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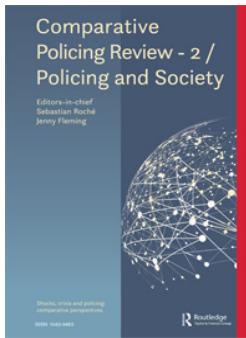
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Improving police investigation of intimate partner sexual violence: challenges and opportunities

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ABSTRACT

This article reviews how police investigate Intimate Partner Sexual Violence (IPSV). IPSV is both domestic abuse and sexual violence. This duality means there is flexibility as to how it is investigated. An empirical study in England and Wales shows that as a result of this duality/flexibility there is significant variability in how IPSV is investigated by police forces. Despite widespread support for taking a specialist approach to investigating sexual offending, not much attention has been given to the best way to configure specialist units. This article explores officers' perceptions of the challenges of conducting investigations of this type and considers how variability in how IPSV is located may impact the ability of officers to overcome those challenges. We find that forces who locate the investigation of IPSV with specialist domestic abuse officers appear more likely to be able to overcome the challenges associated with this type of offending, due to more consistent understanding of the context of coercive control in which it typically occurs.

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Intimate partner sexual violence; coercive control; domestic abuse; police investigation

Introduction

This article reviews how police forces in England and Wales investigate Intimate Partner Sexual Violence (IPSV) and examines how officers perceive the difficulties inherent in dealing with crimes of this type. We consider what impact the location of the investigation – in terms of which type of police unit is given responsibility for it – might have on the ability of police to address the difficulties identified.

IPSV, which occurs when one intimate partner (or ex-intimate partner) sexually victimises the other, is at the same time a form of domestic abuse (DA), and a form of sexual violence. This duality means that there is a degree of flexibility as to where and how it is investigated by police. Framing IPSV as a sexual offence and locating it in specialist rape and serious sexual offences (RASSO) units is one option; locating IPSV with specialist DA units is another. A third option is not to have specialist units, but to situate the most serious offending, including RASSO, in a Criminal Investigations Department (CID).

The policing of RASSO per se has come under increased scrutiny in the last decade. High attrition rates and ever-decreasing charge and conviction rates alongside a rise in rape offences recorded by the police (ONS 2023a) have received considerable media, governmental and academic attention (Angiolini 2015, Murphy *et al.* 2022, Topping 2020), with a committee of MPs recommending the government 'strongly encourage' all police forces to adopt specialist RASSO teams (House of Commons Home Affairs Committee 2022, p. 78). The idea that taking a specialist approach to

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investigating sexual offending has the potential to address some of those issues is not new (see Westmarland *et al.* 2012), but the financial crisis of 2008 and subsequent programme of austerity impacted policing in England and Wales, alongside other public services. Between 2010 and 2019, the number of full-time officers in England and Wales decreased by more than 20,000 (Home Office 2019). The police inspectorate noted that, to meet the challenges posed by this period of austerity, 'there is less scope to have a large number of specialist units' and 'many police officers and staff have moved away from specialist policing roles' (HMIC 2014, p. 100).

Issues of resourcing notwithstanding, and despite widespread support for the existence of specialist units, not much attention has been given to how they ought best be configured. The most recent inspectorate report identified 'many different operating models' (Criminal Justice Joint Inspection 2021, p. 69) and, while favouring specialist units, was silent on structures and the location of specific offence types. Current national guidance for investigating RASSO in England and Wales refers only to 'local arrangements', specified as CID or 'specialist investigation team' (National Policing Improvement Agency 2010, p. 26), while also noting that engagement with specialist domestic abuse officers might be helpful in relation to the investigation and victim care in cases of IPSV.

This article partially addresses the gap in the literature around the configuration of specialist units, with regard to where the investigation of IPSV specifically should be located. We present findings from data collected as part of Operation Soteria, a one off England and Wales Home Office funded collaboration between academia and policing, which aimed to take a transformational and evidence-led approach to the policing of RASSO (see Stanko 2022, see also Horvath and Davies 2025).

The nature and prevalence of IPSV

The nationally representative Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) estimates that where women experience rape or sexual assault by penetration the perpetrator is most commonly a partner or ex-partner (44%) (ONS 2020). Research carried out as part of Soteria confirmed that a substantial proportion of RASSO that comes to the attention of the police is domestic. Specifically, just under a third of recorded offences were committed by current or ex-intimate partners (Stanko 2022).

Despite its prevalence, it has been observed there is little by way of research looking at the nature of IPSV (Tarzia 2021) or the criminal justice response to IPSV specifically (O'Neal and Hayes 2020, Hester and Lilley 2017). Researchers studying DA tend to subsume sexual violence without identifying and examining its unique correlates and consequences, and much less attention has been given to understanding the specific dimensions and severity of IPSV as opposed to, say, physical violence or emotional abuse (Logan *et al.* 2015). Researchers that approach IPSV via the lens of sexual violence, rather than DA, do not always focus on whether it occurred within the context of an intimate relationship, and do not therefore consider what difference this context might bring to the dynamics of the violence (Bagwell-Gray *et al.* 2015).

Victims are clear: IPSV is 'one of the most degrading and humiliating experiences a person might endure' (Logan *et al.* 2015, p. 111). The international research that exists, while limited, also indicates that IPSV is qualitatively different to non-relational sexual violence. IPSV is a relatively common feature of coercive control (Tarzia, 2021, Tellis, 2010). Coercive control is a particular manifestation of DA that can involve any or all of physical, psychological and sexual violence and has been presented as the most damaging form of DA (Stark 2007). Coercive control is not 'one-off' or incident-specific: abusers use a range of abusive tactics that develop over time. IPSV is similarly rarely 'situational' (Johnson 2008); rather, it plays out as a tool to subordinate and dominate (Logan *et al.* 2015, Wiener 2022). While women can coercively control men, and coercive control can exist in same sex relationships, population surveys suggest women are primarily victimised (Myhill 2015), reflecting Evan Stark's (2007) observation that coercive control operates most often through sexual inequality. And official statistics show the vast majority of prosecutions for the offence of controlling or coercive behaviour ('the CCB offence'), introduced in England and Wales

in 2015 by section 76 of the Serious Crime Act, involve male offenders and female victims (ONS 2023b). Finally, coercive control is a high-risk behaviour. The links between coercive control and domestic homicide are well established (Dobash and Dobash 2015, Johnson *et al.* 2019, Monkton-Smith 2021), and IPSV has been identified in itself as a tactic that indicates higher lethality in abusive relationships (Bagwell-Gray 2021, Campbell 2007, Dobash *et al.* 2007, Hoddinott 2023, Kropp 2018, McOrmond-Plummer *et al.* 2013).

Police investigation of RASSO and DA in England and Wales

Police investigation of DA and sexual offences was subject to criticism from the 1970s onwards (see for example Stanko 1985, Edwards 1989). Reports of inadequacies in RASSO investigations have in England and Wales, as elsewhere, been consistent and ongoing, despite various attempts to improve practice (see for example Temkin 1997, Jordan 2011, Criminal Justice Joint Inspection 2021, Stanko 2022). Poor victim support, the presence of victim blaming (for example, references to 'uncooperative victims' or 'lack of victim engagement'), and disappointing court outcomes have all received considerable attention (for a summary, see Lovett (2021)).

One significant catalyst for change in relation to rape specifically was a television documentary from 1982 depicting aggressive and disbelieving questioning of a woman who had reported being raped; the Home Office subsequently issued guidance to forces around the treatment of victims and the provision of specialist training to officers (see Horvath *et al.* 2011). The introduction of specialist officers and units followed. Rape victims in one force interviewed by Temkin (1997) were satisfied with their treatment by (female) specialist officers, but some had poor experiences with (male) investigators in the CID. Despite supportive Home Office guidance, adoption of specialist RASSO units was piecemeal, with Westmarland *et al.* (2012) finding around half of forces having one. The most common reason forces gave for not having a specialist unit was not being able to resource it, and a large majority of officers, both in forces with and without specialist rape units, agreed that forces should have them (Westmarland *et al.* 2012). Specialist DA units were advocated in guidance from the Home Office in 1990 (Home Office Circular 60/1990), but adoption by forces was similarly inconsistent.

There is evidence to support the effectiveness of specialist investigation of RASSO. A recent systematic review (Dalton *et al.* 2022) found specialism improved overall outcomes and improved specifically elements of investigations, engagement with victims and officer wellbeing. The review concluded, though, that further research is required to identify the specific mechanisms that result in improvements to investigations, and into the set-up of specialist units specifically. An evaluation of a specialist RASSO unit in Wales (Rumney *et al.* 2020) found it outperformed a non-specialist investigative approach in many (though not all) performance measures, including accuracy of crime recording, charge rates, retention of cases featuring complex victim vulnerability, and rate of referral to support services.

It would appear, however, that the introduction of specialism has not achieved positive outcomes in relation to all forms of RASSO. Analysis of force data undertaken for Soteria showed that the suspect profile of recorded RASSO offences led to differing criminal justice outcomes: the charge rate for current or ex-intimate partners was the lowest of any perpetrator type, suggesting difficulties unique to this type of offending (Stanko 2022). This finding is supported by earlier research findings to the effect that IPSV has the highest proportion of arrests but the fewest convictions (Hester and Lilley 2017, Rumney *et al.* 2020).

The present study

By the beginning of the second year of Soteria it had become clear that the substantial portion of RASSO that was IPSV was presenting unique challenges to policing. We were asked to look specifically at how IPSV was being investigated and any obstacles to its effective investigation.

All the aforementioned issues with investigating RASSO have the potential to take on special significance in the context of IPSV. Police perception and understanding of how the victim experiences entrapment is critical to correct safeguarding decisions, making sure she feels able to assist with the investigation (if that is what she wants), and collecting contextual evidence to show prosecutors and the jury that she was not able or willing to consent to sex. Our research queried whether, bearing in mind the duality of IPSV, there was consistency across police forces as to where responsibility for it is located. We explored whether officers perceive that there are issues unique to the investigation of IPSV and investigated if there was a relationship between which unit was responsible for the investigation of IPSV and officer perceptions of the efficacy of those investigations. We also queried what implications this understanding might have for victim support and care, and for the progression of the successful investigation of crimes of this type.

Our specific research questions were:

- (1) Where do the 43 police forces across England and Wales locate the investigation of IPSV?
- (2) What do officers perceive are the challenges of responding to and investigating IPSV cases?
- (3) Does the nature of the specialism (or lack thereof) of the unit in which these cases are investigated have any potential implications for the challenges identified?

Research methods

Ethical approval for this research was obtained from City Law School (#ETH2223-1457). We were careful to ensure the confidentiality of respondents, and to consider the impact of participation on practitioners operating in a challenging environment.

The mapping exercise of IPSV location in forces

To answer the first research question, we conducted a comprehensive mapping exercise across all 43 police forces in England and Wales to understand where they located the investigation of IPSV offences. This involved collating information from multiple sources between February 2022 and July 2023, as detailed in appendix A. An initial email request for monitoring data was sent to all forces, with 19 forces responding to the request between February and March 2022. To fill gaps in the information received and obtain data from additional forces, we supplemented this with data from the wider Soteria project, semi-structured interviews and fieldwork visits from the present study (see below), and shorter structured interviews conducted between January and July 2023 specifically to complete the mapping exercise. In some cases, police forces contributed information through more than one method. While fieldwork visits for the present study were not a primary data source for the mapping exercise, they did supplement our understanding in several cases and are noted in appendix A where relevant. The final data sources to complete the mapping exercise across the 43 forces was as follows: semi-structured interviews (n = 9), structured interviews (n = 16), both semi-structured and structured interviews (n = 4), Soteria database (n = 8), and email data requests (n = 6).

Police force structures in England and Wales are constantly changing, so the resulting map presented a snapshot. Multiple forces referred to recent or planned changes or were undertaking reviews regarding the investigation of IPSV even during the period in which the data were collated. Finally, the findings do not represent a snapshot of the same point in time for all forces as the earliest information is from the beginning of this project (February 2022), while information from some forces came towards the end (July 2023).

The qualitative review of relevance of IPSV location

The second stage of the work involved a mix of qualitative fieldwork. During the mapping exercise, we organised forces into three heuristic groups – CID Focus, RASSO focus, DA Focus – which we explain

fully in the Findings section, below. Between October 2022 and July 2023, we conducted 20 semi-structured interviews and carried out 5 fieldwork visits. Interviews were conducted by the authors with a range of officers across all three ‘types’ of force, with the criteria for inclusion being that they must either currently investigate IPSV, manage a CID or specialist RASSO or DA unit, or have responsibility for overseeing more than one of those units. Contact was made initially with force safeguarding or RASSO leads, with subsequent purposive sampling of CID and DA leads. These senior managers provided names of investigators within their units. An interview guide was developed which allowed us to probe how officers perceived the handling of IPSV, with a focus on both investigations and victim care. Interviewees were asked about their role, training and force structure and resources; their thoughts on investigating and charging IPSV; victim engagement; and the role of controlling or coercive behaviour. Interviews typically lasted 30–60 minutes and were recorded with participants’ consent and transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription service.

Fieldwork visits lasted approximately half a day and were an opportunity to learn more about the interaction between officers and units. We typically spoke with up to half a dozen officers using ethnographic-style interviews and discussion of specific case examples to gain a greater sense of the way that IPSV was investigated within that setting. Scratch notes were taken during the visit and full fieldwork notes typed up shortly after.

All data were anonymised prior to analysis and respondents were given a unique identifier in an anonymisation log. Each respondent is identified by the focus of the force (CID1 – CID10, RASSO1 – RASSO20 or DA1 – DA13) then by a number to identify the respondent, and finally with a descriptor in brackets denoting the type of interaction (‘I’ indicates a semi-structured interview, ‘SI’ indicates a shorter, structured interview, and ‘FV’ indicates a fieldwork visit). DA-06-R3(I) would indicate that the respondent took part in a semi-structured interview in a DA focus force, for example.

The data were analysed using the ‘framework’ method (Ritchie and Lewis 2012, p. 220; see also Gale *et al.* 2013). Following familiarisation with the data, all three authors conducted line-by-line coding of the same three interview transcripts to develop a thematic index that spoke to the second and third research questions, while staying close to the raw data. Differences were identified and resolved by discussion, to ensure consistency in subsequent coding. The remaining transcripts were coded by the third author, in accordance with the thematic index. Following full indexing of the data, a thematic framework matrix was constructed in Excel, allowing us to conduct in-depth analysis of the key themes across the whole data set while keeping the views of each research participant distinct (as a ‘row’ in the matrix) so that the context of that individual’s views was not lost. Individual thematic charts were produced for key themes that emerged from the analysis. For the final stage of the analysis, we added a ‘filter’ to the charts so that we could isolate forces by type and see how heuristic categories we had developed (see below) impacted on the themes identified. We drafted analytic memos for key themes, which allowed us to reflect on the potential relationship between the heuristic label and the theme in question.

Findings

The mapping exercise of IPSV location in forces

We found that while very few police forces in England and Wales investigate IPSV in exactly the same way, it was possible to identify the location of IPSV on a spectrum, and to organise forces into heuristic groups representing what might loosely be termed three different ‘approaches’: ‘Criminal Investigation Department Focus (CID Focus)’, ‘Rape and Serious Sexual Offences Focus (RASSO Focus)’ and ‘Domestic Abuse Focus (DA Focus)’. We highlight the prevalence of these three approaches at the time of data collection and explain the detail of each below. It should be noted that, in practice, there was frequently flexibility as to where resources were deployed and cases investigated, with a few forces displaying features of more than one model. We deliberately use the word ‘focus’ to

Table 1. Mapping exercise findings on approach to IPSV location.

Approach to IPSV location	<i>n</i>	%
CID Focus	10	23.3
RASSO Focus	20	46.5
DA Focus	13	30.2
Total	43	100

reflect that these labels are being used to identify where IPSV was intended to sit, or sat most often, in a specific force (Table 1).

We found that ten out of 43 forces had a CID Focus, locating most ‘serious’ crime types, including all rapes and serious sexual offences, in central CIDs, or an equivalent in local policing areas. All detectives in a force with this approach are expected to investigate IPSV as part of their general case-load. This approach is sometimes referred to in UK policing as an ‘omnicompetent’ model (see Stelfox 2011, p. 18). While in England and Wales Home Office guidance has suggested the introduction of specialist teams, our data shows that the trajectory towards specialisation has not been a linear one, at least in some forces. The majority of officers that we spoke to in CID Focus forces told us that they had moved back to omnicompetence, with interviewees citing the effect of austerity and the challenge of recruiting officers to specialist RASSO teams.

A majority (20 out of 43) forces were using a RASSO Focus approach. In these forces, IPSV is located alongside stranger, acquaintance and familial rape in a specialist RASSO unit. Some, but not all, of these forces also had specialist DA units, but even where separate DA units existed the RASSO units investigated IPSV.

Finally, we found 13 forces were using a DA Focus approach. In these forces, which did not always have a separate RASSO unit, IPSV was investigated in the DA unit, or in about half of these forces, in a mixed unit which focused on relational offending (child sexual abuse, IPSV, high risk DA and abuse of vulnerable adults, for example). This tended to be a centralised unit working out of one police station but covering the whole force. Forces with a DA Focus located IPSV in DA units even where they had separate RASSO units in operation. Some forces located acquaintance rape with IPSV and DA in one unit, with only stranger rape being split off and dealt with by CIDs.

The qualitative review of relevance of IPSV location

The rest of this article answers the second and third research questions by drawing primarily on the second stage of the research involving semi-structured qualitative interviews and fieldwork visits with police officers across England and Wales. As explained in the methods section, above, we spoke to both senior officers with oversight of entire units, and more junior officers that take on the role of officer in charge (‘OIC’) of IPSV investigations. To the extent that they yielded useful data, we also included the shorter, structured interviews from the mapping exercise where relevant. We present five key themes identified through the analysis which highlight officers’ perceptions of some of the strengths and weaknesses associated with the different approaches to the location of IPSV investigations. The themes identified are (1) the ‘complexity’ of IPSV and the associated need for specialism, (2) utilisation of the CCB offence, (3) prioritisation of IPSV, (4) fragmentation (where the IPSV investigation is ‘split’ from the associated DA), and (5) resourcing. We explain our findings on each of these themes below. We end with a discussion of implications for policy and practice.

Theme one: the ‘complexity’ of IPSV

Officers were articulate about what they saw as the challenges that are unique to IPSV investigations, and many expressed a view on how the configuration of a force impacts on the ability of officers to navigate those challenges. Many officers saw IPSV investigations as ‘complex’ and ‘specialist’ and

identified differences from other rape investigations that coalesced around the type of offending, the nature of the evidence needed, and the needs of the victim.

Many respondents suggested a good understanding of coercive control was necessary for the effective investigation of IPSV. We explore in more detail below the importance of understanding controlling or coercive offending behaviour in relation to proving absence of consent, specifically. But respondents also emphasised the importance of understanding how coercive control impacts wider victim behaviour. Officers suggested that without such understanding it was possible for the investigator to feel reluctant or unable to believe the victim due to the presence of unhelpful assumptions – that the victim ‘chooses’ to stay, for example. Officers said that these assumptions were possibly especially prevalent with IPSV cases. As DA-02-R8(I) put it: ‘Domestic abuse is vocational because the last thing you want amongst the rape investigator is somebody that’s thinking, I don’t believe this woman from the beginning’. Or, as another officer explained: ‘A lot of the time, victim blaming, that culture, ah what – so you were raped in 2019 and you report a further five rapes since why did you remain with him?’ (RASSO-03-R5(I)). Officers felt that these kinds of unhelpful assumptions were much more likely to exist in the absence of a ‘proper’ understanding of the power imbalance present in an abusive relationship, which may take some time to unpick.

Some officers, then, perceived a vocational mindset to be vital to the proper investigation of the domestic abuse aspects of IPSV. This vocation for investigating sexual offending was perceived as present less often in CIDs. To be clear, not all officers working in specialist RASSO and DA units were there as a vocation; many had been posted to specialist units or were working there as part of their general career development. But there was generally a core of officers for whom such work was a vocation, and who had been supported to develop, in some cases, years of specialist knowledge and experience. Officers working in CIDs who are vocational about investigating IPSV, on the other hand, may not get the support they feel they need. As one officer in exactly that position said to us of his department:

... so there’s not like a cohort of investigators who have said, I quite like dealing with these [IPSV], and I think it’s important; I’ve got a desire to get these perpetrators to justice, can I be, spend most of my time dedicated to, not dedicated, but at least can I be the one that these get allocated to? And can I have some extra training and some extra support in this? We don’t have that. That’d be nice. (CID-02-R3(I))

The second issue identified by officers as explaining what made IPSV ‘complex’ was the nature of the evidence needed to progress the investigation. One of the most straightforward explanations of why investigating IPSV is different to stranger offending came from a senior officer in a DA Focus force:

Now, if you’re familiar with the offender, victim, location triangle ... you’re always going to have an offender, a victim, and generally, location ... if you take a ... burglary ... you have your victim, you have your location, you don’t have your offender, do you? All your investigative resources are about focusing on finding that person. Often, it’s quite interesting and exciting trying to do that. But if you take domestic abuse, and about 80–90% of all of the rape investigations ... you’re given the name of the offender immediately. But ironically, even though that triangle is complete, it’s really, really, really tricky. You take a burglary; you have a victim who has no relationship whatsoever with the offender. They will give a statement. There’s no background, there’s no issue, there’s no phone involved, there’s no history, there’s no massive disclosure issues, and then if you find the offender, there’s usually evidence ... you charge them ... all your enquiries are actually based around the offence location. House to house, CCTV, forensic evidence, a fingerprint at the point of entry ... Forensics are irrelevant within a domestic abuse case, generally. (DA-02-R19(I))

This officer is setting out what we heard from many DA Focus forces, that IPSV is different precisely because there is no need to find a suspect because you already have him, and the skillset which is needed is the ability to be offender focussed, and to untangle a complicated relationship between offender and victim. Third party disclosures and materials are also important, and for officers who are used to working primarily with an investigation that relies on forensic evidence this may present a challenge. As another officer put it: ‘so the stuff that goes on when you’re investigating a rape in a DA world ... you wouldn’t ordinarily or wouldn’t relate in the CID world, if that makes sense?’ (DA-05-R17(I)). Some respondents felt that those skills were central to a specialist DA officer’s skillset:

Because what, when you look at what Op Soteria is saying about offender centric approach, our domestic abuse unit is incredibly successful at bringing offenders to justice. And I think we could deliver more positive outcomes for rape victims through the special domestic abuse unit, if that makes sense.' (RASSO-07-R9/R10(I))

As well as the type of offending and the nature of the evidence, officers highlighted the need to run a fully victim centred investigation as adding an extra dimension of complexity to IPSV investigations. Victims of IPSV were perceived as the least likely to be able to support the investigation, even as their evidence is perceived as critical to its progress. Some officers recognised that victims who often have complex lives, and for whom criminal prosecution might, quite reasonably, not be an immediate priority, need a lot of time and support.

It's difficult to keep the victims on board ... they've probably been the victim of domestic violence for a number of years. They are coerced and controlled by the perpetrators. They generally have connections like financial obligations, children, a lot of history goes there. And it's quite difficult, I think, because they are at a low point for them to see that there's ever going to be anything beyond that. So it's easy for them just to revert ... to what they know and going back to being coerced and controlled by the perpetrator. So I find that that's the thing, and nothing moves fast enough for them. Nothing is quick enough for them. (RASSO-02-R3/R4(I))

Officers in CIDs (and to a lesser extent RASSO units) tended to compare their IPSV investigations with the other crime types on their books and viewed IPSV victims as especially difficult to engage. Officers in DA units, on the other hand, appeared more 'trauma informed', aware of safeguarding concerns and more likely to appreciate the complexity of victims' needs and the notion of entrapment:

They might have complex needs. Alcohol, drink, drugs ... but more the relationship with the offender. If they've been in a relationship for many, many years, they might be completely financially dependent on them, emotionally dependant. There might be lots of coercive control involved, children and so on ... probably a massive history ... and the judicial system is not structured to account for that kind of complexity of the relationship between offender and victim. (DA-02-R19(I))

Theme two: the CCB offence

One key issue identified by officers across all types of forces was the relationship between IPSV and coercive control. One CID officer said to us:

Where you've got coercive controlling behaviour, there will be a rape ... and conversely, where it's a rape, you should be looking for coercive controlling behaviour within a domestic abuse setting ... rape in a domestic crime is power and control. It's not about sex. It's not sexual activity. It's not sexual gratification. It is power and control. (CID-03-R6(I))

This co-existence of coercive control and IPSV was expressed both as a challenge and an opportunity. While most officers across all force structures recognised the potential of the CCB offence for IPSV investigations, the nature of the unit in which IPSV was investigated had implications for whether the importance of coercive control was properly understood and/or seen as an opportunity.

There were undoubtedly officers in CIDs and RASSO units who had an excellent understanding of the *potential* of the CCB offence in the context of an IPSV investigation, as evidenced by the quote from CID-03-R6(I) above. Similarly, an officer in a RASSO unit (in a RASSO Focus force) said to us:

If you can overlay it [the coercive control], you can articulate sometimes what the victim struggles to say ... We should then be presenting to say, a reasonable person, given what's taken place over the last 48 hours, would not be consenting ... it's understanding how you can overlay and use your controlling behaviour to actually articulate your rape. (RASSO-02-R2(I))

What this officer identified is the potential impact that evidence of the context of the coercively controlling behaviour has on the question of consent. But overall, even officers in CIDs and RASSO units that had a good understanding were more likely than their colleagues in DA units to see the CCB offence as a challenge, to be of the view that it is still a misunderstood piece of legislation, and

that policing in general was not up to par with it. Or that while they could see that the coercive control context could be useful, specifically to demonstrate a lack of consent, and that they would like to use this more, they were not sure how to.

The CCB offence, then, might be under-utilised in some CID and RASSO Focus forces. In force CID-04 respondents R4 and R5, who were interviewed together, told us that the CCB offence and rape are very rarely charged together. RASSO-04-R6(I) told us while he understood the potential of the CCB offence he thought it currently was not always being considered: 'I think it's probably an easier offence to prove, and it's one that we can take forward, but maybe isn't always being considered'. RASSO-03-R5(I) said that while he was aware of the potential he was 'not too sure' whether officers in his unit made the connection between rape and coercive control.

As well as officers who had a good understanding of the potential of the CCB offence but did not necessarily utilise it, there was more evidence in CID and RASSO Focus forces than in DA Focus forces of officers investigating IPSV who did not have a good understanding of coercive control and/or the CCB offence. RASSO-07-R9(SI) suggested that generally RASSO officers do not have the knowledge of the CCB offence, and coercive control more widely, that DA officers would have. He said: '... we need to give them some more training ... we need to give them some of the [professional development] that we have been giving our [domestic abuse] unit.' One CID officer who had a good understanding himself (CID-03-R3(I)) expressed concerns that in the absence of an understanding of coercive control, it was more likely that what he called the 'inevitable grey area re consent' in IPSV cases may lead officers to suspect there is less chance of a prosecution and see it as a weak case, and therefore less worth investing time in. This concern also seemed to be borne out in a force that was transitioning from CID to DA focus at the time of our fieldwork, where an officer suggested (when reflecting on the time his force spent with a CID Focus):

It's because within the DA setting it always comes down to consent and that, that proving of consent and we so rarely seem to be able to prove beyond all reasonable doubt, or to a point where it's acceptable. So we don't take that many [IPSV] cases into CPS I would say ... coercive controlling [*sic*] is ... a big, missed opportunity for us.' (DA-13-R23(I)).

Perhaps the biggest opportunity afforded by the CCB offence is that it allows evidence into the courtroom that demonstrates that the defendant would have known that the victim was not consenting to sex – a recognised hurdle in domestic rape prosecutions (Wiener 2022). Forces with a DA Focus seemed best placed to capitalise on this opportunity. We found DA Focus forces tended to consider a CCB charge alongside charges for IPSV as a matter of course. As one officer said:

I think we always think, have we got a CCB, because I think probably in most of the relationships, or most of the incidents we deal with, there's always an element of CCB. So we would always consider, is there enough of that behaviour to be able to quantify a charge? And I think we do that automatically for every case ... I think it's something we think about all the time, our end. (DA-01-R2(I))

This view was backed up by officers in DA units in other DA Focus forces, with comments like 'CCB usually goes along with rape' (DA-02-R13(FV)) and 'so all DA sexual offences will have a CCB crime attached to it ... it's dual recorded, so you'll have the CCB and you will have the rape offence as well' (DA-03-R20(I)).

Officers in the DA units of the three DA Focus forces that we visited (force DA-01, force DA-02, and force DA-07) showed a consistently better understanding of the relationship between IPSV and coercive control than their counterparts in RASSO units or CIDs, with DA-02-R12(FV), for example, telling us that the CCB offence is invaluable to them, and that it 'will help get the rape into court if it is done well – if the victim is being coerced and controlled and intimidated, how can they then say no in a sexual act?'. Similarly, officers DA-01-R1, R4 and R5(FV) showed extensive experience and knowledge of complex DA investigations and considered the whole context of an abusive relationship and how that formed the backdrop to rape. And officers DA-07-R24, R25 and R26(FV) explained to us how coercive control helped explain why the victim feared the perpetrator, which in turn explained why she remained with him despite the IPSV – which these officers pointed out were critical issues for a jury to understand at trial.

Theme three: prioritisation of IPSV

For some of our respondents, sexual offences were seen as lower status in CIDs. Detectives in a force that had moved from a CID to a RASSO focus (and so had experienced both models) said some CID officers viewed RASSO offences as 'second class' and 'jobs for the girls' (RASSO-02-R3/R4(FV)). One of the three more junior detectives present at our group visit to a DA Focus force said they were described as 'not a real detective' by a CID officer as the DA unit deal with crimes with a known suspect (DA-08-R26/R27/R28 (FV)).

In addition, much wider domestic abuse also appeared to be afforded a lower status by officers working in CIDs. As one officer explained to us:

I will talk frankly and honestly about our teams and our people. So we have detectives who very much see themselves as PIP2¹ senior investigators, trained investigators, who [deal] with the most dangerous, difficult people and sort of put them behind bars. And they're completely on board with RASSO investigations and things like that, on the whole. I think the problem is when you get a DA case in, they don't see DA as their role, it's not for them to deal with. So they'll deal with the CID element in it and they're just not interested in those lower level crimes that they, they either prove the rape or the serious sexual offence or they don't and if they don't, they're happy to NFA [No Further Action] it and get rid of it. (DA-13-R23(I))

Several officers also suggested the reactive nature of a CID, where live cases are prioritised (those within the 'forensic window' whereby it is possible to collect forensic evidence from the victim, or other evidence such as CCTV footage), was incompatible with the investigation of rape, which needs protected time to progress. One officer in a RASSO Focus force that had recently moved across from a CID Focus said:

I was a [Detective Constable] in [CID] at the time, very grateful that it [moving to a RASSO unit] came in because rapes were on my collar and they were sinking me because I had to deal with everything else and they weren't getting the attention because they're complex, aren't they? And they're involved and they weren't able to get the attention that they deserved off me because I was spinning other plates ... I was having to deal with the victim, having to deal with the investigation, as well as the series of robberies or the nasty assaults or the drug dealing or whatever. And I wasn't giving anything probably the best of my ability. (RASSO-03-R5(I))

The view that this 'plate spinning' environment is not conducive to the progression of rape investigations was supported by many of the officers we spoke to that were either currently, or had been recently, in CIDs. A possible exception is stranger rape, where the CID skillset of identifying a suspect and collecting forensic evidence is highly relevant, albeit the ongoing victim engagement element remains. One supervisor in a CID Focus force said:

We get your stereotypical stranger rape or town centre rape, that I think we are very good at dealing with. The ones that don't get dealt with as quickly, not necessarily as well, just not as quickly is ... the domestic related ones or the relationship related ones, or ones that happened where there's no urgent stuff that you need to get someone charged and remanded. (CID-03-R3(I))

Overall, our findings suggest that some officers in CIDs may de-prioritise some of the rapes on their caseload, with cases in a domestic context, including IPSV, perceived as non-urgent and at the very bottom of the list.

In RASSO focus forces, the issue of de-prioritisation of rape per se is avoided by having a unit dedicated to investigating that crime type specifically. There was appreciation by officers that time for protracted and complex investigations could, at least some of the time, be prioritised. We did not find that there was necessarily more dedicated time for the investigation of IPSV specifically, however. Just as with CID Focus forces, we found in RASSO units a tendency to prioritise 'live' cases which inevitably sidelines the investigation of IPSV in favour of cases involving strangers or acquaintances. Stranger rapes, in particular, were also seen by some officers as the most acute in terms of risk. One head of a RASSO unit (in a DA Focus force) said to us that for her, stranger rapes would be the priority because they were the most dangerous:

Actually, we don't know who that person is. And actually that is where you would get every single hand to the deck ... if we have what we'd call a stranger 1 [complete stranger] rape ... I know that obviously threat and risk is massively high on that isn't it? Because we don't know if they're going to go and rape again, do we? (DA-02-R20(I))

In fact, as we explain above, in an IPSV setting an identified suspect is very likely to rape an identified victim (his partner) again as IPSV is rarely one-off or incident specific (Wiener 2022, Tarzia 2021, Logan *et al.* 2015, Tellis 2010, Stark 2007).

Situating IPSV in a DA or wider safeguarding unit, by contrast, has the potential to allow it a high status. Respondents in some DA Focus forces did, however, say that IPSV investigations are sometimes deprioritised to focus on newly reported cases. DA and safeguarding units deal with high-risk DA, including cases where there is no sexual offending, or where the sexual element has yet to be disclosed. Officers in these units suggested they often had to prioritise cases with offenders in custody, or where there was an acute safeguarding need. This issue is linked with that of resourcing (see below).

A final indication of the lack of priority afforded to IPSV in some forces is bound up with the lower status that appeared to be afforded to domestic abuse more generally, relative to wider RASSO and other 'serious' crime types. While there is a national shortage of qualified detectives (see below), our findings showed CID and RASSO units tended to be staffed on point of principle by PIP2 qualified detectives (or at least officers in the process of obtaining that qualification); specialist DA units, by contrast, tended to contain a mixture of PIP1 and PIP2, with only IPSV and, in some cases, CCB investigated by PIP2 officers.

Theme four: fragmentation and 'splitting' investigations

As we have highlighted throughout this paper, coercive control is the primary context in which IPSV occurs. To that end, some interviewees recognised the advantages of IPSV and associated DA offences being investigated by the same unit and/or OIC. As one senior officer summarised:

You need to take a wide-reaching view of an investigation to understand all the parts of it. Because, certainly in safeguarding, you might have a victim who is coercively controlled by her partner, raped at various points, victim of harassment, and any other magnitude of offences, and the potential there then is to have one or two detectives running silo investigations, and the ramifications are they could both come to a 'no further action' point because they don't have enough evidence, but actually if you join them together, took a holistic view of what's happened to that individual, you're going to strengthen your case. You're going to provide a better level of service to the victim, and you're going to have a greater opportunity to bring that offender to justice. (RASSO-12-R19(SI))

Such a holistic approach to investigation was not the default in all forces, however. Though one CID Focus force situated some wider DA offending with detectives, in the remainder the majority of DA offences, including CCB, were investigated by first response officers, or PIP1 prisoner processing teams. The exception would be 'high-level' physical assaults, such as grievous bodily harm. This fragmentation can lead to tension, as a supervisor in a force that had recently moved to a DA Focus, but used to operate with a CID Focus, observed of previous years:

So I started November last year in my role and straight away there was a tension, you could see a tension between domestic abuse and CID, because of the, they're upstairs, you're up and down the stairs and you're sort of taking work backwards and forwards and it's like the hokey cokey sometimes, you're pushing work forward, pushing it back again and it's, yeah again, you get a victim sat in the middle of all this. (DA-13-R23(I))

'Splitting' investigations was also common among RASSO Focus forces, however, with around half of the interviewees from such forces suggesting it was necessary or inevitable. In some instances, there can be operational reasons in favour of splitting, such as statutory time limits for charging lower-level assaults, or the perceived need to seek to remand an offender in custody. Yet the practice of splitting cases was also frequently explained as RASSO units not having the capacity to deal with associated

DA offences. Even RASSO Focus forces who said they try not to split cases tended to do so with ‘telling not reporting’ cases (see Lovett *et al.* 2023, p. 9), instances when a victim ‘discloses’ sexual violence – for example in response to a question in a DA risk assessment interview, or to a professional who makes a report on a victim’s behalf, in some cases without her knowledge or consent – but does not want to make a formal report of a crime. Such disclosures can instigate a rape investigation that is neither intended nor wanted by the victim. An unfortunate outcome in some of these cases is that the victim disengages completely when they may have supported investigation of and/or safeguarding around wider DA offending for which they called the police. To avoid this outcome, forces would situate such cases with a DA unit, while retaining the possibility of initiating a rape investigation at a later stage. This decision sometimes followed a joint preliminary investigation involving both units, where the aim is to determine which team should take investigative primacy, based on the victim’s willingness to support the rape investigation. ‘Telling not reporting’ cases were seen as more problematic in forces with no specialist DA unit, however, with several officers expressing misgivings about cases where sexual coercion is likely present being (re)allocated to CID, local PIP1 investigators or even first responders due simply to a shortage of specialist resources.

We also found, conversely, a tendency in some RASSO Focus forces, in the case of a rape disclosure which came part way through a DA investigation, to transfer what had been a DA investigation to the RASSO unit and make it primarily a rape investigation, even where this went counter to what the victim wanted. There was an awareness of the potential negative consequence of this action, and resentment within overworked RASSO units who did not feel able to give ‘unwilling’ victims and/or the associated DA offences the time and attention that they needed.

To summarise, the wider pattern of offending is vital in creating context for rape offences, and operating in silos has the potential to impede the investigation of all the offending. Victims are likely to find it more difficult to deal with two or more teams of officers rather than one. Forces that split cases reported confusion and conflict over ‘who takes what’ which is unhelpful for officers and victims – some CID Focus and RASSO Focus forces discussed the ‘constant battle’ over which department takes which part of split cases. In DA Focus forces, by contrast, IPSV was always investigated in the context of the wider DA offending.

Theme five: resourcing

A finding that was strong and consistent across all forces was that there is a perceived national shortage of detectives. This finding is consistent with national inspection data: HMICFRS (2019) identified a 14% shortfall of accredited investigators. Though raw numbers have risen slightly due to an ‘uplift’ programme in the past five years, the shortfall – based on forces’ perceptions of the number of investigators they need – has further risen (HMICFRS 2025). In addition, the uplift programme has accentuated an existing trend toward a younger and more inexperienced workforce (Williams and Sondhi 2022).

Many respondents consequently presented resourcing specialist functions as a constant challenge, and of the necessity of flexible deployment and ‘robbing Peter to pay Paul’ (RASSO-03-R5(SI)). Yet the impact of this resourcing shortfall appeared to affect specialist DA units most acutely. Of RASSO Focus forces where a respondent discussed resource pressures, four said they were underresourced, while two said they were well resourced, and one said workload was challenging but manageable.

By contrast, all respondents from DA Focus forces said DA units were underresourced and overwhelmed. ‘The problem we’ve got, the problem about the DA teams is they can’t, they simply can’t cope’, from a senior officer in a DA Focus force (DA-01-R1(I)), was an uncomfortably common refrain. In forces where there were both specialist RASSO and DA units, resource pressures appeared especially acute in DA units. One senior manager with oversight of both described their DA unit as ‘critically’ understaffed (DA-02-R9(I)). There was a recognition at a senior level that

underresourcing was having a direct and negative impact on the ability of police to keep some very vulnerable women safe. As one senior officer explained:

... too many offences of high risk [DA] are still sitting with uniformed officers ... It doesn't make me happy, and I don't have enough flexibility with the Domestic Abuse team and the rape teams with the vacancies that we've got now. (DA02-R21(I))

Underresourcing, then, resulted in the rationing of specialist support. In most forces, the 'gateway' to a case being dealt with by a specialist unit was the level of risk assigned following a primary risk assessment, though there was evidence of a more nuanced approach in some forces:

I've changed our, well, I've changed my own mindset over the years with this because I used to be very much like you need a PIP2 dealing with a high risk, [but] actually some of the repeat medium risk cases that might be long running, CCB, stalking type cases, that is more complicated to deal with ... And actually as long as it's getting the right supervision ... we allocate the resources really based on the complexity of the job, not necessarily because it's high risk or medium risk. So ... we might choose to assign the PIP2 resource to a complicated medium risk CCB and allow a PC to manage a high risk case because the crime itself is relatively easy to investigate. (RASSO-07-R9(SII))

In one DA Focus force that we visited, however, the (underresourced) DA unit dealt only with cases classified as 'high risk', meaning some cases of IPSV were dealt with by the RASSO unit and were therefore less likely to be investigated by an officer with specialist knowledge of DA.

Discussion

The investigation and prosecution of IPSV poses particular problems for police, in part because of the dichotomisation of sexual violence and DA. Our first research question asked where the 43 police forces across England and Wales currently locate the investigation of IPSV, forcing us to unpick what the current national guidance for investigating RASSO in England and Wales refers to as the 'local arrangements' (National Policing Improvement Agency 2010, p. 26). Mapping where police forces situate IPSV proved to be a surprisingly delicate and complicated exercise, and we found that 'local arrangements' varied considerably.

Our second and third research questions considered the relationship between officers' perceptions of the challenges of responding to and investigating IPSV cases, and the nature of the 'local arrangements'. We asked whether the nature of the specialism of the unit in which IPSV is located had any implications for the challenges that were identified. A key implication from this study is that the environment of a CID appeared least conducive to overcoming the challenges presented by IPSV (and indeed domestic abuse more widely). Notably, and consistent with Westmarland *et al.* (2012), only one interviewee advocated for the omnicompetent model. Respondents in CID Focus forces and in forces that had (recently) moved away from omnicompetence described the model as not working and even, as one senior manager put it, 'a disaster' (DA-02-R19(I)). Though there were knowledgeable individuals, the reactive nature of CIDs, coupled with a general lack of specialism and vocation for investigating RASSO and DA, suggested a low status afforded to IPSV and its consequent de-prioritisation.

IPSV may be investigated well in RASSO Focus forces, especially where the force also has a specialist DA unit. But effective investigations can be dependent on the existence of a degree of vocation and specialist DA knowledge among RASSO officers, and/or co-location with and support from DA specialists, which was not always present. As one supervisor, in a force currently operating with a CID Focus, observed:

I think that it is easier for someone who has got a domestic head on to deal with a rape offence, than it is for someone who purely deals with a load of rape offences to start putting a domestic [abuse] head on, and dealing with the other massively time consuming, complex area to do with domestic abuse and trying to prevent it. (CID-03-R3(I))

And in common with CIDs, RASSO units were also to some degree reactive, affording a higher status to stranger offending.

Fragmentation, or the ‘splitting’ of cases between units was common in CID and RASSO Focus forces. We found cases that were relocated to a RASSO unit on a late disclosure of a rape, sometimes against a victim’s wishes. In fact, in such cases, responding to the wider DA first and foremost is likely the most appropriate course of action, permitting victims to potentially support a RASSO investigation at a later stage, if they feel able. Re-locating the investigation to a RASSO unit risks sidelining the wider DA offending in a way that is confusing for the victim and not in line with the reasons she initially sought help. This may inhibit evidence gathering and case progression, as a victim who feels pushed into an investigation that she did not want is understandably more likely not to offer her support.

The most consistent approach to ensuring effective investigation of IPSV appeared to be the DA Focus. Situating IPSV investigations in a specialist DA or wider safeguarding unit ensured an appreciation of coercive control was ‘baked in’ to the investigative process. Understanding and evidencing coercive control helped officers in those units to appear more proactive with IPSV investigations. They more consistently recognised that evidence of coercive control can be used to provide helpful insight for a jury that is trying to assess what the defendant reasonably believed about the victim’s state of mind at the time of the rape. This approach is supported by recent research in New Zealand which found that evidence of coercive control is critical for the successful prosecution of IPSV:

Only by including a full picture of the dynamic of the relationship, one characterised by a propensity to dominate and control, including through physical violence, can the jury have true insight into whether the complainant was consenting to sexual activity, and, in light of how the defendant treated the complainant, whether he could reasonably have believed she was consenting. (Armstrong and High 2025, p. 17)

Officers in DA Focus forces were more likely to feel able to pursue lines of enquiry evidencing coercive control, which helped to support the victim’s testimony. There is an evidential hurdle with sexual offences concerning proof beyond reasonable doubt that there was both absence of consent and lack of reasonable belief in consent, which officers suggested was especially problematic in cases of IPSV. In DA Focus forces there was more likely to be a recognition of the potential utility of evidence of wider abuse to show that, at the time of a rape, the victim was terrified (with good reason) of what the defendant might do to her.

In relation to victim support and care, it has been pointed out that frustrations with victims who are perceived as ‘uncooperative’ or as ‘choosing’ to put themselves at risk is inevitable in the absence of a recognition of the significance of coercive control (Myhill *et al.* 2023a). Focusing on ‘incidents’ of sexual violence, in other words, leads to ‘the assumption that victims ... exercise decisional autonomy ‘between’ episodes’ (Stark 2012, p. 200). This means that victims who fail to capitalise on that (assumed) autonomy are perceived as responsible, at least in part, for the ongoing abuse that they experience. A victim who appears unwilling to engage is blamed for her ‘decision’ not to co-operate with the police investigation when there are many valid reasons she might not want a rape investigation, at least initially. The fact that there might be good reasons for her to terminate all contact with police gets overlooked (Hayes 2016, O’Neal 2017, O’Neal and Hayes 2020). We found that re-framing the IPSV as part of coercive control facilitated entrapment helped reduce the possibility that an officer might hold the victim partially responsible for the abuse she experiences, and that this framing was most common in DA Focus forces.

The only identified drawback to the DA Focus model concerned resources. In most forces, DA units appeared to be the ‘poor relation’, to both RASSO units and CIDs, with fewer resources and fewer PIP2 investigators. A direct consequence of underresourcing was some degree of de-prioritisation of IPSV cases, in favour of ‘live’ DA cases. Underresourcing also meant DA units often only dealt with cases assessed as ‘high risk’. The inconsistent identification of coercive control by first responder risk assessments is well documented (Myhill *et al.* 2023b) and using risk grade as a gateway likely means not all cases that require specialist investigation will receive it. The investigation of IPSV needs to be adequately resourced, wherever it is located.

A limitation of all qualitative interview data is that it is prone to social desirability bias. The investigators we interviewed were suggested by unit heads, and we were able to speak with only a small number of respondents in each force. We found however that officers appeared very comfortable to discuss any issues and shortcomings relating to working practices, and the consistency of the themes identified suggest these were not significant limitations.

Conclusion

Policing structures that distribute the investigation of sexual offending and DA between different specialist units, and/or policing structures that avoid specialisation altogether, appear less able to actively pursue the investigation of controlling or coercive behaviour, which is helpful context for IPSV investigations. While there is no one perfect way to situate IPSV within police forces, we found that recognising the role that IPSV tends to play as part of a coercively controlling strategy may improve prioritisation, help generate the policing empathy that is necessary for better victim support and care, and help officers evidence that the perpetrator would have known that the victim was not consenting to sex – a historically difficult area in the context of the prosecution of IPSV.

Note

1. The Professionalising Investigation Programme (PIP) is the core training for police investigators in England and Wales. It has different levels, with PIP1 (priority and volume crime) sitting below PIP2 (serious and complex).

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Appendix

Force ID	Research method/Data source
CID Focus	
CID-01	Semi structured interview
CID-02	Semi structured interview
CID-03	Semi structured interview
CID-04	Structured interview
CID-05	Soteria database
CID-06	Soteria database
CID-07	Soteria database
CID-08	Email data request
CID-09	Email data request
CID-10	Soteria database
RASSO Focus	
RASSO-01	Structured interview
RASSO-02	Semi structured interview and fieldwork visit
RASSO-03	Semi structured and structured interviews
RASSO-04	Semi structured and structured interviews
RASSO-05	Structured interview
RASSO-06	Structured interview
RASSO-07	Semi structured and structured interviews
RASSO-08	Structured interview
RASSO-09	Structured interview
RASSO-10	Structured interview
RASSO-11	Structured interview
RASSO-12	Structured interview
RASSO-13	Structured interview
RASSO-14	Email data request
RASSO-15	Soteria database
RASSO-16	Structured interview
RASSO-17	Email data request
RASSO-18	Structured interview
RASSO-19	Email data request
RASSO-20	Soteria database
DA focus	
DA-01	Semi structured interview and fieldwork visit
DA-02	Semi structured interviews and fieldwork visit
DA-03	Semi structured interviews
DA-04	Semi structured interview
DA-05	Semi structured interview and structured interview
DA-06	Structured interview
DA-07	Fieldwork visit and structured interview
DA-08	Soteria database
DA-09	Structured interview
DA-10	Soteria database
DA-11	Email data request
DA-12	Structured interview
DA-13	Semi structured interview