘Sizeable minority’ (Bartholomew, 2008) (Stanley, 2006)
Frequency of violence	8% (Ansara, 2010)	57% (Ansara, 2010)
Fearing for one’s life	9% (Ansara, 2010)	60% (Ansara, 2010)
Severity of violence (i.e. injury requiring medical attention)	13% (Graham-Kevan, 2003)	43% (Graham-Kevan, 2003)
Low marital/relationship quality	13% (Frieze, 1989)	50% (Frieze, 1989)
Likelihood of leaving the relationship more than once	26% (Frieze, 1989)	74% (Frieze, 1989)
Likelihood of violence escalating	20% (Graham-Kevan, 2003)	78% (Graham-Kevan, 2003)

Table adapted from [Tavistock Relationships.ac.uk](http://TavistockRelationships.ac.uk)

VIOLENCE IN COERCIVE CONTROL

Violence perpetuated through coercive control is based on the belief that the one experiencing the abuse will be punished for not following the abuser’s rules/demands (Dutton & Goodman 2005). The threat of violence, regardless of actually being present, must be perceived as credible by the survivor. In this way, a clear distinction is made between situational couple violence, that is not shrouded in a more generalized pattern of controlling behaviour, and coercive control, which is not always accompanied by physical violence against the survivor.

The violence used in **coercive control** includes:

- Intimidation (e.g., stalking; threats against the individual, their children, or their pets; degradation; surveillance)
- Isolation (e.g., prohibiting them from working or going to events, refusing to interpret or failing to interpret verbal communications from service providers and others)
- Control designed to compel obedience and foster dependence on the one inducing the violence (e.g., withholding or sabotaging needed equipment like wheelchairs, hearing aids, medications, ramps)
- Violence (Lombard and McMillan 2013)

Physical violence may or may not be present within the context of coercive control (Crossman et al. 2016). When coercive control is coupled with physical violence, the severity of the physical violence can be greater than in physically abusive relationships in which coercive control is not present (Campbell et al. 2003; Graham-Kevan & Archer 2009). Indeed, lethal rates of violence are higher in relationships that exhibit coercive control (Campbell et al. 2003).

The presence of physical abuse is predictive of whether or not the person receiving the violence will leave an abusive relationship (Dutton et al. 1999), yet coercive control is not always coupled with physical violence (Crossman et al. 2016), suggesting that survivors of coercive control without physical violence might stay in the abusive relationship longer than if physical violence were present. Therefore, a survivor of coercive control might be subjected to violence for a more prolonged period of time than what would otherwise occur in the presence of physical violence alone.

We need to do more to understand coercive control and the different ways that it operates.

A facet of coercive control that should be further investigated is how technology can be used to perpetuate the control. Dragiewicz *et. al.* (2018) have proposed the term Technology Facilitated Coercive Control (TFCC) to encompass the technological and relational aspects of patterns of abuse against intimate partners. This includes image-based sexual abuse, harassment on social media, monitoring emails and accounts, and publishing private information. Survivors have shared how TFCC is unique as, compared to in-person encounters, online messages can reach many different people and stay documented on websites (Dragiewicz *et. al.* 2018).

IMPACTS OF COERCIVE CONTROL

A unique aspect of coercive control is that it is omnipresent and psychological in nature, affecting all aspects of life for the one subjected to the abuse. Within the context of coercive control, the abuse often permeates many or all facets of life including, but not limited to, personal hygiene, sexual relationships/performance, relationships with family and friends, finances, and performance of household duties. As such, an individual cannot easily escape the violence because so many areas of their life are controlled. This seemingly omnipresent threat fosters an environment in which the recipient of the abuse feels trapped not only in their home, but in seemingly benign occurrences throughout the course of their day (e.g., shopping for the “right” cut of meat at the grocery store) (Williamson 2010). As such, an individual’s sense of self, independence, and freedom can begin to erode, leaving the individual experiencing the violence without the feeling of autonomy.

INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE DISCUSSIONS MUST INCLUDE COERCIVE CONTROL

Reframing intimate partner violence to incorporate coercive control, as opposed to isolated incidents of physical violence that are not intended to control the survivor, better portrays the different experience of individuals experiencing intimate partner violence. Additionally, it will serve to validate the psychological and emotional distress experienced by survivors of intimate partner violence in the absence of physical assault.

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