

Hiding in Plain sight - Coercive Control a Crime of Liberty. **Jenny Sanbrook, Mental Health Social Worker**



The murder of Brisbane woman Hannah Clarke and her three children in February 2020 by her ex-husband provides an extreme and tragic example of the complexity of domestic violence. Hannah and her children (pictured above) were doused in petrol and set alight by her ex-husband Rowan Baxter before killing himself. According to reports at the time Mr Baxter was due to appear in court on charges of breaching a domestic violence order. He had allegedly assaulted Ms Clarke in the weeks prior and had also attempted to kidnap their daughter late last year. In this case and others, the question around how seriously police take breaches of AVO's has been raised. Highlighting the issue in this case, the senior detective Inspector Mark Thompson was criticised and stepped down from the investigation for his comments that police were keeping an "open mind" and that the husband "may have been driven too far" (The Guardian 20/2/20).

This story highlights the complexity of domestic violence and prompts us to consider how we identify and respond to such cases. But of equal importance, how do we identify and respond to abusive relationships when there are no overt physical signs of violence and instead where domination is the primary form of abuse. The abuse is hidden in plain sight.

This article will highlight the importance of a number of factors when seeing this population firstly the importance of establishing safety, encouraging responsibility and lastly helping women to recover their voice.

Background, Beliefs and Attitudes to Domestic Violence

Domestic Violence is a major national health and welfare issue that can have lifelong impacts for victims and perpetrators. It can affect people of all ages and backgrounds however predominantly affects women and children. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2016 Personal Safety Survey (PSS) estimated that approximately 1 in 4 woman

(23% or 2.2 million) experienced violence by an intimate partner, compared to 1 in 13 men (7.8% or 703,700).

There are various terms used interchangeably domestic violence such as Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), Domestic Violence (DV), and Family violence. According to the Australian Institute of Family Studies: DV is defined as: “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty”. Domestic Violence includes physical, sexual, or emotional abuse, as well as sexual coercion and stalking by a current or former intimate partner. An intimate partner is a person with whom you have or had a close personal or sexual relationship. (<https://www.womenshealth.gov/relationships-and-safety/domestic-violence>).

In the Covid-19 crisis there are also concerns that there has been a rise in Domestic Violence. The Sydney Morning Herald last month also featured an article on the rise of domestic attacks in the Pandemic. According to research conducted by the Australian Institute of Criminology in May this year a survey of 15,000 Australian women found that 8.8% of women in a relationship experienced some form of violence or control. The E-safety commissioner also found women were being trapped at home with limited access to phones or computers <https://www.esafety.gov.au/women>.

A study by Worden and Carlson (2005) of 1,200 residents in New York. The survey reported people were of the view that there were individual family and macro factors present as causative factors in DV such as:

- Individual factors - substance abuse, anger, adultery, jealousy, dominant / controlling personality, mental health issues.
- Family Factors - relationship issues, communication problems, child or family stress.
- Macro factors financial and work stress
- Other factors such as lack of education, social isolation.

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Coercive Control

In the case of Hannah Clarke however the main feature of the violence was around control and manipulation which ended in dire consequences. One of the more troubling aspects of this area lies in the fact that there can be no signs of physical violence as the the goal is to dominate by manipulation, control, rigid rules and put downs.

Professor Evan Stark in his book “Coercive Control” defines coercion as “the use of force or threats to compel a particular response... control is comprised of structural forms of deprivation, exploitation and command that compel obedience by monopolising vital resources. The result when coercion and control are combined is the condition of unreciprocated authority and the experience

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Stark argues that the focus on physical violence has led to a lack of understanding and capacity to see the more subtle forms of abuse. He points out that “many of the rights violated by physical abuse are so fundamental that it is hard to conceive of meaningful human existence without them.. once injury becomes the major medium for presenting abuse other experiences seem muted by comparison” (Stark 2007:14). The entrapment of women in personal life can be hard to discern - it can take the form of recording every cent that is spent, accounting for every activity, justifying every decision, dressing or speaking a certain way. These are invisible to the law as they are infringements of adult autonomy, it is taken for granted that adults will determine their own daily activities thus the denial of these is a powerful and invisible way of subjugating and entrapping women in a similar way to being held hostage.

Furthermore, Stark’s research has found approximately 60-80% of women who seek help for abuse have experienced coercive control and that the level of control in such relationships is a predictor of severe and fatal violence. A review of domestic violence-related homicides in NSW, for instance, found that in 99% of cases the relationship was characterised by the male abuser's use of coercive controlling behaviours towards the victim. But coercive control is not a crime in Australia, and unless a perpetrator has stalked or physically assaulted someone, damaged property or breached an intervention order, they are unlikely to be detected or punished see <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-11-19/coercive-control-domestic-abuse-australia-criminalise/11703442>. The tragedy of Hannah Clarke’s case is an example of this very issue.

Therapeutic Considerations in Couple and Individual Therapy: A Two-Pronged Approach

Seeing Couples - Establishing Safety and Responsibility

Cases that involve either coercive controlling behaviours and/or other forms of domestic violence can arise in a private practice setting and may not be immediately obvious in the initial interview. Gottman Method Couples Therapy makes the distinction between characterological and situational violence. Characterological abuse involves belligerence, control and coercion and involves a clear victim and a clear perpetrator. Research conducted by John Gottman and Neil Jacobson in 1998 also divided characterological abusers into two categories - Pit Bulls and Cobras the former being men whose emotions quickly boil over, are driven by deep insecurity and an unhealthy dependence on their partner. Pit Bulls also tend to become stalkers, unable to let go of relationships that have ended. Cobras are cool and methodical as they inflict pain and humiliation on their partners - studies in this area showed that during violent arguments the heart rate of Cobras actually declines. Couples therapy is not recommended in the case of characterological violence. Instead referral to individual / group therapy or mediation which involves taking responsibility and emotion regulation is

The Gottman Method of Couples Therapy defines characterological abuse as involving belligerence, control and coercion and where there is a clear victim and a clear perpetrator. Couples therapy is not recommended in this case. Situational violence involves both partners (often the woman) having some agency and power within the relationship and partners showing an ability to take responsibility for the violence and where the aggression hasn't developed into a means for control. (Gottman training manual 2014)

indicated (see list of resources). On the other hand, Situational violence may involve both partners (often the woman) having some agency and power within the relationship and partners showing an ability to take responsibility and show remorse for the violence. In situational violence the aggression hasn't developed into a means for control and the woman may not be afraid of her partner.

Gottman Method Couples Therapy has developed assessment questionnaires (The Gottman Relationship Checkup) which screens for domestic violence. The clinical assessment process also involves an individual session with each partner to ensure safety issues can be identified. There are 10 questions screening for situational violence such as "has your partner hit or pushed you in the last 12 months". In terms of characterological violence there are 25 questions including asking about physical violence and questions around control such as has your partner withheld money, threatened to kill you/ family members or pets, "has your partner stalked or harassed you" "has your partner tried to isolate you" "are you uncomfortable talking in front of your partner" "are you worried couples therapy may lead to violence". These screening questions then inform the next steps and whether couples therapy is indicated. If not using the questionnaires asking questions such as "is your partner making you afraid", "Is your partner controlling, what you say or do" will be a guide for further assessment.

When it has been deemed safe to see the couple, according to Goldner (1998), treatment should involve personal responsibility and accountability of both partners around safety. This approach also engages women in the change process and mobilises their sense of agency. This treatment approach also talks about the importance of engaging men in the process of therapy and developing a therapeutic alliance with both partners in order to be able to support both partners in making changes or in moving towards separation.

Suggesting individual work as an adjunct to couples work for some men where the focus is on education around violence and also provides strategies for improved emotion regulation is valuable. Programs such as NoTo Violence (NTV) through Better Man , offer support and education for men wanting to do this work.

"Better Man" is a new a confidential website partnering with University of Melbourne and No To Violence (NTV) which offers online modules focussing on relationships, values and communication www.betterman.org.au

Seeing the individual - Recovering a voice

When a woman presents in a situation of coercive control therapy, can involve helping women re-establish their sense of self and recover their voice. Assertiveness training which involves being able to recognise ones own rights and needs, articulate these in a conciliatory manner and being prepared to say no is indicated. One resource that can be used in these cases is the trauma informed model developed by Ursula Benstead (2011), the Shark Cage Framework. This model focusses on assertiveness, boundary setting and defending legitimate rights and recognising emotionally abusive relationships. This is a group program and can also be used in individual therapy.

The Domestic Violence Safety Assessment Tool - NSW Government is one way to screen for violence: http://www.domesticviolence.nsw.gov.au/_data/assets/file/0020/301178/DVSAT.pdf

Summary

Careful assessment and screening in cases involving domestic violence is paramount for the treatment that provides safety. This may involve conducting an individual session for both partners before proceeding with couples work. It is important to be able to identify the type of violence such as situational versus characterological and also assess for behaviours that are subtle which can indicate coercion and control. Joint sessions can involve working on emotion regulation, self soothing and taking responsibility to improve communication and problem solving. Individual therapy may involve helping women identify and label their situation, putting in place supports and improving assertiveness. In the case of Hannah Clarke, the Chief Executive of Women's Legal Service, Angela Lynch, "says there needs to be greater enforcement of domestic violence orders particularly when women have been identified as being at high risk...we know perpetrators, especially of coercive controlling violence are testing those orders to see how far they can push the system, how much they can get away with..."orders are only effective if they're enforced, so without a quick and firm response, if breaches are not treated seriously, perpetrators know they can get away with further violence". Sadly this case reminds us of Stark's research findings that a significant proportion of women who seek help for abuse have experienced coercive control and that the level of control in such relationships is a predictor of severe and fatal violence. A reminder for us to be aware of something can be so hidden to the law and to us but actually right in front of us if we ask the right questions.

Support services

Mens Referral Service

1300 766 491

<https://ntv.org.au/better-man/>

Relationships Australia

1300 364 277

National Sexual Assault, Domestic Family Violence Counselling Service

1800 737 732

Domestic Violence Hotline

1800 656 463

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Media Links

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<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-03-10/hannah-clarke-domestic-violence-law-cant-keep-women-safe/12041184>

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(<https://www.womenshealth.gov/relationships-and-safety/domestic-violence>)