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Who is the victim? Exploring the complexities of misidentification

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Abstract

This article presents findings from an N8 Policing Research Partnership-funded project concerned to explore the nature and extent of (mis)identification of the victim and perpetrator in policing responses to coercive and controlling behaviour. The phenomenon of (mis)identification of victim and perpetrators in cases of intimate partner violence is not new and the purpose of this article is to consider the extent to which the presence of misidentification manifests itself in relation to the newer legal framework of coercive and controlling behaviour in England and Wales, introduced in December 2015. The work presented here, suggests that the 'misidentification moment' contemporarily is neither simple nor straightforward. Its findings are suggestive of the need for a more considered approach to the use of this term in the contemporary policing context.

Keywords

Coercive control, (mis)identification, positive policing, safeguarding, victim-survivor experiences

Introduction

Violence against women and girls was added to the strategic policing requirement in England and Wales for this first time in 2023 and a police-led National Centre for Violence Against Women and Girls and Public Protection was established in April 2025. This recent activity in England and Wales stands as testimony to the extent to which such violence has moved from being thought of as predominantly a private issue during the 1950s, to being acknowledged as a public one demanding public policy responses in the

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21st century. Lying behind this changing recognition, there remains a range of challenges for the criminal justice system in general and policing in particular in England and Wales. One of those challenges is the phenomenon of misidentification

of the primary aggressor in cases of domestic abuse, now increasingly understood through the lens of coercive control. The phenomenon of misidentification has a long history associated with it of feminist informed research documenting the failure of a wide range of legal systems to see women as credible: as people to be believed. This lack of trust associated with women's testimony also extends to wider public views (Minter et al., 2021) and sets the scene in which frontline police officers, when responding to any form of domestic abuse, may listen more closely to a male perpetrator's version of events over the female victim (Stark, 2007). Thus the barriers for women to be believed are both extensive, profound, and well-known (Gribaldo, 2021; Meyer, 2011; Reeves, 2021; Reeves, 2023; Reeves et al., 2025), with the phenomenon of misidentification also having been well-documented.

In the early 1980s Sherman and Berk (1984) promulgated the value of arresting the perpetrator when police officers responded to an incident of domestic abuse. This led to mandatory arrest policies in many states of the United States, which has been translated as 'positive policing' elsewhere (Pearson and Rowe, 2020). Yet research has illustrated just what a problematic policing moment this can be, pointing to evidence that when arrest did occur, frequently both parties were arrested (Hester, 2013; Hirschel and Buzawa, 2002; Tolmie, 2018). This occurred especially in those cases where the woman herself may have used violence. Evidence further suggests that the phenomenon of dual arrest and its consequences can be compounded for marginalised women (such as women with disabilities, women from minoritised communities and cultural backgrounds. Hirschel and Deveau, 2017; Royal Commission into Family Violence, 2016). The problematic consequences of criminalisation following arrest have also been well documented by Dichter (2013) and Goodmark (2023). Such consequences can have carry over effects on future criminal justice decisions as well as experiences with family law systems (Ulbrick and Jago, 2018; Reeves et al., 2025). In addition, work by Jones (2011) and Moffa et al. (2025) has pointed to the added pressures placed on women to be perfect victim-witnesses (Stubbs and Wangmann, 2015) and to reach agreements with their perpetrators. These pressures also feed assumptions concerning their credibility and can have particularly deleterious outcomes for Indigenous women (Nancarrow et al., 2020). Thus misidentifying the primary perpetrator can have complex and complicated consequences.

Of course, women can be perpetrators of domestic abuse, and men can similarly be victims of domestic abuse (Walklate et al., 2023; Westmarland and Burrell, 2023). However, women's behaviour in the context of a police frontline response to domestic abuse, especially if they turned to violence, can belie a complex pattern of victimisation, trauma, and structural disadvantage often closely tied to their experience of, and use of, violence (Chesney-Lind and Pasko, 2004; Goodmark, 2023; Miller, 2005). Thus the evidenced increased risk of misidentification for women from marginalised and/or disadvantaged backgrounds as perpetrators of intimate partner violence (Reeves, 2023) needs to be understood in the context of their use of such violence. In Australia, Indigenous women, migrant women, disabled women, women with mental health issues, women with drug

and or alcohol dependency, have all been found to be over-represented as misidentified persons (Nancarrow et al., 2020; Reeves, 2020; Ulbrick and Jago, 2018; Wangmann, 2009). While much of the recent work on misidentification has emerged from Australia, England and Wales afford a different legal landscape in which to explore this phenomenon. This is particularly the case, given the criminalisation of coercive and controlling behaviour (CCB) since 2015. Evidencing CCB has shown itself to be problematic (Barlow and Walklate, 2025; Barlow et al., 2020; Bettinson and McQuigg, 2024), in the context of which there can be additional challenges in identifying the primary perpetrator.

Research since the introduction of the 2015 legislation (Section 76 Serious Crime Act) has already pointed to some of the issues arising for police officers in its implementation (Barlow and Walklate, 2025; Barlow et al., 2020; Brennan and Myhill, 2022), with officers focussing on what is visible and actionable (Myhill et al., 2022, 2023) at the moment of first contact. The police response officer, as the first point of contact with the criminal justice process, is uniquely placed to solicit vital information from victim-survivors about their experiences (Davies and Barlow, 2024) and understanding that first point of contact is neither simple nor straightforward (Hirschel and Buzawa, 2002). Indeed, officers are often called out to a 'domestic dispute', not an incident of CCB in and of itself. However, to date no work in England and Wales has paid detailed attention to the question of (mis)identification in the context of the introduction of the offence of CCB and the specific challenges that CCB poses for identifying the perpetrator. Given the focus on a course of conduct (not an incident) within CCB, evidencing problematic behaviour (who does what to whom) necessarily moves the frontline officer beyond what is visible at a particular moment in time. As more jurisdictions across the globe consider criminalising CCB (including various states in Australia and Canada), it is important to develop an appreciation of how police officers identify victims and perpetrators in this context. Based on empirical data in one police force in England and Wales, this article explores how this identification moment was experienced by both police officers and victim-survivors during 2022-23.

The article falls into four parts. The first offers an overview of the data gathering process for the project from which these data are drawn. The second presents the voices of those victim-survivors of domestic abuse with CCB present interviewed for this project and who had also been in receipt of frontline police officer responses during the timescale of this study. The third presents an analysis of the interviews conducted with frontline police officers during that same period. In the fourth and final part, these findings are drawn together and their relevance is discussed for understanding the issues arising in relation to the problem of (mis)identification in the context of CCB.

Overview of this study

The data presented here were gathered as part of an N8 Policing Research Partnership funded study completed with the support of a policing partner in the North of England. This study aimed to explore how the victim and perpetrator are identified by police officers in coercive control cases and how victim-survivors felt about this identification process and broader policing response. This work comprised three data-gathering phases offering a mixed-methods approach: high-level quantitative data analysis of the partner

force's domestic abuse data, supplemented by a deep dive of a random sample case file analysis incorporating 58 cases, and semi-structured interviews with police officers and victim-survivors of domestic abuse. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Liverpool's Ethics Committee prior to data collection. This article pays detailed attention to the last phase of these data-gathering process: the interviews with police officers and victim survivors.

Fifteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with police officers with a view to understanding their perspectives on how primary victims and perpetrators are identified in coercive control cases, including decisions surrounding arrest. Thirteen of these officers were frontline response officers and were regularly involved in the decision-making of identifying victims and perpetrators. Two interviews were conducted with officers in lead roles in relation to domestic abuse. Recruitment for these interviews involved an email being sent to all frontline officers, followed by an invitation to a face-to-face briefing session for those who sought further information. Members of staff who wanted to take part contacted the researchers directly.

Ten interviews with victim-survivors of domestic abuse/coercive control were conducted. Pseudonyms have been provided for all victim-survivors. It was clear that the invitation to interview was open to all genders and sexualities, however all those who participated were heterosexual women. Three interviewees identified as coming from a minority ethnic community and one identified as having a disability. At the time of interview, all these women were being supported by local domestic abuse services, and it was these services who supported the research team with the recruitment of participants. This was to ensure the women were provided with appropriate support and, if required, counselling after the interviews had taken place. Interviewees were given the choice of interviews taking place in person or online via MS Teams. All victim-survivors chose for their interviews to take place online. The interviews focused attention on these women's experiences of the policing response to domestic abuse/coercive control particularly around issues of (mis)identification. None of the women contacted the police specifically about their experiences of coercive control; however, in some cases, this became apparent upon further investigation. For most of the women, they had not understood their experiences through the lens of coercive control until they sought support from domestic abuse services. The length of abuse the women experienced varied from a few years to decades in some cases.

All interview data were coded and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019), with both sets of interviews (victim-survivors and police) analysed separately. Thematic analysis allowed the identification of overarching themes, the aim being to identify 'patterns of shared meaning, unpinned or united by a core concept' (Braun and Clarke, 2019: 11). To enhance inter-rater reliability, two researchers performed this analytic stage during which themes were independently identified within the data and then compared and discussed to reach a thematic consensus. In what follows, the key emergent themes from these data are discussed.

By way of context, it is worth offering some comment on the findings from the random set of arrest and non-arrest CCB case files chosen for deeper analysis. Of note, most of these cases (55 of 58) included some form of positive action on the part of the police officer. Examples of 'positive action' included the suspect being charged (32), the suspect being placed in police custody (3), a non-molestation order put in place (3),

supporting the victim-survivor in changing the locks to their home (4) and a vulnerable domestic violence marker on the address (6). There were also referrals to Independent Domestic Violence Advisor (IDVA) services (27), Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (13), health services (14), and education services when children were present (9). In 43 cases, more than one type of positive action was put into place. In 5 cases, aggravating factors were identified (for example, the presence of drugs and/or alcohol). These cases were less likely to result in positive police action. The victim-survivor interviews also raised these factors as an issue (see below). There were five examples of cases where the male called the police complaining the woman had harmed them or committed criminal damage. In all these cases, after further investigation, the female was still recorded as the victim and male as the perpetrator, with appropriate safeguarding put in place for the victim-survivor. These observations from this aspect of the project's data offer an appreciation of the wider practice context in which to make sense of the themes which were identified in the interview data discussed below.

(Mis)identification: Experiences of victim-survivors

Five main themes were identified from the interviews with victim-survivors; systems abuse, ideal victimhood, the presence of alcohol, the impact that an incident-led approach by the police had on them, and loss of faith in the police. Importantly for all these victim-survivors, the complex ways in which these different issues overlap and inform each other was evident in what they said. They are presented separately here as a heuristic device only.

System abuse

All 10 victim-survivor participants related how their perpetrator manipulated the criminal justice system (system abuse) to further entrap them. For example, Sarah discusses the occasion where her ex-partner had held her against the wall by her throat and a few hours later, when the police turned up at the door, it became clear he had called the police on her. She says,

I just couldn't believe it. I went absolutely silent. I couldn't bring myself to say anything. I was so desperate to speak, say something, but the only way I can describe it is I was shell shocked. They were asking me stuff, but I had nothing to say. . . He thought he had won, because he had got in there first with the police. He would say things like "what will you do now? The police will never believe you", and I just thought he was right. (Female, White British)

Likewise, Lucy said,

I will be honest and say there was a few times when I thought he's won the police over as well, they think I am the abuser. You know, he made things up, switched things around on me, made me look aggressive. The neighbours had called the police a few times and this happened then. But they (the police) just said go your separate ways tonight, let the alcohol go out of your system and that. . . (Female, White British)

As will become evident in the discussion which follows, for this participant, as for several other victim-survivors interviewed, the inter-play between the presence of alcohol and their experience of control, manipulation, and how they were viewed as victims, were frequently intertwined (Gadd et al., 2019). However, their experiences of systems abuse (Douglas, 2018, 2021) as illustrated above, confirms the significance of their interaction with the police, how they felt they were identified during that process, and its impact on them.

Ideal victimhood

Six victims highlighted how the notion of the ideal victim, alongside potential systems abuse, might have impacted on the decision-making process of police officers in their cases. These victim-survivors felt that how they presented themselves during the front-line response directly informed police action or inaction. For instance, Anitha reports how she was 'hysterical' on several occasions when the police arrived, either because she was 'terrified' or because the perpetrator had called the police on her:

I think because from the off I didn't act like your typical victim; they instantly didn't see me that way. You know the times when they did come out, I was either hysterical because I didn't call them and I was terrified of what he may do, or angry because he called them on me when he was the one who had been violent, or when I did call, I felt like they had already made up their mind it was just an argument or we were both to blame. (Female, British Pakistani)

The ways in which this woman felt that being seen by police officers as too hysterical or too angry, for her, directly informed their perceptions of her as a victim. This is particularly pertinent for those victim-survivors when the police presence may have been unexpected or uninvited, for example, if a neighbour had contacted the police or there was a counter-allegation from the perpetrator. The women who participated in this study felt that the police demonstrated minimal understandings of why victim-survivors may react in different and unexpected ways (Epstein and Goodman, 2019). The ongoing powerful presence of Christie's (1986) conceptualisation of the ideal victim, and the impact this has on women as victims/witnesses/complainants in the criminal justice system, has been well-documented (Duggan, 2018; Stubbs and Wangmann, 2015) and does not resonate with how these respondents saw themselves.

Fighting back or using retaliatory violence against the perpetrator was discussed by five women. These women did not see themselves as 'passive victims', often a key requirement in informing police perceptions of what constitutes ideal victimhood (Goodmark, 2023; Gribaldo, 2021). As discussed by Tara:

Because of the type of person I am, I would fight back, I would resist, but it was only ever to react to what he did to me. His violence to me was repeated, it was purposeful, he wanted to hurt me, there was malice and evil there. I think the type of person I am meant that the police never really saw what I was going through as coercive control. I think they thought we were both as bad as each other. Like I say, because I was either quiet and didn't say anything if they blindsided me, or I was angry when they turned up as I just didn't want them there, I think they

just had an idea of who I was in their head and it wasn't a victim. So that influenced everything really. (Female, White British)

Similarly, Grace reflected on an occasion where she had pushed her violent ex-partner after he had tried to attack her. He fell backwards and hit his head on a cabinet drawing blood. Shortly after this, the police came to her home:

When they came to the door it was clear that he had called the police about me pushing him. I was shouting again, saying I can't believe they dared come in and question me about this. They were telling me to calm down again, and I was just so so angry. God knows how I must have looked. And it was weird, because I wanted to try and explain what he was like with me, but because so much of it I didn't even realise was abuse at the time, I couldn't really say what it was like in my relationship with him. The only thing I could try and explain was the time he tried to strangle me, so I started telling them about that. But I just didn't feel like they fully believed me. They just basically said 'look, you're telling us one thing, he's saying another, it was him that called us. (Female, Black British)

This participant clearly took the view that when the police were present her behaviour contributed to their unwillingness to hear her point of view. As intimated above, failing to meet the expectations of the 'typical' victim, as participant 3 stated, either by fighting back, being 'hysterical', shouting, or engaging in responses other than being fearful, were compounded when alcohol was present.

The presence of alcohol

Six victim-survivors mentioned the presence of alcohol and its impact. In their view, this contributed to no action being taken against the perpetrator. For example, Lesley told us how the perpetrator manipulated officers by using her intoxication:

He chucked a scarf at me and told me to hide where his hands had been and got right in my face and said, "you need to make them go away otherwise you know what will happen". Needless to say, I was terrified by this point. So they came to the door, I answered, and I must have just looked insane. I had had a drink anyway as I say, but I was just shouting saying "why are you here", they explained a neighbour had called as they had heard loads of aggressive shouting and banging around. I said they didn't know what they were talking about, everything was fine. But then when they tried to ask more questions I just got more and more angry, telling them to go, nothing was going on. And he just stood there, calm as anything, apologising for my behaviour. Saying I was drunk, and I sometimes have these kinds of episodes when I'm drunk. The male police officer that was there then basically told me to "calm down and control myself" and eventually told him 'Can you please control your partner'. (Female, White British)

The presence of alcohol often meant that the police perceived both parties to be as 'bad as each other' or that what they were witnessing was a 'drunken argument'. Following in this vein, Michelle describes how her intoxication prevented action in her view:

Because he [the police officer] could tell we had both been drinking so he was like, 'you've both been drinking, had an argument, sleep on it' but it wasn't that straight forward. It never

was. Alcohol was a big factor. I think when alcohol is involved, they instantly think its six of one, half a dozen of the other and just “you go that way, you go the other way”, but again, for me, I was stuck in that position, and I couldn’t get out”? (Female, White British)

The interplay between perpetrator manipulation, the presence of alcohol, and the victim’s behaviour at the time of the police response, is evident in all these reported experiences. When alcohol was a factor, victim-survivors felt that the police officers who were dealing with their case dismissed allegations of domestic abuse and did not look for the signs of CCB (Gadd et al., 2019)

An incident-based approach

Seven victim-survivors expressed concerns that the police officers they had contact with failed to consider the bigger picture and just focused on the immediate incident they were presented with. For example, Aisha said:

I think they just treat it like any other situation they go out to. They look at what’s in front of them and not beyond that. But coercive control isn’t something you can see really. It so complicated, unique to the people involved and even though I’ve had lots of support in understanding what happened to me I still can’t quite get my head around it, and I lived it. So a police officer chatting to you for an hour or usually less isn’t going to get it are they? And I think there is also a reluctance to understand the harms of it. It can all sound a bit trivial can’t it? Its only when you look at it all together you can start to put the pieces of the puzzle together. But are the police realistically going to do that every time? I don’t think so. (Female, British Pakistani)

Similarly, Lucy recalls:

They asked me a few questions, which I know now was some sort of risk assessment I think? Anyway, they basically asked me some questions, but they didn’t really probe anything at all. Like they didn’t ask me about anything else in the relationship, they didn’t give me an opportunity to properly share what had been going on. They asked to see my injuries, but I didn’t really have anything visible. But they never really gave me the opportunity to talk about the whole relationship. Even when I wanted to. I think because of the drink and my behaviour on the times before when they had come out, they just saw us as both bad rather than it being very one sided. (Female, White British).

These women suggested police response officers were focussing on what was visible or on the ‘here and now’ rather than responding to their experiences as a pattern of abusive behaviour occurring over a prolonged period (Barlow et al., 2020; Myhill et al., 2023). The cumulative effect of these experiences for five of the women interviewed left them feeling unwilling to be involved with the police in the future.

Losing faith in the police

Five participants expressed some unwillingness to contact the police in the future based on their experiences. For example, Michelle told us how she would have no contact with them again:

...no I've had no more contact with them, and I don't think I ever will if I can help it. They had their own idea of who we were and what this relationship was, both as bad as each other, and that in the end, but it wasn't, and they didn't bother asking about that. (Female, White British)

Laura told us that she felt 'shut down' by the police before she had a chance to talk because they had assumed she was the aggressor after her partner had called the police on her:

I wouldn't go to the police after that, I don't want to feel like I'm stupid again, which is how they made me feel. (Female, White British)

In sum, the experiences reported here resonate with much of what is already known about the difficulties for victim-survivors in their relationship with policing and criminal justice processes, the presence or otherwise of CCB notwithstanding (Hester et al., 2023).

The role of alcohol and mental health in framing and mediating victim-survivor experiences and responses to perpetrators has been well-documented (Gadd et al., 2019). More recently greater awareness of legal systems abuse (Douglas, 2018), especially in the context of coercive control has become increasingly apparent with the powerful impact of conceptions of ideal victim victimhood well-known (Goodmark, 2023; Gribaldo, 2021). The tensions between incident-led policing responses and the process informed experiences of women are not a new observation (Genn, 1988). The cumulative effect of losing faith in the police is also not new. However, what these testimonies illustrate is the powerful way in which all these factors interact and compound one another for the victim-survivor when faced with a manipulative perpetrator and an incident focused policing response. As was stated at the beginning of this discussion, these experiences have been presented here as separate themes as a heuristic device only. As experiences they are not separate nor separable into individual variables but are experienced *holistically*. This is important to keep in view when considering the voices of the police officers discussed next.

(Mis)identification: Listening to Police Officers

Four main themes emerged from the interviews conducted with police officers: the role of information received from the control room, safeguarding and positive action, what officers referred to as 'digging deeper' and the identification of the primary aggressor. Each of these are discussed in what follows.

Information received from the control room

The information received from the control room by frontline officers has several elements to it. On one hand, as police participant 6 detailed:

I think we are determined by the control room. For instance, we get a call and it's something happening, but the perpetrator lives 2 miles away from the victim and isn't at the property. So that doesn't get an immediate response, they may get an appointment in 3 day's time. This compared with he's outside the address, he's hit me, that will get a grade 1 response. And usually with coercive control cases where there often isn't that grade 1 response, we (response

officers) decide that we're not arresting. Even before we get there those decisions are usually made if we're honest. (Male, White British, frontline officer)

On the other hand, coercive control is not always logged on the system. As police participant 3 pointed out, the victim-survivor or her family may not have used these words when calling in:

They usually call for something else and it's later than coercive controlling behaviour comes out. So usually, when we are called out it isn't coercive control we're responding to, it's something else that the control room have recorded it as or something else the victim has said. Because they don't always see it that way either. (Female, White British, frontline officer)

Police participant 4 shared similar sentiments:

It's not usually the case that a victim calls about coercive and controlling behaviour either. Again, it's usually something else they call about then coercive control becomes clearer as we dig more into it. So yeah, it tends to be other stuff and then we see more once it has been investigated, but not during the initial response. (Male, White British, frontline officer).

These comments resonate well with those made by Hirschel and Buzawa (2002) when discussing the complexities of the first moment of contact and lend some support to the view of the need for a fuller appreciation of this moment (Davies and Barlow, 2024). Some of these complexities were revealed by the officers themselves as developed below.

Safeguarding and positive action

Out of the 13 interviews, 12 mentioned safeguarding and providing positive action as important to their response to domestic abuse cases in general, alongside those involving CCB. Such positive action included a range of different responses, such as separating parties, referring people on to partner services and securing the support of an Independent Domestic Violence Advisor (IDVA). The importance of positive action taking different forms was also evidenced in the case file analysis discussed earlier. Safeguarding was prioritised even in cases which did not lead to an arrest:

The priority is safeguarding, so this usually involves separating the parties, making sure kids are safe if there are any in the house. If appropriate, we will signpost the victim onto other services, maybe allocate them to an IDVA there and then. In coercive controlling behaviour cases, the suspect is usually asked to come in for a voluntary interview as there isn't always the evidence to arrest, so it's much more about safeguarding really. (police participant 10). (Female, White British, frontline officer)

Participants also reflected on the complexities of making an arrest in CCB cases illustrated by police participant 9 below when discussing the wide use of voluntary interviews in coercive control cases in this force as an alternative to arrest:

9 times out of 10 with coercive control it will be a voluntary interview. Unless the victim has loads of evidence there and then and its clear there is a safeguarding risk, it's hard to justify arresting in that moment for coercive control. It isn't usually that there is an immediate threat or risk with these cases. Because if we're at a job for an hour or so, there is only so much we are going to get to be able to make an arrest if there isn't that evidence there to justify why we're arresting. (Male, White British, frontline officer)

This quote illustrates the tensions in an incident focussed policing response and the complex decisions police officers need to make in cases of CCB. However, officers reflected on the importance of safeguarding even if an arrest was not always deemed the most suitable option in CCB cases. As police participant 8 explained:

For me with coercive control, its usually about engaging individually with both parties in separate rooms. We'd basically work out what the options are, but our main interest is safeguarding at that point, and it would basically be if someone was saying I am being quite controlled, we think about what we can do. Alternative accommodation etc. so it isn't always about arrest at that stage. Arrest would kick in if there is an immediate physical risk to that person. So it's about making sure the person is safe with coercive control, maybe bringing them in for a voluntary interview. (Male, White British, frontline officer)

For police participant 1, safeguarding was central to listening to what might be in the victim's best interests.

Now we think more about what we do in coercive control cases. Because if we go too hard, it can make people more isolated because we have dealt with it in a way they wouldn't have wanted it to be dealt with. So now they won't call the police again because it can make things 10 times worse. So we do try to take account what the victim wants and how they want things to be addressed. (Female, White British, senior officer)

Each of these participants highlight the complex interplay between following policy recommendations and the value of using their professional judgement: digging deeper.

Digging deeper

Twelve of our police respondents talked of the importance of digging deeper. This term captures the need to look beyond the immediate incident and to take time to understand the wider context. All victim-survivors interviewed also highlighted the importance of this, though interestingly none reported experiencing this. Police participant 1 discussed this as being especially important in relation to counter-allegations made by the perpetrator.

I often look at it with counter allegations as well because perpetrators are very manipulative. Very manipulative people, and they will call the police, and come across as the innocent party. And it's about being wise to that and making sure that you're checking what they're saying is actually accurate. (Female, White British, senior officer)

The complexities which might be revealed in ‘digging deeper’ were highlighted by police participant 11 as follows, recognising the challenges that this approach brings:

So it’s about seeing the bigger picture of what is going on. . . . You can dig in a case and see family court involvement for instance. Then all of a sudden the clouds part and it’s like “oh there is other stuff going on here” and that realisation comes in that perpetrators manipulate agencies as well. But there isn’t always the time to do that digging. I’m not sure we have a grip on that. (Male, White British, frontline officer)

Participant 4 provided a powerful example of the importance of ‘digging deeper’ in domestic abuse cases:

I had this one case a few months ago where I turned up, it was a neighbour who rang it in because they heard shouting and smashing next door. We got there, they both clearly had physical marks on them. He looked fuming and she was just so difficult to understand as she didn’t speak very good English, but she was clearly not wanting us there. And at face value there and then, we thought they had a fight, and the evidence that we had at our disposal all pointed in that direction. We put the safeguarding in place for both of them, he left the premises for the night. We didn’t make any arrests as it was all very up in the air. But actually the more digging that was done it was clear he was incredibly controlling; she had moved here from another country and was incredibly isolated and he was using this to his advantage. It was really sad. But for us as first response, we can just go with initially the information we have in front of us or what they tell us. And in this case because of all of these complexities, it meant that it was all a bit cloudy I guess. (Male, White British, frontline officer)

This case highlights the complexities in identifying the victim and perpetrator in domestic abuse and coercive control cases frontline officers are often faced with.

Identifying the primary aggressor and the problem of misidentification

Set in a context in which arrest has been seen to be equivalent to positive action, none of our police participants thought arrest was common in cases of coercive control. This is perhaps no great surprise given the overwhelming commitment to the broader framework of safeguarding in this sample of respondents. When asked if misidentification of the primary aggressor was common in coercive control cases, most officers initial reaction was that it is not. However, several were able to draw upon examples of dual arrests where there had been ambiguity in who was the victim and perpetrator. As participant 3 stated in response to being asked about dual arrests:

No, I haven’t. But I know a colleague of mine is dealing with a job where she arrested a female for controlling and coercive behaviour, when actually it turns out that this female is being controlled by the male. And so that’s when the waters get really muddled. It is a difficult one to prove if there’s no one else in the household and no one else is seeing these behaviours, then it is a difficult one, because if there’s no outside independent witnesses and it is one word against the other. . . So it’s trying to find that that boundary of the offence. (Female, White British, frontline officer)

When specifically talking about misidentification participant 4 commented on one example:

It wasn't really that they had been misidentified necessarily, just that we didn't have all the information we needed, so we thought they were both abusing each other if you get me. And often in these cases there can be right and wrong on both sides. It can sometimes be like weighing up who is the worst in these scenarios. We felt really unsure what had happened, they had both been heavily drinking, she didn't have English as her first language, so this just made it difficult. It did leave a bad taste in the woman's mouth because she was arrested. It's sad when that happens, as it's hard to think something we have done has impacted that person's experience with the police, but we just had to make the decisions with the information we had. (Male, White British, frontline officer)

This quote strongly speaks to the experiences of the victim-survivors interviewed for this project, highlighting the ways in which alcohol and other factors can influence police officers' conceptions of ideal victimhood, ultimately informing their actions or inactions regarding the identification of the primary aggressor. In this case, it ultimately led to the victim-survivor being wrongly arrested. Participant 5 also reflected on issues with misidentification in coercive control cases:

I am 100% sure this happens, because it's such an underlying thing. It's so hard to detect. We had another case, where a male went over to a female ex-partner's house, she lashed out at him, or so we believed, she was an alcoholic, but we had suspicions there was something else going on there with coercive control from him towards her, but we didn't have enough to go off so everything was dropped. (Male, White British, frontline officer)

The complex ways in which, misidentification, the need to dig deeper, officer awareness of systems abuse in the form of manipulative perpetrators, conceptions of ideal victimhood and policing responses are inter-connected is captured in the following:

... (misidentification) definitely does happen. Perpetrators are manipulative people, and I think we as the police need more training on how to navigate this to be honest. I think as well with coercive control because sometimes on paper it is one word against the other its bound to happen. I think a lot of it is down to demeanour, what information we can get on scene at the time and basically how people present themselves. I know that's tricky, as there isn't a particular way victims should behave, but if we are going to a case and that is one of 12 in any given day, the reality is we are basing on decisions on what we have available to us there and then, so sometimes we make the wrong judgements. (Police participant 9, Male, White British, frontline officer)

The voices of these police participants speak strongly to a commitment to positive policing in relation to domestic abuse and coercive control expressed by their embrace of safeguarding also supported in the data from the case file analysis mentioned above. It is also evident from these responses that the complex demands faced by in them in responding to coercive control can, and does, result in tensions between what they see as actionable and doable and what the victim-survivor testimonies discussed above might expect from them. The question remains as to what extent these tensions constitute misidentification.

The Five ‘M’s: Manipulation, misidentification, miscommunication, misunderstanding, and minimisation

In putting the victim-survivor and police officer narratives side by side, it is possible to develop a picture, which is quite a complex one, of what is happening in identifying the perpetrator and victim in cases of CCB, the five M’s: manipulation, misidentification, miscommunication, misunderstanding, and minimisation. Again, as with the victim-survivor experiences cited above, the five M’s are not necessarily discrete processes. They can be inter-connected, and one M can dominate for the victim-survivor. For example, as is the case with the increasing awareness of perpetrator manipulation of the system (Douglas, 2021).

When identifying CCB, *misunderstandings* can and do occur. This happens when decisions about who the victim and perpetrator are need to be made ‘in the moment’ when there is limited time to respond, limited evidence/information available at the scene, and when the priority is safeguarding all parties. The presence of misunderstanding is evident in both victim-survivor and police voices presented here. Furthermore, there is the potential for *miscommunication* to occur when victim-survivors try to articulate extremely complicated and traumatic experiences of coercive control to the police; experiences which they themselves may not label as coercive control. Such experiences are often not linear and can be difficult for those outside of the relationship to understand, especially when frontline responses can be time-limited with little space available for victim-survivors to explain difficult circumstances. If alcohol is added into this mix, or if the victim-survivor did not contact the police themselves, potential for miscommunication and misunderstanding can escalate. Expectations of ideal victimhood also play a role here and can contribute to *misidentification*, clearly recognised by both the victim-survivor and police voices cited here. In addition, when a perpetrator is seeking to *manipulate* the situation to avoid being labelled as the perpetrator and to direct attention to the behaviour of the victim, manipulation opens the door to misidentification. Moreover, when police officers deploy concepts of ideal victimhood in making their decisions (as reported by victim-survivors interviewed in this project), this can lend weight to the perpetrator’s view of events, inevitably leading to all parties, including the police, *minimising* the woman’s testimony (Reeves et al., 2025).

Thus, the 5 ‘M’s, when taken together, render making sense of police responses to CCB complex (Hirschel and Buzawa, 2002). Importantly however with CCB, the process of identifying the victim and/or perpetrator is more reliant on victim testimony. Hence the need to ‘dig deeper’ and to actively listen to and believe victim-survivors’ experiences. Balancing listening with needing to ‘do something’ is not simple or straightforward for police officers responding to CCB.

Conclusion: Making better sense of (mis)identification

This work was concerned to examine the nature of (mis)identification in policing responses to CCB. These findings suggest that while (mis)identification can and does occur, the moment in which this happens is quite complex. Manipulation, miscommunication, misunderstanding, (mis)identification, and minimisation are all possible and can meld together. Following the observations of Hirschel and Buzawa (2002) further work

on the complexity of the first response moment will not only be useful, but will importantly also contribute to enhancing both women's experiences of policing and criminal justice more generally and also all those for whom their experiences of frontline responses to domestic abuse would benefit from 'digging deeper' (members of the LGBTQ+ community, and other marginalised groups). However, there is still a way to go for police and other agencies in navigating the complex landscape of responding to domestic abuse as a form of coercive control. Conceptions of ideal victimhood along with expectations of how victim-survivors should behave during the police response continue to influence decision-making when identifying victims and perpetrators. There is clearly scope for further training and development initiatives here. As highlighted by Epstein and Goodman (2019: 454) 'The crucial first step is to shift away from an automatic, uninformed disbelief of women's stories—to begin, in other words, to distrust one's own distrust'. Starting from believing women and listening to their stories, alongside all those who do not fit with ideal conceptions of victimhood (Duggan, 2018) is a major step to improve their experiences of this complex policing moment.

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