

**School of Psychology and Speech Pathology**

**Faculty of Health Sciences**

**“You can live in a war zone and not be a victim”**

**Domestic abuse: The experience of women who are currently living  
with an abusive male partner**

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**This thesis is presented for the Degree of**

**Doctor of Philosophy**

**Of Curtin University**

**October 2015**

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## Acknowledgements

My sincere gratitude goes to the brave women who were prepared to be interviewed for my project. I will always be eternally grateful for the time you were prepared to give me in sharing your stories and the courage you showed in being prepared to allow me to enter your world of living with an abusive male partner. Without you ladies I would not have been successful in this journey. I hope I have done you justice.

Pat Giles Counselling Service, the sole service provider who was prepared to refer participants to my project. I would like to acknowledge the wonderful women who work at the Pat Giles Centre for the counsel they provide to women currently living with violence, for their support to woman and their support to my project through their referrals of clients. Also thank you to Di for her suggestions regarding recruiting further participants and her enthusiastic attitude to my research. You added to my inspiration.

To Dr Lyndall Steed, my initial supervisor who began the PhD journey with me, I would like to thank you for always being available when I needed you, and for providing the direction and support I needed to achieve my candidacy. I hope you are enjoying your retirement.

To Associate Professor Cecilia Thogersen-Ntoumani for offering to be my internal marker. The suggestions and insight provided were greatly appreciated.

To Associate Professor Clare Rees and Dr Lauren Breen, who have travelled the most difficult part of the journey with me. Thank you for your amazing intellect that guided my decisions and kept me on track with the project. For opening my eyes to areas that I would not have considered, and creating a number of paradigm shifts in my knowledge and an exponential learning experience of the extent I did not initially think possible. Thank you for never giving up, and for having faith in my project even when others were less

enthusiastic. And thank you Lauren for actually voicing “I believe you can do it.” You guys rock!!! I don’t care if I’m too old for that comment.

To my amazing Mother who, although she had no idea of what this journey of mine was all about, was unfailing in her support. Thanks for the meals, the appropriate breaks, and for never getting angry with my withdrawal during the busy time. Love you more than you can imagine. And yes I will attend the graduation ceremony just for you.

Thank you to Daniella Rigoli for your unending faith in my ability to complete this task, for your humour which was desperately needed many times, and for your academic, professional, and personal advice along the way.

A special thanks to my dear friend and proof reader Beatrice Drysdale, for the time she spared, even when she was very busy, and for her enduring friendship shown over the many years of my academic journey, and hopefully beyond.

To my friends and fellow PhD hubbites who have been there throughout the journey, and most of whom will be there now I have finished. Even those I appeared to have abandoned during the latter months.

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## **Abstract**

Domestic abuse (DA) against women is an international issue which, despite a plethora of research adding to our knowledge and the implementation of numerous intervention programs, continues to be perpetrated. Research to date has investigated the process of leaving the partner with less consideration for women who remain. Considering, the majority of women do not leave after the first abusive act there are a considerable number of women who continue to live with an abusive partner whether or not they plan on leaving in the future. Further, although DA has been extensively researched within Australia and internationally, there have not been any studies exclusively investigating the experience of women who remain living with their male abuser. Therefore, the aim of this thesis is to explore the experience of women who are currently living with an abusive male partner.

Subjectivist interpretative phenomenological analysis was utilised upon data collected from 16 women currently residing with their abusive male partner, who were residing within Perth, Western Australia. The same sample of 16 women was used for all the analysis chapters in this thesis. The sample size allowed time, during analysis, to explore and interpret the nuances and subtle inflections of meaning required to obtain the depth of analysis required for an IPA study of women's experience, of living with DA. The data were collected using semi-structured episodic style interview techniques and the interviews were recorded using a digital recorder.

Interpretation of the data indicated, women were fighting the socially acceptable script in their attempts to find meaning for who they were and the reason for the abuse to which they were exposed. In women's attempts to find meaning for the situation they faced, all women felt compelled to explain their reasons for staying. In Chapter 4, I discussed women's experience of attempts by the partner to close down their sense of self. Women displayed resistance to

attempts to diminish their positive and strong personhood by strategically silencing self in times of danger. Actions of strategic silencing provided women with feelings of control over their uncontrolled environment. Adaptive coping strategies, such as these, reinforced women's feelings of strength and their positive sense of self. Women reported that closing down and silencing was also experienced from service providers, family, and friends, and these reactions from others often initiated a reconnection with the partner, where women viewed abuse from others no lesser than that of the partner. However, when able to access appropriate support from others, women experienced internal growth and reinforcement to their belief of themselves as good, worthy, and valued individuals. Women were also able to find self-affirmation outside the abusive relationship, which enabled them to find an identity divorced from that of an abused woman, further reinforcing their experience of being a valued and important individual.

In Chapter 5, I identified women's need to find meaning for their experience of being abused. Women drew on the social narrative to find explanations for the abusive events, which appeared to alleviate the cognitive disequilibrium experienced, because of the abuse they were facing. However, the socially acceptable explanations of substance use, psychological disorders, and past abuse, did not hold credence when women began to identify that abuse occurred before these issues had presented for the partner. In questioning the reasons for abuse women began to expect change from the partner and were actively making attempts to initiate positive change for themselves and their family.

In Chapter 6, I reported on the stay/leave issues, a topic that was initiated in the interviews by the participants in this study. Women were fighting the social script, which encourages them to leave the partner when faced with abuse. They presented as strong and capable individuals, who were strategically managing their lives using adaptive coping strategies, providing them with

agency and reinforcing their feelings of strength and control, particularly over their emotional and psychological wellbeing. Difficulties in accessing appropriate services was identified by women who found many support services, whether formal or informal, judgemental and attempting to encourage women to display the socially appropriate behaviour of leaving, with little consideration of what was appropriate for women themselves.

In the final Chapter, I complete the interpretative phenomenological journey for women, by positioning the analysis of the 16 women's narratives within the current literature on women who have experienced DA. The novel contribution my research brings to research on DA is unique insight into the experience of women who are currently living with their abusive partner, not a retrospective view of this experience. By interviewing women during their experience of DA, I was able to capture a depth of knowledge not possible from past retrospective studies. The narratives revealed a lack of service provision from providers who are purported to be available to assist women facing abuse. Through no fault of service providers, they are currently presenting as judgemental and not helpful to women who choose to stay. It would appear, a paradigm shift in the thinking of service provision is required, where there is a willingness to listen to women's needs, devoid of judgement of those who stay, to ensure all women facing abuse are provided with support as they manage their difficult journey.

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

The World Health Organisation (WHO) recognises that violence perpetrated against women is, “a universal phenomenon that persists in all countries of the world,” and it is, “frighteningly common and ... accepted as “normal” within too many societies” (WHO, 2013). Violence against women is an age-old problem, not limited by borders or religious affiliation and has been reported to occur at all socio-economic and class levels of society (Heise & Garcia-Moreno, 2005; Krantz, 2002). Further, violence against women within their own home is viewed by many communities as a private family issue or an expected part of women’s life (Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi, & Lozano, 2002). However, views are changing in regard to the private nature and acceptability of violence within the home.

Violence against a female partner is currently defined as, the perpetration of physical, sexual, financial, emotional or psychological intimidation, and/or control against the person with whom you have an intimate or personal relationship, whether currently living in the same home or living separately (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2007; National Centre for Injury Prevention and Control [NCIPC], 2003; WHO, 2013). Such violence may occur between a male and female couple, family members, or between same sex couples. Irrespective of the definition used, the purpose of the abusive action is to control the other person and to create fear. The presence of current or future fear of harm, to one’s physical or mental wellbeing, is what differentiates violence from general disagreements occurring between partners and family members (NCIPC, 2003; WHO, 2013). Reportedly, the most common form of violence in the home is between male and female persons, with the male most likely to be the perpetrator (WHO, 2013).

Many terms are used to describe violence within the home; family violence, domestic violence, spousal abuse, intimate partner violence, and all

derivations of these. The terms domestic violence and intimate partner violence are used to describe abuse between partners, whether they be heterosexual (male/female) or homosexual (same sex) couples. Family violence recognises the violence that may be perpetrated against or by children, or against elders living within the home. The term family violence is often used when discussing home violence issues within indigenous families, as these issues are viewed by many indigenous peoples, but not all, as a whole-of-family concern (ABS, 2007; WHO, 2013). Family violence is also a more appropriate term for many non-Western collective cultures where family issues are considered within the context of the impact on social issues, not simply the couple involved (Buchbinder & Barakat, 2014; WHO, 2013).

The World Conference on Human Rights in 1993, and the resulting Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, framed domestic violence (DV) as a public health and human rights issue. This reframing brought the problem from the private sphere of the home into the public domain of governments and health organisations (Krug et al., 2002; WHO, 2005). Once viewed as a public issue, DV became more difficult for governments and individuals to normalise, or to maintain as a private concern not to be questioned by outsiders. As DV began to be considered an issue of public health and human rights, within their respective countries, governments were pressured to create formal policy to address the violence perpetrated against women (Corvo & Johnson, 2003; Krug et al., 2002; McDonough, 2010).

Public policy relating to DV is not new. Many countries have recognised the inappropriate behaviour of men who are violent toward partners, and as such have, since the 1800s, prosecuted and punished men who behave in such a way (Blackstone, 1827; Douglas, 2008; McFerran, 2007). Countries such as Britain, the United States of America (USA), and Australia, have had laws relating to DV for centuries, and from both a legal and private perspective have condemned many acts of violence by a male against his female partner

(Blackstone, 1827; Douglas, 2008; Ramsey, 2011). Evidence of public members having intervened to prevent the occurrence of violence or punish the perpetrator, independently of intervention by authorities, has been reported in historical writing (Blackstone, 1827; Ramsey, 2011), indicating the public issue of violence was evident in some form for many decades.

### **Domestic Violence: An International Issue**

In 1997, the WHO invited a number of countries to participate in a survey, with the aim of investigating the prevalence and incidence of violence against women. The criteria for inclusion were, the country currently provided services for women escaping violence from a partner and had laws to penalise those who perpetrated violence. The resulting report titled *WHO Multi-country Study on Women's Health on Domestic Violence against Women* included statistical data from the responding countries of Bangladesh, Brazil, Ethiopia, Japan, Namibia, Peru, Samoa, Serbia, Montenegro, the United Republic of Tanzania and Thailand (WHO, 2005). Other countries or states who had been invited had not responded at the time of this report being distributed. The initial data from these countries provided statistics indicating, between 15% and 71% of women aged 15 to 49 had experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime, with the majority of countries recording statistics within the range of 30% to 60% of women experiencing such violence. Globally it is estimated, of all women murdered, 38% were committed by her partner (WHO, 2013). In addition to the physical and sexual abuse between 20% and 75% of women had experienced one or more acts of emotional abuse, which included intimidating, controlling, and denigrating behaviours, within the past 12 months (Heise & Garcia-Moreno, 2005).

Statistics, such as those reported by WHO, are important in gaining a perspective of the extent, impact, and cost, (financial and psychological) of DV throughout different communities and cultures worldwide. In considering the current cohort for this study of Australian women, statistics from Britain, the

United States of America (USA) and Australia, will be presented. Britain, the USA and Australia, have legal systems, services provided to women facing DV, language, and socio-economic backgrounds with strong similarities, rendering this data more applicable to the current research.

### **Britain.**

Using the British Crime Survey (BCS), data were collected during the period 2009/10 from over 40,000 women, on DV they had endured. The BCS is used to measure rates of DV, which include financial, emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, and stalking of adult women aged 16 to 59 (Smith, Coleman, Eder, & Hall, 2011). Results from this survey indicate, from the age of 16 years approximately 29% (an estimated 4.8 million) of women have experienced violence (emotional, physical or sexual assault, financial, or stalking) from an intimate partner. Of these, the most prevalent violence was non sexual, with 23% of women reportedly experiencing non-sexual physical and emotional abuse, financial control, and stalking behaviour, from the male partner, 20% reporting the experience of sexual violence (including attempts at sexual assault), and 4% of women reported stalking, by the male partner. Further, 7% (the equivalent of 1.2 million) of women completing the BCS reported, within the previous 12 months they had experienced violence from an intimate partner, and 2% reported that within the previous 12 months they had experienced sexual violence (Smith et al., 2011).

### **United States of America.**

USA data relates to survey information collected during 2010 by the Centre for Disease Control's (CDC) National Centre for Injury Prevention and Control (NCIPC) using the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS) (Centre for Disease Control, 2010). The survey was used to collect data on the prevalence of sexual and intimate partner violence and stalking, throughout 50 states of the USA (Centre for Disease Control, 2010), measuring the lifetime occurrence of the above types of abuse for both adult women and

men, in the USA. The data collected from 9,086 women surveyed will be reported here. The survey questions were designed to collect data on: physical violence which included aggression whether psychological, verbal or physical contact, coercive control, and reproductive or sexual health control; sexual violence which included any unwanted sexual experiences; and stalking which also included unwanted electronic forms of stalking (e.g. text messages, emails etc) (Centre for Disease Control, 2010).

From the NISVS the National Centre for Injury Prevention and Control collated data on violence perpetrated by a male partner and reported, 35.6% of women (approximately 42.4 million) over the age of 18 have been stalked, physically, or sexually assaulted by an intimate partner during their lifetime. The lifetime occurrence of physical assault for women was reported to be 32.9% (approximately 39.2 million), with 4.0% of women reporting an occurrence within the past 12 months, extrapolating to 3,353,000 women experiencing assault from their intimate partner, within that year (Centre for Disease Control, 2010). Raped by an intimate partner was reported by 12.3% of women in this survey, which extrapolates to approximately 14.6 million rapes by intimate partners. Further, 0.5% reported rape occurring within the past 12 months, extrapolating to approximately 620,000 women being raped within that year (Centre for Disease Control, 2010). Stalking was reported to have been experienced by 16.2%, which extrapolated to approximately 19.3 million women in the sample, with 4.3% (extrapolating to approximately 5,179,000 in the population) having been stalked within the past 12 months (Centre for Disease Control, 2010).

### **Australia.**

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2007) conducted a Personal Safety Survey (PSS) in 2005, asking respondents questions relating to violence they had experienced from a male partner. Violence in this survey was categorised as physical and sexual violence that was threatened, attempted, or

actioned by the male partner. From these results the ABS estimated, 16.6% (approximately 1.3 million) of women over the age of 18 years had experienced violence from a partner since the age of 15 years, and of these 16.6%, 1.5% (approximately 110,000) reported being assaulted by their partner within the previous 12 months, and 5% (approximately 400,000) had experienced violence within the previous 5 years. Of those women experiencing violence in the previous 5 years: 90% (approximately 360,000) reported physical assault, with 79% of these categorised as actioned physically assault and 21% as threatened physical assault; and, 22% (approximately 89,000) reported sexual assault by a partner, with 18% being categorised as actioned sexual assault and 6% being threats of sexual assault. Twelve percent of women reported experiencing both physical and sexual violence. However, for this statistic there was no separation of assault by partner or others as perpetrators. More locally, in 2009 and 2010 there were 34,000 DV incidents reported to the Western Australian Police Department (Western Australian State Government, 2014).

The incidence of DV in Australia is reportedly lower than Britain and the USA, which is likely to be because the ABS did not include financial, psychological and emotional abuse, and stalking, in their survey. In 2000, the Office of the Status of Women (Law Reform Commission of Western Australia, 2007) conducted a survey to investigate the public view and knowledge relating to DV. They found, although the understanding of DV had improved, where people no longer viewed it as a private matter, the conversations continued to relate to physical violence, with little comment on the psychological and emotional abuse that can occur (Law Reform Commission of Western Australia, 2007). This would suggest, many in the Australian community continue to misunderstand the full spectrum of violent behaviour when it is displayed by an intimate partner, which likely leads to lower rates of reporting abuse. As such, the Australian statistics reported here are likely to be considerable underestimations of the actual numbers of women in Australia exposed to DV.

## **Financial Cost of DV to Governments and Communities**

It is beneficial to investigate the cost of DV to the economy of the country because, although there is an appreciation of the importance of preventing DV due to the human cost, financial issues lend weight to the argument for official intervention and support from governments and health providers in the establishment of appropriate services. Therefore, an estimation of the financial cost, combined with the human cost, aids policy makers and governments in their assessment and perhaps justification of expenditure in this area.

### **Britain.**

England and Wales considered three aspects in estimating the cost of DV in society, services provided to the women, lost employment due to injury, and the human and emotional cost. It is estimated that in 2008 DV cost the British economy £15.7 bn (approx. \$30.9AU billion). These costs included services provided by police, refuges, medical facilities, psychology, psychiatry, housing, and lost economic output (Walby, 2009).

### **United States of America.**

The USA estimated costs from two perspectives, direct costs, which are the actual expenditure on health care services such as hospitals, physicians, psychologists, dentists, and physiotherapists, plus transportation by ambulance, and indirect costs, which include lost productivity from paid and unpaid work. It is estimated, in the USA the total cost of DV is approximately \$5.8US billion (approx. \$7.4AU billion), of which \$4.1US billion (approx. \$5.2AU billion) is related to direct costs and \$1.7US billion (approx. \$2.2AU billion) to indirect costs (NCIPC, 2003).

### **Australia.**

In the estimation of the cost of DV to the Australian economy a broad definition of services and lost productivity due to, emotional and social abuse, and financial restriction were considered. It is estimated; in 2002-2003 the cost

of DV to the Australian economy was \$8.1AU billion, with the largest proportion of this cost, \$4.5AU billion, being attributed to pain, suffering, and premature mortality (ABS, 2007).

### **Defining My Use of Terminology**

#### **Reason for using the term domestic abuse.**

I will be using the term 'domestic' to define men and women currently living together, whether they are married or de facto. I have excluded the term intimate, as there were relationships neither I, nor women participating in this study, would consider intimate. Even when there were sexual relations between the pair, women who experienced feelings of obligation, or felt forced to participate, did not consider intimacy was involved. Also, there were women who had been in long-term relationships who were no longer engaging in sexual relations with the partner, and who would not consider any other form of intimacy (physical, emotional or otherwise) present in the relationship. Although, there were reports of abuse toward and by children, I have not included these issues here, as it is beyond the scope of the current study. Therefore, I have preferred not to use the term family abuse, instead I have adopted the term domestic abuse (DA) throughout.

The term violence can be controversial because, there is often confusion relating to the distinction between physical assaults as violent, and emotional, psychological, and financial control as abuse. Therefore, to avoid any distraction because of terminology, I have chosen to use the term 'abuse' for both physical and other forms of controlling behaviour by the partner. Abuse refers to incidents that are more than minor disputes or arguments, occurring within relationships, the term is used to describe intentional hostile or aggressive acts or threats whether physical, financial, emotional, or psychological in nature (Dwyer, Smokowski, Bricout, & Wodarski, 1995). There will be occasions where I will use the term DV, this will be when reporting research using the term.

**Victims and perpetrators.**

There is contention relating to terminology used within the DA literature for women and their male partners. From the perspective of heterosexual relationships, abuse terms such as victim and survivor have been the norm to describe women, and perpetrator to describe men. I am going to use the terms women/participant and men/partner to describe women in this study and their partners. This is done out of respect for my participant women, many of whom did not view themselves as victims, nor their partners as perpetrators. The term survivor will be avoided as it infers the victim status preceded. This is a story from my participant's viewpoint. Therefore, out of respect, I am refraining from any labelling terminology, hence the use of women/participant and men/partner throughout.

**Aims and Research Questions**

As far back as the 1990s, there have been calls for research investigating women currently living with DA (Brown,1997; Davis,2002; Lempert,1996; McMurray,1997), with suggestions, the only way to discover what is occurring and the experience of women facing DA is to talk with them directly (Werner-Wilson, Zimmerman, & Whalen, 2000). Studies to date, investigating the stay/leave decision retrospectively, have been beneficial in furthering knowledge of the process and the array of psychological and environmental factors involved in leaving the abusive relationship (Anderson, 2003; Douglas & Walsh, 2010; Kim & Gray, 2008; Tutty, Ogden, Giurgiu, & Weaver-Dunlop, 2013). However, despite our increased awareness, there continues to be limitations to our current knowledge of the stay/leave process, and there continues to be a research focus suggesting, the ideal decision is to leave (Anderson, 2003; McDonough, 2010).

As will be discussed in more detail in the literature review in Chapter 2, the basis for much research investigating women facing DA has focused on those who have left, with little attention on women who are currently residing with their abusive male partner. Previous research, investigating the experience of

women living with DA, has in the majority recruited women who, either permanently or temporarily, have left their partner. To date, past research has provided invaluable information, which has instigated the development of appropriate services and support, and aided women in their efforts to leave. However, with a focus on women who have left, there is little known about the circumstances of those who choose to stay, and the appropriateness of current support and services currently provided to women who are exposed to DA, while living with the partner. The cohort of women currently living with their abusive partner in Western Australia has not, to my knowledge, been specifically recruited to investigate their experience.

Because there has been a lack of qualitative research investigating women's experience of living with an abusive male partner, there is a lack of knowledge of the way in which women evaluate and perceive their experience, and the support they require when attempting to cope and engage in help-seeking (Liang, Goodman, Tummala-Narra, & Weintraub, 2005). Without knowledge of women's needs, when coping and help-seeking, service providers, policy makers, and the general public, may be directing appropriate aid for women, currently facing DA, into areas that are not helpful (Allen, Bybee, & Sullivan, 2004; Hegarty et al., 2013), and further may be harmful to their safety and wellbeing. Therefore, if researchers, service providers, and policy makers wish to understand abused women's experiences, from their own perceptual view, it is necessary to begin to investigate women who are currently residing with the abusive male partner, whether or not they are engaged in help-seeking (Liang et al., 2005), as their experiences and perception of the abuse are likely to vary from women who have left.

Therefore, suggestions have been proffered that, research is needed to understand the process used by women exposed to abuse in assessing and appraising their perceptions of the abuse in their lives (Broadhurst, 2003; Liang et al., 2005; Patton, 2003; Perilla, Serrata, Weinberg, & Lippy, 2011; Simpson,

2003). The knowledge gained from women in differing situations will allow identification of women's progress through their decision making regarding the stay/leave process (Buchbinder & Barakat, 2014; Liang et al., 2005), potentially contributing to the development of better support systems to be developed to support them through their decisions. Currently, success by service providers and legal agencies is measured by a change in women's behaviour, or the cessation of violence, without consideration of women's perception of success (Allen, Bybee, & Sullivan, 2004; Buchbinder & Barakat, 2014; Fugate, Landis, Riordan, Naureckas, & Engel, 2005; Hegarty, O'Doherty, Gunn, Pierce, & Taft, 2008; Perilla et al., 2011). Until we are aware of the interpretation of success for women living with an abusive partner there is likely to be limited value in the support we are able to provide.

The general aim of my study was to explore the experience of women living with an abusive male partner, to understand how women interpret their world, when faced with DA, how this is likely to affect their sense of self, and the coping strategies they employ to manage living with DA. The broad research questions were:

1. How do women, currently in abusive relationships, cope with abuse against them?
2. How do women make meaning of the abuse to which they are exposed?
3. How do women negotiate staying or leaving their relationships?

### **Structure of the Thesis**

In Chapter 2, I provide a review of the current literature relating to DA. An overview of the negative psychological, emotional, and physical consequences of exposure to DA will be reported. Aspects of coping and protective factors will be explored in relation to how this might protect against the negative psychological and emotional impact of DA. Theoretical perspectives relating to the stay/leave decision of women will be described as this has been a major theme of

investigations relating to DA. This will be followed by a review of the research that has recognised the barriers women face when attempting to leave their abusive partner. This review will finish by presenting research on women who choose to stay with their partner despite facing DA.

In Chapter 3, I will provide an outline of the three elements of, the epistemology of subjectivism, the theoretical and methodological perspective of interpretive phenomenology (hermeneutic), and the interview method of unstructured and episodic techniques utilised in this study. These elements underpin the Interpretative Phenomenological Analytic (IPA) technique that has been adopted for my research. The reporting of the elements of my study will incorporate my personal perspective, which will provide the reader with an insight into my personal worldview and how this may impact on the results of this research. An understanding of these elements, the IPA method plus my personal perspective, will provide the reader evidence of the soundness and decisiveness of the results presented. In this chapter I will also provide a full description of the procedure applied in this study. The basis for selection of my cohort will be explained, and the recruitment method of women currently residing with an abusive male partner plus the difficulties entailed in the recruitment process. A brief description of the materials used during recruitment and interviews will follow. A comprehensive explanation of the ethical issues relating to research within the area of DA is provided which included issues of safety, for both women and me, when conducting interviews and recruiting participants. This chapter will finish with a full description of my data analysis.

In Chapters 4, 5 and 6, my findings will be presented. The resulting information indicated that women were faced with a number of restrictions within their lives. However, despite these restrictions women were able to find strength and control within their lives, which provided them with feelings of internal power within a powerless situation. Finding a sense of internal power

and control appeared to provide a protective defence for women's emotional and psychological wellbeing.

In the final Chapter 7, I will report the key implications of the research data and discuss the contributions this information will make to furthering knowledge of women who currently live with DA. Research results will be presented within the background of current literature and an outline of the novel and substantial contribution, particularly to practice concerning the experience of living with DA, will be offered. Finally, strengths and limitations of the study will be reported and future research suggestions will be presented.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

In this chapter, a review of the DA literature will be presented with the purpose of providing a background and rationale for the exploration into the subjective experiences of women who choose to live with an abusive male partner. I will begin by reporting literature relating to the impact of exposure to DA on women's psychological and emotional wellbeing. Research has indicated women exposed to DA experience more negative psychological and emotional issues than women not facing DA. However, the coping styles of women living with DA have an influence on the negative impact, where some women fare better than others and exhibit less negative effects. Problem focused coping, which is generally considered more adaptive than emotion focused coping, may not necessarily be so for women experiencing DA, because a proactive approach can often exacerbate the partner further and place women in more danger. Therefore, the coping strategies presented within the literature that are either adaptive or less adaptive when facing DA will be reported. The stay/leave decision of women experiencing male abuse has dominated past literature on research of DA. Therefore, differing theoretical perspectives will be presented on the topic of women's stay/leave decision making process. The reasons for women's decision to stay will be further reviewed with consideration of barriers to her leaving. Last, the literature review will cover women who chose to stay despite the lack of barriers to them leaving. In discussion of women who chose to stay it will be evident that many are limited in resources or support available because of the social narrative regarding what is the correct action when faced with abuse, which is to leave. Throughout this discussion the rationale for the current study will unfold.

#### **Psychological Implications of Living with Domestic Abuse**

Exposure to physical DA can lead to physical problems such as back pain, headaches, gastrointestinal disorders, hypertension, chest pain, and neurological

issues such as seizures and headaches (Ali & Naylor, 2013; Bitton, 2014; Devries et al., 2013). Further to physical implications, there is a plethora of research to suggest that exposure to physical DA increases the risk of mental health issues with prevalence rates of major depressive disorder (MDD), posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), suicidality, cognitive difficulties, somatisation, anxiety disorders, phobias, sleep disorders, fearfulness of partner, obsessive compulsive symptoms, and drug and alcohol problems being considerably higher for women exposed to physical DA than for those within the general population (Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Bell & Naugle, 2008; Beydoun, Beydoun, Kaufman, Lo, & Zonderman, 2012; Bitton, 2014; Campbell, 2002; Devries et al., 2013; Golding, 1999; Jones, Hughes, & Unterstaller, 2001; Khadra, Wehbe, Fiola, Skaff, & Nehmé, 2014). Although any form of physical violence reportedly has a negative impact, the severity of violence has been implicated in the likelihood of developing PTSD symptomatology (Bargai, Ben-Shakhar, & Shalev, 2007; Campbell, 2002; Cascardi, O'Leary, & Schlee, 1999; Jones et al., 2001), and incidents of homicide by a male against a female are predominantly the result of a DA incident (Bell & Naugle, 2008; Gerber, Iverson, Dichter, Klap, & Latta, 2014).

Psychological and emotional abuse can have an equal or more profound negative impact on mental wellbeing than physical abuse (Cascardi et al., 1999; Pico-Alfonso, 2005). The presence of emotional and psychological abuse, whether inclusive of physical or sexual abuse, has been shown not only to lead to psychological distress it can also negatively impact a woman's sense of who she is undermining feelings of self-esteem, self-worth, and self-concept (Aguilar & Nightingale, 1994; Cascardi et al., 1999; Jones et al., 2001; Orava, McLeod, & Sharpe, 1996). When a woman's sense of who they are is negatively affected they begin to express feelings of worthlessness, inadequacy, deficiency, and being unlovable (Andrews & Brewin, 1990). Further, when women hold these perceptions of themselves the negative impact of trauma and victimisation from the DA can persist longer than their exposure to abuse by the partner continuing after they have removed themselves from the relationship and abuse (Bargai et

al., 2007; Campbell, 2002; Golding, 1999). These persistent problems are understood to be the result of the negative impact on women's confidence, which in turn inhibits their ability to negotiate positive change in their life making it problematic for them to overcome future difficulties they may face (Aguilar & Nightingale, 1994). It is therefore not surprising that women who have faced, or are currently facing DA, are considered to be the largest group of traumatised individuals throughout North America (Kubany & Watson, 2002).

DA cannot be easily defined into distinct categories of physical, sexual and emotional abuse. Physical abuse rarely occurs without verbal name calling, and sexual abuse is likely to be associated with emotional abuse (Aguilar & Nightingale, 1994; Astbury, 2006; Feder, Hutson, Ramsay, & Taket, 2006). It is not difficult to understand these associations and that sexual abuse would be associated with emotional abuse, as sexual abuse is likely to be experienced as an attack on the individual's feminine identity, a taking away of the control over her body which would be expected to have emotional consequences (Astbury, 2006). Also, the issue of a partner violating the most intimate aspect of a relationship is likely to have negative emotional consequences (Astbury, 2006; Bargai et al., 2007). These views contradict past ideas of a distinct categorisation of abusive acts, and it has been suggested (Bargai et al., 2007) that these insights provide an indication of how women might experience abuse that is different to past impressions gained through quantitative research methods.

### **DA Does Not Impact All Women Equally**

Despite a strong link between exposure to DA and negative physical, psychological, and emotional symptomatology, some individuals fare better than others when faced with DA, with many displaying less or minimal negative emotional and psychological impact (Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Anderson, Renner, & Danis, 2012; Bitton, 2014; Waldrop & Resick, 2004). It has been suggested that a number of characteristics, which include the effectiveness of coping strategies, perceived control within the situation, and resilience, impact

the emotional and psychological harm experienced as a result of abuse (Anderson, Renner, & Danis, 2012; Clements, Sabourin, & Spiby, 2004; Cobb, Tedeschi, Calhoun, & Cann, 2006; Coker, Weston, Justice, & Blakeney, 2005; Davis, 2002; Humphreys, 2003).

### **Coping style may minimise the negative psychological impact of DA.**

Coping was generally considered to be the thoughts and emotions employed by individuals to help them manage stressors (stressful situations) in their lives. Early conceptualisations of coping suggested that individuals engaged in internal processes in an attempt to protect and maintain their emotional and psychological wellbeing (Billings & Moos, 1981). More recently, this conceptualisation has been expanded to incorporate both cognitive and behavioural aspects in explaining the avoidance and/or management of the effects of a stressor (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985). Folkman and Lazarus make the distinction between problem-focused coping aimed at managing the stressor, and emotion-focused coping aimed at regulating the emotional and psychological distress experienced as a result of the stressor. Problem-focused coping is seen as pro-active that is doing something to positively change the source of distress, whereas emotion-focused is seen as an attempt at controlling the feelings of distress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Folkman and Lazarus suggest that stressful appraisals are characterised as either threatening, challenging, or harmful depending on the situation, and it is only when a situation is considered harmful or threatening that the person will become distressed. They indicate that the individual's appraisal of the stressor, and the individual's aim at the time, will impact upon the choice and effectiveness of the coping strategy called upon (Lewis et al., 2006; Matheson, Skomorovsky, Fiocco, & Anisman, 2007). Therefore, an individual may have a general disposition toward a particular copying style however, his/her coping strategy will often be influenced by the current situation, so it will be situation specific (Matheson et al., 2007).

Problem-focused coping has been considered the most adaptive coping strategy, where adaptive is seen as minimising the distress experienced in the short-term and promoting well-being in the long term (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Within the DA literature, this view has been supported by study results indicating that non-abused women are more likely to use problem-focused active coping behaviour and strategies (Follingstad, Neckerman, & Vormbrock, 1988), which is viewed as providing better psychological outcomes for individuals than emotion-focused strategies (Vitaliano, Russo, Weber, & Celum, 1993). Researchers investigating populations of abused women have indicated that they are more likely to engage in emotion-focused strategies (Clements, 2004; Follingstad et al., 1988), generally exhibiting more dependent and avoidant behaviour when attempting to cope with violence in their lives (Claerhout, Elder, & Janes, 1982; Clements, & Sawhney, 2000). These results lead to suggestions that the use of avoidant coping strategies by women facing abuse is an attempt to ignore the problems with hopes they would go away (Claerhout et al., 1982; Clements, & Sawhney, 2000), and that the use of avoidant coping strategies can be detrimental to the mental health of women facing DA (Krause, Kaltman, Goodman, & Dutton, 2008). However, although there is evidence that problem-focused coping is beneficial to a positive psychological health outcome, there is controversy over which coping technique is most effective when faced with DA.

Currently, there appears to be a realisation that differing coping styles are more appropriate when the person has control over an outcome as opposed to when, at that particular moment for example when being physically attacked, there is no control (Clements, & Sawhney, 2000; Parker & Lee, 2007). Emotion-focused strategies may be more appropriate and beneficial when faced with an uncontrollable situation (Vitaliano et al., 1993) such as DA. The possibility that problem-focused coping strategies may not be beneficial when facing DA has been evidenced in reported literature of incidents where women who exhibited stronger direct resistant coping strategies (physically resisted, restricted sexual contact, did not obey his requests), or attempted placating behaviours, or made

attempts to remove themselves from the immediate incident, were at more risk for higher levels of DA (Goodman, Dutton, Vankos, & Weinfurt, 2005). These results are not surprising when considering that some males may resort to violence to maintain control over women. Therefore, any attempts by women to use direct resistance coping strategies are likely to exacerbate the situation and result in increased violent behaviour by the partner (Goodman et al., 2005) placing women in further danger.

Researchers suggesting that women who are not facing abuse, who use problem-focused coping strategies, showed less dysphoric and depressive symptomatology, than those who use emotion-focused or self-blame strategies, (Calvete, Corral, & Estévez, 2008; Clements, 2004) has led service providers to encourage women exposed to DA to engage in more problem-focused coping strategies (Kocot & Goodman, 2003). However, as noted, problem-focused coping may not always be the most beneficial action when facing DA. Further reinforcement for caution when encouraging problem-focused coping for women facing DA was identified by Kocot and Goodman (2003) when they conducted a study to investigate coping in women attending a court intake centre while pursuing legal action against their violent partner. Kocot and Goodman found that problem-focused coping behaviours predicted more negative mental health symptomatology when the women perceived less social support. They concluded that social support moderates the relationship between problem-focused coping and mental health, indicating that women who perceived higher levels of social support while using problem-focused coping were less likely to exhibit symptoms of depression and PTSD. Whereas women perceiving less social support, who utilised problem-focused coping, were more likely to exhibit symptoms of depression and PTSD. This would suggest, if women exposed to DA perceive a lack of social support encouraging them to cope from a problem-focused perspective may not be empowering nor beneficial to their mental health. These results were supported by Krause, Kaltman, Goodman and Dutton (2008) who also found that problem-focused coping strategies and

perceived lack of support could be detrimental to the mental health of women facing DA.

Many investigators of DA (Billings & Moos, 1981; Flicker, Cerulli, Swogger, & Talbot, 2012; Lewis et al., 2006) are now acknowledging that coping is a complex process, and women exposed to DA are likely to employ multiple coping strategies when faced with an abusive situation. These researchers suggest that the current interpretations may be oversimplifying women's circumstances. Women exposed to DA are likely to utilise both disengagement strategies, such as "withdrawing from the problem and the associated emotional response" (Flicker et al., 2012, p. 421), in combination with engagement strategies, such as "strategies that increase proximity to the stressor" (Flicker et al., 2012, p. 421), when faced with DA, and that disengagement coping when faced with extreme levels of physical violence may act to protect women from any negative psychological impact.

Research to date has not provided clarity in relation to the appropriate coping style for women facing DA. This may be because the majority of research has involved women who have left the abusive relationship (Flicker et al., 2012; Mitchell & Hodson, 1983; Smith, Murray, & Coker, 2010), and women who have left their abusive partner may utilise coping strategies that those who stay do not (Lewis et al., 2006). It is well accepted that adaptive coping is effective in reducing distress (Billings & Moos, 1981; Smith, Murray, & Coker, 2010). However, what is less well known is the form of coping that is most beneficial for women currently facing DA. Suggestions have been proffered that further investigation may need to look less at the categorisation of coping and focus on the actual strategies women engage when coping with the stressors of DA (Flicker et al., 2012). Strategies that involve "planning, positive reframing, acceptance, humour, religion, using emotional support, using instrumental support, venting, disengagement, self-blame, self-distractions, active coping, denial, and substance use" (Flicker et al., 2012, p. 422) have all been reported as

coping strategies that women facing DA find effective. The issue to be considered is that the women who are able to adaptively cope with DA may be those who remain (Herbert, Silver, & Ellard, 1991).

### **Perceived control.**

The concept of personal control refers to an individual's belief that they have some influence or impact on an event or situation within their environment (Umberson, Anderson, Glick, & Shapiro, 1998). An individual's perceived control may relate to a behavioural aspect or an emotional or psychological aspect of control. Research has indicated that the perception of control over a DA situation provides protection for negative stress related symptomatology, and that a feeling of powerlessness within non-abused and abused women has been linked to depression (Campbell, Sullivan, & Davidson, 1995; Walker, 1981). Subjective appraisals of an event or situation are reported to contribute significantly more to psychological distress than are objective appraisals of the situation or event (Martinez-Torteya, Bogat, von Eye, Levensky, & Davidson, 2009). Campbell and associates (1995) in their longitudinal study of women and depression reported that those who had a perception of power over their lives were less likely to experience feelings of depression. They encouraged service providers to focus on empowering women during therapeutic interventions holding the belief that empowerment would help women make changes to "free them from" (p. 252) the current relationship. Appropriate support from others, which involves supportive non-judgemental response to women who discuss their issues from agencies, or social support from friends and family, empowers women and results in wellbeing (Campbell et al., 1995; Feder et al., 2006; Hegarty et al., 2008; Lehrner & Allen, 2008). It would therefore appear, that women's appraisal of the control over their situation is related to their mental health outcome (Martinez-Torteya et al., 2009).

Internal resources such as an internal locus of control, feelings of mastery, self-efficacy, and the ability to care for self (Benight, Swift, Sanger, Smith, &

Zeppelin, 1999; Campbell et al., 1995; Garvin, Kalter, & Hansell, 1993; Mitchell & Hodson, 1983; Nurius, Furrey, & Berliner, 1992; Orava et al., 1996; Sullivan, Campbell, Angelique, Eby, & Davidson II, 1994; Sullivan, Tan, Basta, Rumptz, & Davidson, 1992) are important for woman facing DA. These internal resources provide the confidence to initiate adaptive coping strategies when facing trauma and abuse. Internal resources of perceived control, which is the feeling they have the ability to change their situation, appear to provide a buffer to the negative impact from DA because confidence in her ability to manage a situation provides an important protective internal resource for a woman facing trauma and abuse (Clements et al., 2004; Orava et al., 1996).

Clements and colleagues (2004) suggested that perceived control for women facing DA was not advantageous as it would hinder them leaving the relationship. They reported that hopelessness may be beneficial as it would prompt women to leave the abusive partner, whereas those not feeling hopeless may continue to hold hope that the relationship will be successful and stay in an attempt to make it work. Ideas of making the relationship successful or deciding to stay were viewed by Clements and colleagues as a negative decision, and suggestions were presented to include therapy that reduced women's hopeful feelings in an attempt to move women toward leaving.

The implications for the provision of services for women facing DA who chose to stay is, that if service providers attempt to thwart women's feelings of control by viewing their decision as negative, women who stay may perceive that they will only receive help if they leave (Bostock, Plumpton, & Pratt, 2009). Perceptions such as these may increase women's feelings of hopelessness and inhibit their feelings of personal control and sense of wellbeing; it is also likely to reduce their motivation to seek support, further isolating women facing DA. A view of increasing women's feelings of hopelessness appears to contradict the literature on women's psychological and emotional wellbeing, which suggests positive results when some form of control is maintained over their future life

(Benight, et al., 1999; Campbell et al., 1995; Garvin et al., 1993; Mitchell & Hodson, 1983; Murius et al., 1992; Orava et al., 1996; Sullivan et al., 1994; Sullivan et al., 1992).

There have been discrepant results from studies on the aspect of perceived control of women who have been exposed to DA. Orava and colleagues (1996) suggested intervention strategies to increase sense of control in women facing DA would be beneficial to feelings of power and thereby increase their ability to make decisions and master their environment, making it easier for them to initiate departure from the relationship. Although the methods differed, Orava and colleagues agree with Clements and colleagues' (2004) aim to remove women from the current relationship.

Few studies investigating the perceptions of control for women currently living with an abusive partner appeared to have been conducted (for exception see Buchbinder & Barakat, 2014). Women reportedly present with a better sense of well-being, have less physical and psychological problems, and more positive emotional and psychological adjustment (Anderson & Saunders, 2003) when feeling in control. It would therefore, be beneficial to understand perceptions of control for women currently living with an abusive male.

### **Resilience and coping self-efficacy after facing DA.**

Resilience has been described as the ability of a person to restore equilibrium to their emotions, psychological wellbeing, and life demands, through adaptation when exposed to immense adversity (Benight et al., 2004; Benight et al., 1999; Wagnild & Young, 1993). An indication of resilience does not imply that when faced with adversity an individual will not experience disruption in their ability to function. It is to infer that a resilient individual will experience less disruption than a less resilient person, where the disruption to their functioning will be experienced as mild and brief (Bisconti, Bergeman, & Boker, 2006). Therefore, a resilient individual will be able to quickly find meaning and

restore balance within his/her life, despite experiencing considerable adversity (Anderson et al., 2012; Landenburger, 1998; McMillen, 1999).

Researchers investigating resilience in women exposed to DA have reported strong resilience displayed in women who had removed themselves from the DA situation (Anderson et al., 2012; Bitton, 2014; Humphreys, 2003; Tyson, Herting, & Randell, 2007), while less reporting has been forthcoming on women who stay. Indications of resilience in women who had left were reported as their abilities to not only survive the experiences of DA, but also their ability to remove themselves from a DA situation (Humphreys, 2003). Women who had left were described as resourceful, confident, determined, possessing energy and force of will (Humphreys, 2003). Although not entirely lacking, acknowledgement and reporting of resilience and characteristics reported by Humphreys in women who stay in the DA situation has been less prevalent.

Cobb and colleagues (2006) investigated a cohort of 60 women accessing shelter services, 20 of whom were living with the abusive partner. They reported that although women who had left the abusive relationship showed greater posttraumatic growth relating to appreciation of life, women who were currently living with the abusive partner also experienced a degree of growth. Cobb and colleagues attributed the growth of women who had returned to their partner, evidenced in a more positive emotional and psychological wellbeing, as likely to have occurred when they were out of the relationship and staying at the shelter and sustained when women return. There was little recognition that growth may have occurred while residing with the partner. This was somewhat contradictory to their reporting of women's struggle with survival when facing DA leading to important changes which women see as positive for their growth and psychological wellbeing.

Anderson and colleagues (2012) were interested in understanding women's experiences and how, when experiencing DA, they function from a psychosocial perspective. Their aim was to gain knowledge to aid not only

women facing abuse, but also increase service provider's knowledge of the healing process for women in this situation. They held the belief that women's strengths, plus the environmental strengths she is able to call upon, will aid in her post trauma recovery and growth. In their study, resilience factors such as feelings of personal competence, acceptance to change, instincts, and control, appeared protective against PTSD symptoms. Anderson and colleagues (2012) concluded that growth when faced with abuse is possible even when the abuse has occurred over many years. Their results indicated limited presence of interpersonal issues such as depression, low self-esteem, and anxiety with evidence of strong resilience for the women in their study. There was evidence of residual traumatic symptoms. However, for women who registered symptoms of PTSD they also showed higher resilience scores than other populations with PTSD symptoms. Such results were interpreted as women having both a degree of psychological distress and resilience and this was seen as part of the adjustment and coping experience for women facing DA. Appropriate support systems appeared essential to greater resilience and recovery in this group, with the support systems often being informal. Many women exhibit strength in their capacity to persevere and survive the debilitating impact of the trauma they experience when facing DA (Anderson et al., 2012). The limitation of this study is that it was retrospective, with women having been away from the abusive relationship for one year. However, an important issue raised by Anderson and colleagues was, that despite the negative consequences of exposure to DA, which cannot be minimised, the events of DA and the impact of these events does not need to become the major part of a woman's identity.

Davis (2002), in her qualitative study of 17 women who had experienced abuse (16 who had left the partner and 1 still residing with her partner), presented as more positive of resilience in women who stay with their abusive male partners. She investigated women's inner strength in coping with DA. Davis reported three themes relating to inner-resources: strength and survival, resilience, and self-protection which were reported as persistent and ongoing. In

her reporting, Davis acknowledged that women's strength not only provided women with the internal resources to leave, their strength also aided them to cope in staying when leaving would have been too dangerous for both themselves and their children.

The benefits of resilience have been reported as adaptive when faced with trauma, including DA, and may promote less negative psychological and emotional impact and enhance effective coping (Taylor & Brown, 1988). A woman's view of herself, her self-enhancement and self-esteem, will have considerable influence on the negative impact of abuse in her life, where those who hold a higher view of self and perceive support from others are less likely to experience immediate or long term negative psychological effects (Davis, 2002; Landenburger, 1998; Taylor & Brown, 1988).

### **Self-blame.**

Research conducted with victims of trauma has indicated that attributing self-blame to a crime can be a beneficial coping strategy, as it restores the persons sense of control where they can see how future incidents can be avoided by their own actions (Cascardi & O'Leary, 1992). Use of self-blame does not indicate feelings of provoking or deserving the criminal act against them, but it can be a form of empowerment where women begin to identify future behaviours they can adopt to prevent further attacks or danger. Women empower self by suggesting that their behaviour 'could be' to blame for the attack and that they can change this in the future to avoid a reoccurrence of such incidents (Andrews & Brewin, 1990).

Self-blame as a positive behaviour has been investigated with women exposed to DA, because this attribute has alleviated depression in women exposed to sexual and physical assault inflicted upon them by persons other than their partner. Investigations however, have not supported self-blame as a beneficial coping strategy for women facing DA. Cascardi and O'Leary's (1992) investigation of women living in New York facing DA who participated in self-

blame indicated that they presented with more depressive symptomatology and lower self-esteem than women facing DA who did not attribute self-blame. They reported that such results were not surprising for women facing DA as non-adaptive coping strategies, such as self-blame which involved women blaming self for the abuse and attributing the partner's behaviour to her own actions, are likely to place her in danger of further abuse in the future. Therefore, self-blame is likely to exacerbate her depressive symptomatology and impact negatively on her self-esteem. Others have suggested that, for women facing DA, there is a need to consider self-blame from a different perspective. It may be beneficial if women attribute self-blame not from the perspective that they are causing the violence, or even that they can control the partner's behaviour, but from the perspective that they are providing themselves with some control (Cascardi & O'Leary, 1992; Patton, 2003; Simpson, 2003). This control may take the form of awareness that they can leave if they choose (Buchbinder & Barakat, 2014; Cascardi & O'Leary, 1992; Simpson, 2003). They may gain a perception of internal control over the situation where they have control over their thoughts, body, emotions and to some degree their actions (Buchbinder & Barakat, 2014).

Feelings of internal power under these circumstances are beneficial, because the implication of accepting that another has control over your body is depersonalising (Walker, 1981). However, Clements and colleagues (2004) reported that self-blame in women living with abuse was associated with dysphoria despite their level of self-esteem. It has been suggested, that for women facing DA, avoidance of feelings of loss of control over one's body may inhibit the healing process thereby perpetuating the dissociation and depersonalisation experienced as a result of the trauma (Walker, 1981). Self-blame may act as a form of avoidance for women inhibiting their psychological and emotional recovery. If avoidance and dissociation continues women are likely to find it difficult to experience future joy and the normal pain associated with a complete life (Walker, 1981). The implications may be that a comparison of women facing DA and women facing violent crimes, where self-blame can be

adaptive, may not be possible because the dynamics of the relationship are different for women abused by their partner compared to women aggressed by a stranger (Cascardi & O'Leary, 1992).

The negative implications of self-blame can often be exacerbated by the partner's and societies influence, where both implicate a woman's role in maintaining the home and by inference the relationship, where it is often the woman's role to 'keep the family together' (Andrews & Brewin, 1990). Further to self-implication, women are likely to face emotional and psychological attacks on self where the partner often demoralises and criticises her (Andrews & Brewin, 1990). Added to this, although self-blame does not appear to be impacted by degree of violence (Cascardi & O'Leary, 1992), the DA experienced is likely to lead to her questioning her sense of who she is (Andrews & Brewin, 1990). These assumptions are indicated in retrospective research reporting that women currently living with the abusive partner appear to exhibit more self-blame, whereas those who had left their abusive partner changed their attribution of blame from self to the partner after leaving (Barnett, Martinez, & Keyson, 1996). This change may occur because women had the foresight to seek help. However, it may have also been that the services from which they sought assistance created an awareness of the partner's role in the violence, and that women had become more cognisant of the lack of self in this situation (Cascardi & O'Leary, 1992). There appears to be a distinction with self-blame where women reportedly place blame on self toward their behaviour as opposed to their character, however, attribute partner blame to the partner's character (Barnett et al., 1996).

### **Stay/Leave Attitudes**

The stay/leave aspect of DA has been the primary focus of the majority of investigations in this field (Barnett, 2001; Buchbinder & Barakat, 2014; Halket, Gormley, Mello, Rosenthal, & Mirkin, 2014; Herbert et al., 1991; Kim & Gray, 2008; Koepsell, Kernic, & Holt, 2006; Murray, 2008; Rhodes & McKenzie, 1998).

Theoretical perspectives that focus on issues such as entrapment, helplessness, hopelessness, investment in the relationship, and the differential societal power have been proposed to explain the reason for women remaining with their abusive partner. Information based on theories of the stay/leave process has provided a degree of explanation, and aided service providers and policy makers on best practice when assisting women who wish to leave. A comprehensive outline of all theories is beyond the scope of this report. Therefore, a brief outline of a selection of stay/leave theories will be explored here to provide the reader with an overview of the literature pertaining to women's decision to stay with or leave the abusive partner.

### **Psychological entrapment.**

One explanation provided for women who stay has been psychological entrapment which would appear understandable when a woman has limited access to resources such as housing, finances, or emotional support (Gelles, 1976). A situation that presents as more difficult for most to comprehend is that of women who, despite facing continued abuse and having the resources to remove themselves, choose to stay. The psychological theory of entrapment has been suggested as an explanation. Entrapment theory is based on the premise that women remain in the abusive relationship because of feelings that they have invested too much to leave (Brockner et al., 1986; Brockner et al., 1984; Strube & Barbour, 1983; 1984). Those purporting to this theory view the woman as a knowing participant in the entrapped role where she is aware that her goal to right her problem relationship has been unsuccessful, and that she also views success of her further efforts to improve the relationship with scepticism (Staw, 1976; Strube & Barbour, 1983). There is awareness that increased effort is needed to sustain the relationship which will be greater than the expected reward, but she takes responsibility for the lack of success to date (Staw, 1976; Strube & Barbour, 1983). This, combined with the often extensive effort extended to date, sees a self-perpetuating situation. To stop would mean the

past has been a wasted effort or failure. She continues to hold the belief, although recognising this may not be the case, that she just needs to try a little harder and the relationship will improve (Brockner, 1985; 1986; Strube & Barbour, 1983; 1984).

Feelings of responsibility to make the relationship successful will be further strengthened if success is linked with self-identity. When a woman facing abuse views self as a 'good partner and parent' she may see her unsuccessful relationship as reflecting on her sense of self, where if she is not successful in the relationship then she is not a good person (Brockner et al., 1986) further reinforcing her feelings of failure. Brockner and colleagues (1986) described these concepts in terms of 'depth' and 'breadth' of entrapment; this is who I am within the relationship, and this is who I am in society. The social aspect of how one is viewed socially will impact on psychological entrapment as it is likely that a successful/happy marriage is viewed as socially acceptable and, particularly if the abuse has been hidden, there will be a priority to keep the marriage together. Under such circumstances, the cost of suffering the abuse may be viewed as less salient than the potential benefits of social presentation of a successful marriage (Brockner, Rubin, & Lang, 1981). These views are likely to be linked to the traditional emphasis for success within marriage being placed onto the woman, and her role to attempt to maintain harmony and protect the children within the relationship, and if it is not working "she must not be trying hard enough" (Strube & Barbour, 1983, p. 241).

Women are often the first to make attempts to improve the relationship and are culturally viewed as the 'fixers' (Strube & Barbour, 1983), which may further contribute to her feeling of entrapment (Staw, 1976). If women feel personally responsible for the success of the marriage and were the first to make an attempt to rectify the problems, there is the possibility that even in the face of failure they will be reluctant to leave, and as previously noted may escalate their attempts to create a successful marriage. This is likely an attempt to

“restore the rationality to their own behaviour” (Staw, 1976, p. 40). Such feelings of responsibility are further exacerbated by the partner who will often accuse women of causing the abuse, further reinforcing her feelings of personal responsibility. As commitment increases often the view of the situation narrows and it is difficult to see other ways of acting that will change the negative result, which may lead to feelings of hopelessness and helplessness (Abramson, Metalsky, & Alloy, 1989; Maier & Seligman, 1976). However, to stop following the original idea is to admit defeat that they were wrong, that the past efforts had been a waste of time, and their decision to enter the relationship was a bad decision (Brockner et al., 1986). If they still love the partner, when faced with others accusations and blame of him, women may become more determined to make the relationship work (Brockner et al., 1984; Brockner et al., 1981) to prove that he is not a bad person and that their feeling of love toward him is not wrong.

#### **Investment model.**

The basis of investment theory is that social life involves “reciprocity, exchange, and transactions” (Lacey, 2010, p. 670), and within social engagement people will balance rewards and costs in an attempt to maximise a beneficial outcome (Lacey, 2010). Those following this model suggest that abused women, like other individuals, are committed to a relationship because required needs are being met (Rhatigan, Moore, & Stuart, 2005; Rusbult, 1980, 1983; Rusbult & Martz, 1995; Rusbult, Zembrodt, & Gunn, 1982). A further element of this balancing of rewards and costs is the issue of power within the social environment, which will impact on the choice of alternatives. When power is coercive and if punishment is involved with threat of harm, there may be a need to reconsider the options available. This is evident in abusive relationships where women may see returning to the abusive partner as a more positive alternative than leaving, which may involve costs such as financial hardship, family disruption, and further violence (Lacey, 2010). The power structure relates

to the view that not only the influence of available options is important but also the environment in which the decision needs to be made. So the options may be available but the impact of another's power may make these options less attractive or available at a cost that is too great.

Three components have been suggested to explain the Investment Model: satisfaction – the rewards of being in the relationship are greater than the costs when compared with what would be expected from another relationship; alternatives – options such as another relationship or being single; and investment – the degree of psychological and material resources invested to date in the relationship (Rusbult, 1980, 1983). Satisfaction is thought to be assessed by women comparing the costs and benefits of their current situation with that of most relationships. The investment component is composed of two areas, intrinsic such as time and effort which will include psychological and material resources, and extrinsic which are bonds that develop through the relationship such as friends, family ties, and shared possessions that are likely to be disrupted if the relationship ends. Finally, alternatives available are calculated in a similar fashion to satisfaction where women weigh the cost and rewards compared to the alternatives available to them (Rhatigan et al., 2005; Rusbult, 1980, 1983). Commitment is therefore defined as investment plus satisfaction less alternatives [Comm = Inv + Sat – Altern]. This calculation suggests that women who stay in a relationship are committed because they currently feel satisfied in the relationship, which may be because they have less positive alternatives available and feel they have to date made a considerable investment in the relationship (Rusbult & Martz, 1995; Rusbult et al., 1982). This model implicates that the causes of the stay decision are, that although the costs are higher than the rewards women have high investment and lack suitable alternatives that would allow them to leave, therefore, they become committed to stay (Le & Agnew, 2003; Strube, 1988). It has also been suggested that this model can help explain why many women remain when commitment is low. In these circumstances, it is suggested, for women who lack appropriate

alternatives that limit their option to leave the term “trapped” within the relationship may be more appropriate than “entrapped” (Strube, 1988, p. 245).

Rusbult, Zembrodt and Gunn (1982) extended the model to include responses of women to dissatisfaction in the relationship. These responses comprised four strategies: Exit – either showing destructive relationship behaviour or ending the relationship, Voice – active attempts to improve the situation, Loyalty – passively waiting for positive change, and Neglect – taking no action allowing the situation to worsen. These four strategies can be further categorised into “constructive versus destructive” (p. 245) which includes *voice* and *loyalty* or *exit* and *neglect* respectively, and “active versus passive” (p. 245) where *voice* and *exit* are considered active and *loyalty* and *neglect* are considered passive. Rusbult and colleagues suggest that those who are more committed and invested in the relationship are more likely to exhibit constructive behaviours when they are dissatisfied with the relationship. Also, when there are positive alternatives available active strategies are likely to be applied by women when they are dissatisfied with their relationship (Hirschman, 1974; Rusbult et al., 1982). Therefore, the more satisfied a woman is with the relationship the more likely she is to engage in constructive responses, voice and loyalty, when she becomes dissatisfied with her situation in an attempt to restore the relationship to its more satisfying state. Such is likely to also be the case when a woman has a large investment in the relationship, where she has considerable intrinsic and extrinsic resources invested. Under these circumstances a woman is more likely to engage in constructive strategies to maintain and restore the relationship (Rusbult et al., 1982).

Rhatigan and colleagues (2005) in a study of women mandated to court for abuse by their husbands reported consistent results with the Investment model. However, they stated that higher investment was related to women reporting a desire to leave, which they suggested was counterintuitive. They explained the results as a statistical anomaly. However, it may be worth

considering that women who have invested to the degree where they feel they have exhausted their resources may becoming aware that the investment is not going to change their situation, and that leaving is the best decision. The result of their study also indicated that investment and alternatives were not related to degree of abuse experienced. Although this result is consistent with previous research, (Rusbult & Martz, 1995; Rusbult et al., 1982) Rhatigan and colleagues expressed interest in this result as these two issues, investment and alternatives, are thought to impact on commitment to stay despite low satisfaction in the relationship. They suggested this may indicate “violence exposure appears to affect women’s “wanting to” remain in their relationships (i.e. satisfaction), but may have little to no effect on their “having to” remain (i.e., alternatives or investments)” (p. 320).

#### **A socio-cultural model – Feminist model.**

The feminist model, which evolved during the women’s movement of the 1960s and 1970s, focuses on the inequality of women due to the patriarchal social attitudes and power imbalance between males and females (Bell & Naugle, 2008; McPhail, Busch, Kulkarni, & Rice, 2007). Discussion with women regarding their disadvantage in areas such as employment, ownership of land, pay rates, health, and education, unexpectedly uncovered awareness of the number of women facing violence within their own homes (Hoff Sommers, 1994). The occurrence of DA in women’s lives reinforced the feminist belief of the patriarchal social view of male privilege, entitlement, and domination over females, and efforts to challenge these views which appeared to accept a degree of DA became a logical extension of the feminist movement (Dobash & Dobash, 1992). DA was believed to evolve from socialisation of male entitlement, viewed as an attempt by males to subordinate women through use of control and intimidation (Bell & Naugle, 2008; McPhail et al., 2007), which was further maintained within the patriarchal environment of female socialisation regarding family values and the female role in maintaining these (Ferraro & Johnson, 1983;

Mills, 1985). Therefore, women faced with DA will respond to the violence following traditional religious ideals and female stereotypes in developing coping strategies for the violence, which would include being the nurturer, carer, and protector of the children. These ideals may lead to minimisation, secrecy, and denial of the abuse (Ferraro & Johnson, 1983; Mills, 1985).

Being one of the first models to attempt to understand DA from a sociocultural view, the feminist model focuses on the power differences established historically, but continuing to oppress females to this day (Bell & Naugle, 2008). The grounding principle within this model is, that DA is primarily perpetrated by men against women to maintain control and oppression of females (Dobash & Dobash, 1981; Walker, 2009), and is “supported through cultural beliefs and institutional organisation and practice” (Dobash & Dobash, 1992, p. 43). There is a belief that society educates the population to place males at a higher status and to hold power over women and children. Violence is therefore more likely to occur when there is a threat to the male role, for example, if the female does not hold patriarchal beliefs and/or if the wife holds a higher status than her male partner (Bell & Naugle, 2008). Because of this, feminists see correcting these issues requires an approach that addresses both the attitudes and behaviours of men that abuse, and the cultural institutional attitude that allows the abuse to continue (Dobash & Dobash, 1992). The feminist movement therefore aimed to challenge this view and fight for public acknowledgement and solutions (McPhail et al., 2007).

Those espousing the feminist model stress the “strength, resilience and agency of women, and strive toward the goals of female empowerment and self-determination” (McPhail et al., 2007, p. 818). However, others argue that although feminists have achieved success, advocates of the feminist model have moved away from equality to a victimisation of women within society (Hoff Sommers, 1994; Lehrner & Allen, 2008), citing Sandra Barky’s comment “Feminism consciousness is consciousness of *victimisation* .... to come to see

oneself as a victim” (Hoff Sommers, 1994, p. 42). It is suggested, that the victim status can disempower women because those in authority begin to make decisions that they feel are in the best interest of women because as victims they are not capable of appropriate decisions or caring for themselves (Astbury, 2006; Lehrner & Allen, 2008). These decisions for women facing DA are often devoid of any consultation with those impacted by the decisions. An example cited is the mandatory conviction of males who abuse without consent from their partners, an act that has been considered disempowering for some women (Eley, 2005) as it takes away their choice of action regarding their relationship with their partner. These legal changes have eliminated one powerful tool that women often used, the threat of legal intervention to maintain a degree of control over their partners’ behaviour, a strategy that they are resistant to use if they lose control of the process and are unable to withdraw the charges (Hoff Sommers, 1994; McFerran, 2007).

Further criticism of feminist theory is that the patriarchal or sexist model of the male having, or attempting to maintain the power, does not provide an explanation for other areas of abuse, such as abuse instigated by women against men or violence within same sex partnerships. A final area not covered well by the feminist model is women who wish to stay with the male abusive partner. Within the feminist model there is a strong urge and support for those who leave with less support for those who remain, and a degree of judgement on women who choose to stay seeing them continuing to be influenced by social norms of the women’s role in marriage/partnerships (Hoff Sommers, 1994; Lehrner & Allen, 2008). While noting these criticisms, it is important to acknowledge that activism by the feminist movement has instigated awareness of DA and advocates have been instrumental in negotiating improved services for women facing DA.

### **Improvements for Women Facing Abuse - Refuges and the Assistance to Women Who Leave**

Recognising the difficulties faced by women removing themselves from the abusive partner the women's movement worldwide instigated the availability of safe houses for women escaping violence. Erin Pizzey was the first to establish a safe house in 1971 in Chiswick, London, Britain; the trend spread internationally with the USA establishing safe houses in Wisconsin, Minnesota in 1973, and Boston in 1974 (Dobash & Dobash, 1992). Inspired by the London Chiswick Women's Aid initiative a group of Australian feminists headed by Anne Summers (Summers, 1999) entered a house in Glebe Estate, Sydney, Australia, during March 1974 and established the first refuge in Australia for women escaping an abusive partner. The house, named Elsie, struggled to operate on donations of food and other supplies for over one year before the Commonwealth Government of Australia, in June 1975, provided funding (Summers, 1999) and instigated the development of a women's refuge program (McFerran, 2007).

Women working within the feminist model have achieved a degree of change in the patriarchal attitudes that limit women's choices when facing DA, not only providing assistance to women facing abuse, such as refuges, counselling, and financial assistance, but also entering into the political environment and successfully initiating change at the policy level (McPhail et al., 2007). In addition to the services offered to women facing abuse, programs for men plus a push for the justice system to enforce stricter penalties on violent males followed (Coker, 2001; McPhail et al., 2007). Feminists viewed these initiatives as bringing the issue of DA from a private family matter into the public domain, where formal action could be initiated to change public action and attitudes toward DA against women (Bartlett, 1999; McPhail et al., 2007).

The feminist movement in Australia made the issue of DA public, and over the coming years fought for the right of a woman to leave the relationship and build a future for herself and children without the partner (McFerran, 2007).

Although these actions were beneficial for women facing DA, for women to leave the relationship necessitated them leaving their home, and for some this resulted in homelessness for themselves and their children (Murray, 2008). The solution for the seventies (1970s to now) was, leave the home. The major purpose of refuge accommodation, and their services, was to allow women to find a safe space (McFerran, 2007) where they could gain their independence from the abusive partner with the aim of leading an independent life free from violence (Peled, Eisikovits, Enosh, & Winstok, 2000; Perez, Johnson, & Wright, 2012).

The availability of services, and public acknowledgement of the existence of DA, aided women who chose to leave their partners by providing housing and support. Because of the services now available for women leaving DA, the predominant view among service providers and society was, and continues to be, that to leave is the best choice. However, the right of the male to remain and the women and children being disenfranchised was being questioned (McFerran, 2007), because to many, women's refuges appeared to reward the perpetrator and penalise the sufferer (Murray, 2008).

### **To Leave is Expected, But is not Always the Safest or Preferred Action for Women Facing DA**

A prominent opinion within DA research, and from DA service providers and society, is that the best option for women is to leave the relationship as this will stop the abuse and lead to a healthier lifestyle (Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Gelles, 1980). Although there has been considerable progress in awareness of women's predicament when living with an abusive partner, there continues to be support for myths that women who stay are deviant, lacking strength, utilising inappropriate coping skills, and powerless victims (Buchbinder & Barakat, 2014; Meyer, 2012; Peled et al., 2000), because a 'normal' person would not remain in such a situation. Gelles (1976) reported that it would seem logical that anyone who is being abused by another would make attempts to avoid or leave them;

there seems no logical reason why they would allow themselves to sustain such harm to themselves. Others suggested that many may see the decision as abnormal and ask, "Who in their right mind would choose to remain in an abusive relationship?" (Strube, 1988, p. 240). In referring to the statistics on women reportedly abused in the USA, Strube (1988) stated that:

Although these statistics are frightening in their implications, an even more alarming aspect of abuse is that many women choose to remain in their violent relationships, even though they may risk severe injury or death (p. 236).

Myths and social perspectives such as these produce an automatic reaction from many people when discussing DA, which is expressed as 'why doesn't she leave?' Two assumptions are made by asking this question. First, the violence will stop when women leave, and second that she will not return to the partner. Literature reviews suggest both these assumptions are incorrect (Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Rhatigan, Street, & Axsom, 2006). Women who separate or divorce their abusive partner are reportedly more likely to experience abuse than their married counterparts, also women who leave the partner and return experience more abuse than women who never leave, and those who leave permanently experience less than those who leave and return but more than women who never leave (Anderson, 2003; Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Anderson et al., 2012). Further, the majority of women who are killed by their partners were separated from them at the time of their deaths (Horn, P. 1992 as cited in, Anderson, 2003). In regard to the second assumption, the indications are that abusive relationships are rarely terminated immediately after abuse has occurred. It would therefore appear that the majority of women being abused do, in the first instance, stay with the abusive partner (Ellsberg, Winkvist, Peña, & Stenlund, 2001; Fugate et al., 2005; Meyer, 2012), and most women leave 3 to 5 times before making a permanent break from the abuser (Anderson, 2003). Therefore, for some women a major barrier against leaving is

the issue of further or more intense abuse. The second issue, of women returning numerous times after having left the relationship is more complex.

The numerous attempts to understand ‘why would a woman continue to live with a partner who is abusing her?’ have been unsuccessful because of the complexity of the decision (McDonough, 2010). Views of women who stay or return to the abusive relationship as feeling helpless, being passive, irrational, and irresponsible (where children are involved) (Koepsell et al., 2006; Meyer, 2011), do not consider the complex situation faced by women living with DA (Meyer, 2012; Murray, 2008). The journey involves power differentials from the partner and social influences (service providers, family and friends), which are possibly why leaving involves numerous attempts (Dunn & Powell-Williams, 2007; Strube, 1988; Walker, 2009). Suggestions have been proffered and have added to understanding, but the complexity of the situation (McLeod, Hays, & Chang, 2010; Meyer, 2011) continues to raise questions regarding the degree that these reasons are impacting the final decision (McDonough, 2010).

Return behaviour of women facing DA often leads to frustration, exasperation, cynicism, and anger from family, friends, and service providers, whose support is beneficial for the wellbeing of women facing DA (McMullan, Carlan, & Nored, 2010). The continuation of negative views of women who return to a DA environment impact on the degree of support provided by services who are there to assist, as many service providers and policy makers find it difficult to understand when a women returns to her partner after leaving (Allen, Bybee, & Sullivan, 2004; Brown, 1997; Liang et al., 2005; Meyer, 2012; Moe, 2007). There continues to be an attitude that only those who intend leaving the partner permanently are deserving of assistance (McMullan et al., 2010), and these assumptions presume that we can only work with women who have decided to leave which is referred to as the “appropriate action” (Brown, 1997, p. 7). Attitudes and feelings such as these from service providers are problematic, as they are the people that women faced with abuse will turn to for

assistance (Allen, Bybee, & Sullivan, 2004; Astbury, 2006; Hegarty et al., 2013; Lerner & Kennedy, 2000).

Models that prioritise leaving over other options are not helpful to women who may be facing less severe abuse and wish to remain with the partner, but want the violence they are experiencing to halt (Allen, Bybee, & Sullivan, 2004; Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Astbury, 2006; Peled et al., 2000; Perilla et al., 2011; Simpson, 2003). Nor does this attitude help those who for whatever reason are unable to leave (Buchbinder & Barakat, 2014). Moreover, leaving is not necessarily the magic solution of success that will halt violence, as many women continue to experience violence in the form of stalking, emotional abuse, power and control behaviours, and physical violence, after leaving the partner (Gonzalez-Mendez & Santana-Hernandez, 2014; Mechanic, Weaver, & Resick, 2008; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Further to the safety issues, studies have indicated that women's depressive and trauma symptoms can, in the short term, increase or remain constant after leaving (Anderson & Saunders, 2003), primarily because of the partners continued abuse after her leaving (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). As yet, there has not been any conclusive empirical evidence to support that leaving the abusive partner will result in the best outcome. More so, research has often indicated no difference in wellbeing between those who leave or those who stay (Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Bell, Goodman, & Dutton, 2007).

Most find it difficult to understand that there are likely to be valid reasons why women decide to stay with the partner when faced with further abuse, or that she has probably carefully evaluated her situation in making this decision (Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Stanko, 1997). In his review of the literature, Strube (1988) acknowledged that the decision to stay is logical and has been rationalised by women based on the current information they have, and clarified that this is not a pathological decision making process. Women facing DA are able to provide logical and well thought through reasoning as to why they continue to stay, and the decisions involve complex situations with many factors

to take into consideration (Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Fugate et al., 2005; Meyer, 2012; Peled et al., 2000; Perilla et al., 2011). Issues to consider involve both personal individual factors and socio-cultural factors, and decisions are made on a harm reduction basis for both self and others involved, such as children, pets, or other family members (Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Meyer, 2011; Murray, 2008; Perilla et al., 2011). Rational decisions are made with the purpose of stopping the violence, minimising their feelings of fear, and minimising damage to self and others (Lempert, Akers & Kaukinen, 2009; Buchbinder & Barakat, 2014; Hart, 1993; Hoyle & Sanders, 2000; 1996; Perilla et al., 2011).

Outsiders view avoiding the violence as a main priority above any costs that may be involved in leaving the abusive partner (Meyer, 2012). Those facing abuse however, are aware of the impact that leaving can have on their future safety (Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Logan & Walker, 2004; Wilson, Johnson, & Daly, 1998), and that the legal and social interventions for eliminating abuse after separation (for example court orders) are not necessarily effective (Fleury, Sullivan, & Bybee, 2000; Logan, Shannon, Cole, & Walker, 2006). Therefore, the risk of abuse in staying is often viewed as less damaging than the abuse if they leave (Douglas & Walsh, 2010; Felson, Messner, Hoskin, & Deane, 2002; Hart, 1993; Hirschel & Hutchison, 2003). Considerations such as these outline the complex and strategic decision-making process involved for women making a decision to leave or stay with their abusive partner (Meyer, 2012).

#### **Persistence of negative beliefs toward those who stay.**

In his review, Strube (1988) emphasised the importance of research and theory development to understand women's decision to stay as, "crucial" (p.236) to identify those who may remain with the abusive partner. Opinion focused research, such as that suggested by Strube, was focused toward investigating intervention needs to assist women in changing their decision-making from that of a willingness to stay, toward a need to remove self from the abusive partner.

The focus for most researchers and service providers working in DA continues to be, why women would remain with the abusive partner when there are so many services now available to support them to leave? The next section will address a portion of the difficult and important decisions women face in considering whether to stay or leave their DA situation. Some of the issues considered by women when making the decision to stay or leave their abusive partner include, their economic situation, relational bonds, the degree of effort they have extended, the children's best interest (moving schools, resettling in a new home), their safety while there and after they leave, availability of accommodation, and cultural stigma (Barnett, 2000; Lacey, 2010).

***Social support, economic issues and relational bonds.***

Issues restricting women from leaving can include both external and internal resource limits, and include material support such as housing and finances, and social support from family, friends, and professional service providers (Anderson & Saunders, 2003). One area oft not considered is support within the woman's work place. Formal and informal support from companies and work colleagues can be a powerful factor for women facing DA, as it allows them financial independence and provides both social and emotional support (Barnett, 2001). However, rarely are there resources within the work environment that support a woman facing abuse. Executives and managers, even if they have concerns and are empathetic in the area of DA, tend not to possess the skills or training to assist. Further, the employee assist programs (EAPs) provided by most organisations lack the appropriate training and skills to not only support workers facing DA but to recognise that it is present (Barnett, 2001). Social support within the workplace and through family, friends, and other services is invaluable in aiding individuals facing DA (Kocot & Goodman, 2003; Mitchell & Hodson, 1983; Valentiner, Holahan, & Moos, 1994), as it provides women with the space to reassess their situation, improve their feelings of control which is likely to impact positively on self-esteem and self-efficacy, and

these combined will often allow women to achieve a more productive outcome (Barnett, 2001; Cluss et al., 2006; Kocot & Goodman, 2003). If women are lacking social support, which may be the result of the partner isolating them from others or impacting on their work environment, they are more likely to return to the abuser, not leave at all, or have feelings of hopelessness and helplessness (Barnett, 2001; Cluss et al., 2006; Kocot & Goodman, 2003; Luszczynska, Mohamed, & Schwarzer, 2005).

Economic dependence and the lack of availability of material resources that allow women to support them and their children have been offered as explanations by women for remaining with the abusive partner (Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Barnett, 2000; Goodman et al., 2005; Kim & Gray, 2008; Rhatigan et al., 2006). This has been evident where women, who had incomes separate from the abusive partner even if these were welfare payments, were more likely to leave and stay away (Anderson & Saunders, 2003). Others have found this not to be the case, finding women who did have the financial means to leave chose to stay (Lacey, 2010). Two aspects have been suggested to influence the decision to stay when not trapped by financial dependence. First, although women may be earning sufficient income to support themselves the partner may be controlling her finances and she may not be able to access those (Lacey, 2010). Second, women report that their motivation to stay is emotive involving love for the partner rather than economic (Anderson & Saunders, 2003). Although the rhetoric related to leaving would infer the second option to be a less logical form of decision-making, many women appear to see this as more acceptable as it is a voluntary and positive decision-making process (e.g. love) rather than a forced decision brought about through uncontrollable aspects in their lives (e.g. too poor to leave) (Allen, Bybee, & Sullivan, 2004; Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Feder et al., 2006; Meyer, 2011; Rhodes, Cerulli, Dichter, Kothari, & Barg, 2010; Rusbult, 1980). This aspect of women's decision-making is important for service providers to note as it is seen as empowering women who remain, but may require an acceptance by service providers of women's views of

love and caring for the partner. Working within these parameters instead of contradicting or judging their statements of devotion and love may require a paradigm shift in the thinking of service providers, as these views may be required to provide appropriate support and aide to women facing DA (Allen, Bybee, & Sullivan, 2004; Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Astbury, 2006; Hegarty et al., 2013; Lehrner & Allen, 2008; Reisenhofer & Taft, 2013).

***Accommodation difficulties and protection and safety of children.***

Historically women would not leave the abusive partner because they were not able to support the children, that is feed, clothe, or house them (Hoff Sommers, 1994; Wojtczak, 2008). In today's environment services such as shelters for women assist with these basic needs of the family (Bell & Naugle, 2008; Compton, Michael, Krasavagehopkins, Schneiderman, & Bickman, 1989; Davis, 1988; Dobash & Dobash, 1981; Gerber et al., 2014; Tutty et al., 2013). But, women continue to stay. One reason for this is that homelessness continues to be a viable threat for women who leave (Douglas & Walsh, 2010). Refuge accommodation, although helpful and essential for women attempting to escape DA, is only able to provide short to medium term solutions (Bell & Naugle, 2008; Gerber et al., 2014; Tutty et al., 2013). Therefore, when the period of availability has been exceeded women need to find alternate long term living arrangements. If women have limited funds and employment opportunities they are likely to find it difficult to access suitable accommodation. Shelter and refuge staff attempt to help women find alternate long term housing. However, shelter and refuge staff/services are overextended, underfunded, and understaffed, in all services they provide, and in the long term women can "slip through the cracks, sinking into a life of poverty, unsafe housing, or becoming homeless" (Tutty et al., 2013, p. 1499). When women are facing homelessness and poverty, returning to the abusive partner is often seen as a better alternative for the safety of themselves and the children (Douglas & Walsh, 2010).

Women facing abuse also express conflicting concerns relating to the impact on their children of separation from the partner. Studies have reported that women hold concerns that, the relationship between father and child will be negatively impacted if they separate, also that the father's wealth and provision of finances provides better opportunities for children's education and future (Meyer, 2011, 2012; Rhodes et al., 2010). Studies conducted with women accessing the judicial system in both Australia (Meyer, 2011) and the USA (Rhodes et al., 2010) report that women express concerns relating to the learning experience for children continuing to be exposed to violence in their lives, the trauma of exposure to the judicial system, and fear of children being removed by child protection agencies. Women also reported reluctance to leave because of the likelihood of abuse toward the children during contact visits with the father, because of the judicial systems reluctance to include children on the restraining order against the partner (Rhodes et al., 2010). If children are not included on the restraining order the partner would be alone with them during access visits, and if the women are not present they are not able to protect the children from his abuse (Rhodes et al., 2010). Researchers have indicated that, when women are deciding whether to stay or leave the DA relationship they will take a rational option by looking for assurance from service providers that they and the children will be safe, and if this is not forthcoming they may decide that to stay is the safer option (Felson et al., 2002; Logan et al., 2006; Terrance, Plumm, & Little, 2008). When the full range of difficulties faced by women exposed to DA are not considered their decision-making processes are often judged harshly by others, and she may be seen as undertaking inappropriate coping strategies for herself and her children. Under circumstances where women decide to stay with the abusive partner their decisions are often misinterpreted by service providers as a mother not protecting her child (Douglas & Walsh, 2010; Felson et al., 2002), and because of these misinterpretations women risk intervention from child protection services that may result in removal of her children.

***Judgemental attitudes and the impact on women seeking help.***

It is understandable to see that although there are numerous agencies and support groups now available to women facing abuse there is a continued resistance to ask for assistance (Liang et al., 2005). The systems that require binary ultimatums for women who are attempting to protect their children while facing DA, fail to understand the complex issues faced by women living with DA (Allen, Watt, & Hess, 2008; Douglas & Walsh, 2010). Women facing DA are often placed in a no win situation where an approach to an agency will lead to threats of their children being removed if they do not leave the abusive male, while the male is often threatening to harm the child if she does leave (Douglas & Walsh, 2010; Meyer, 2011; Terrance et al., 2008). Many decisions by women not to leave are formed through a considered decision-making process, and are forms of risk assessment that have been well planned where women perceive staying as the safest option for themselves and their children (Meyer, 2011). However, although women often chose to remain with the partner, to protect her children, she is likely to be blamed by agencies for placing her children in danger (Douglas & Walsh, 2010; Meyer, 2011; Terrance et al., 2008). Victimization is thereby experienced, by women facing DA, from both the partner and the judgement and actions of service providers, particularly when children are also exposed to the abuse (Douglas & Walsh, 2010; Dunn & Powell-Williams, 2007; Meyer, 2011). For women who need assistance, but do not wish or are unable at the time to leave the abusive relationship, these perceived or real feelings of being judged can create barriers in approaching service providers (Beaulaurier, Seff, Newman, & Dunlop, 2007; Meyer, 2011).

Women will often define their problems with DA differently from service providers, and this perception of the situation will impact on the assistance they receive (Allen, Bybee, & Sullivan, 2004; Lehrner & Allen, 2008; Liang et al., 2005). If the service provider, whether a refuge, therapist, or medical worker, defines the problem differently than the women presenting, their approach to offer

assistance is likely to be of little help as it will not be meeting women's perceived needs (Allen, Bybee, & Sullivan, 2004; Liang et al., 2005; McLeod et al., 2010). In many situations where women present for assistance the service providers may not respect their wishes, and either attempt to provide services not required or to influence women in making a decision that the service providers feel is correct (Allen, Bybee, & Sullivan, 2004; Meyer, 2011). For instance, if the woman presents with concerns for psychological issues such as depression, and the service provider is focusing on practical assistance to remove her from the abuse, she may be resistant to return for further help (Astbury, 2006; Liang et al., 2005). While many decisions made by women are part of her risk assessment strategy that has been well planned, and are to her the safest options under her current circumstance, service providers often minimise the level of danger for she and her children in leaving and continue to encourage behaviour not suited or wanted by women (Douglas & Walsh, 2010; Meyer, 2011; Patton, 2003; Terrance et al., 2008). When faced with such conditions women are not likely to return to service providers for assistance, resulting in no current or future benefit and likely further distress will be experienced (Douglas & Walsh, 2010; Liang et al., 2005).

Advocacy from women's groups in portraying the abused woman as victims has instilled in the public view an individual who is passive and tragic, and unable to help themselves, therefore needing intervention from others to remove them from their current environment to allow them to overcome their passivity (Enander, 2010; Peled et al., 2000; Simpson, 2003). This limited view provides supporting evidence of women's inability to help self through appropriate decision-making, and further justifies the intervention of service providers to make the decisions women are allegedly unable to make for themselves (Astbury, 2006; McDonough, 2010; Peled et al., 2000). Further, these social judgements of stigmatisation and gender role expectations may negatively impact women's view of self in relation to responsibility for the violence, which may influence her future decision to stay or to leave (Buchbinder & Barakat,

2014; Eckstein, 2011; Perilla et al., 2011), as such views may create feelings of disempowerment, inhibiting her ability to make appropriate decisions for herself, further reinforcing the victim status.

It has been suggested that the way to change such attitudes is to alter the public perception concerning women's choices when faced with abuse, and to respect that she is the expert in her situation and needs support to instigate her plans in protecting herself and resist the violence she faces (Astbury, 2006; Buchbinder & Barakat, 2014; Patton, 2003; Peled et al., 2000; Perilla et al., 2011). Women have been shown to make accurate judgements on the degree of violence they will face in the future. Therefore, there needs to be a respect for their judgement in the correct actions for her and her family (Buchbinder & Barakat, 2014; Peled et al., 2000; Perilla et al., 2011).

With the majority of studies focusing on why women stay and the intention of aiding them to leave (Eckstein, 2011) there appears to be a judgemental view of women who return to the partner after leaving. In reality, few women leave after the first DA episode, and of those who do eventually leave there is a process of leaving and returning before their final departure from the DA relationship (Ellsberg et al., 2001; Fugate et al., 2005). This is because women's decision to leave a relationship involves a complex journey with a number of barriers, which is likely to result in her needing to make a number of attempts before she is able to permanently leave (Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Ellsberg et al., 2001; Trotter & Allen, 2009).

### **Returning as a Process of Growth**

Women who leave and return are often viewed as less strong and many service providers, family, and friends find these behaviours frustrating, particularly when they feel their efforts to help are being undermined (Meyer, 2012; Peled et al., 2000). Service providers often see the returning behaviour of women to a DA situation as an unsuccessful intervention on their part, and are reticent to provide future aid seeing this as a waste of limited resources (Liang et

al., 2005; Moe, 2007). This feeling of being unsuccessful, if women return or remain in the DA situation, appears to create an unspoken belief that women who leave need and are more deserving of support (McMullan et al., 2010). However, these views maybe unfounded as research indicates that attempts to leave are positive coping behaviours that are strengthening women's resolve and confidence in their ability to finally leave the abusive partner (Anderson & Saunders, 2003), with reviews in the literature indicating that the majority of women do eventually leave the DA situation (Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Ellsberg et al., 2001; Strube, 1988). In the action of leaving and returning, women facing DA have clear intentions and plans which often include attempting to stop the abuse and fear they are experiencing, and to protect self and children (Akers & Kaukinen, 2009; Lempert, 1997; Meyer, 2012). Numerous studies have indicated that the more attempts a woman makes to leave, and the more varied her coping strategies, the more likely she is to succeed in the future (Anderson et al., 2012; Compton et al., 1989; Humphreys, 2003; Schutte, Malouff, & Doyle, 1988; Snyder & Scheer, 1981; Strube, 1988). Researchers have acknowledged that the process of leaving and returning is a natural growth period for women attempting to change their relationship, with each attempt to leave being a learning of new techniques and thought patterns to manage their current situation (Anderson et al., 2012; Brown, 1997; Humphreys, 2003). Attempts to leave, even when returning, often expose women to new coping strategies which enhance her feelings of self-efficacy, mastery, and self-esteem, all of which improve the likelihood of her successful departure at a future date (Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Reisenhofer & Taft, 2013). Researchers are reporting an appreciation of the positive aspect of the behaviour women display when making numerous attempts to leave (Dunn, 2005; Hoff, 1990), even if they return to the partner, viewing these efforts as an indication of the women's strength, persistence, and resilience (Anderson et al., 2012; Hoff, 1990; Humphreys, 2003).

The strength approach views returning as a relapse within behaviour change. The perspective taken is that relapse can only occur if a person has made

progress, where time away from the relationship leads to growth and on returning women are able to manage their home situation differently (Pagelow, 1981 cited in Brown, 1997). Anderson and Sanders (2003), in their review, indicated that women show “courage, determination and persistence” (p.176) in leaving the abusive relationship emphasising the importance of recognising that women are not acting passively and accepting the violence in their lives. Reporting of this view highlights the complexity of the psychological process of leaving and helps to discredit stereotypes of women as victims who are unable, or not choosing, to actively respond to the DA in their lives (Akers & Kaukinen, 2009; Buchbinder & Barakat, 2014; Feder et al., 2006; Kim & Gray, 2008; Liang et al., 2005; Trotter & Allen, 2009). More recent research is portraying women staying in the DA relationship as empowered, thoughtful, active decision-makers (Akers & Kaukinen, 2009; Buchbinder & Barakat, 2014; Kim & Gray, 2008; Liang et al., 2005), and until such characteristics are acknowledged in the decision-making process for women who return or stay with their abusive partner, service providers will be limited in their ability to provide adequate support to women facing DA (Meyer, 2012).

Social narratives tend to discount or ignore the practical and logical reasons why women would chose to remain in the DA relationship, and such attitudes limit the willingness to offer support to those who chose to stay (Meyer, 2012). These narratives are evident throughout the literature where the impression of women who stay is that they are trapped “against their best judgement or against their will” (Peled et al., 2000, p. 10). There is no argument that situations do arise for women facing DA where they are unable to leave. However, there are women who choose to stay without feelings of entrapment or the disability that negative psychological states may provide, they stay as a choice, and many are beginning to question the current services offered which prioritise those who leave (Patton, 2003; Peled et al., 2000; Perilla et al., 2011; Simpson, 2003). When women seeking services find that their choice to stay is questioned by others, and their attempts to make decisions that they feel are

correct for them and their family are not being supported, they are likely to feel disempowered (Peled et al., 2000). Empowerment has been defined as “enabling women to access skills and resources to cope more effectively with current as well as future stress and trauma” (Johnson, Worell, & Chandler, 2005, p. 109). However, it is difficult for service providers to “operationalise empowering practices” (Peled et al., 2000, p. 10) because the current social narrative is in opposition to the view of women living with abuse having any control over their lives, and of them being strong and able to make their own life decision without intervention from others to manage their coping strategies. Thoughts in this vein are evident in the argument presented by some who suggest that the term choice is somewhat controversial for women who stay, as women facing abuse are seen as limited in their choice of behaviour because of the controlling behaviour of the partner (Peled et al., 2000). Whereas others suggest, that women exposed to severe partner abuse are not likely to have “free or ideal options” (Burstow cited in Peled et al., 2000, p. 12). Service providers are likely to be part of the social narrative of women being controlled. Therefore, although they will be making attempts to respect women’s decision in staying, the service providers underlying professional view is most likely to be that there is a need to intervene and change women’s view and remove them from their DA situation (Peled et al., 2000). However, there are reports indicating that a minority of researchers and service providers are able to respect women’s decision to stay, even under situations of severe abuse, and these researchers and service providers are arguing for increased empowerment of services in allowing women facing DA to maintain control over their decisions to stay or leave (Buchbinder & Barakat, 2014; Perilla et al., 2011; Simpson, 2003).

Peled and colleagues (2000) suggest that empowering women who are suffering severe physical abuse is likely to differ from women who are living with violence that, although damaging and deleterious to their wellbeing, is not life threatening. Yet, Buchbinder and Barakat (2014) saw no need to differentiate between level of abuse and the advantages of empowerment for women facing

DA. These differences in views are not surprising when considering the differing cultural perspective of their cohorts. Peled and colleagues were investigating women living in Western individualistic societies, whereas Buchbinder and Barakat were seeking perceptions from Arab women who hold a more collective cultural aspect to social choices. In both circumstances, it was suggested that women need to be viewed as decision-makers who are actively negotiating their life circumstance in an attempt to change their environment and make it safer (Buchbinder & Barakat, 2014; Meyer, 2011; Peled et al., 2000; Perilla et al., 2011), and that they would benefit from empowerment which focuses on women's strengths, with the aim of building on these while acknowledging the social structures that provide power to some at the expense of others (Cattaneo, Calton, & Brodsky, 2014).

#### **The Service Provider Dilemma.**

Worthy of consideration is the dilemma service providers face if they condone or support women who stay, and an incident occurs where either the women or her children are harmed. It is well documented that, apart from the physical danger, exposure to DA is detrimental to children's psychological wellbeing (Levendosky, Huth-bocks, Shapiro, & Semel, 2003; Poole, Beran, & Thurston, 2008). Service providers and policymakers therefore face a "practical, ethical and philosophical challenge" (Peled et al., 2000, p. 10) when attempting to support women who choose to stay. If harm occurs to any party involved in DA a service provider risks social remonstrations from the media, government authorities, and society. Many agencies within Australia are becoming very diligent of their actions because of past incidents of harm to women and children, where the agencies actions were deemed inadequate in protecting the woman or child. Within Australia, there are strict guidelines regarding the procedure for children living in a DA environment (State Law Publisher, 2004). Under these guidelines, it is difficult for service providers to support women's decision to stay without intervening, which often results in removal of the children from their mother. How protection of the child is to be managed while

allowing women to maintain control over their decisions is a difficult conundrum, but one that needs addressing if we are to provide suitable services and assistance to women facing DA (Allen, 2006; Allen, Bybee, & Sullivan, 2004; Allen, Watt, & Hess, 2008).

### **The adequacy of services available to women who choose to stay.**

Service providers are also faced with a dilemma when women request assistance but wish to remain with the abuser, because the service providers' ability to offer such support is often restricted by the predominant social narrative and expectation that women who are being abused would and need to leave (Allen, Bybee, & Sullivan, 2004; Dunn & Powell-Williams, 2007; Peled et al., 2000). With the primary focus within Western cultures being on leaving, there is a void of information being gathered on women who choose to stay. Thus, when accessing services women who choose to stay may find they are 'at odds' with the service providers or support systems they are accessing because of the lack of knowledge regarding the needs of women who stay and the preference for women to leave (Allen, Bybee, & Sullivan, 2004; Peled et al., 2000; Perilla et al., 2011; Simpson, 2003). If women are asking for services which differ from the worldview of the service provider, that is leaving is the aim, it is likely that their needs may not be met to the same degree as women who leave (Allen, Bybee, & Sullivan, 2004; Baldry & Pagliaro, 2014; Hegarty et al., 2013).

Many women who choose to stay are faced with problems not only with the partner but also with the service providers from whom they are seeking support (Allen, Bybee, & Sullivan, 2004; Hegarty et al., 2013; Patton, 2003; Peled et al., 2000; Simpson, 2003). Not every woman wants to leave her relationship and many women don't leave, which means that there are a large percentage of women who continue to live with the abuser who are either not receiving any assistance or receiving aid that is contradictory to their wants and needs (Allen, Bybee, & Sullivan, 2004; Bitton, 2014; Buchbinder & Barakat, 2014; Eckstein, 2011; Hegarty et al., 2013; Perilla et al., 2011; Simpson, 2003). When it is

considered that 75% of women who do leave return 3 to 5 times before they leave without returning, there are a considerable number of women currently living with abuse (Brown, 1997). It is also acknowledged that women do not have to leave the abuser to have made important changes, and are actively making attempts to improve their environment and keep themselves and others safe (Brown, 1997; Buchbinder & Barakat, 2014; Perilla et al., 2011). Women are continually making active choices through cognitive and behavioural adjustment to manage the abuse or to evaluate the situation differently (Brown, 1997; Cobb et al., 2006; Koepsell et al., 2006; McGarry, Simpson, & Hinchliff-Smith, 2011; Meyer, 2012; Moe, 2007; Parker & Lee, 2007; Perez et al., 2012; Song, 2011), and it is only through respecting these choices and attempting to understand the support women need in managing their DA situation, while living with it, that help can be of any benefit. Support services need to begin to attempt to define success and the problems faced by abused women from the women's perspective, not from the service provider's perspective (Allen, Bybee, & Sullivan, 2004; Astbury, 2006; Feder et al., 2006; Hegarty et al., 2013; Liang et al., 2005; Patton, 2003; Simpson, 2003). And, the only way to gain women's perspective is through not only *a priori* qualitative research but also by talking with women currently residing with the abusive partner, including those who have not yet accessed support services.

### **The Issue of Empowerment for Women who Choose to Stay**

Despite the number of women who are likely to present with issues related to staying with their abusive partner, indicated by the number who return to the abusive partner even after leaving, there has been minimal research in this area. One exception to this is Baker (1997) who investigated the experience of women who chose to stay with the abusive partner. She reported that women empowered themselves through resistance of the social script, which attempted to influence their decision and persuade them to leave their partners. Women in Baker's study expressed frustration at the limited

expectations and choices presented to them, where the dominant attitude was to leave. Resistance by these women was expressed through their decision to stay with the abusive partner, which Baker interpreted as women empowering themselves through their non-acceptance of the social norm. However, there was a price for this empowerment where women's resistance to the social norm often led to their withdrawal from programs offered to support them because of the perceived judgemental attitudes they encountered, and attempts to direct them into behaviours not suited to their needs (Baker, 1997). Women in Baker's study explained that they did not want the relationship to end they just wanted the violence to stop. A view also expressed by women from other studies (Buchbinder & Barakat, 2014; McFerran, 2007; Perilla et al., 2011). However, since Baker's study published in 1997, there has been little research on the experience of women who stay holding Western individualistic cultural perspectives, and no studies within Australia on this topic with this cohort appears to have been conducted.

Although the women in Baker's (1997) study reportedly empowered self in their resistance to the social narrative, and the concept of empowerment is regularly verbalised when discussing assistance and intervention for women facing DA, empowerment appears more evident for women who are leaving than for those who choose to stay (Anderson et al., 2012; Humphreys, 2003; Tyson et al., 2007). The concept also appears to be more ideological than practiced (Peled et al., 2000) with mechanisms for empowerment of women who stay being rare (for exceptions to this model see Buchbinder & Barakat, 2014; Perilla et al., 2011; Simpson, 2003). The role of empowerment is to allow individuals control over their own lives and the decisions they make, and to encourage and assist them to develop the ability to make such decisions, and suggests mastering ones environment and gaining self-determination (Gutierrez, 1990; Meyer, 2012; Peled et al., 2000; Perilla et al., 2011). Empowerment skills are developed within a respectful environment where women are able to balance their own rights as an individual and their current needs within the situation (Peled et al., 2000;

Perilla et al., 2011). However, the actual rhetoric about empowering women facing abuse may be disempowering for those who stay, because they are often faced with resistance to their decisions about their own lives and find an imbalance between their expectations and the actual services available to them when seeking assistance (Briones-Vozmediano, Goicolea, Ortiz-Barreda, Gil-González, & Vives-Cases, 2014; Peled et al., 2000). Women staying with the abuser are likely to find fewer services available to them and a resistance to assist if their aim is not to leave (Liang et al., 2005; Meyer, 2012; Moe, 2007; Peled et al., 2000).

Clients within Australia are beginning to challenge DA service agencies provision of appropriate services. Women are asking for a better service that listens to women's needs, and attempts to understand and work with women in considering the prospect of them staying with the abusive partner (Patton, 2003; Simpson, 2003). They report a need for agencies that are willing to help them work through the issues to improve and make their life safer by hopefully removing violence, but an agency that does not try to "break up their families" (Simpson, 2003, p. 6) by attempting to persuading them to leave. The term empowerment maybe the problem, because even when women maintain feelings of control and feel stronger in self than their partner, the power over her does not subside. A woman will continue to feel under threat from the partner's abusive behaviour. Therefore, a change in terminology from empowerment to a resistance toward the social narrative that they encounter, and the abusive acts they encounter from their partner, may be needed. Changing the social narrative is likely to change social views of women who live with DA, providing women with more control over their life situation, a feeling of self-efficacy, and likely a better psychological and emotional outcome than the current narratives.

### **Summary**

Although there is a plethora of literature relating to DA there are limited current studies on women in Australia who are exposed to abuse (exceptions

being, Meyer, 2011; Meyer, 2012; Mitchell, 2011; Mouzos & Makkai, 2004; Vinson, 1996; Walsh, 2008), and of these none have independently investigated women currently living with a partner. Studies investigating women who stay are beginning to appear from Middle Eastern and Asian cultures, and minority groups who hold more collective worldviews, within the USA (Bitton, 2014; Buchbinder & Barakat, 2014; Perilla et al., 2011). There has been limited research into women who hold Western worldviews in regard to their choice to stay. Researchers are appreciating the issue of women who choose to stay whether because of cultural worldviews, restrictive social pressures, or because this is what they want, and see the need to understand the support needed for women facing DA who wish to stay. There has also been a suggestion throughout literature for the necessity to conduct research to gain an understanding of what is occurring for women in DA, with the aim of developing appropriate theories to underpin clinical strategies that will assist women who choose to remain (Rhatigan et al., Cattaneo et al., 2014; Peled et al., 2000; 2006; van Schalkwyk, Boonzaier, & Gobodo-Madikizela, 2014).

The beginnings of the feminist movement saw research conducted through interviews with women asking their experiences of “day to day reality” (for more comprehensive detail see, Brown, 1997, p. 5). Since the 1960s and 1970s there has been limited all-encompassing research investigating the views of women who are currently residing with their abusive partners in an attempt to understand their “day to day reality” (Brown, 1997, p. 5). Social and political viewpoints have changed substantially since past research was undertaken. Therefore, there is a need to readdress the experience of women living with DA. The assumptions presented here suggest that women cannot be empowered through methods that others perceive as appropriate, there needs to be an understanding of the subjective experience of women and an inclusion of their ideas before appropriate intervention or assistance will be effective (Allen, Bybee, & Sullivan, 2004; Astbury, 2006; Cattaneo et al., 2014; Hegarty et al., 2008; Patton, 2003; Peled et al., 2000; Simpson, 2003). Empowering women who

stay requires a consideration of the relevance of assisting the women who are facing DA achieve their goals, not simply the goals that present as most appropriate to the service agency (Allen, Bybee, & Sullivan, 2004; Astbury, 2006; Cattaneo et al., 2014). This way of approaching empowerment of women living with DA may require a paradigm shift in service providers thinking (Peled et al., 2000), with a power shift from that of service provider to women experiencing DA as the expert (Cattaneo et al., 2014; Simpson, 2003), and a good beginning is to ask the experience and opinion of those who are currently living with DA.

## Chapter 3

### Methodology

#### Introduction

In this chapter, I describe my epistemology and methodological perspectives of subjectivist interpretative phenomenological analysis, providing the reader with a briefing of my research design. Explanation of the research design will provide the reader with the assumptions on which my study is grounded and position the status of my findings (Crotty, 1998). I will then outline my research process which will include my sample of participants, the participant's demographic information, data collection by in-depth interview, and finally the data analysis will be explained. Data were collected from a group of women who were currently residing with their abusive male partner, a topic considered sensitive. Therefore, data collection required a balancing of empathy and respectful inquisitive enquiry. The method adopted to manage recruitment for women willing to discuss this sensitive topic and the principle for adopting an in-depth interview for data collection will be explained.

#### Epistemological and Theoretical Assumptions

Crotty (1998) suggests identifying the four elements of, epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology, and methods underpinning my research will “ensure the soundness” (p. 6) of the project and “make its outcomes convincing” (p. 6). These four elements will be discussed in relation to the philosophical background and the research perspective I adopt in undertaking this project. A subjectivist interpretative phenomenological approach will be utilised as the research design, and a semi-structured/episodic interview will be the data collection method.

#### **Subjectivism – my epistemological approach.**

The epistemology behind a study provides the philosophical grounding on how meaning and knowledge are acquired. It is the “way of understanding and

explaining how we know what we know” (Crotty, 1998, p. 3) and “what kinds of things we can find out” (Coyle, 2007, p. 11). The subjectivity assumption holds that exploration of individual experiences requires gaining understanding of the subjective meaning individuals hold of the world (Cunliffe, 2011), while appreciating the impact of the objective reality in their lives. Subjectivity assumptions from the psychological perspective relate to individual feelings, thoughts, and experiences, where reality is a product of the individual’s mental process and is specific and internal to that individual (Cunliffe, 2011; Hanly & Fitzpatrick Hanly, 2001). The subjectivist viewpoint fundamentally recognises that the subjective perceptions and interpretations of individuals, rather than the objective reality they encounter, will impact the behavioural and mental outcome for them. I have adopted the subjectivist viewpoint for this study because I am attempting to understand the meaning women living with DA place onto the real world objects and life events they encounter within their lives (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Crotty, 1998). It is women’s perceptions and interpretations of the objective reality with which they live that I am attempting to uncover (Horwitz, 1994; Lachmann, 1978). Therefore, if my intention is to understand women’s experience of DA I need to gain access to the meaning women attribute to their emotions, cognitions, and behaviours while living with DA, before I can attempt to explain their experience (Horwitz, 1994).

My viewpoint while conducting this investigation of women’s experience of living with DA is that women hold a subjective view of their lives and the events occurring within their world. Their subjective viewpoint will be impacted by the social environment in which they live, and the social environment will impact their reactions to events of DA. However, while appreciating that the impact of external influences, such as contact with others, is likely to shape their motives and experiences (Hanly & Fitzpatrick Hanly, 2001) I regard women as autonomous in thought with freewill to create their own meaning of the world, making knowledge and experience “personal and experiential” (Cunliffe, 2011, p. 656). Women are not governed blindly by the social world in which they

participate. I therefore see the way to investigate and attempt to explain women's experience of living with an abusive male partner is to attempt to understand their subjective experience, and this understanding can only be gained through face to face exposure to the narrative of this experience that women are willing to share. Taking the subjectivist stance I will be presented with the participant's experience through their own subjective interpretation, and this interpretation will then be subjectively interpreted by me the researcher (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

Throughout the research process there is recognition of the impact the researcher has on the outcome which is the result of "a process of reciprocal adaptation" (Hanly & Fitzpatrick Hanly, 2001, p. 518). My personal subjectivity and personality will influence the process, leading to reciprocal adaptation between the participant and myself. As researcher and participant we are likely to "become affectively attuned" (Hanly & Fitzpatrick Hanly, 2001, p. 518) to the participant, and begin to identify with the observations we are encountering. In turn the participant will also be identifying with me the researcher, and in the process modify and adapt to being interviewed and expressing their story (Hanly & Fitzpatrick Hanly, 2001). In brief, together we will become aware of the participants journey. However, my presence and input will influence the participant's expression of their journey.

Although there may not be an exact match between the meaning-making, where I as the researcher may not have a full understanding of the subjective experience of the participant, the participant's experience is available to me and becomes meaningful for me through the presented narrative (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Because the subjective views we hold are believed to impact on our understanding and beliefs, and therefore, how we experience our world, access to a narrative of subjective understanding will provide me the researcher insight into the interpretative experience of my participants (Barnard, McCosker, & Gerber, 1999).

### **Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis - my theoretical, methodological and analytic perspective.**

IPA has a historical background in interpretivism and phenomenology. A brief overview of the development of IPA will follow.

Max Weber (1864-1920), who is attributed with introducing interpretivism to the social sciences, was interested in understanding the subjective meaning individuals placed on events in their lives, their values, and their actions. The aim behind Weber's (1949) attempts to interpret individual understanding was to investigate the causal mechanism behind the meaning making of individuals (Crotty, 1998). Silverman (1990) acknowledged Weber's contribution in emphasising the interpretation of data to understand the phenomenon of meaning for individuals. However, he questioned the emphasis on empirical methods to establish causation, and recognised the need for different methods when working in the social sciences. Silverman's interpretivism is the current viewpoint for researchers within the social sciences, and is viewed from three perspectives; symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, and hermeneutics. Interpretative phenomenological (hermeneutic) analysis which will be utilised in my study incorporates aspects of these three perspectives (Crotty, 1998).

#### **Symbolic interactionism.**

When taking the symbolic interactionist approach the belief is held that individual action is bound within the social context which guides our actions and understanding of the world (Blumer, 1969; Crotty, 1998). Blumer (1969), has been attributed to the greatest impact on symbolic interactionism in the social sciences, and views the meaning placed on things by humans as primary in itself. Believing that to ignore such a premise and simply consider factors that initiate behaviour is to undermine "the role of meaning in the formation of behaviour" (p. 3). Those following the symbolic interactionist approach see meaning of things being derived from the social interaction between individuals and things (objects, people, narratives), where meaning is socially created through actions

of others in regard to the individual's interaction with things. Other's actions provide definitions of things for the person observing, where the individual takes on "the role of others" (Blumer, 1969, p. 21) with whom they interact. An example of this in relation to women facing DA would be, if an individual's reaction to hearing of a woman being abused was to state that 'she is silly if she stays,' this reaction might initiate similar actions from other individuals leading to a learned belief about women who face DA. These actions create a social meaning that women facing DA are silly if they do not leave. A social narrative, such as that of women staying being silly, will have an influence on future interpretations of woman facing DA, and future actions and beliefs of both women experiencing DA and those exposed to this view. This viewpoint is unique to the symbolic interactionist position.

Blumer (1969) also suggests that, meaning is established by the individual through an interpretative process and is not simply formed as a result of social interaction without any input from the individual. The interpretative aspect of meaning explains the process where individuals do not simply apply established meaning to things with which they engage they adopt a more questioning manner in applying their own meaning to their world. The symbolic interactionist approach views the individual as actively interpreting things. This interpretation process is "a formative process in which meanings are used and revised as instruments for the guidance and formation of action" (Blumer, 1969, p. 5).

### **The phenomenological perspective.**

Whereas the symbolic interactionist approach is pro-culture, that is the impact of the cultural perspective on an individual; the phenomenological perspective is interested in actions of the person from their viewpoint of the experience, framing the individual as a decision maker of their understanding and meaning-making (Crotty, 1998; Smith & Eatough, 2007; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). When holding a phenomenological perspective the interest is in uncovering the meaning behind an individual's narrative, and to achieve an

understanding as near as is possible of the person's language, cultural history, and belief of the world (Flood, 2010). From Crotty's perspective, phenomenology is an objectively critical methodology where practice involves seeking "objects of experience rather than being content with a description of the experiencing subject... an exercise in *critique* (Italics in original), it calls into question what we take for granted" (p. 83). There are four traditions forming the core basis of phenomenological research: Husserl (1931/2002), Heidegger (1962/1927), Merleau-Ponty (1962), and Sartre (1956).

### ***Phenomenological foundations.***

Husserl (1931/2002) is accredited with initiating phenomenology into psychological research. He emphasised that research needed to view reality as the lifeworld and 'interrelated meanings' of the individual. Husserl's method for 'being phenomenological' and being able to identify the core of human experience required not only an acknowledgement of our own accepted world view, but a way of placing this out of view to allow us to focus on our actual perception of the world (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Husserl's view was philosophical to the degree of surpassing the understanding of individual's experience, where he was attempting to understand experience itself. Although, Husserl recognised that it is not possible to eliminate our preconceived views of the world, he hoped that a series of steps would lead the researcher away from their own assumptions and preconceptions toward the core of their experience of the event or situation (Smith & Eatough, 2007; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). These concepts of bracketing, which Husserl has been credited with creating, are some of the most influential in psychology today (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Heidegger (1962/1927) differs from Husserl where his phenomenological approach was a move toward a hermeneutic and existential phenomenology. The important issues for Heidegger were how the world is perceived by us, the day to day activities with which we engage and how this forms a meaningful

world to the individual (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, Racher, 2003; 2009). He viewed the individual as exposed to a world that is already present with cultural aspects, specific language, and real objects, with individuals interacting with these real entities as an intentional actor creating meaningful options (Heidegger, 1962/1927; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Heidegger viewed the individual as inseparable from their world and the others in this world, and referred to this interrelatedness as *intersubjectivity* (Heidegger, 1962/1927; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 17). Heidegger viewed the phenomenological researcher from an interpretative focus where it is the understanding of meaning-making of individuals that is important to phenomenological research in psychology (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Merleau-Ponty (1962, 2013) acknowledged the interpretative aspect of our knowledge of the world and emphasised the necessity to constantly recognise the role of our own perceptions and experience in how our knowledge of things is created and formed. He views Husserl's return to things of consciousness as the philosophy of vigilance that reminds individuals of their origin of reality. He viewed this concept as necessary for researchers and philosophers as a reminder of the basis of knowledge itself (Crotty, 1998). Merleau-Ponty described the perception of things as a development from an individual's personal perspective unique to that individual, and that this cannot be fully experienced by another because the individual experience is an "intentional quality and meaning of the 'mineness' and 'aboutness' of an experience are always personal to the body-subject" (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 19). This concept is important for IPA researchers because from Merleau-Ponty's perspective abstract and logical perception is less important than the physical affordance of the body-subject interaction (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The issue of recognising the importance of physiological responses to the world instead of purely cognitive and emotional responses needs to be considered within qualitative research, as individuals physiological response to events and situations within their lifeworld are of equal importance and must be considered (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin,

2009), particularly if we are seeking an understanding of the experience of women facing DA.

Sartre (1956) extends our knowledge of phenomenology incorporating the aspect of projects within the world of individuals, which incorporates an action-oriented meaning-making process. Sartre views the individual as an ongoing project that is continually developing into the self, not a pre-defined entity waiting to be unveiled, a concept that Sartre famously termed 'existence comes before essence' (Sartre, 1956, p. 26). His view saw individuals as continually becoming who they are, engaged in a process of constant flux and development with a concern toward "what will be" (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 19). The concept of 'becoming' for an individual infers the freedom of will in choosing their existence and actions (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin). Although suggesting responsibility of the individual in the actions they take within their lives, Sartre acknowledges the impact of culture, social environment, and history leading to complexities within decisions the individual may need to make. From the phenomenological researcher perspective, Sartre extends Heidegger's idea of the impact of the world on individuals' perception of experience by incorporating the impact of social and thereby personal relationships. The incorporation of personal and social relationship into the understanding of participant's experience will provide a more comprehensive understanding for the research of the participant's experiences, because it will allow the researcher to identify and incorporate the concept of individual experiences being dependent upon the presence and absence of others and our relationship to these dependent issues (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The benefit of incorporating the other, such as the male partner, when researching the experience of women facing DA is evident in itself.

### ***Phenomenological method.***

Giorgi and Giorgi (2008), describe the phenomenological perspective as an attempt to understand an everyday experience or situation in the real world

context. They suggest that to achieve understanding, informants for the research project need to have experienced the phenomenon under study first hand, and have the ability to describe what occurred in their lives at this time and in context. For this study, I have selected women who are currently living with their partner in an attempt to gain a concept of participant's experience within a real world context, where they have firsthand and current experience of the situation under study. I want to attempt to understand women's experience of life within a DA relationship from their subjective experience. In my attempt to gain an understanding I will consider the impact my presence will have on the narrative from women, and attempt to present in a manner that limits this impact as it is their experience I wish to uncover, not my worldview of the topic. To achieve the sensitivity needed by the researcher in uncovering the meanings of the participant's experience I need to be an authentic writer of the scientific report and also a veracious listener who is able to focus on anomalies that are normally missed in general conversations.

Phenomenological analysis of the rich data gained from the detailed contextual narrative of women's experience of living with DA, which is the lifeworld of women in this study, will attempt to uncover the psychological and physical nature of the event experienced by women. It is acknowledged that it is often difficult for women to fully analyse the meaning of their experience while living through this experience. Therefore, analysis from a psychological researcher's interpretative viewpoint can be insightful (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008). It is hoped that my analyses of the women's narratives of their experience of living with an abusive male partner will relay not only their own interpretation of the events and situation, but also an underlying interpretation of their experience, adding deeper insight into the experience of women living with DA.

From the phenomenological theoretical perspective two approaches, which differ in how results are utilised to extend knowledge, may be adopted: The eidetic (descriptive) or the hermeneutic (interpretative) (Flood, 2010). In my

study, the hermeneutic approach will direct research as I am attempting to interpret participant's narrative of their experiences of living with an abusive male.

### ***Hermeneutics.***

The hermeneutic method of interpretation encompasses attempts at reading human endeavours such as situations and events (Crotty, 1998; Shaw, 2010). It is therefore regarded as a method for deciphering meaning that is not directly evident in text or narrative. Hermeneutics looks toward the translation and attempts to interpret this understanding and meaning-making process and report this to others to assist in their understanding of the phenomenon (Van Manen, 1990). The philosophical basis behind hermeneutics, as a method of analysing human endeavours through narrative, is that language shapes the way we view the world and the objects and events within this world. And it is these objects and events shaped by language that create our reality (Crotty, 1998).

In using the hermeneutic approach I am hoping to uncover explicit awareness of the meaning behind women's experiences, and the assumptions connected to these experiences that participants are not able to communicate (Crotty, 1998; Smith & Eatough, 2007; Smith & Osborn, 2008). I am attempting to not only interpret the meaning the participants are presenting, but venturing further in uncovering underlying meaning within women's narrative to understand "the utterer, better than he understands himself" (Crotty, 1998; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). This is referred to as the double hermeneutic (Flick, 2009; Shaw, 2010; Smith & Eatough, 2007; Smith & Osborn, 2008) where I am attempting to interpret their interpretation of meaning of the abuse they are experiencing.

### **Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA).**

IPA is based on the theoretical concepts of phenomenological and hermeneutic approaches within interpretivism, where interest is concerned with

a person's subjective experience of 'things' and the personal accounts of experience of these 'things' (Shaw, 2010; Smith & Eatough, 2007). The research commitment of this analytic approach is to seek understanding of the way individuals psychologically and emotionally negotiate life experiences, and how they understand these experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Major experiences in people's lives leads to a reflection on their part of what this experience meant to them, and IPA is a way of exploring these reflections (Flick, 2009; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). These experiences will necessitate the individual to negotiate feelings and thoughts during considerable reflection of the significance of the event to them (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). They will be trying to make sense of the event or situation (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). In utilising the IPA I will adopt a phenomenological approach by seeking to understand the subjective lifeworld of my participants, how they perceive their world, and what this experience means for them. Participants are considered to be sense-making beings and are thought to display this sense-making process through the narratives of experiences, which in this study will provide me with access to the reflective process of women as they are attempting to make-sense of their experience (Smith & Eatough, 2007; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). There will also be an appreciation that individuals may not find it easy to access and communicate their experience fully to me. Therefore, my role is to interpret the narrative with the purpose of understanding the DA experience from my participant's perspective (Smith & Osborn, 2008; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

My aim in conducting IPA research is to enquire about participants experience about a particular event in their life through their description of their contact, thoughts, emotions, values, beliefs, and other related psychological impact relating to the DA (Shaw, 2010). The purpose of this endeavour is to seek from the participant an experiential reporting of the DA from their viewpoint. In the sharing of these experiences it is hoped I will gain an insight into the sense-making of women within this personal and social world they are describing (Smith & Osborn, 2008). The sense-making of the participant is part of the

hermeneutic aspect of IPA (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Therefore, IPA is both phenomenological and interpretative (hermeneutic) (Smith & Eatough, 2007; Smith & Osborn, 2008; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

When using IPA there is also an appreciation of my role in the process, acknowledging that this is a dynamic process where both I and the participant have active roles in the relaying of the participants' story. This dynamic process arises because I am attempting to gain a perspective from the insider's viewpoint, although not able to achieve this directly this will be gained through my interpretation of the narrative presented by women in the study. However, I will be aware that I am bringing my own perceptions and worldly creation to this process. It is precisely this knowledge brought to the table by me that will allow me to be involved in the interpretative process and will add to the dynamic of the data gained through women's narratives (Smith & Osborn, 2008). The double hermeneutic that the IPA researcher, me, is engaged in is possible because I will be utilising the same mental processes, personal skills, and have the same fundamental aspects of being human as my participants. However, I will also be applying skills at a more systematic and consciously aware level than the participant, and this level of sense-making allows the second order interpretation of the narrative bringing the account to a more in depth level (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The result will be an interpretative activity undertaken by me in search of the perceptual meaning presented by my participants, plus the underlying meanings that may not be consciously aware for women. On the basis of our perceptions and interpretations, both I and participants make sense of the situation (Cunliffe, 2011; Flick, 2009; Smith & Eatough, 2007). From the hermeneutic perspective such an analysis applies two hermeneutic styles, empathic and questioning (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Empathic hermeneutics is the attempt by the researcher to understand the meaning-making of the participants, to take their side, and the questioning hermeneutics is the critiquing of the narrative asking the critical questions of the narrative, the questions that the participants themselves may not have considered (Shaw,

2010; Smith & Eatough, 2007; Smith & Osborn, 2008). Utilising both aspects of hermeneutic enquiry is likely to result in a more in depth analysis of the data which is aimed at gaining a richer insight into the person's lifeworld.

Researchers conducting an IPA appreciate an individual's social and personal world and have a theoretical focus that views the individual as a cognitive, emotional, and linguistic person, and therefore considers a connection between people's narratives and their emotions and thoughts (Shaw, 2010; Smith & Osborn, 2008). There is however, an appreciation that because of the social stigma many abused women may have experienced, they may be hesitant to express their experiences and how they think and feel about their situation. If their previous attempts to communicate have been met with shaming they are not likely to have felt sufficient trust to share with others in the past. It is therefore necessary in this research project for me to provide an environment where women feel safe to "explore, share, and validate their feelings and insights that otherwise would not have occurred" (Davis, 2002, p. 1250). It is only under these conditions will I gain the data needed to understand how women cope and manage DA, and therefore advance further therapeutic practice and research in the field. It is also under these conditions that I as the researcher will need to interpret the participant's thoughts and feelings from the narrative they are prepared to present.

Researchers using IPA are focused on the cognitive and social aspects of clinical psychology as they are interested in the mental processes of sense-making for both the participant and the researcher, with the aim of learning about the participant's lived experience. This connection of narrative and access to emotions and cognitions renders IPA a good tool for accessing perceptions on health, social, and clinical psychology (Smith & Eatough, 2007). The research process involves an interest in how participants "think about what is happening for them" (Fiske & Taylor, 1991, p. 54). IPA is an appropriate analysis for research with women facing DA because followers are interested in the way people

understand significant events in their world (Smith & Eatough, 2007), and the aim of my research is to understand how women think and feel about their world of DA.

## **Procedure**

### **Sampling.**

When conducting IPA participants are selected for their knowledge of the particular topic under investigation with the purpose being to capture a depth of understanding of a particular perception of an event, incident, or experience. Therefore, it is necessary to source a sample of individuals who have specific experience of the topic under investigation, a technique often referred to as purposive sampling (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Participants are selected because they represent a viewpoint of a particular phenomenon of interest and reporting of this viewpoint provides the researcher with a rich descriptive set of data about the phenomena of interest. It could be referred to as quality versus quantity, where detailed quality descriptions to explain an experience are sought as opposed to a quantity of data that relies on numeric values to reflect a particular position. Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for purposive sampling were met within the criteria of IPA. Participants were chosen for their current exposure to DA and their ability to explain their experience of living with an abusive male. The selection criteria also involved convenience sampling because of the delicate nature of the topic and the difficulty accessing women facing abuse. Therefore, any participants were included if they were willing to volunteer and met criteria for the study.

The idiographic nature of IPA involves the exploration of the concrete individual and unique perception of an individual in regard to a phenomenon they have experienced in a particular context. The aim of the researcher is to capture and report a detailed account of these perceptions and understandings. Considering the complex nature of most human experiences and perceptions, this is a time consuming activity which will involve reflection after sustained

engagement with the data. Without this sustained engagement and reflection the interpretative ability of the researcher will be inhibited and they will be less likely to be "... able to say something substantive and specific about the particular individuals who.... provided the data for the study" (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009. p.49). Therefore, to ensure the researcher had the time to explore the data adequately and provide the depth of analysis required for an IPA smaller participant numbers were recruited (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).

Although the participants are selected for their similarity of experience, representing a homogeneous sample, it is also recommended that diversity be sought among the participants to capture a wider range of experiences of the particular issue under investigation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Within my study this was seen in the variability in the ages of the group which provided insight into experiences for participants being in long term abuse and those in shorter term abuse. There was also a diversity of cultures which is indicative of Australia's social structure, which is considered to be multicultural. The independent income was also a good range from those reporting lower socio-economic status to women reporting within the higher socio-economic status (\$10,000-\$100,000AU). These differing perspectives were invaluable to the insight gained of the experience of participants (Dexter, 1958; Gelles, 1976) allowing me the researcher to "examine in detail psychological variability within the group by analysing the pattern of convergence and divergence which" (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009. p. 50) arose.

### **Recruitment.**

Wording of documents used in the recruitment of participants in a study of DA must be approached with care. Many women who are experiencing abuse do not label themselves as being abused or in a violent relationship. Therefore, to recruit women who may not be aware of the abuse they face my wording in the recruitment brochures used terms such as 'difficulties' in the relationship. Many women who did contact were aware of the motivation behind the

research, and when interviewed stated 'I am in a domestic violence relationship.' However, I feel it was beneficial not to include the term within the recruitment material as other women, although acknowledging the abuse, were inclined to minimise the degree and may have therefore been deterred from volunteering for the study. The approach used was to allow participants to have their own definition of their relationship. An example of the recruitment brochure and wording of the radio advertisement can be sighted in Appendix A.

Because of the less precise wording there were a number of callers who did not qualify for the study. However, it was better to have women ring who were not appropriate than miss those who did not identify as abused. Screening of applicants was conducted over the phone where questions were asked about the difficulties women experienced. If there was an indication of abuse where women described being physically harmed or experienced feelings of psychological or emotional control an appointment was organised to meet at a location chosen by women. I suggested locations such as the local library, the university, or a local community centre. Women suggested parks, coffee shops, and a friend's home.

When recruiting participants within an area such as DA there is a need to be cognisant of the delicacy of the subject. I therefore decided to approach agencies that were providing services to women who had been exposed to abuse with the willingness on my part to be guided by their expertise in the area. Although the agencies that I approached expressed an interest in my study, and were willing to meet with me on a number of occasions, they were less willing to refer clients to be interviewed. After a number of meetings one agency expressed their unwillingness to refer because of a concern that the clients maybe further distressed if discussing their issues. I suggested that this may be a form of control over the women where the agencies were making decisions for their clients without consulting them. The agency representative acknowledged that this was a valid point but did not refer any clients. Fortunately one agency

did not hold this view and referred 3 candidates who participated in the interviews. From these three one referral was made through snow-balling, a technique where a candidate refers another person by word of mouth.

My second attempt at recruitment was through hospitals within Perth, Western Australia. Two hospitals were willing to have brochures placed in their waiting rooms while another suggested I approach the social workers for referrals. Three candidates were recruited through brochures. Recruitment was not successful through the hospital social workers who were of the same opinion as the agency workers, suggesting the approach may further distress their clientele. One hospital suggested they did not have patients who had been exposed to abuse. The lack of acknowledgment that abuse may be present for patients who present at this hospital further reinforced my belief in the value of my research project.

Further recruitment was attempted by placing a paid advertisement in the local newspaper, which did not result in the recruitment of further participants. The most successful recruitment, of 11 participants, was through a free advertisement on Curtin FM, the community radio station run by Curtin University, Perth, Australia. After a period of two years, where further attempts to source participants through various agencies and support groups were unsuccessful, it was decided to cease the recruitment process. Recruitment efforts resulted in 18 interviews from participants, of which 16 were included in this study. Full details of the participant group will be reported in the participant section.

### **Materials.**

This section will outline how the data were collected and the interview methods chosen.

***Data collection.***

Although it has been suggested that it is beneficial to send an information sheet and consent form to participants prior to interview (Rapley, 2007), under circumstances of abuse there were concerns that the receipt of documentation to a participant's home may impact negatively on women's safety. Therefore, if a person expressed an interest in participating a comprehensive description of the study was provided over the phone. On arrival at the interview the participants were provided with a written description of the research (refer Appendix B). This was verbally explained to the participant and they were provided time to read through the document at their own speed. After which a consent form (refer Appendix C) was presented which the participants were asked to read and sign before the interview commenced. Participants were then given an envelope that contained \$20 to cover any expenses they may have incurred in attending the interview. Participants were advised that they could discontinue the interview at any time without loss of payment. No participants chose to discontinue. After fully informing the participants, allowing them time to consider the process, and securing a signed consent form, the digital recorder was started and the interview commenced.

Data were collected using a combination of semi-structured and episodic style interview techniques, which are described in the interview section that follows. My approach to the interview was to adopt an attitude that was friendly, non-judgemental, and relaxed, the manner suggested by Barnard, McCosker and Gerber, (1999) to achieve results required for IPA. Although the interview is an indirect insight into the world of the individual it can if successful uncover something new and unexpected (Silverman, 2006). In an attempt to achieve something new and unexpected my interviews began from a semi-structured standing, but they would often veer off into other areas that the participant controlled. This was encouraged and embraced as it allowed for issues of importance to the participant to be uncovered, not only what was expected from

my own world view and my reading of previous literature (Eatough, Smith, & Shaw, 2008). As the interviews progressed I began to allow participants more control over the direction of the interview. When participants did move off track from the semi-structured format I was able to discover more in depth information of topics they felt were relevant, thereby discovering their meanings of these particular events. This form of interviewing, where the interviewer moves from semi-structured to unstructured in an attempt to pursue participant's areas of interest, is inductive in its approach which is indicative of the IPA method (Eatough, Smith, & Shaw, 2008).

Interview locations were open to the participant to decide. Participants were offered the option of private rooms in the local library, Curtin University, or a location of their choice. Interviews were not conducted in the family home because of issues of security. There were concerns that if the partner arrived home or was informed of my presence this may have endangered both the participant and me. Other locations participants chose included parks, work office, and a café which was organised during a quiet time where we were able to find a private corner in which to conduct the interview. Interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes.

### ***The interview.***

Participants are similar to scientists where they develop theories about their life experience and their own actions within this life experience. They will test and modify their theories as they experience the challenges they face living with a phenomena such as DA (Flick, 2009). My aim was to attempt to gain access to their theory making process, their perceptions, thoughts, values, and beliefs, while understanding the impact my presence had on the telling of the stories and on my interpretation of same. During this process I attempted to gain an understanding as near as possible of the subjective meaning of the events and experience in the lives of women facing DA. To access women's theory making process I needed to speak with women directly, asking them to share their

experience of living with an abusive male partner. It was through access to their narrative that I gained an awareness of the conscious experiences and core meaning of the phenomenon of DA in their lives (Crotty, 1998; Flood, 2010). Therefore, the method of data collection adopted for this study was the interview.

Questions were approached in an indirect manner at the beginning of the interview due to the sensitivity of the subject matter, plus the likelihood that participants may have minimised the abuse or not recognised their situation as abusive. In an attempt to manage this sensitivity terms such as, 'problems in your relationship' and 'difficulties with your partner' were used in place of 'domestic violence' or 'abuse'. The interview started with the general question 'tell me the difficulties you are having in your relationship?'

For me to gain a full understanding of the participants' experience I felt that I needed to learn not only about their overall day to day perceptions of abuse, but also explore the impact and experience of particular events of importance in their lives. Therefore, as the researcher I adopted the role of an enquirer, where although I had some knowledge of the information I wanted to explore I was also inquisitive about what I did not know. This necessitated an appreciation of the limitations of my knowledge of the participants' experience of living with an abusive male, and acknowledgment that the participant is the expert in this regard. I therefore allowed participants to take some control with the direction of the interview, as it was their experience that I was attempting to uncover.

The reason for employing semi-structured interviewing techniques was to provide some structure to the interview to uncover the participant's description of the overall experience of abuse. A further reason for the semi-structured component was to avoid distress through inappropriate presentation or wording of questions (refer Appendix D for interview questions) when exploring sensitive issues (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). I also needed the capacity to explore in

detail the experience of particular events of importance that had occurred in women's lives, and for this to occur I needed to call upon episodic interview techniques. Episodic interviewing allows the researcher to delve further into the interpretation of an event that is important to the participant, and this uncovers more depth of interpretation for both the participant and the researcher. Further explanation of my use of semi-structured and episodic interviewing techniques will follow.

Semi-structured interview techniques provide some direction to the interview process which ensures that the information needed to address the aim of the research is gathered, while also allowing the participant to have a voice and some control over the direction of the interview. By allowing the participant to have a voice and direct the conversation into avenues that are of relevance to themselves, the participants had the opportunity to take some control and uncover any areas that were important to them that the researcher may not have considered (Flick, 2009). This flexibility ensured that the interview was not being controlled by the researcher's worldview, which may have impacted the information provided. The semi-structured approach is appropriate for IPA because, although having a basic idea of where the interview needs to proceed there is also an aim to uncover the lived experience of participants with the intention of gaining insight into their psychological world (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Episodic interviewing techniques (Flick, 2009) allowed the participant to discuss the events while the researcher probed for further information to encourage them to think more deeply about their experience. This form of interview encouraged the participant to describe in detail their experience of particular events and thereby enter into some interpretative thinking. The interpretative thinking, when narrated to the researcher, provided further insight into participant's life world and lived experience. Therefore, the interviews for this project incorporated aspects of semi-structured and episodic techniques which allowed me to gain a rich source of data that gave voice to my participants with minimal impact from me.

## **Participants**

Women interviewed for this study were all involved in heterosexual relationships. Although I have chosen to focus on the abuse of females by a male, I would like to acknowledge that abuse of males by females and same sex abuse (male to male and female to female) also occurs. This study did not investigate the perspective of males who are being abused for two reasons. First, women who experience DA by a man are purported to experience greater negative impact, emotionally and physically, than men who experience DA from a woman (Coker et al., 2005; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Second, the purpose was to analyse the voices of women who are living with abuse. To investigate both genders is beyond the scope of this current study. In relation to same sex couples, I do not think this cohort would benefit from being included in an overall study of DA. I believe that individuals from same sex couples living with DA are presented with unique issues and stressors that are not faced by heterosexual couples. Because of these issues and stressors I believe this cohort would be better served by independent research investigating the specific difficulties that arise for same sex couples exposed to DA. It would therefore be more advantageous to investigate all cohorts separately to gain a more accurate picture of the issues involved.

### **Cohort for this study.**

A total of 18 participants were recruited for this study. One participant was excluded from the study because she reported that her partner was no longer exhibiting controlling behaviour, and that her current experience was that the power dynamic had shifted and was now to her benefit. Indicating that she was the person in control and holding the power over her partner. One recording was stolen when my handbag was taken during a home robbery. This was reported to the ethics committee who deemed that no further action need be taken as there were no identifying details on the recording. I could not attempt to re-interview the participant because a requirement of ethics approval had

been that I could not contact the participants after each interview due to the implication this may have on the safety of the participant.

A total of 16 participant interviews were utilised for this study. Demographic information relating to age, income, and education is presented in Table 1 and country of birth is presented in Table 2. Five participants were university graduates three had diplomas the remaining seven participants had completed Year 9 or higher. Eleven were married with the remaining living in a defacto relationship. Three participants did not have children. All participants were living in the metropolitan area of Perth, Western Australia and were currently residing with an abusive male partner. Individual characteristics of participants have not been reported, this is addressed in the section on confidentiality.

Table 1

*Age, income and education level of women (n=16) interviewed who are currently living with an abusive male partner*

	Range	Mean (SD)	Median
Age	21 – 69 years	50.44 (13.16)	51.00
Income	\$10,400 – \$100,000	38,456.65 (26,808.91)	31,200
Education	9 – 18 years	12.89 (2.72)	13.00

Table 2

*Participant's country of birth*

Country of birth	Number of participants
Australia	9
South Africa	3
England (United Kingdom)	2
India	1
Australia - Indigenous	1

One of the strengths of this study is that the participant group is quite unique in the broad spread of age groups, where the majority of studies conducted to date have had a more restricted age range and often do not include women over 60. The range of ages is advantageous as it provided some perspectives from women who have been in long term and relatively short term relationships. The socio-economic status, income and profession, of my group were of a good range, which differs from many studies in the area of DA, where participants are often recruited from refuge accommodation or support groups and are of a lower socio-economic status. A further advantage of this cohort was the range of nationalities of the participant group, which provided a degree of diversity which is representative of the multicultural nature of Australia. Having a participant group with a range of characteristics, although not making the results representative, does allow a less biased analysis as there are an array of views and beliefs being presented. The diversity of the group is worthy of attention as women's experiences and perception of the abuse in their lives are assumed to be influenced by issues such as, length of relationship, age, income range, education level, and cultural background. Therefore, any similarities in experience and perception were interesting to observe.

#### **Ethical and confidentiality considerations.**

Ethics approval was granted by the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee on November 2009. A consideration of ethics is particularly pertinent for the investigation into DA due to the emotive nature of the topic, and the risk to both participants and researcher. The cohort investigated in this study is considered to be vulnerable to exposure to harm. Therefore, procedural issues considered to be the norm in other qualitative studies, such as participant checking and reinterview of participants, were not possible. To ensure protection of women recruited for my study there was a limited opportunity to collect the data required. One phone call for screening and one face to face interview. The process of recruiting was also hampered by women not being willing to leave

contact information if their call was missed, for fear that a return call may indicate to the abusive spouse contact with the researcher.

***Confidentiality.***

The confidentiality of the participants was protected at all times when communicating with colleagues, supervisors, and other parties. Pseudonyms are used for participants throughout the thesis and all data was scrutinised to ensure there were no identifying information included in this thesis. Full explanation of participants' characteristics was also excluded because of concern that these descriptors may reveal identifying information, particularly from members of different cultural communities. One participant was very cognisant of the implication of identity identification when she expressly asked for particular comments not to be included in the report for fear of being identified and the resulting reprisal.

***Issues of safety.***

DA can be an emotive issue and individuals sharing their life stories may experience distress, either at the time of interview or at a time later. When discussing experiences of abuse unresolved issues and distressing emotions may arise. Therefore, a structured process was adopted (outlined below) to ensure that no undue distress was experienced by my participants, and to also ensure that they had access to support systems if they required aid in the future.

***Minimising risk during the recruitment process.***

Women living in a DA situation are likely to be at risk from their partners if the partner is aware that they are discussing their current situation outside the home. There was therefore a need to ensure that my participants were kept safe or not placed at any further risk through their participation in my study. To avoid this, all interviews were conducted outside the home at a location and time appropriate for both parties, attempting to accommodate women's choice wherever possible. I did not contact women at their home. Any contact with the

participants was on their terms, as women in this position know the best way to keep safe.

***Minimising risk during and after the interview.***

*Upset during the interview* – when a participant became upset during the interview, I acknowledged her distress and asked if she was able to continue or if she would like to take a break and talk about something else for a while. If the participant stated that she was fine, I monitored her affect and on a number of occasions stopped the interview and recording for a short break. When the participant felt they could continue I resumed the recording and the interview proceeded. There were no occasions where the interview needed to be terminated.

*Ending the interview* – If women became distressed, I ensured they had moved out of their distressed state before they left the interview by discussing topics other than those relating to DA. After the informal chit chat, I provided women with information about organisations she could contact if she required further support or assistance in areas such as counseling, of other practical issues such as financial advice. These details were provided on an information sheet (refer to Appendix E) which was offered to all participants on completion of the interview.

*Debriefing after the interview* – At the end of the interviews I asked women if they needed to debrief. I approached this by asking how they felt. The overall response from women was positive with a number of women expressing feelings of empowerment and some mentioning that they had gained a new perspective on their situation.

**Data Analysis**

IPA is focused on the individual level of understanding and therefore follows the idiographic process of analysis and is primarily suited to case study research. Therefore when IPA research involves more than one case the

researcher analyses the individual transcripts on a case by case basis, ensuring a full analysis and understanding of the first transcript before moving onto the next and so on. It is after completing this full analysis of all cases within the study that the researcher begins to make comparisons between cases, differing from other analysis such as grounded theory where cross sample comparisons are conducted from the beginning of analysis (Shaw, 2010).

### **The analysis journey.**

I personally transcribed all interviews as I felt the process of transcribing would begin my familiarity process with the transcripts. I was careful to ensure that a verbatim transcription resulted by checking the tapes and my transcript for all interviews a number of times, further immersing myself in the data set. Line numbering was then generated to allow easier recording and tracking of notations and theme data.

With the aim of understanding the meaning of the experience and attempting to unravel the complexity of this subjective sense-making on the part of women in my study, I engaged in active reflexivity in my interpretative endeavour of the data. I reflected on the details that were emerging, while also contemplating my own thoughts and emotions about the experiences, events, and objects being reported. My analysis involved an iterative process of moving from my own interpretations, to those of women in the study. Therefore, I was continually referring back to the source data to ensure that my interpretations were continuing to be indicative of the data. I used a diary during the analytic process to keep myself aware of my perceptions and subjective views, and to manage these to allow an opened minded approach to the data. This allowed me to track my ability to not become closed to ideas outside my current worldview, and make any paradigm change that may have been required during the process of analysis. One area that was noticeable to me in the monitoring of my own process was my fight against including the stay/leave issue in my analysis. However, from the women's reports this was an issue of importance to them

that arose regularly. I therefore, needed to make a paradigm shift in my approach and thought process around this issue in particular, but also on other areas that arose unexpectedly. This was only noted because I was willing to listen to the voices of the women, through the data, and not be blinkered by my own journey in this process.

### ***Analysis of the transcript.***

Stage 1 - The first transcript was read a number of times and with each reading I performed my initial coding. Coding involved making notes in the margin of the transcript of any interesting or relevant phrases or sentences within the narrative, using words that were very similar to the transcripts. Psychological terminology or any terms used in current literature were avoided. Numerous readings were conducted which allowed me to immerse myself further into the content of the transcript with each new reading providing me with new and more comprehensive insights into the participant's narrative. At this stage I made no attempt to form meaningful themes from the data, I simply notated, summarised, or paraphrased what the participant had stated. This process was continued through the whole of the first transcript.

I then returned to the beginning of the first transcript and started to document any themes that I could see emerging from the margin notes, attaching theme names to these pieces of transcript. Instead of using the traditional comments in the margins I recorded identified themes in a table and copied and pasted the relevant extract from the transcript, a process that allowed me to begin to group the related themes together in a more accessible manner. During this stage the margin notes were modified into language that expressed the essential information that I found in the text. The development of these themes brought the analysis to a higher stage of abstraction often being communicated in more psychological language. However, care was taken to ensure that these themes stayed true to the transcript and narrative of the participant. The aim was to investigate and interpret narrative accounts that

were sufficient to connect with other women's narratives, but also continued to be grounded in the individual's story. This process was continued for the whole first transcript and similar themes were labelled then transferred to the table. Although I was transferring my themes and related quotations to a table for easier reference for me, I was continuing at this stage to treat the whole of the transcript as data. The themes that had been identified were examined to find any similarities between them and from this a list of emergent themes was compiled.

Stage 2 – In the second stage, using the emergent themes from the transcript, I started to look for similarities in the themes. This involved making a list of all the themes and beginning to identify commonalities amongst them and to group similar themes together. Contradictions were also noted and included. The grouping became more theoretical and broached the process from a more analytical perspective. During this stage themes were checked against the transcripts to ensure they maintained their connection with the actual words of women's narratives and their experience. This is the iterative aspect where I was drawing on my own interpretations of the text, but also ensuring that I was not venturing far from the narrative of my participant. I was ensuring that I was keeping my own interpretation and sense-making of the phenomenon close to what the participant said. This was where my table of themes and comments made the task easier. I was able to easily access the actual words of my participant as I sorted and grouped the themes, making the editing and condensing of the data more manageable.

The themes uncovered from the data were now perused for similarities and grouped to form a more coherent organisation of the data. The grouping formed clusters of themes which were named and formed the superordinate theme structure for the first participant transcript. This process resulted in a list of superordinate themes beside which the original themes were recorded and the quotations that related to each of these. During this process some themes

were dropped as they were not an appropriate fit with the structure of the analysis and were somewhat unrelated to the topic under investigation.

This process was continued with all transcripts with the first participant transcript being a skeleton outline for subsequent transcripts. Although this was the skeleton, I was cognisant of not only identifying repeating patterns but to also identify new issues that arose from other transcripts. In allowing me to identify new issues there were areas where the data was similar and also where it differed from the other transcripts. One area where this was noticed was the reporting from younger women compared to more mature women who had been living with abuse for a longer time period. By using previous transcripts to inform further analysis of transcripts, I was able to identify divergent themes in other transcripts while also identifying similar themes that gave further voice to the existing themes. Evidence for the 'sense of self' and 'silenced by others' themes emerged in many transcripts giving a more in depth understanding and interpretation to the meaning of the participants experiences.

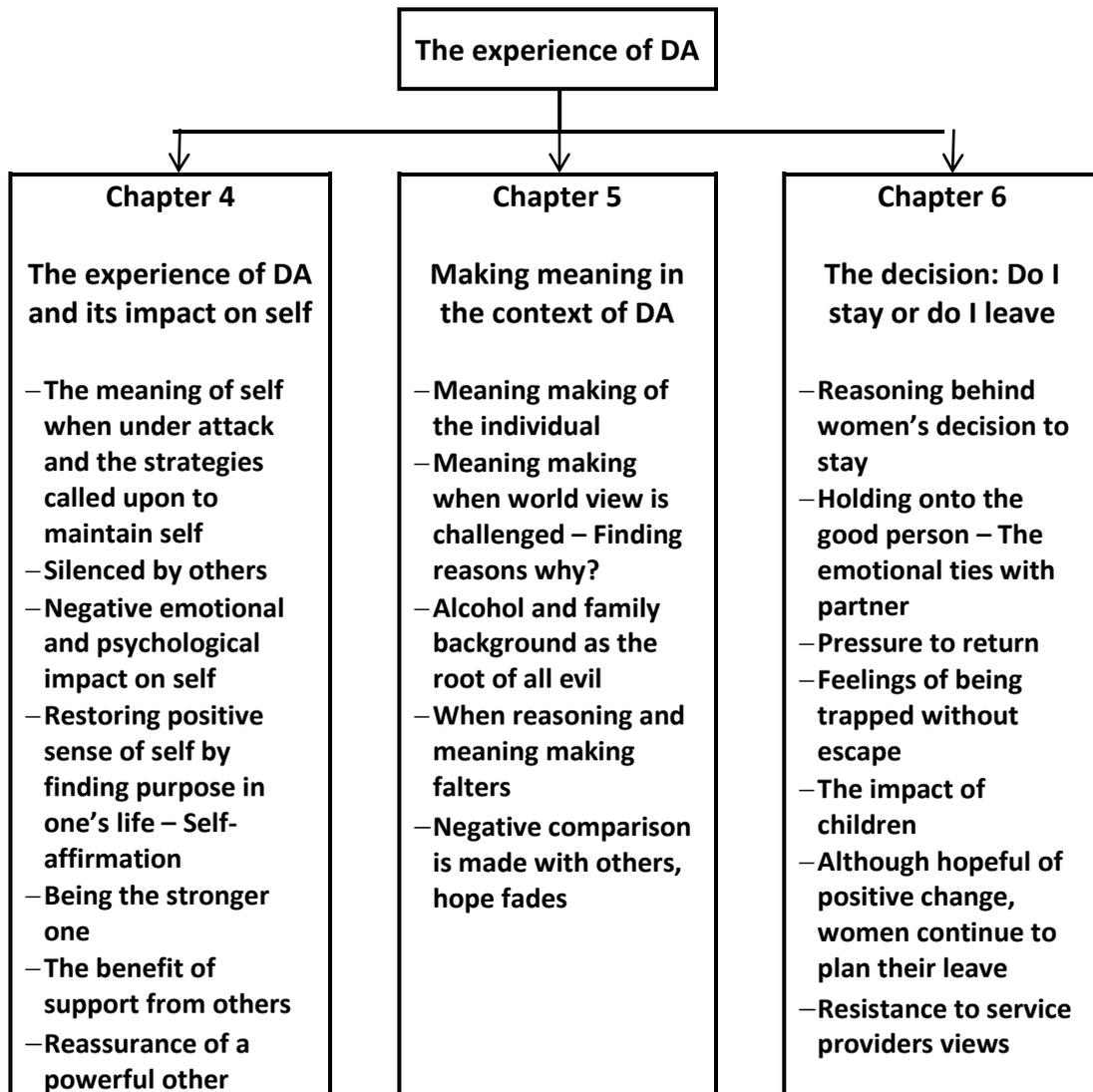
Stage 3 – After the interpretative analysis had been completed further analysis involved a perusal of the superordinate themes to prioritise and reduce them to produce a deep and rich analysis of the data. This process was not a simple matter of reducing themes to those that occurred most regularly. It was a process of establishing the data that contained the most poignant information of the impact on women's experience. As mentioned earlier one example of this was the stay/leave theme that developed during the analysis. Stay/leave was reported in a different manner for participants who were older and had been in the relationship longer, and although not a major theme, appeared to have a strong emotional and psychological impact on women. Identification of stay/leave as a superordinate theme, which originally appeared as a contrasting issue, was an example of the analysis being pushed to a higher level of extraction and interpretation. After a reassessment of the themes the transcripts were re-analysed in light of these new insights, often resulting in further extraction of

themes and quotations from the data. This form of analyses enabled me to incorporate the individual uniqueness and the theoretical similarities within the data.

### **Summary**

The methodology chapter described the epistemological and theoretical viewpoint behind the current study, provided an explanation of the research procedure which included the materials and recruitment process, and described the cohort for this study. A thorough explanation was provided for the ethical considerations required when working with women living with an abusive partner. Finally, the analytical journey was fully explained. This information will have provided the reader with evidence that the method used here was the most appropriate in achieving the aim of this current study. This chapter will end with a figure outlining the superordinate and emergent themes reported in the following analysis chapters.

In Chapter 4, 5, and 6, my findings and interpretations will be reported. The findings will be supported by participant quotations to ensure that the interpretations are indicative of women's experience. The emerging superordinate themes will be presented with supporting literature in order to identify similarities and differences with my findings. The discussion (Chapter 7) will follow the three analyses chapters.



*Figure 1.* Heading indicating the superordinate theme for each analysis chapter followed by the associated emergent themes

## Chapter 4

### The Experience of DA and the Impact on Self

In this chapter I will provide analysis of women's experience of DA, and the personal impact of exposure to abuse from their male partner. Women's experience of criticism by the partner and others led to a re-evaluation of who they needed to be, and the behaviour and psychological adjustment they needed to make to manage their safety and psychological wellbeing in the situation of DA. This is not to say that participants necessarily felt that they need to change themselves, or felt that they were not appropriate. Rather, it is to infer that women recognised that the person they needed to present to the partner was not who they saw as them. This dichotomy of selves was often experienced as stressful to maintain. Therefore, women in this study were attempting to adjust the presented self to suit the circumstances they faced, while attempting to maintain their internal personhood. Participant descriptions indicated that the distress experienced varied when negotiating the adjustment needed to protect them from physical, emotional, or psychological harm. Social support was beneficial to women's emotional and psychological wellbeing. However, when sought social support was not always positive, as women often experienced feelings of being abused from those purported to be supportive. Women finding difficulty in maintaining a positive sense of self within the abusive relationship looked to strategies of self-affirmation, such as being good parents or grandparents, which reaffirmed their sense of who they are as being good despite the DA. Feelings of strength and resilience were displayed by women in their management of DA, with many women perceiving themselves stronger than the abusive male partner. Others continued, despite narrating examples of displayed strength, to describe themselves as weak.

### **The Meaning of the Self When Under Attack and the Strategies Used to Maintain the Self**

The subjective meaning of an event or situation in a person's life will, consciously or non-consciously, affect their emotions and how an individual understands their world and is often referred to as an individual's worldview. Subjective worldview formed by individuals will influence their sense of self or individual identities and the manner in which they portray themselves to others in different situations (Davies & Harre, 1990; Hitlin, 2003). Therefore, a sense of self, or one's self-concept, is formed in response to an individual's meaning-making of events and situations in their lives, combined with their free will in choice of thoughts, emotions, and reactions to the meaning made. The self-concept of an individual is a set of schemas developed over a period of time that defines the person as unique. It is the core of how they see themselves and provides a sense of coherence within them. A sense of self can be defined as having an understanding of who you are and knowing your own personality, values, and opinions. These self-schemas and feelings of coherence, consistency, and self-enhancement are developed through exposure to the environment which is instrumental to the development of a self-concept, but it is the internal aspect of the person the free will in creating self that has the major impact (Davies & Harre, 1990; Ickes, Park, & Johnson, 2012).

Self-concept is not a static concept. It comprises multiple entities and is dynamic and individuals will continually construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct elements of themselves, as different situations and different people engage in their lives (Gergen, 1972; van Schalkwyk et al., 2014). Although there are numerous selves they are interconnected and become evident as situations and the thoughts about self at the time call for them, and these changes to the self are adaptive and normal (Chang, 1989; Gergen, 1972). Women facing DA adapt to their differing situations by adopting the person that is appropriate for their current circumstance, the self that will keep them emotionally and

psychologically safe. However, when the social influences or real world events negatively affect a person's current self-concept, and there is a discrepancy between their beliefs and values, and that of the other (Hitlin, 2003; Ickes et al., 2012; Hazel Markus & Kunda, 1986; Rasinski, Geers, & Czopp, 2013), they are likely to question any change of self and fight to retain the person that they feel is appropriate. Therefore it would appear that a "dynamic interpretative structure" (Markus & Wurf, 1987, p. 316) of self-concept initiates an individual to constantly assess the social influences and events to which they are exposed, and compare these with their own concept of who they are, their beliefs, and values, and therefore what the appropriate presentation of themselves in any particular situation will be.

**Criticism of voice and management of the criticism to protect sense of self.**

Women's childhood experiences appeared to have established a self-schema of their voice being valued and heard and communication was viewed as a form of caring. Participants reported that within their family they were encouraged to share an opinion, *"like when we were little and he'd (the father) ask us a question we weren't allowed to say I don't know" (Beryl)* and that communication was positive and involved *"cuddles and kisses" (Irene)*. However, within the current relationship they were facing an environment where their opinions were dismissed, and further, they experienced accusations of being trouble-makers and not important. When faced with criticism from the partner, participants appeared to experience a contradiction to their current view of a positive self-concept evident in the following passage where Beryl reported feelings that her partner is attempting to change her core self.

*Like, he just, everything I say is wrong. And that's basically what it comes. Like I can never do anything right ... I can't say anything. I can't give him advice, nothing. He goes, "I'll only ask for your opinion when I want it." You know? I can't give him an opinion, when I've just got an opinion. But that's me. I'm opinionated. I'm loud. You know.*

*Everything. But I'm not. I can't be that person with him, cos that's not what he wants (Beryl, 21)*

Although identities may differ in different social situations they are related to the underlying personal identity of the individual. In this passage, Beryl experienced the criticism of her opinion as not only a closing down of her voice but also an attack on her identity or self-concept of being an “*opinionated*” and “*loud*” person. When criticism of the behaviour extended to the core of how Beryl viewed herself she expanded the experience to domains beyond communication, expressing difficulties in terms such as “*never do anything right.*” The broadening of her definition of criticism would suggest that Beryl was not only experiencing a closing down of her voice but also a closing down of her sense of who she was as a person.

The inference in women’s narratives was that although they were experiencing criticism from the partner, they were not critical of themselves nor did they report that their own actions were inappropriate. During women’s discourse it was evident that although they experienced attempts to silence their voices there was a lack of self-criticism, women maintained a sense of strength and belief in their personal sense of who they were. There was a particular dynamic of feelings of control combined with feelings of powerlessness. The feeling of powerlessness was evident in women’s reported experience of criticism of their actions and the abuse, to which they were exposed, and an internalisation and interpretation of a criticised self. However, there was a resistance to accept this assessment of them. Women in this study exhibited internal control in holding their current self-concept and continued to experience the sense of self as positive.

*I think the hardest thing was our communication levels. Um, I came from a family who are very communicative, and, um, very um, affectionate ... Where's he came from a family that, um, there's more said in silence than there was in words. Um, and there's just some things you just don't say or go into. Um, especially if you've sort of had any sort of problems. You know. Sometimes you seem to be a bit of a troublemaker, if you try ta um, talk about problems, especially if*

*they're caused by someone else, or what have you. So I think we had a lot of difficulty, and still do, very much so now, um. I'll say something and he'll take it totally out of context, or totally warped way, to what I was thinking. Um, and for some reason, always seems to think that I'm being negative, when my intention is positive. So that's probably a very big thing (Irene, 27)*

In this passage, Irene expressed that her communication was positive, indicating that she was confident that her attempts to voice her opinions to her partner were beneficial. Evidence of Irene's experience of a degree of control within her environment was the reporting of criticism by her as being a 'warped' interpretation, which indicated confidence in her actions as appropriate and not questioning herself in regard to communication effectiveness. In this quote it was evident that Irene interpreted the criticism of her actions as inappropriate, because her attempts were to positively communicate with her partner. Therefore, although she indicated the difficulties in communicating and inferred a silencing of her voice, Irene was not self-critical and was holding to her current self-concept of an appropriate communicator.

During the narratives from women in this study, there appeared to be a process of striving to maintain a coherent sense of self despite the unpredictable environment they faced, which may at times trigger doubts about their worth. Despite their doubts being triggered women here appeared confident in maintaining a positive view of their effective communication style and their identity in this regard. Other participants expressed similar experiences of attempts by partners to close down their communication; Carol stated "*I can't communicate with him, not at all about anything, because whatever you say, he's the other way*" Fiona reported "*he doesn't believe anyone else is entitled to be different*". Although exhibiting strength in maintaining a strong sense of self, because a person's identity is the basis for their understanding within any social situation, it was not surprising for participants to report experiencing distress when their partner challenged their self-concept. Women's recognition of the negative aspects of exposure to criticism and abuse by the partner will be

reported in more detail within this chapter in the section headed 'negative emotional and psychological impact of self from exposure to DA.'

### **Strategic silencing of self – protection and control.**

Women reported voluntarily silencing themselves during times when they experienced fear of the situation escalating and danger of physical harm occurring, or when women were attempting to experience feelings of control over the partner or themselves. Silencing self became a protection when women felt that the partner needed to be calm before they could voice their opinion, and when he would be more likely to listen to her view. This was evident in the following passage where Irene reported that she finds the appropriate time to communicate her needs to her partner.

*I'm like well, I'm not gonna just let it keep occurring. So this is a problem that I think we need to talk about. And I'll try to instigate conversation to talk about it. And I have to plan and prepare, almost for, you know, the surroundings, the time, who's going to be there, and whatnot. It's very important to. So it's a bit of a process to sort of try and deal with any issues that we're having ... You know. Like, so you try to avoid the, um, the escalation I suppose. You try to, you know, um. When he's ranting and raving and what not, as much as I argue back with him sometimes, because he's just totally wrong, um, sometimes, you know, I can judge his anger. If he's getting too angry, then I know to just shut up. And just wait until he's cooled down. And wait for another day. And say "heh remember this argument, you was wrong. Because this, this, this, and this." But you can't quite do it in the heat of the moment. Cos it's all so fired up, and not thinking rationally and just too ... You don't wanna, um, make it escalate. Because then that's not a healthy situation for anybody (Irene, 27)*

Irene has learned to use her skills to protect her self-concept of being a good communicator, even when faced with abusive actions. She continued to pursue her aims when she felt safe to do so. Irene's continued attempts to voice her opinions to the partner indicated that she was confident in the 'rightness' of her actions and beliefs. However, she had the insight to strategically monitor her communication and keep herself safe. Irene however, persisted in her endeavour to ensure the partner was aware of her needs in the hope of establishing a better

relationship in the future, and keeping her family together and free of abuse. Also, in the behaviour exhibited, Irene was able to retain her self-view of being a fixer of problems as opposed to the “troublemaker” label she reported earlier.

Strategic silencing was also evident in other forms where some women found their silencing of voice provided a feeling of control over the partner, who did not appear to have the control that they were able to muster for themselves. Anne reported that her partner appeared to enjoy her verbal stoushes with him, and identified that this had a negative impact on her self-concept “*just kept my mouth shut, or if we did, we’d have arguments, and I always came out the worst*”. When Anne recognised the negative impact on her during the verbal arguments with her partner, she was able to learn techniques to silence herself. Controlling her behaviour through silencing provided Anne with control over her situation, and she described feeling less distress from the abusive encounters.

*I try really hard to just look after myself. Because I know from previous years, when I used to always react to what he would say, do. Ummm. That I’d, I’d sort of get right in there screaming and yelling. And I’d generally come out of it second best. I don’t know what he feels, obviously. But, I would feel just like I’d been through the ringer ... A lot of the times I still blow my stack. And get in the ring, as we say at Al Anon, with him. Which is what he wants, of course, and, umm. You know. I know. Then I think afterwards, “aww well that was, that was not what I should have done, but I did it, and so be it.” But it has taught me, ahh, taught me yes, not to put myself in situations of danger. I know when there’s, it’s a, it’s a very volatile situation. Like, if he’s very drunk, I try really hard, and usually am able, not to get into that situation with him, of arguing and raging, with him. Because it can be dangerous, in the sense he’s threatened me many times. He has, and, umm. As he’s getting older, he’s probably getting less, ahhh, to the point of ever physically trying to do anything to me. But that is, I feel, because I have learned to not put myself in that position (Anne, 64)*

Differently to Irene, Anne was not attempting to improve the relationship as she presented as resigned that things were not going to change. Instead, Anne, through her action of silencing, appears to gain a feeling of control that was absent in the past. Anne appeared to have learned how to protect her

psychological and emotional wellbeing during DA, an issue that had previously been problematic for her but not so now that she was able to manage her own emotions within the abusive situation. Management of her reaction to the situation often provided Anne with a feeling of advantage by being stronger than her abusive partner who was not able to manage his behaviour. Anne's ability to silence self reinforced her self-concept of strength and control. Anne had been able to increase her feelings of self-efficacy and found she was able to manage situations within the relationship that she could not previously. As with other participant's experience, Anne learned that she had the control to silence self which provided her with control in the DA. As with other participants Anne had found a form of control within her powerless situation.

Feelings of improved self-efficacy have also allowed Anne to forgive herself when she was unable to maintain control and stay quiet. This forgiving of self was reported as a new concept for Anne, and indicated a sense of self-power where she identified that although she sometimes lost control and engaged in the DA, she was able to regain control in further encounters with the partner. Other participants also described behaviour and thinking that enabled them to find a degree of control within their powerless situation, when strategic silencing of self was effective in maintaining their self-efficacy and feelings of self-power. Women were accepting that they would not change the partner describing times when they would *"let him do it, and not argue,"* (Dianne), where they had learned to manage themselves stating *"and then just carry on with what I was doing anyway,"* (Dianne), and many found self-awareness of the control they had in managing the negative experiences *"if I'm taking it personally then I have stuff I need to deal with around that"* (Eve). Eve was more aware than Anne of her self-power in remaining silent during her partner's abusive behaviour. Eve appeared to feel a strong sense of self-efficacy which allowed her to maintain her view of having control over her situation and having internal strength.

*You know I'm not a saint. And I'm not, I'm not super human. And there are times when, you know, I start shouting back. And then you*

*go, which freaks him out completely, because I just take a couple of deep breaths, and he will say "what are you doing now?" Because it used to be just going into the thing, and then, you know. And you know, when I started doing that a couple of years ago, it just freaked him out completely. He wanted a fight. He wanted to bait me. He wanted to put it off onto me. And he wasn't getting what he wanted. (Eve, 44)*

In these situations, awareness of the partner's power when she engaged in verbal arguments provided Eve with feelings of control when she was able to silence self during conflict. Women who reported being able to silence self, and maintain this silence when the partner was losing control, felt stronger than the partner and experienced feelings of power over him even when he was being abusive toward her. Women appeared to have learned that although the partner maybe physically stronger, he does not have control over their emotional and psychological wellbeing. That power was within her. This appeared to provide protection from the negative impact on their psychological and emotional wellbeing.

*But I think he doesn't like the fact that I am actually an emotionally, and, um, mentally stronger person. And he is only stronger than me physically (Irene, 27)*

The previous passage was an example of participants' ability to negotiate distressful feelings when exposed to abusive incidents, while maintaining their self-concept and managing the behavioural aspects involved in keeping safe. Participants reported being silenced when situations were volatile, but reported being able to vocalise their concerns during situations of calm. This behaviour exhibited by women appeared to be possible if they were able to view themselves in a positive light as effective communicators, appreciating that it was not always the best time to voice their opinions with the partner. Some of this determination to communicate appeared to be because women presented with feelings of entitlement to portray their ideas.

Others, who were not able to communicate their needs, even during times of calm, found power in being able to control their actions, and stay silent

when the partner was attempting to engage them in a verbally abusive encounter. Although not communicating their needs at a later time, these participants were able to provide themselves with feelings of control by showing strength in their silence. To women in this situation, feelings of self-power were gained through their control over the partner's impact on their emotional and psychological wellbeing. When they silenced themselves the partner was not able to engage with them verbally, and they were able to control their emotions when the partner's emotions were not under control. For women in this study, this situation was experienced as them being the stronger person in the encounter.

### **Silenced by Others**

When faced with abuse from their partner, participants sought reassurance from family, friends, and/or service providers. These endeavours varied in the ability to maintain a positive self-concept. Often when approaching others for assistance, participants were faced with criticism similar to that experienced from the partner. Women described difficulty seeking assistance from others when they felt negative judgement of their actions and decisions, with some women reporting feeling abused by others in addition to the partner. Although this did not have the strength of impact of partner silencing, there were negative aspects. Some women felt others were silencing them and not respecting their views of self and the decisions they were making about their life.

*He (counsellor of group) asked about my childhood, and thing. And you just set up a dynamic. With different people playing the different parts, that they received, the positions you were in as a child and all that. When I spoke to him about where I was, with that stuff. He just completely, he was just like, "no, this is the case. This is where it is. This is," you know. (He said) "Well you can't be cos, I'm looking at you, you can't be in that position. You've, you know. That's not, you know, why do you think you were?" It was like that. Ah, cos I've done work, and you can change, you can move on. You don't have to be a permanent disciple to (name of group) or anything else. The whole point is to graduate. Not to go forever. And keep talking about it. And go around in circles (Eve, 44)*

In this passage Eve expressed feelings of frustration and of being held back by professionals she had accessed for aid. Eve had sought help in the past and felt she had addressed a number of her issues and when seeking further growth she experienced judgement and a feeling of her past efforts being thwarted. For Eve, there was self-recognition of growth within the DA situation that was not recognised or acknowledged by services providers she was accessing. Because of the lack of recognition of her progress, growth and development due to Eve's own efforts, she experienced feelings of not being heard by the professionals she was accessing for support. Other participants, although initially seeking help from others, felt that advice being offered was inappropriate to their needs. They experienced the advice being offered as judgemental, and it appeared to reinforce the social narrative of them being wrong, bad and stupid.

*I ring my mum, whereas, I never used to do that before. Um, but I really don't like doing that. Because then, that means I'm putting stress and pressures, and my problems, on her. And seeing as she doesn't want me to be in the relationship in the first place, I kind of feel like I shouldn't be involving her if I don't want her, if I don't want her advice, and opinion. Which I do, but it hasn't changed, her advice and opinion of the situation has not changed. Over the last 5 years. So I, if I ask for anymore, I'm just going to hear the same thing. So I know how she feels about it. I know how dad feels about it. Dad's a lot more understanding and a lot more, um, "yep we need to let Irene deal with it. We need to let her work it out for herself, because until that happens, we're just wasting our time." And I appreciate that quite a lot. Because I find that my happy time is when I'm with my parents or my family. You know. Like when I get away from that situation, where we are having our cup of tea, and talking about the kids. So, when I get with mum, and all she wants to talk about is, tell me what to do with the situation, and how to fix myself, and fix my life, it just drains me even more. I try to avoid it .... So, I kind of go, "ah mum you know. Please, don't even start. Um, I've heard it all before. I know what you're going to say. I know what I need to do. So I know right from wrong. And I know that it's, that I'm in a bad situation" (Irene, 27)*

This passage was an indication of the negativity experienced by some women facing abuse, where they saw themselves as 'wrong, bad, and in need of fixing.' Words expressed here by Irene were views expressed within the social

narrative where women who continue to live with abuse are viewed as “stupid, weak, wrong and in a bad situation,” women in this study often expressed these views of self. There was also expression of a lack of appreciation from others of changes women have made within the relationship where Irene’s mother is reported as “*her advice, and opinion of the situation has not changed,*” indicating a lack of recognition of any growth or development by the participant.

In women’s attempts to build strength and fight the abuse they were facing negative views and responses from others were a reinforcement of the negative messages women were currently receiving from the partner, where he was suggesting that their views are not important, are forms of troublemaking, stupid, and are driving him away. When women attempted to discuss their views with significant others they were being provided advice that was not necessarily what they believed, nor wanted to hear. This was also experienced as an additional layer of abuse as they were again being told how they should be, or act, what they should, and should not say.

Some women were able to identify these influences whereas others were led to feel guilt and a lack of self-efficacy, because the suggestions inferred that they were currently not able or not willing to undertake the actions that are appropriate when faced with abuse. Other women identified that it was not necessarily acceptance that they needed, they just needed to speak the difficulties out loud to enable them to form more of an understanding, not only of their situation, but also how they were feeling and coping with the predicament.

*Part of the reason for coming here (referring to the interview for this study) is because I need to vent sometimes, about this stuff. And you need somebody who’s not going to just get tired of hearing you whinge. And, you need somebody who doesn’t have an agenda, doesn’t know him, doesn’t, you know, sort of have a, a, um, barrow to push. “You should do this. Or you should do that.” And, and, you get a lot of that. You get a lot of “should.” But I get a lot of “should” and control from him. So, there’s always the sense of being victimised again. You go to somebody who then tells you, “you should do this;*

*you should do that.” You know. And I feel like I had that a lot. And of all of the things in reading that book, about abuse, is it’s not just him when I was, you know, a victim (Eve, 44)*

In this passage, Eve identified the abusive side of other’s suggestions regarding her management of her life. Eve had identified what many participants had not, that others advice giving was another form of telling her that her behaviours were not appropriate and that she needed to change. This was the same experience that she was currently having with her partner. Eve appeared to experience the counsellor response as limiting her growth and inhibiting her movement forward. If women receive the same treatment outside the relationship, and are unable to identify this as controlling and abusive behaviour by those offering the advice, they may incorporate this view from others into their self-schemas of being incapable of managing their life, which is likely to negatively impact the positive sense of self.

*...but I mean women are so stupid though. Women put up with so much. They can be so strong on one hand, yet so weak on another one. And they can just let, without realise, men twist their minds around. You know. I can understand why some women stay in violent relationships, because mentally, they’re so messed up. It’s just I don’t know (Olga, 54)*

Olga’s expression of women, which included her, as being ‘stupid,’ was a negative connotation of her actions and expressions of a lowered self-esteem, in that she acted inappropriately within the relationship. It may not be surprising to find women living with abuse considering themselves in this vein where literature, which includes feminist literature, is reported in a manner that is typically judgemental of women who remain with an abusive man (Enander, 2010). Women are made to feel stupid because of the societal narrative for a preference to leave and that staying implies a victim status and weakness within them. Abused women therefore adopted the narrative as factual and viewed themselves negatively for not following the societal rules of leaving. Olga generalised her evaluation to all women who remain with an abusive partner, which indicated that she viewed women as powerlessness within society. Olga

appeared to view herself as being mentally manipulated by her partner, and generalised her reactions to the abuse to all women as an explanation for staying. Olga's emphasis on women as a group was indicative of the cultural history of women being less intelligent than men (Enander, 2010). Her usage of third person in reporting "*you know I can understand why some women stay in violent relationships*" appeared to divorce her somewhat from the fact that she is currently remaining with her abusive partner, and renders herself powerless in her situation.

There were many other ways that women could have viewed self in the abusive situation without the personal attack of stupidity. The adoption of this appraisal may have been women's lack of self-esteem, or it may have occurred because of responses they have received from others on their decision to stay with the partner, or a combination of both. There was also the issue of the partner's emotional and psychological attacks which were likely to infer, if not obviously suggest to her, that she was incapable thereby inferring stupid. There appeared to be contradiction expressed where women understood their own strength while continuing to denigrate themselves with terms such as stupid, an idiot, and silly. Without being aware of the connotations of using terms such as stupid, women were implying that they are faulty, unintelligent, and therefore to blame for the predicament they face (Enander, 2010). Women were aware that this is the impression the general public was likely to hold about their current situation and they often transferred this to their own narratives, if not beliefs. In contrast, others were fighting the general narrative and arguing with service providers and partners who expressed disagreement with their decision making and actions in relation to coping strategies when facing DA.

### **Them against us.**

Women in this study were often likely to defend their position which on occasion brought them back to the partner for support. Under situations where others criticised the relationship the partner and the participant became

collegial, and this brought them closer together. Participants who identified being abused by others felt more isolated, which often led to them going back to the partner for advice and comfort. This likely occurs because the participant will feel that the partner is no different to others, therefore negating the reason to leave, somewhat like the idiom better the devil you know.

*So, like I sort of got to a point where I thought well I'm not listening to none of youse (sic). Because youse are all trying to tell me, and no one is any, you know, different ... DCP (Department of Child Protection), and Mum, and all that, doesn't help, and I think they kind of refused, um, what you actually want, and what you actually feel. Cos, you have so many people giving you, instead of just being there for you ... I was too angry and didn't want to hear that. So then I turned my thing (sic) back on him, and then I was back to talking with him ... My biggest thing is, that if you have someone there to talk to, if you want to talk about the shit, because I get to a point where I think, I'm just repeating myself so much to different people that I don't like talking about it. But everyone seems to ask, you know, that's all anyone ever seems to ask me. "What's going on with you and B?" "How's this? How's that?" And I think, "why not ask me how I'm going?" So you don't really like me, you just want to know what's going on in my business. You know. Like, so, um, I think yeah, having someone to talk to (Irene, 27)*

This passage displays the importance Irene placed in being able to discuss the problems she experienced, without feeling judged for her actions. It also indicated the difficulties women face when living with abuse where others see the abuse as part of women's identity as a person without seeing the person. Here, Irene indicated that the abuse in her relationship was seen as the only thing within her life, and she appeared to feel that she as a person was being lost within one area of her life, where others were not considering the whole individual. Many women indicated that their identity becomes connected to the abusive acts of the partner and their other attributes become secondary to these. Ignoring of their identity was likely to negatively impact women's sense of self as they may begin to listen to and identify with the social narrative of the abused woman.

Irene reported experiencing criticism when her family persuaded her to access service providers for financial assistance. When presenting for aid, Irene experienced judgement by the service provider who inferred that she was not coping with her life, and criticised her in areas where she felt proud of her ability. The criticism of her parenting was experienced as hurtful and led to her rejecting the aid that was offered. Also, the suggestion that she was not managing her finances was hurtful as this was an area of concern for Irene, so they were reinforcing a criticism she had of herself, where the partner demands money from her and this impacts on her ability to manage. Irene was fighting the social narrative that was being presented to her where she was not willing to accept their judgement of her being a 'bad' mother and provider for her family. Therefore, Irene was rejecting not only their evaluation, but also the support that would have been beneficial for her to cope. The attitude of service providers also limited future access to resources where Irene made the decision not to return.

Participants often reported that they were "*sick of talking about it*" (Beryl) which would suggest that even though they had a need to express the distress and issues they face, "*I just need to vent sometimes,*" (Eve) which they find beneficial, when venting was met with advice giving or criticism, the participant did not benefit and therefore needed to vent further. They therefore found themselves voicing their problems repeatedly which led to feelings of frustration and often withdrawal. The experience of being heard and understood seemed very important to the development of positive self-concept because it indicated to the participant that they were important and that their situation was important. The benefits of being heard were evident in the descriptions provided by many regarding their current counsellors and the interview process for this research.

### Negative Emotional and Psychological Impact on Self from Exposure to DA

Despite reporting coping with the criticism directed toward them, and being able to maintain their self-concept, there was an appreciation of the negative impact of exposure to DA. There was also an appreciation of the effort entailed in maintaining their identity, and on occasion women pondered whether the negative impact on self both physically and emotionally is worth the price. Participants reported negative impacts on their health stating that it was “*making me sick*” (Irene) others were more focused on the emotional and psychological impacts stating:

*I’ve learned to shut my mouth, a little bit more. But obviously it’s not ok for me. But it’s ok for us. Do you know what I mean? ... I will break out eventually. (Beryl, 21)*

Beryl’s statements implied that a lot of energy is required to maintain the current self. Anne reported that it is “*soul destroying*” and “*lowers your self-esteem*” when you are living with a critical person. The reference from participants was that they felt they were being closed down, Dianne stating “*I find that I’m just kind of, shutting, I’m shutting down more and more, and basically, can’t do it*” was not only an expression of their silencing but could also have been an indication of them feeling they were being negatively impacted emotionally and physically by being closed down by the DA. Literature suggests that emotional and verbal abuse is viewed as more damaging to the relationship than physical abuse (Herbert et al., 1991) with reports that the verbal abuse progressively denigrated their dignity and psychological wellbeing (Estrellado & Loh, 2014). Anne suggested this was the situation for her when she reported:

*He’s just a very difficult man to live with, because even if he didn’t drink, he’s such a control freak. And it’s that controlling, I, I, I think I can deal with the drinking side of things better than his control ... his control has always made me feel inadequate (Anne)*

Anne’s reporting of the drinking referred to concern over the physical aspect of the abuse. Here she was indicating that the controlling behaviour

exhibited by the partner was more damaging to her wellbeing and more difficult for her to cope with than the physically abusive behaviour. Other women reported the negative impact on self from the partner's attempts to control their communication and change the person they felt they were.

*I'm pretty much just deteriorating. Like my self-confidence is obviously just going to be shot to zero, cos, that's what's happening anyway. I used to be like you know a hell confident girl, you know (Beryl, 21)*

*I don't even know who I am anymore, cos I've put so much into this relationship, in trying to make it work ... I feel, yeah, not appreciated and whatever. And that kind of affects my self-esteem and stuff like that ... It was just draining myself. Um, I'm always run down, I'm always emotional, I'm always stressed, I'm always sick, I get breakouts, I get just kink necks, everything I get that goes on. Um, we just did a health and wellbeing thing down for work, at a seminar that they sent me to for work, and I had everything on the board, um, ticked off (Irene, 27)*

*It totally affected my health. So I've got to stop hating him now, and work out how I can cope with it, live with it, and what I'm going to work out. That is what I gotta do. I gotta get rid of all those feelings (Olga, 54)*

It was evident that, even when participants were managing the negative impact of DA and protecting their self-concept, there was a cost. An indication of the emotional impact of past abuse were comments by Anne that she "*felt like I was 5 years old again, it takes me back to when I was 5 years old*". This helplessness of being a child without control over her emotions was powerful and was described as crippling her ability to respond as an adult to the verbal and emotional abuse she was currently facing. However, there were descriptions from women, including Anne, where they explain that they can logically divorce themselves from the emotive situation and think realistically about the current abuse, which allows them to '*not take on board*' the partner's accusations.

### **Restoring Positive Sense of Self by Finding Purpose in One's Life – Self-Affirmation**

One method of restoring feelings of worthiness and achieving a feeling of consistency was through self-affirmation, where women sought information to confirm their positive self-concept of being good, influential, and in control of their life. Experiences of self-affirmation did not come from the current relationship instead self-affirmation came from work, other friendship networks, and sources that reassured the participant that they were effective, ethical, honest, and capable (Lynch & Graham-Bermann, 2000). The use of self-affirmation appeared to have a positive influence on women in this study, where many reported situations in their lives that provided a sense of competence and worth, where they found significance and purpose in their lives through activities that allowed them to see themselves as useful, worthy, and strong. This was achieved by recognising the restrictions encountered because of the abuse, and then focusing on their achievements.

It was often not possible to make sense of or find benefit in the situation. Under such circumstances finding purpose or significance in one's life must suffice. Women in this study, who were able to self-affirm that they were valued in other areas of their life, did not need to resolve self as an abused person to benefit psychologically. Despite, or as a result of the restrictions to their lives instigated by the abusive actions of the partner, women described compensatory activities in which they engaged that gave them an opportunity to experience positive affect toward themselves and achieve a purpose in their lives. Whereas in the above narrative Anne had experienced feelings of inadequacy and lowered self-esteem, she described her ability to secure work despite her husband restricting her ability to learn new skills through education, and her pride in being a good grandmother.

*I got a job at (name deleted) Hospital, and worked there in catering for about 5 years. I was there then I left when my daughter, eldest daughter, had her first child. So I left to help out with minding my granddaughter. And I've never regretted that, because we have a*

*special bond. She's just turned 17, and got her driver's licence, and the first place she came to was grandmas, when she got her licence. So yeah. Umm. She (the eldest daughter) had another child, a boy, so I did the same with him. And he and I are very close as well. So that's, that is special to me. And had a big involvement with grandchildren, cos I have another daughter, my second eldest daughter, she's a drug addict, so my granddaughter, whose now 10, I've had an awful lot, I've probably half raised her (Anne, 64)*

Within this narrative it was evident that Anne experienced a close relationship with her grandchildren, it was an indication to her that she is worthwhile, adept at a socially acceptable role, and significant in others' lives. Anne reported pride in her achievements as a grandmother and finds purpose and significance within her life, unlike the identity of being a women living with abuse. Anne's pride in being a good grandmother is close to her values and was therefore acting as a protective mechanism for her emotional and psychological wellbeing, providing her with positive feelings about herself. Having purpose in life can provide an individual with a feeling of enthusiasm and feelings of positivity for their own future (George & Park, 2013) and a sense of meaning to their life (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). The purpose Anne found in her work and being a good Grandmother has given her a reason to get up each morning and continue on with life, despite the difficulties faced living with DA.

This was typical of many women whose compensatory activities matched their current belief systems and identities of being worthwhile and valued, and as such they experienced feelings of significance and worth. These actions helped them gain experiences of success which provided them with feelings of achievement and a life of significance. Activities focused on women's ability to be good at something in their life, and provided feelings of being worthy of love and consideration. Other participants were able to find the positive self-affirmation from their ability to relate to others outside the family. Such experiences provided women with a sense of achievement despite the abusive reactions of their partners'.

*... made lots of friends. I'm in touch with two of them still to this day (Carol, 62)*

Experiences such as those reported by my participants indicated that women in this study identified their strengths within the workforce and their social skills, and saw themselves as more effective than the partner. These experiences allowed women to acknowledge their value and worth, and appeared to enable women to gain self-efficacy, increased self-esteem, and feelings of worth, which was in contradiction to the experience of abuse they were exposed to in the home. Other women did not need activities to achieve feelings of success in their lives they were able to see their attributes as positive.

*I'm a pretty positive person, I know myself that I'm a happy person. Ah, um, and I basically just tell myself that what he is saying is all rubbish. Basically, um, it's um, a lot easier when I'm at work, obviously. Cos I know how I'm relating to everybody and all that sort of thing. ... I was always, you know, a very um, um, popular child. I mean I always had heaps of friends. Um. I was never a trouble maker. I never got into trouble. Haha. You know that sort of thing. Yeah (Fiona, 48)*

In this narrative Fiona recognised her behaviours as competent, she saw self of value to others in her ability to have friends, and she was proud of her mental capacity to remain positive. This was possibly an indication to Fiona that she is a strong person even though she was being abused, which from a societal viewpoint may be viewed as a personal weakness. Feelings of strength were described by a number of women, indicating a lack of feelings of helplessness and hopelessness.

Self-affirmation experienced by women enabled them to maintain their self-concept of being effective, efficient, and capable. For some this was a process, as they originally believed the negative feedback they were receiving from the partner. However, for others they were able to maintain their self-concept from the outset. This difference is likely because of childhood experiences where many reported past abuse either within the family or directed toward them from family members. The presence of abuse did not always result

in these feelings or reactions to the abusive partner's criticism, but many participants saw this as an explanation for their reactions and often for the reactions and behaviour of the partner. Past family abuse for both the partner and participant is addressed in Chapter 5.

Women, as part of their coping and meaning making strategy, appeared to find self-affirmation within their lives. They were motivated and sought activities within their careers or within family roles that provided an outlet for them to be successful, and to plan and act out roles within their world that ensured they were useful and achieving goals. Women participated in activities that provided fulfilment and allowed them to make goals and participate in life events. These goals aided women to make sense of their lives and to find meaning in their existence outside the DA relationship.

### **Being the Stronger One**

Women were able to recognise the partner's emotional state and act in a manner that was protective of self, while also managing their own emotional state. Women presented as strong individuals who were applying adaptive coping skills while experiencing a difficult situation. And many were aware of their strength and power. Eve explained her aim is "*about doing more than coping, cos that's what I've been doing for a very long time is coping and surviving.*" From their narratives it appeared that they valued their own emotional and psychological strength above the physical strength displayed by the partner. Women described their partners as lacking strength "*husband a very weak man*" (Carol). Throughout the narrative women overall viewed the partner as physically stronger but described self as personally stronger, describing instances where they were more socially adept, better at their careers, and emotionally stronger.

*There have been incidents of violence as well ... You know. I just stood my ground. Um, and he's, I mean, he's stronger than me. You know. But I'm very, um, determined too. That time when he threw everything on the floor, and pushed me. Um. So that I fell down, and*

*that was more than anything else, that was humiliating, that I actually fell down (Gail, 50)*

Women described feelings of control and strength within the abusive encounters with comments such as “*I do stand up for myself*” (Gail) and “*I just stood my ground*” (Gail). Narratives presented women as feeling strong and wilful when faced with adversity, not feeling like a victim or having feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. They were able to identify their own success in areas where the partner was displaying weakness. Experiences where women felt they were being stronger appeared as a protective element to women’s psychological and emotional wellbeing.

*Yeah I can’t pinpoint one specific thing that. I guess I’m very fortunate, in the sense that, someone said to me the other day, umm you are just such a positive person. You know. That I’m amazed you’re so positive, and, umm, I don’t know why I’m like that. Because sometimes [laughter], at times I do think well golly, you know, this is just all crap. And get me out of here. And, and, so on, and so on. But, usually, I often stop and think, when I start to get really down, umm, and fed up with things, I, in my head it might only be, but I do what I call a gratitude list... I just try to look at those sides of my life that are things I can be grateful for as against just always wallowing in that negative side of all the things that are bad in my life. And, umm, whether it’s that helps me to, to sort of stay sane, if, if I am. I sometimes, I think I’m quite nuts but (laughter) ... And, um, so yeah, that’s, that’s how I deal with it, at this time. How I deal with it 6 months down the track, or who knows (laughter). I just live at this stage try to (Anne, 64)*

As previously reported Anne felt strength in being able to remain silent when the partner was verbally abusing her. She gained strength in not engaging with him. Although, Anne continued to report low self-esteem describing feelings of inadequacy and feeling 5 years of age when the partner berated her, she identified where others see her strength. In this passage, Anne described with pride her ability to remain positive when exposed to adversity. This was a sign of her resilience despite the negative psychological feelings she described. Anne was able to recognise this positive aspect of self when others comment, however, may not be able to self-identify. It was these examples where others

can have a positive impact on the wellbeing of women facing DA by identifying women's strengths and supporting the gains they have achieved despite their difficult circumstances.

### **The Benefit of Support From Others**

Contrary to the silencing experienced by many women, there were women who described benefits from being able to voice their current experience of DA without judgement or advice giving from others. When arising, circumstances of being heard were experienced as understanding and acceptance of their current situation. This understanding appeared to provide the participant with a reinforcement of their current positive self-concept as it was presented as 'there is no fault in me if someone else understands.' 'I must not be crazy or stupid or hopeless.' It appeared to infer to women that they were 'normal' and their reactions and decisions were acceptable, a suggestion that had not been communicated to them by others. This provided women with strength which was what many needed to continue to cope and manage their situation.

*I've got a tremendous network of friends. Particularly people in the Al Anon program, who understand where I'm coming from. Cos a lot of them live with it also. So when times get really tough, I will turn to them. Just for, they don't say to me, "well you do this, this, this." But, they just listen. And you know that it helps to talk about it. Get it off your chest. Umm, and I've got wonderful, I've got a. I've got three sisters, but two of them don't live here. One's in America, and the other one lives in the country. But my sister that lives here, her and I are very close. She's wonderful support to me. And very understanding ... I think it's just offloading all the stuff that's going on ... I think you've, because you allowed me to talk a lot. Ummm, some counsellors, that I've been to, this is going back, because I come to D now, but over the years, umm, a lot of counsellors will ask a lot of questions. But I don't, I, I often got the feeling that, they sort of weren't really listening to what you were saying ... (referring to the interview Anne stated) I was able to give my side of what I'm living with (Anne, 64)*

Many participants mentioned talking to someone who understands and this inferred that only those who had experienced abuse would relate to their situation. This is also evidence that past attempts to discuss issues have likely been met with inappropriate advice giving or reactions, which have led participants to have feelings of isolation and thoughts that no one will understand unless they have been abused themselves.

*You know somebody to talk to. Somebody you could, um, I don't know possibly give you some moral support would be good. Um, yeah. Just somebody to talk to I guess. Somebody who possibly has been through it or understands (Fiona, 48)*

*I have got a reasonable network of friends. Um. And I think I'm lucky that I'm the woman, because women do talk. Women do, um, help each other, just by having a bit of a bitch in the moment, for want of a better expression. But, um, that's very helpful for me. I don't know how I would manage without, um, this quite a close network of girlfriends (Heather, 52)*

Communication appeared important to women in this study. However, the communication they experienced as most beneficial was when the topic was discussed on their own terms. When others were forcing the topic discussion this was experienced as controlling and women experienced this as an abusive action from those who were purported to be helping. Interestingly this advice was of the kind that was most acceptable to the service providers and friends and family, but not necessarily most beneficial to women to whom it was aimed, as despite participants expressing that they did not think that family members and service providers were intentionally attempting to silence them, women found the experience distressing. Alternatively, other women were able to find family members and service providers whose actions were not experienced as silencing of their voice, or closing down of self. In circumstances where participants felt heard by others their distress was minimised. Therefore, the support provided by others reportedly helped alleviate the distress experienced by women because they felt they had a voice and were being heard and understood.

## Summary

Women in this study reported experiencing a feeling of their sense of self being 'closed down' by the abusive behaviour of their partners. Although these acts were often experienced as distressing, there was an element of resistance by women who saw the criticised attributes of themselves as positive and advantageous to an improved relationship. Women reported strategic resistance where they chose to silence self when they felt the situation may escalate and place themselves or others at risk. However, they were prepared to voice their opinions when they felt they would be heard by the partner, and that their voice would make a difference. Women's ability to voice their opinions during times of safety did not necessarily eliminate the distress they experienced from the partner's controlling behaviour, where women recognised the detrimental health aspects of living with abuse. Further to the partner's attempts to silence women, they often also experienced silencing from others such as family and service providers.

Silencing from others reinforced messages that women were receiving from the partner, that their voice was not important and what they had to say was silly, leading to feelings of stupidity because of their actions in staying. However, the criticism received from others often initiated a reconnection with the partner who offered them support when they were criticised by others, and also instigated thoughts from women that life was no better outside the relationship. Women who found supportive others experienced benefits such as reinforcement of the experience of being good and worthy of respect, and encouraged women to find control in their situation. They were also able to restore a positive sense of self outside the relationship through acts of self-affirmation. They achieved success within the workforce and found a sense of achievement and success through family acts such as being good parents and grandparents. Through these behaviours women were able to find purpose and meaning and feel valued for their actions and the persons they are. Many

women were able to identify their strengths and viewed self as the stronger person within the relationship.

Women displayed a number of resilient coping strategies to maintain their positive identity despite this area of self being attacked by others, and manage safety within the relationship. Resilience was indicated when women were able to succeed when faced with adversity (Davis, Christopher & Kulig, 2000; 2002) (Davis, Christopher & Kulig, 2000; 2002) by drawing upon flexible coping strategies to meet the differing situations in their lives (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). Resilient characteristics displayed by women promoted adaptation to the situation of DA and an acceptance of self as positive (Anderson, Renner, & Danis, 2012). Throughout their journey women, when criticised by the partner, appeared to constantly question their sense of self, their beliefs, and their values, and find the strength to identify and reinforce that current self was appropriate and good.

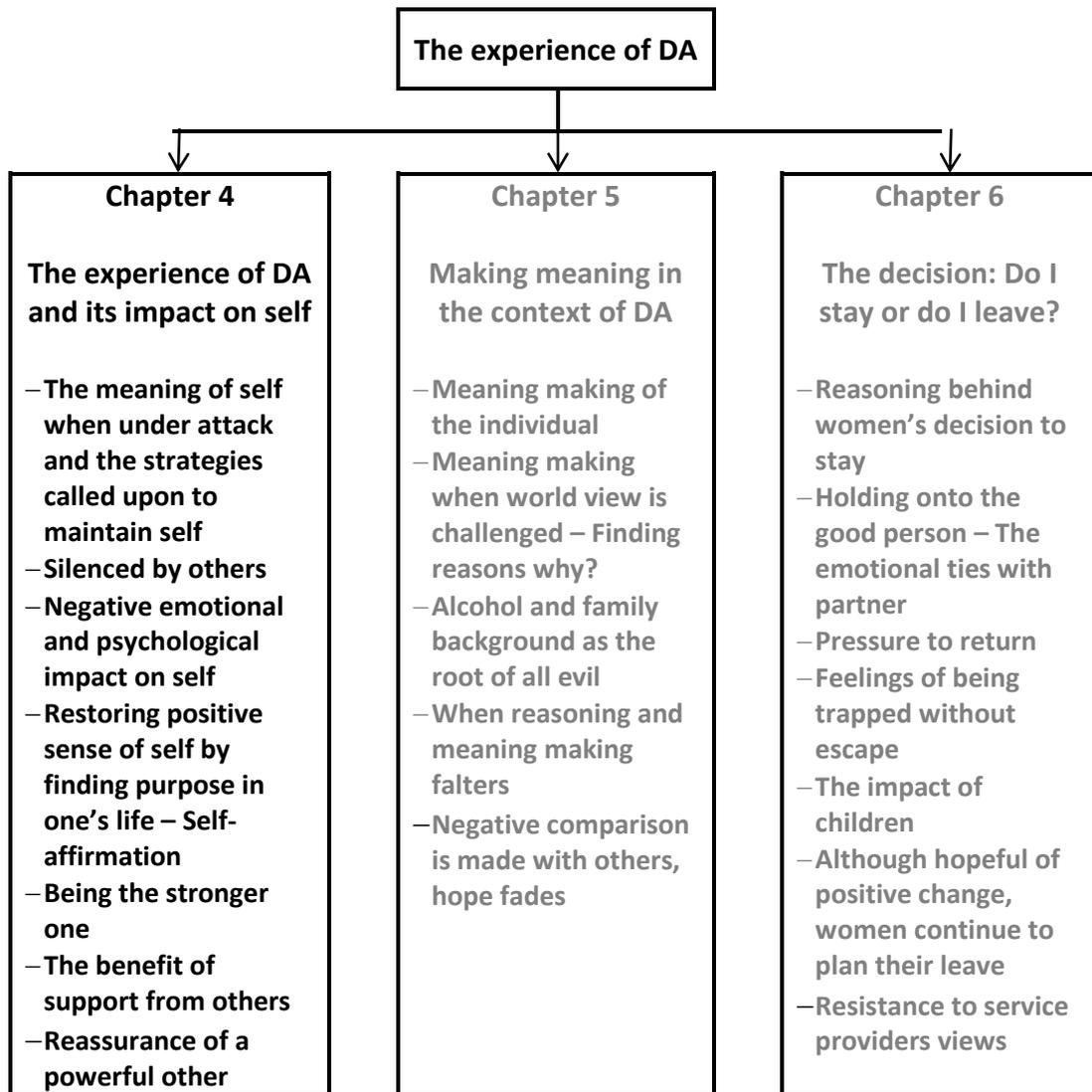


Figure 2. Heading indicating the superordinate theme for each analysis chapter followed by the associated emergent themes with, 'The experience of DA and its impact on self' chapter emphasised

## Chapter 5

### Meaning Making in the Context of DA

In this chapter, I describe participants' attempts to find meaning when faced with the distressing experience of exposure to DA. I discuss the different reasoning women presented for the occurrence of abuse in their life, and the expectations for the future. Some of the women in this study expressed hope that life will improve and the DA will subside, while others were resigned to a life of continuous abuse. Last, I report the discrepancies and doubts that arose from participants' narratives, where hope and acceptance of the partner's behaviour was questioned and expectations for change were expressed.

#### Meaning Making of the Individual

Meaning is a way in which individuals connect things, such as events, people, and relationships, within their world. The process of meaning making provides individuals with a cognitive schema of their world, which aids in interpretation and motivation within their daily life. When an individual is exposed to an event or situation that is incompatible with their current schema, or their worldview, they will make an assessment to appraise whether it is challenging, threatening, or harmful, in assigning the appropriate meaning (Travis Proulx & Inzlicht, 2012). Whether or not the assigned meaning to the new event is considered a stressor will determine the distress experienced. When distress is experienced the individual will undergo an exercise of reassessing their meaning making in an attempt to minimise the distress experienced as a result of the discrepancy between the event and their worldview (Park, 2010). Therefore, meaning making efforts are an attempt to restore an individual's worldview, and if successful will reduce feelings of distress and result in a better psychological and emotional outcome. The literature indicates that, individuals who are able to make sense of abuse through meaning making endeavours will

experience less negative affect and feelings of distress (Janoff-Bulman & Frieze, 1983).

### **Meaning Making When World View is Challenged - Finding Reasons Why**

The first impression for women entering a relationship is that it will be a loving and fulfilling union, which is an overall societal belief in the ‘happy ever after’ story. Women in this study often reported entering their relationship with feelings and expectations of trustworthiness and value in having an intimate partnership. Stating that they saw the happy couple scenario as normal and this was the aim for themselves and their partner *“the family thing is what I’ve been brought up with,” (Irene)*. Women also discussing the benefits of families being together for the children’s relationship with their father, *“they need to see their father in a positive light” (Irene)*. However, involvement in their current DA relationship challenged their optimism, expectations, and belief system in this regard. The challenge to women’s worldview of a happy intimate relationship was experienced through negative emotions and affect disequilibrium, because of the discrepancy between their beliefs in a just world, and the reality of living with DA. In women’s attempt to re-establish affect equilibrium and gain a feeling that they had an understanding of their situation, participants engaged in a comprehensive exploration of the reasons behind the partner’s abusive behaviour. That, all women in this study began their interview discussion with an exploration into why the partner’s behaviour was abusive lends weight to the importance for them to find some meaning or reasoning for their current situation. The most common reasons presented by participants were alcohol use and past abuse during childhood.

### **Alcohol and Family Background as the Root of all Evil**

#### **Alcohol causes his behaviour.**

One of the issues women felt important in explaining the abusive behaviour was the partner’s alcohol use. Statements including *“my husband is an*

*alcoholic,” (Ann) “I believe he has a drinking problem,” (Carol) “the main reason I think for his alcohol and drug issues have caused us a lot of stress [sic]” (Irene) and “when my husband drinks he gets argumentative,” (Jane) were used to explain why this behaviour was occurring. Women explained that after consumption the partner became violent and aggressive.*

*It’s generally after he’s been out drinking an excessive amount of alcohol that he becomes, um, you can’t see **him** anymore. In his eyes it’s not **him**. It’s like he’s running off the subconscious. And he’s not actually there. And that’s when I feel intimidated the most. Because you’re, I can’t talk to **him**. I’m like where are you in there? Like, I need to talk to you. You need to stop behaving the way that you’re behaving and be, behave. And that’s when he just, um, he’s his worst I suppose. Because I don’t think he’s rationally thinking, or thinking at all. So, um, and it just seems the bloke I know goes away. And there’s this little demon inside him that has all these anger issues, and hurt issues from whatever (Irene, 27)*

Alcohol use was described as the casual factor for the abuse as it removed the person that she knows and left a person who was behaving badly, like a “*demon*.” There was also mention of the hurt and anger issues within the partner which were referring to his past childhood hardship, an issue that women also discussed when finding meaning for the abuse the partner displayed. Childhood abuse and hardship for both the partner and women will be discussed later in this chapter. When alcohol could be called upon to explain the cause for the partner’s behaviour there was a separation of the individual and his bad behaviour. That it was not the real partner who was abusive as he was a different and bad person when there was alcohol in his system. An explanation of a substance taking the partner away allowed women to continue to view the partner in a more positive light. They were able to convince themselves that they were not caring for a person who was bad. Alcohol was presented as a powerful influence having the ability to remove the partner, the person they know and care for. Women found alcohol use a tangible form of meaning for the DA situation because it provided visual evidence of a cause for the abusive behaviour “*you can’t see him anymore, in his eyes it’s not him.*”

Further support for women's argument that alcohol takes control was their own personal experience of alcohol use causing problems in their own behaviour. A typical example was provided by one woman who explained that she refrains from alcohol because when consuming she feels that her defences will falter and she may retaliate to the partner's behaviour, thereby exacerbating the abusive situation.

*We don't drink quite so much. Because, um, especially with me. And I obviously, inhibitions go, and you say whatever you think. If I were to do that now, heaven knows what could come out of my mouth (Gail, 50)*

In this passage Gail expressed concern that if she consumed alcohol she would become less inhibited losing some control over self and express opinions that may have caused further problems in the relationship. Therefore, it appeared that women viewed alcohol as a powerful and somewhat uncontrollable factor in the cause of inappropriate and abusive behaviour within the relationship, whether for self or for the partner. Meaning making that implicated alcohol use as the reason for the inappropriate behaviour tapped into a socially acceptable explanation for women's situation. Socially acceptable behaviour impacts positively on self-esteem by increasing acceptance (Leary, Cottrell, & Phillips, 2001). Therefore, when explaining the abuse from the perspective of the uncontrollable aspect of alcohol, women were more likely to allay feelings of emotional and psychological discomfort experienced because of the DA, as this was not a reflection of herself or the partner it was due to an external influence. Two aspects were likely to influence the positive aspect of blaming alcohol use for the abuse in their lives. First, that the negative impact of alcohol use is a socially acceptable narrative, where the general public would accept that substance use is bad and does bad things to people. Second, if women continued to hold positive emotions toward the partner, the explanation of alcohol being the cause of the behaviour allows them to justify their positive feelings, because the person under the influence of alcohol was not the person toward who this caring is focused.

Although meaning making provided a socially acceptable explanation for women, this did not necessarily indicate an acceptance of the current abusive or drinking behaviour. Some women in this study expressed recognition that the behaviour was manageable by the partner, and held expectations that he could change. Women indicated that they were aware that if the partner removed or managed the alcohol use, the situation would improve.

*Fair enough you've left that, and you've been on the war path of self-destruction. But, it's been going on for a long time now. And something needs to give either [sic]. And that's what I've said to him. You either snap out of it, and you be a part of our family, or I'm moving on (Irene, 27)*

Although women provided reasons for the partner's abusive behaviour and to some degree were justifying and empathising with him, they continued to hold the partner accountable and were not accepting of the current situation. In narratives where women identified that the partner had a degree of control over his behaviour and that he could by choice change, there appeared to be hope of a future with the partner that was abusive free. As indicated in Irene's passage where she suggested that he "*snap out of it ..... or I'm moving on,*" which indicated that Irene's intention is to stay, if the partner was prepared to stop his drinking behaviour. An action that Irene thinks will stop the abuse. Therefore, particularly for the younger participants in this study, there was an expectation expressed for partners to take responsibility for their actions, and make the changes needed in stopping their inappropriate behaviour, which women felt would lead to an abuse free relationship.

There were other women who described the partner's alcohol use as a disease. When holding the disease model view there appeared to be less hope for change as there was no perceived controllability to the situation. There appeared to be resignation that things would not improve. Women holding views of this model described substance use in terms of it being a biological issue "*it's getting worse and of course alcoholism to is a progressive disease, so as he gets older the longer he's drank [sic]*" (Anne). A physical explanation calling on the

medical model was likely to be viewed, by women and the general public, as more socially acceptable than a more unpredictable psychological model of reasoning for the behaviour. By using biology in their meaning making women appeared able to find an explanation that matched their current worldview of predictability, that disease is a bad thing and does bad things to people. Adopting the disease model of addiction women described the partner's alcohol use as *"full blown," "he's a practicing alcoholic"* and *"progressive"* (Carol), indicating that they saw no future change from the partner and this was something they needed to manage in their lives.

Women who adopted the biological/medical model resigned self to not being able to manage the partner's substance use nor him being able to manage the abuse, and therefore looked toward managing their own emotional and psychological wellbeing by attending support groups. The support groups chosen by women holding to the biological/medical model were likely to reinforce their belief of alcohol use as a disease.

*14 years ago I sought help for myself, to try to deal with his, try to deal with his alcoholism. And I rang AA (Anne, 64)*

Through help seeking from a group such as AA (Al Anon), which is an organisation that supports partners of alcohol users and follows the 12 step program a disease model of alcohol use, Anne was assured of reinforcement of her current views on alcohol abuse, being a disease. It would appear, that for many women in this study, even though their meaning making was contravening the view of a just world and presented a harsh future of abuse that was not going to stop because of the disease factor, the familiarity was less confronting and anxiety provoking than having no meaning at all. However, in the long term the beliefs in the medical model for alcohol use may be less adaptive. Women who reported that the alcohol use was of a biological nature were more likely to be mature and were reporting less hope in change within their relationship, evident in Anne's comment *"in my marriage my husband is an alcoholic he's a practising alcoholic"* with the term inferring that there was no end, it was likely

to deteriorate further as he was “*practising.*” Anne provided further support for her view of a biological and genetic aspect of the problem and the uncontrollable situation, when she discussed the problems her children were having with substance use.

*That’s another area he’ll attack me, he’ll say to me, “if you had been a better mother they wouldn’t be drug addicts” [referring to two of their daughters who have drug problems], and all this. I know that’s not true. I don’t take that on board today. For a while I used to sort of think “where did I go wrong?” and all this. But, it’s just, I know their drug addiction is, is, a genetic thing. They’ve got, we’ve got addiction in our families. So they happen to be drug addicts, and, but he’s got no tolerance for drug addiction. That’s the irony (Anne, 64)*

In this passage it was evident a change in meaning making allowed the participant to cope with the accusations from the partner, by identifying the drug issues of their children and the partner’s behaviour as a genetic predisposition. Using the summation that these behaviours are genetic and therefore uncontrollable, Anne was able to divert negative feelings about self that would result from thoughts of being inadequate as a mother. She was able to reassure herself that she could not change what has happened and was therefore not to blame for the children’s or the partner’s abusive (whether of substances or toward her) behaviour. Meaning making that relies on a biological explanation for the behaviour appeared to allay the cognitive dissonance experienced by women because, although providing a sad view of their reality, it was a familiar belief of the world and therefore did not contradict their current worldview.

The positive benefits of meaning making has been reported in the literature where individuals who are able to attribute a reason why a stressful event occurred or who was responsible for the event, are more likely to be able to adjust to the situation and suffer less trauma (Park & Folkman, 1997). This appeared to be the situation for women in this study when they referred to alcohol use by the partner as the reason for the DA they were experiencing, whether or not they felt it was something the partner could control. Women viewing his use of alcohol as controllable appeared to find reassurance that it

was not the person they cared for who was bad it was the substance that was problematic to the relationship. Therefore, if they could stop the partner's use of alcohol the relationship would improve. Other women in this study, who attributed the cause of the abusive behaviour to uncontrollable substance use, such as biological or heritable attributes, also appeared to experience less psychological distress, because despite being unchangeable there was some logic to the event. It therefore appeared that it was not necessary for women to see an end to the DA for them to experience less negative affect from the abuse, it was whether they were able to find some meaning or reasoning for the occurrence of the abuse in their lives. Silver and colleagues (Silver, Boon, & Stones, 1983) study of females who had experienced past child sexual abuse by their fathers indicated that finding meaning for the father's behaviour, such as he was lonely after his wife died, was adaptive and allayed negative affect relating to the situation they had faced. Finding meaning, in whatever form, also appeared to be adaptive and allay distress for women in my study.

**Partner is the result of his family background.**

Women also proffered exposure to childhood adversity in their reasoning for the partner's behaviour. As with alcohol use being a societally accepted explanation, childhood adversity is also meaning making that is aligned with society's worldview. That this was a situation inflicted upon an innocent, who was the victim. The victim status for the partner appeared to illicit a degree of empathy from women in this study, and provided them with an explanation for his behaviour that is plausible.

*My boyfriend, he ummm, has had probably a rough past, you could say. He didn't have a very good childhood. Like, his dad like, you know, used to like, ahh, get like, he was an alcoholic and bashed him up a bit and stuff. And he was just treated unfairly amongst, like, the other siblings in his family. And stuff like, they were all favourites and he wasn't. And um, he's kind of following in his dad's footsteps. I believe anyway, because his dad's an absolute arsehole. And um, I believe that M, that's the boyfriend, is exactly the same ... They are exactly the same, as much as he hates to admit it, him and his dad*

*are exactly the same. And he's like my dad. My dad was the same, when he was younger, as well. It's just, I don't know, that trait that our family's just seemed to follow. I guess it's like, I don't think I am destined for anything greater ... (Beryl, 21)*

In this passage, the participant appeared to hold the belief that the partner's abusive behaviour resulted from both childhood adversity he had experienced and an inherited disposition. Beryl reported the same issues arising within her own family which for her appeared to further reinforce the biological impact and uncontrollability of the DA in their lives. Past abuse inflicted on the partner during childhood was presented as a justified excuse for his current behaviour. Also the learning or genetic influence from the partner's father's behaviour was presented as an uncontrollable influence on the abuse displayed by her partner. That he is genetically predisposed to behave abusively, therefore to be expected and normal under the circumstances. The expectation of abuse was reinforced in this narrative with the report of her father being the same and that their destiny was to face DA, further reinforcing the uncontrollable aspect of the partner's abusive behaviour. During this narrative there appeared to be a resignation that the partner will not change. However, in later discussion Beryl expressed a need for the partner to change his behaviour and remove the abuse from their relationship if she was going to stay. Beryl's hope of change reportedly comes from her experience early in the relationship where she stated that the partner was, loving and caring. Also, where her father who was abusive toward her mother is no longer abusive, noted in her comment "*when he was younger.*" Therefore, although Beryl was attempting to allay any dissonance experienced from the abuse in calling upon past abuse and genetic explanations for its occurrence, there was an underlying belief that the partner did have control over his behaviour and this appeared to provide Beryl with hope for a future without DA.

For women in this study, exposure to childhood adversity appeared to take away the blame from the partner and from self, and allowed the participants to see their partner not as a bad person but as a victim of

circumstance. Where a bad event occurred to an innocent child who had no control over their environment and was therefore not to blame for the result, which is their current abusive behaviour. The view that upbringing has 'caused' the current behaviour enabled women to find some meaning in the DA, and when this meaning had been experienced by them and was a socially acceptable reason, it appeared to fit with women's worldview and thereby allay some of the distress experienced because of the DA.

**I am the result of my family background.**

Reports from women of exposure to abuse in their childhood provided further meaning for their experience of DA. As mentioned above by Beryl, her exposure to abuse when younger elicits thoughts that this was her "destiny" and perhaps she needs to expect nothing better. Thoughts of being a destined situation were likely to answer the 'why me?' question. This form of meaning-making allowed women to find comprehension in the belief that past exposure to abuse had led them to see this as normal, or to not know of any other way. When women discussed their own childhood adversity as the reason behind why the abuse was occurring in their present lives, this current abuse was often expressed as *fait compli*. They described instances where family had inflicted abuse and saw their reactions to past abuse as continuing to be acted out in present day situations.

*I know I can never settle the, the, childhood. The alcohol, the violence, but every so often it will just come up and go hello. Yeah ... nasty horrible (Dianne, 56)*

Women who explained the abuse as a result of their own childhood adversity appeared to accept the abuse as inevitable. They expressed views such as:

*Maybe that's the attraction Maxine. Maybe that's all I could cope with. All that's led me to the choices I have made (Lesley, 44)*

Although many women suggested that their own exposure to past abuse may be a precursor to them living with abuse, there was no indication that they

were accepting of the behaviour and instead they continued to make attempts to alleviate or remove the abusive behaviour. Many women who experienced past abuse before the current relationship had been successful in seeking help to manage the abuse they faced, and recognised that they had the ability to change their own behaviours. When change in them was present, women often expressed an expectation that the partner also had this ability. Eve describes how she entered the relationship as an abused person and held beliefs that she was somewhat deserving of the treatment. However, there was evidence in her narrative that she has identified the impact of the abuse and is no longer accepting this as *fait compli*.

*I had issues with um body dysmorphia from my childhood. Because I was told all the time I was fat and ugly. And I was told I was stupid. I was told literally all the time that I was nasty and horrible. And that nobody would ever be able to live with me, that, I'd have to have a career, because nobody would want to marry me, and all that sort of stuff. So that would ring in my ears, and when he would say "well you're this and you're that." And the biggest compliment he ever gave me, even on my wedding day, and I look at the pictures now, and I looked beautiful. I didn't know, I still thought I was fat. And, and, was other people said "oh you look beautiful" I didn't believe it. His best compliment to me ever, is "oh you look really smart." And I'm like, not what I was going for. But that's, he can, he's very quick to say things about, you know, negative things. But not anything like that. So I would take that personally, and I would take it on board. And it was, it would be when he would, turned it back on me. I owned that. And I got depressed. And I got miserable. And I didn't feel like I had a right to. And I knew nobody else was going to have me (Eve, 44)*

Although Eve was expressing an initial expectation to be treated in an abusive manner, she indicated an awareness of her psychological state at that time which was evident in the terminology "*I would*" indicating past tense of her expectations. Eve presently identified the compliments that she did receive on the day of the wedding noting that she was attending only to the criticism. This was likely because this description at the time, was a better match with her schema of self. She expressed growth within herself when stating that she was

“beautiful” and appeared now able to appreciate the compliments and take these as correct without dismissing them. In these examples Eve had attributed the events of DA to an injustice and the literature indicates that attributions of this type are more likely to lead to feelings of control, and an initiated action to change the situation with a lack of acceptance of the behaviour (Park & Folkman, 1997).

Many of the women’s cognitions relating to the reasons for the abuse presented as powerful messages and offered a meaning making option that matched their current worldview of the world being a dangerous place. Although danger is not viewed as a positive state, for women who have experienced childhood adversity, it may present as normal. As Anne suggested “*normality in the chaos.*” Where the familiar, although somewhat fear provoking, was understood and something they had been able to cope with in their past. This appeared to bring back a feeling of comprehension of why this was occurring in their lives.

*Took me back, probably subconsciously, at the time to where I was as a child, with violence (Lesley, 44)*

The impact of past abuse on their current situation was further reinforced by women’s children entering into abusive relationships. Women reported that their children who had lived with the DA were estranged from the father, and themselves had difficulties with DA in their own relationships. These incidents reinforced women’s ideas that exposure to abuse as a child increased the likelihood of exposure in an adult relationship.

*These two daughters, both of them went into relationships that they’ve ended up as disasters. C, the guy she (Anne and partner’s daughter) was engaged to for some time before, he nearly killed her. Belted her, he used to belt her every day, and strangled her, and all of this. And see, those girls have not got a good relationship with their father. So there is, definitely has an impact, I think (Anne, 64)*

Women viewed the violence they had experienced as children resulting in them entering a violent relationship, and the same situation occurring for their

children. For many this reinforced their belief in the impact of childhood experience and that there was little control over the circumstances they were now encountering. Women who had younger children expressed similar views where they expressed concerns of the impact of the children's view of them if they continued to expose them to the violence. Their thinking for the future in halting the generational aspect of abusive behaviour was evident. In the following passage awareness of the negative impact on children was expressed in concern about the future relationship she will have with her children.

*I don't really want the relationship to continue the way that it is. Um, because it affects the kids, not only me, but it affects the kids more so. And knowing the way that he is, and my cousin, and different people that have had abusive parents, um, really resent their parents when they get older. And also resent their mothers for allowing them to be exposed to that kind of behaviour (Irene, 27)*

There was a difference in reports regarding the impact of DA on the children, where Anne appeared to see the result of exposure to DA as less controllable where her two daughters had become involved in substance abuse and violent relationships because of a genetic predisposition. Whereas other women, such as Irene, described ways to alleviate the pattern of abuse by removing the children or stopping the DA in their lives, thereby stopping the abusive pattern in the family. The reactions resulting from the differing views were that Anne resigned herself to managing an uncontrollable situation as best she could. Whereas Irene was more demanding of change from the partner and herself to alter inappropriate behaviour, or remove herself and her children from the situation. Both actions that of instigating change within the relationship and of leaving were her attempt to improve the living situation for the family. However, despite the different views relating to the causal factors and impact of DA in their lives, either outlook appeared to provide some protection to women's negative affect when exposed to DA.

Women are attempting to form an acceptable worldview through a cognitive organisation process that involved making links with alcohol use and

past abuse in the partner and their own lives, and the current events of DA. This organisation process, through linking, provided a logical explanation for the DA and although not a pleasant outcome it appeared reasonable and socially acceptable. Therefore, it was possible to incorporate into their current worldview resulting in an alleviation or minimisation of their distress. This form of meaning making has been referred to in the literature as ‘palliative’ (Travis Proulx & Inzlicht, 2012) meaning making, because although the negative emotions evoked because of feelings of meaninglessness had been allayed, the violations of meaning regarding a healthy relationship had not been resolved.

The degree of incongruence between the life event and the meaning held regarding that event will impact the distress experienced for individuals (Davis, 2002). Women who had faced abuse in their past or during childhood may have found the current DA less stressful, as there may have been an expectation that this was typical of the world. However, women who had not experienced abuse in the past may have found adjustment to DA more difficult. Women who had not faced adversity in their childhood met the initial experience of DA with disbelief.

*I had a very good relationship with my dad. And then to hear these terrible things, you know. Um, you know I remember, um, saying to him that perhaps we shouldn't be together, and all this. He said, you know things like, I can remember it so many years ago. Um he said "well who do you think is going to look at you." (Jane, 69)*

However, women who had not faced abuse during their childhood continued to draw on socially acceptable explanations of the partner's past impacting his current behaviour, evident in the following passage, again by Jane.

*You know all I can say is, he is a good person. He wouldn't do anybody any harm [this was after Jane had described being given a 'clout or two at different times'], you know. It's just, I think, the way his family life. There wasn't much you know. Um, there were 8 kids. Um, I think, um, during the war years, he was born in 35, so it was war years. There were 4 kids. And the father went away. And it was the best time in his life, he said. And then the end of the war came.*

*And then there were another 4 kids. And I think those 4 kids suffered worse than these 4 kids, you know (Jane, 69)*

Here Jane consoled herself with the thoughts that the partner she lives with was not a bad person, he was good inside but he was a victim of past circumstance. This was expressed by a number of women who identified the partner as good beneath the abusive behaviour.

*Cos I think, well he's not a bad person. He doesn't need to be this way. It's because I can see the path where he's come from. And how he's gotten to where he is. Um, and I think well, he deserves to be happy too, you know (Irene, 27)*

Women changed perspective of the reasoning for the partner's behaviour, from assigning cause of past abuse or alcohol, to many beginning to question this reasoning, and identifying the partner's predisposition to abusive or threatening behaviour, with the expectation that he was responsible and needed to stop. Women who were not expecting the partner's behaviour to change had reconciled self to the worldview they had formed as children; that the world is a dangerous place and they needed to do whatever they could to protect themselves despite these circumstances. Those holding this worldview were likely to seek help from service providers who reinforced their worldview. Through help seeking and reinforcement, their meaning making did provide psychological benefit, because they were able to find connections between events in their lives and answer the questions of why this was occurring and why to me? The abuse was consistent with their worldview of abuse being somewhat normal and expected because of their past exposure to childhood abuse, and the impact of alcohol exacerbating the situation. This is supported by literature that suggests that when individuals feel that they understand their situation and events in their world, they perceive a sense of control over their environment which has been related to a more positive psychological outcome (Travis Proulx & Inzlicht, 2012).

## **When Reasoning and Meaning Making Falters**

### **Expectation for change.**

While women expressed an acceptance of the inevitability of the partner's current abusive behaviour, because of his past experience and his alcohol use, and expressed hope that he would change, many women were beginning to question the current state of their relationship. The justification for the partner's abusive behaviour was beginning to falter, and an expectation that he needed to begin to take responsibility for his actions was expressed.

*I'm starting to get to a point where, I've gone "I don't care anymore. If you. What happened to you as a child, I don't care." You know. The excuses, I'm getting a bit tired of all the excuses. (Irene, 27)*

*But you know what, it's not my problem. That's for him to sort out now. I can't be his therapist (Lesley, 44)*

Women who had found the ability to recognise the impact of the past on their own behaviour, and had been able to grow and move forward despite these barriers, were more likely to express an expectation for change in the partner. Also, women who reported similar behaviour in family members who had been able to change and remove abuse from their relationships, where holding hope that the partner was able to change and abuse would stop. Therefore, although women in this study were able to use the past experiences as a means of making meaning of their own and the partner's behaviour, they were no longer willing to use this as an excuse for the abuse to which they were being exposed. The lack of acceptance often arose when women began to identify that the partner had been or currently showed abusive behaviour despite his alcohol use, or that he had exhibited controlling behaviour at an earlier stage of the relationship.

### **It is not always alcohol induced.**

The lack of expectation by women on the partner to change maybe because women had not been able to resolve the impact of their own past abuse, therefore, they did not see this as a possibility for the partner. Although many had accessed services for support and had discussed growth within the self

to cope with the abuse, there continued to be resistance to discuss their childhood exposure to abuse stating “it does not do me any good” (Anne). Also, lack of hope for change may have related to the acknowledgement that partners had exhibited abusive characteristics prior to their alcohol use.

*Well, he didn't even drink. He never, cos, we were very young, we were only teenagers when we met. Met through a, um, sporting club. We both loved tennis, played a lot of tennis, and um, yeah. So he was obviously very different to what he is now. I think that, that, quick temper was always there. And um, yeah his control has always made me feel inadequate (Anne, 64)*

There appeared to be a realisation that the alcohol may fuel the abusive behaviour, but there was evidence of the abuse prior to his use of substances. Other women identified that the alcohol use has subsided without the same occurring for the abusive behaviour.

*When we first started going out, and stuff, together, it was we had lots of fun. You know, drinking together. And there was not a lot of jealousy issues, or anything like that. We were very much just, you know, two young teenagers enjoying each another's company. Drinking and partying together (Irene, 27)*

There appears to be a difference with these two narratives where the older woman was resigned to the abusive behaviour, because this was how the partner behaved prior to his alcohol use. This was likely to reinforce her beliefs in the biological factors influencing the situation. Whereas the younger woman was identifying that she had changed and had the ability to move her life forward, and was therefore bringing this expectation onto her partner. There was an element of hope in change for the better. There was also the expression from the older participant of the impact on self for her in feeling inadequate which she had linked back to her childhood experiences.

*I get, I can get quite knotted in the stomach. Feeling of fear, of that, of his reaction to a situation that I know is going to incorporate me. And when he chastises me, which is what he did, it makes me, takes me back to this (hand action to indicate small child). I feel like I'm about 5 years of age. And um, cos that's the way he's speaking to me.*

*Like I'm a child, "don't you, don't, don't, don't," that, sort of finger shaking type situation. Where, yeah, it ah, it's belittling. So yes, I get feelings of fear. I live with a lot of fear. Because not only fear of his raging, but fear of everything where he's concerned. If I ever have to ask him about things, it might be something that's not that major, but I'm fearful. Because, so fearful of his reaction. And whether that relates, I, it probably has got a lot to do with my childhood. Because, in the home, there was mum and dad, you know, with their, they both drank. My father was, what I would say, was an alcoholic. But I think my mother probably was pretty close too. And they'd drink, and they'd fight, and they'd slap, and they'd hit, and, and, I used to oh, I hated it. I just cringed every time that happened. And that got worse as I got older. And um, then of course, you know, all that sexual abuse started as well. So, that, that, sort of all that fear probably is still entrenched in me. (Anne, 64)*

With terms used in this passage such as '*entrenched in me*' there was the indication that Anne was unable to see the ability for herself to change, although previously reporting changes that she had made in her attempts to cope. This lack of self-efficacy in change related to the biological aspects reinforced her worldview of why this was occurring. For Anne, and other women who were not prepared to discuss their childhood issues "*for me I the past is past and I don't try to go back there too often. Because I don't think it does me any good*" (Anne) it was more difficult to see changes possible in the partner. Whereas for women who were able to work on their past issues and resolve distress within themselves "*you know I've done all this work for years*" (Eve) there appeared to be an expectation that the partner needed to take responsibility and manage his own behaviour. That the reasons behind his behaviour were valid, but the management of the results of this were possible, because the women themselves were proof of this. This was an area where women often identified as stronger than their partners' because of work they had been doing to improve themselves.

### **Negative Comparison is Made with Others: Hope Fades**

Women often expressed regret that their lives with the partner had not been happy. They sometimes compared themselves with others who were in

happy marriages and suggested that they felt envious or sad that they did not also have the happy relationship.

*I'd say their marriage was still very solid. And um, and I, I, really envy that. I think orr, "is it that much to ask?" That's really what I would have liked to have had, just a really happy marriage. Cos, this sister of mine, that's really close to me, she's got the most amazing marriage. They've been married over 50 years. But that's them, and this is me. So, it doesn't really help me that much to compare, too much. (Anne, 64)*

*I didn't expect to live sadly ever after (Carol, 62)*

*He does say he loves me. But what that means, I have no idea, from his perspective. It's not what I envisage (Lesley, 44)*

Meaning making attempts were not always successful. Women asked many questions in attempts to clarify their attempts to make sense of the situation. They would not only ask for clarification but sought information and comparison with other women in the same circumstance. There appeared to be an attempt at a collaborative feeling that I am not alone, therefore it makes more sense because it happens to others.

*She said we have other people like you here. And we have group counselling. Would you like to meet about a dozen other people? I said "yes," cos I think I'm nuts, and there's no one like me. (Carol, 62)*

Some individuals' temper their global views to fit the situation, expression such as sadder but wiser are examples of this, their positive view of the world has mellowed (Park & Folkman, 1997). These views of having gained wisdom matches the ideas of defence mechanisms within grief (McWilliams, 2011), where although women were grieving over a life lost, they were able to provide a defence that they had experienced growth from the bad experiences and the adversity.

## **Summary**

Women in this study initially assigned the cause for the abuse to the partner's substance abuse and exposure to childhood abuse. Meaning making by

looking for reasons for the abuse outside the partner's personality appeared to provide women with a satisfactory explanation and alleviated some of the cognitive disequilibrium faced when being abused. Through meaning making mechanism of coping, women were able to maintain their own values and beliefs about the inappropriateness of the behaviour, while explaining why it was happening, in an acceptable way that provided reasoning and a degree of empathy for the partner.

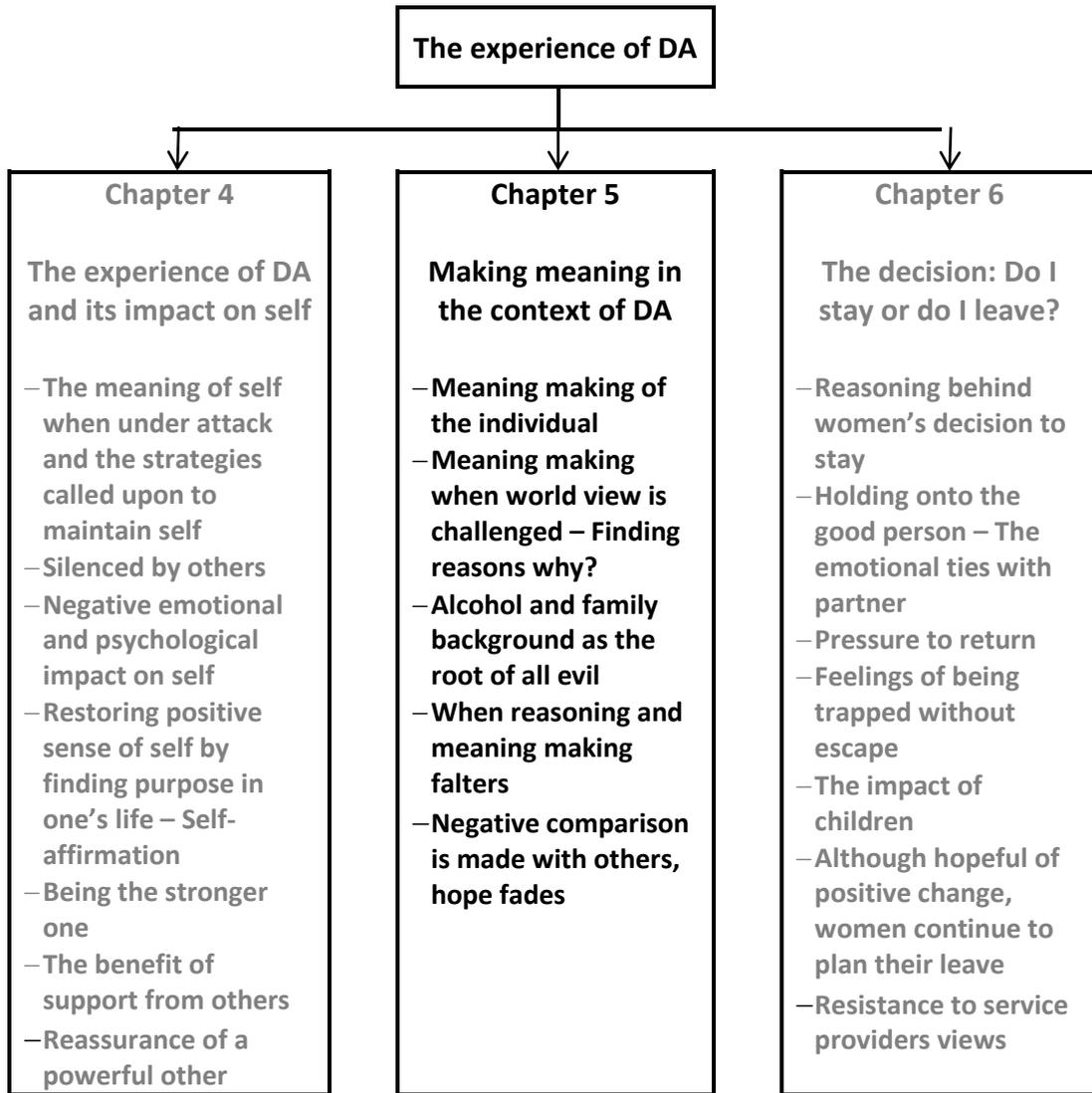


Figure 3. Heading indicating the superordinate theme for each analysis chapter followed by the associated emergent themes with, 'Making meaning in the context of DA' chapter emphasised

## Chapter 6

### The Decision: Do I Stay or Do I Leave

In this chapter, I will discuss the participants' narrative around the reasons they continue to remain in the relationship. First, I will report on women's differing thoughts in regard to their decisions to stay, which ranged from ambivalence, acceptance, and strategic planning to leave. Women expressed feelings of being trapped through circumstance such as family pressure, impact on and protection of children, and financial control by the partner. Then, I will discuss the impact of service providers, and friends and family within this decision making process, where pressure was placed on women to leave and on one occasion to return to the partner. Also, the difficulties many women experienced when accessing service providers who were not supportive of their decision to stay, which often led to women not returning to service providers when they were in need to further support.

#### Reasons Behind Women's Decision to Stay

Women expressed emotional struggles when making decisions relating to leaving or staying, describing commitment to the relationship, and the positive attributes of the partner, as strong influences upon their current behaviour. They reminded themselves of the good times and expressed hope for a better future. Throughout women's narrative, of positive recall of the partner's good behaviours, there appeared to be a need by women in this study to convince themselves of their reasons for staying. This was evident in an unprompted description by Irene where she appeared to be attempting to explain to the interviewer and to herself her decision to stay.

*I don't know. It's really hard to explain. I don't understand quite why I stay either. I think that, when things are going well, um. And, ideally I was brought up with the image of the husband, the wife, the kids, and that's how things go. So, he's the only person that I've ever had a sexual relationship. Well, but, I don't know. I suppose we see the good*

*in them. When it is good, you know. That's, we love that good person.  
(Irene, 27)*

Although, there was no discussion relating to leaving from me as the interviewer, Irene, as did other participants, appeared compelled to explain her reasoning for staying. It is likely that the compulsion to explain their behaviour in relation to their choice to stay with the abusive partner was instigated by past discussion with others (family, friends, or service providers) who have presented the accepted social view, that leaving is the appropriate behaviour when facing abuse. In this passage Irene appeared to be having some difficulty reconciling the socially accepted view of a typical family, and the reality of her current situation of abuse by her partner. That, her current situation did not fit with the happy family scenario appeared to be leading to some cognitive dissonance, evident in her comments, *"I don't understand quite why I stay either."* The previous comment and *"I don't know"* would infer that Irene had difficulty accepting her own explanations for staying, because even though this was her preferred behaviour, it was against the socially acceptable narrative for women facing DA.

Irene described her partner as a good person and the good person was the one she loved. Literature supports the explanation of love in staying with the abusive partner (Patton, 2003; Simpson, 2003), because expressions of love as the reason to stay can be more empowering for the person than staying because of fear. Irene, as with other women in this study, expressed a degree of distress at not only leaving an abusive man, but also leaving the good person within the partner. Leaving the partner when he was viewed as a good person, presented as a difficult decision for many women to reconcile, as they appeared to feel that they were inappropriately punishing the partner, *"you can't walk away from somebody who can't help themselves"* (Dianne). There appeared to be a challenge to their sense of fairness and the carer in them, where they were attempting to protect the partner from hurt. This was particularly evident in mothers of the group. It also appeared evident that Irene experienced a sense of security in being with a partner who knows her well, describing the intimacy they

share of having their first sexual relations together, and having had no other partners. The issue of her only sexual experience appeared to create a bond for Irene that made separation difficult. Irene earlier expressed concerns that the relationship was impacting negatively on her wellbeing. She may therefore, also be experiencing a lack of confidence in her current appearance and ability to attract another mate. Further evidence that Irene's prompting to explain her reasons for staying were likely instigated by pressure received from friends and family who actively encouraged her to leave is in the following passage.

*I kind of go, "ah Mum," you know, "please don't even start." Um, "I've heard it all before. I know what you're going to say. I know what I need to do. So, I know right from wrong. And I know that it's, that I'm in a bad situation" (Irene, 27)*

However, it was evident that Irene was fighting the social narrative and staying despite others views. It appeared that she was experiencing the views of others as judgemental by the terminology in the above passage of "*right from wrong,*" indicating that she feels that others see her actions as inappropriate and 'bad.' The reporting from Irene of being 'right or wrong' is a representation of the socially acceptable behaviour which is to leave. Literature supports participants' feelings of obligation to explain their reasoning for staying being driven by the social expectation for women facing DA to leave (McDonough, 2010).

Younger participants were more likely to express hope that the abuse would stop, suggesting that if they stay with the partner long enough their life would be abuse free. This hope for change evolved from examples of family members who had been exposed to abuse that had stopped.

*Strangely enough, this same thing happened with my Mum and Dad. Um, and the same thing happened with his Mum and Dad. And his Mother gives me the advice, "just don't worry about it. Just shut up. Just don't listen to him." So, you know, her whole life she was ignoring her husband, M's dad. You know. Um, and you know, now they've got 3 kids, and blah, blah, blah. And he treats her great, you know. Actually cares about her. Um, and the same thing is with my*

*Dad. He treated my Mum like crap. And, um, you know. But as time goes on, you know, he cares about Mum now. And, you know, does what she says. The advice M's Mum has given me is "they mellow out with age." So she just reckons, soon enough, you know, if you stick with him long enough, he's just gonna, you know, stop criticising you. And all that stuff (Beryl, 21)*

*My Grandfather used to belt my Nanna. Um, and she stayed with him. And he's stopped belting her. So, I always used to look at them as a bit of a, um, well if he can do it, you know ... So I used to look at them, and because Grandad was a police officer, um, and Nanna used to work, and she had the kids and stuff. So I was, you know, um, same sort of situation (Irene, 27)*

These examples presented strong motivational experiences for women that encouraged them to hold hope of positive change, where if they were patient the "bad" person would leave the relationship, and the family unit would be retained. Hope of positive behaviour change from the partner, and their belief that leaving was punishing him for things outside his control, presented a powerful influence for many participants in their decision to stay. In Dianne's example, she was also holding hope of change because of her belief that the positive feelings from the partner were present, stating "it's, it's still there" and she was willing to fight for the relationship "I'm not going to get out of this relationship, I'll fight."

Where women were not able to see change in the partner, and did not hold hope for future change, there were descriptions of strategic action in remaining. However, women expressed frustration when their decision to stay was questioned by others, as they saw their decision making as purposeful.

*There are reasons why I stay. And they are valid reasons. They're not, they're not excuses. I'm making the strategic decisions in staying here. And in doing what I'm doing. I'm not lying down under him. And I'm not being a victim anymore. And I'm, you know. There are, there are times when it's not just a case of, there's only one answer. And I'm. Partly the reason for saying this, and doing this (Eve was referring to the interview for my study in this sentence), is because I'm tired of reading things, and hearing things, and being told things ... If I can stand up against him. If I can do that, if I can build my own*

*life with him there, with him doing that, that's powerful, given me the strength to, now I can do it anywhere. (Eve, 44)*

Eve's narrative indicated that she had received negative reactions to her decision to stay, and she felt frustration at not being understood, and that her opinions and decisions were not being valued and respected. To Eve, her decision was a sign of strength where she saw herself as having the ability to bear the abuse while achieving personal growth. This was described by Eve as a "strategic decision," as she appeared to be testing her abilities and strength, and planning for a better relationship in the future. Although other women did not express questioning of their decision to stay by others, there was an indication that they felt the need to justify their action in staying. Dianne stated "I suggested to my mother to leave, I was very young and did not understand." This would indicate that she felt that others, who were encouraging her to leave did not have the maturity to understand the situation, the reasoning, or the positives, and that it was more complicated than others envisage. There was an inference here that one needs to experience the abuse to understand the decision making process behind staying or leaving.

### **Holding on to the Good Person - The Emotional Ties with Partner**

Many women expressed concern in leaving the good person within their partner. They appeared to feel guilt and a form of deserting the person they love and care for, and this presented as a punishment of the person they love and who is good.

*I feel really sorry for him. Especially, I look at my son and think they're so much the same. He's (referring to the son) very sensitive and very emotional, and lots of the time just needs a cuddle .... The fact that, that good person you love also can flip to be this bad person. And you just think, "Just go away. You're not the person I want to talk to. Where's the good one." Um, so sort of, um yeah, trying to leave someone when you don't believe that they're a bad person is kind of hard. Like cos, I think "Well he's not a bad person. He doesn't need to be this way." It's because I can see the path where he's come from, and how he's gotten to where he is. Um, and I think well he deserves to be happy too, you know? (Irene, 27)*

In this passage Irene emphasised the good in the partner. The comparison with her son indicated that she felt protective toward the partner and there may have also been an obligatory feeling that she cannot abandon him when it is not his fault. Irene also indicated the love she continued to have for the partner stating that others do not understand, defending him when she felt others were critical. Many women expressed contradictory experiences with the partner however continued to identify the good.

*You don't really know if they love you or not. Because you don't know how anyone, I mean, he can be so nice. Then he can be so mean. I mean he's not a bad person, you know. But haha, it's hard, it's hard (Robyn, 21)*

Reporting of the good within the partner was a fight against the current social narrative that abusive partners are bad. Women were not accepting of this narrative holding the belief that the partner they live with has goodness, and this was why they remain and the good person is the reason they continue to feel love. These emotional responses were an indication of the caring women role that many of the women expressed, a role experienced as pride in her actions; *"so I'm just the kind of person that wants to, you know, give everything to them, because I love them"* (Beryl). Many women expressed continued love for the partner indicating that although they experienced abuse they were reluctant to leave because of the emotional ties.

*I love him. I would give him a whole lot more love if I could ... I believe that he really does love me (Gail, 50)*

*Because I know he loves me. He still does. He may not like me, but that's fine, not all the time (Dianne, 56)*

Feelings of love appeared to be a strong force for women, particularly if they held the belief in the partner's reciprocity of love. The literature has suggested that emotional attachment is often a more justifiable reason for women to stay as it is presented as their choice, not a forced behaviour (Anderson & Saunders, 2003). Under these conditions women were likely to gain a feeling of control that they had some choice in their staying with the partner.

Research has also indicated that the emotional barriers are strongest when making decisions to leave (McDonough, 2010). This was evident in the reporting by women in this study where issues of emotional obligation to the partner, attachment to the partner or the relationship and the family model, were reported when discussing leaving or staying.

### **Pressure to Return**

Women often find themselves in the paradoxical situation of being pressured to not only take responsibility for the success of the relationship, but are also faced with criticism if they stay with an abusive partner (Enander, 2010). In this study there were women who had left the relationship previously, but experienced financial difficulties forcing them back to the partner. Therefore, their decision to stay was an acceptance that the abuse would not stop, but they were willing to endure and manage the abuse to avoid the financial hardship that leaving may cause.

*I have left once, about 8 years ago. I left for 6 months. And he paid me spousal maintenance. He paid that, and at the end of 6 months he managed to persuade his lawyer that he wasn't able to do that anymore. So, it was going to have to go back to court. And he came to me and asked me if I'd be willing to have another go at the marriage, and I did. Thought, "Oh I'll have another, maybe me having been gone 6 months might help." But it didn't. It was OK for maybe a week. And then it all started again. There are many times when I think, "I can't live like this anymore. I can't stand it. I have to do something." And then I go through the whole process of what's out there? How am I going to get out there? Rent, this, that, it's all so expensive. And of course I don't work in a full time job. So financially, that's, that's, probably the one reason that I stay there, is financial security ... It is a big thing at my age particular, and I'm not, I have not got skills (Anne, 64)*

Anne discussed the issues of financial hardship describing that although she was separated from the abuse she continued to rely on the partner for financial assistance. It was indicated that even when separated she continued to experience controlling behaviour from the partner, as she was relying on him to pay her maintenance. In this passage Anne described the partner's persuasive

manner in getting her to return, and her hope of change being dashed when he returned to his abusive behaviour. A situation which was also typical for other participants *“he only manages to hold out that for about 2 months, it’s never been any longer than that” (Irene)*. Anne experienced difficulties relating to her age, where there were fewer services available for her, and she felt more secure within the relationship than attempting to cope alone. Because of Anne’s reliance on her partner for financial aid when she was separated from him and her lack of confidence in her ability to secure employment in the future, she foresaw financial hardship for herself if she left. It would appear that Anne’s experience of financial controlling is present whether she was residing with her partner or separated. Therefore, her deduction was that it would be easier to stay in the home. These issues were likely to impact on her future motivation to leave and ‘struggle’ financially on her own. There was also the probability that if Anne leaves, her partner will again attempt to persuade her to return. Literature supports the difficulties women face when leaving the partner in finding adequate and affordable housing and ongoing financial support (Tutty et al., 2013). Anne appeared to console herself to staying when she reported that although he continues to be abusive, she was confident that he will not become physically violent.

Older women were restricted by feelings that they lack skills, the ability to learn new skills, and were competing for jobs with younger employees, whereas younger women found it difficult to maintain their financial security if they had young children, which inhibited their ability to find full time employment. Even if women did secure work it was often of a less status and did not provide adequate income to support self and children. Other women who successfully removed self from the relationship were persuaded to return by family.

*My son said “you know Mum, how can you do this to Dad? He’s old. He’s never had to look after himself.” Um “why don’t?” You know, “how can you just do it?” (Jane, 69)*

In this passage Jane appeared to have placed family ahead of her own needs in returning to the partner. The social narrative of women being the carers was presented to Jane by her son and she felt the need to conform to satisfy the family unit's needs. Jane also appeared to have consoled her return by suggesting that the partner was not a bad person, as reported in her earlier narrative. This was likely to have aided her decision to return to a partner who was not bad but a victim of his circumstance. Other women reported that they did not necessarily experience direct pressure from family to stay, they experienced the opposite, but there was an underlying pressure to be the wife and mother within the family, which was described by many as a motivating factor to remain or return to the partner.

Women indicated growth in self after they had left the relationship and returned. Mature women who had left and returned to the partner indicated a feeling of resignation that they would not leave a second time. However, there appeared to be a feeling of more control over the situation, which may be because it was their decision to return. The impact of being their own decision may have provided women with feelings of control, if not over the partner over their own behaviour. There was also an impression that they felt they were able to better manage their feelings when exposed to the DA. They had an acceptance that the partner did not present as caring, however presented a resilient attitude where the partners feeling toward them did not have the negative emotional impact it had prior to them leaving, and this acceptance appeared to protect their emotional wellbeing. Women presented with courage, resilience, and determination within self after they had been away and returned, and appeared to experience greater agency and control of their life, which lead to more positive emotional and psychological health.

### **Feelings of Being Trapped Without Escape**

Results of women who leave an abusive relationship, reported in reviews (Rhatigan, Street, & Axsom, 2006), indicated that women who had financial

independence or were able to support themselves and earn an independent living, were more likely to leave the abusive relationship. This did not appear to be the situation for women interviewed in my study. Many women who were able to financially support self were attempting to stay with the partner. There were mixed reasons for this decision. Some women felt trapped in the relationship because of joint commitments with the partner. Although they were able to support themselves financially they were likely to lose a considerable amount of money if they left. Women in these circumstances expressed resistance to lose what they referred to as their 'hard earned money and assets.' They had often needed to rebuild their financial security in the past and were not prepared to place themselves back at the beginning and start over again. Mary expressed her concerns at the control the partner has taken over her assets and finances, which has led to her feeling trapped in the relationship.

*I was working full time at that stage, as well, when he came into the relationship. Um, and everything was kept separate in the beginning. He had his account. I had mine. He had his money. I had mine etc. And then after slowly, he began to say. "Look, you know this is ridiculous we might as well pool." But I ended up having to pool my money into his accounts. It wasn't that we opened a new account together.....So at first I thought ok fine.... I am comfortable (referring to her financial status). But he slowly has just taken that away.... He said to me he said "I'm not leaving this house if anybody leaves it will be you." You know, and like I said, he's already gone and put a caveat on the house ... which is my house. And he feels that if anything went wrong, he wants everything ... So I've sort of made the decision now, that ok, I'm going to stay in this relationship no matter what. (Mary, 61)*

In this passage Mary described how her initial trust in the partner to manage their finances has changed to concern that she will lose her home. Mary experienced feelings of being manipulated by the partner, and although a good income earner she did not wish to have to start rebuilding her financial security. Women's feeling of being trapped resulted from their generosity with their investments and finances. They reported that they could leave however, were not willing to give their monies to the partner when they believed that this was

their hard earned income. They held concerns that it would impact negatively on their future financial security. Women also expressed concern for the financial impact on children who they had planned on leaving an inheritance. The issues of attempting to maintain their current financial status of which they had acquired themselves, the women needed to sacrifice a life free of abuse and remain with the partner.

Other women were at the beginning of their financial security building, but were attempting to seek financial security for the family and include the partner. They were often inhibited by the partner's actions of demanding money for his own needs, but continued to express the motivation to include him in the family unit and seek a future that included the partner.

*Sometimes, I give him money, or buy him things, to avoid arguments. When you know that it's just going to be another argument. And it does get me in, like financial. All the convenient living, um, you know. Like you're always running around doing, you're doing every think. And then he needs a coke for work, or a red bull, or something, so you stop at the petrol station, and then he wants a pie for his breakfast. So then, before you know, it, it's, cost you \$30, um and, \$50 if he wants a phone credit, because he needs to be able to ring, or whatever. So often I'll grind my teeth thinking, "I shouldn't really be spending this money on this because I should be spending it on that." And I wouldn't, if he wasn't around. But I know that he's starting to say something, blah, blah, blah (Irene, 27)*

Many of the more mature participants expressed feelings that they did not have the opportunity to earn their own financial independence because of the controlling behaviour of the partner. Other mature women described instances where they were the income earners. However, there appeared to be a lack of their own acknowledgement of their ability to live independently. This may be generational where women rarely lived alone and secured their independent financial future, therefore they may have contributed all of their income to the care of the family and sacrificed their own independence.

*He didn't look for work. I was the one who found a job. And worked at another big store (Carol, 62)*

Other women presented as more bitter about being financially trapped by the partner because of his threats to take their finances “*threatens he’ll take me to the cleaners*” (Olga) stating that this is the only reason that they remain in the relationship “*there’s no other reason I’ve got to stay in there*” (Olga).

*And what he would do then. He knew I was financially, ah not financially independent, because when my husband and I separated we didn’t have a house. The bank almost foreclosed on the house. And I had to get a loan from, because the previous husband had used all the equity on a business. So I had to, the bank were going to foreclose on it. And all the times, if I ever thought to myself that I’d get a bit brave, and change this relationship, I was reminded that I had nowhere to go. I had no money, and ah, “who do I think I am.” And, “oh so you just use me to get,” where? I don’t know, get anywhere, cos I hadn’t got anywhere. Haha. So all this sort of thing was at the back of my mind, and because my kids were so young, all I thought about was security and stability for them. I did not want to do anything to upset them again. They’d already gone through a separation with Mum and Dad. And ah, I certainly didn’t want to do anything to upset the stability. And that’s why I sort of just hung in there. But wasn’t happy, started to not be happy. (Olga, 54)*

In this passage Olga explained that although she had been building her security and working full time she was under a degree of financial pressure. In the past, because her partner had helped pay her mortgage for a short period he had started to threaten to take her home from her. Olga’s decision to stay was for the security of her children as she felt limited in her options. She however, appeared to express regrets at her decision, which although well intentioned at the time was in retrospect not in her or her sons best interest. This was indicated in later passages where she reported that the financial threats have increased, and now regrets her trust in the partner and her attempts to build a secure and trusting relationship.

*I’m sorting things out. I won’t last long in this. I’m prepared now, I think, I’m prepared now to lose out. To have my freedom back, and to be out early, get on. I think I’m prepared to lose out financially. I think. I don’t know. Some people say, ah friends will say, you know, “why don’t you just, just go. Freedom and happiness is worth more than money.” I feel like saying, “Yeah great, I’ve worked hard, full time for*

*30 old years." I've never been a stay at home mum, never, bloody been on the dole. What just walk away, and give it to someone like that. Why should I see you get like that? You think "why should you? For them to just gamble it away." ... He goes, "oh well I'm enjoying myself all right. And I intend to enjoy myself. And that's what I'm doing." So, what he's saying is, he is enjoying his life, and he is, he is, he's not letting me restrict him. He's not stopping, using all his pay on betting on the horses... He can't save any money, all the money's down the drain... All the moneys gone on gambling ... Yep, he hasn't even got his own car, cos he's gambling. He's got a company car. So when he leaves there, he's got no car. And he's thinking of retirement soon. You see, because he's getting to that age. And I thought, "yeah you think you're going to retire on my investment property, that I got. Well that's not going to happen." That's what he thinks. We'll sell that, then I'll (referring to the partner) use that, cos he's used up all his financial means. And that's what he does, cos he says he's going to enjoy himself while he's here... All these years I've saved, and I've put some money aside. He hasn't saved anything. Not living off mine. And I've maintained the investment properties. I've paid for them when they've need to be. I've sorted out all the horrendous hassles with them, while he sat there in the pub on Saturdays. I sourced them out. I got them myself. Stupidly went and put two names on the title. Biggest mistake! Yet, legally that doesn't matter, apparently, cos you're entitled to you know. So I don't know. (Olga, 54)*

Even when women reported financial barriers to leaving, these were often not supported by reality. Reasons expressed by women in my study varied from the literature on financial dependence, where some of the more mature women expressed a feeling that they needed to stay with the partner because of financial dependence, however in the past had been able to secure employment for self despite the partner's attempts to restrict them in this regard. Other women from all age groups who were financially secure, stayed because the partner became controlling with their finances. If women in these circumstances left, the partner had threatened to claim most of her financial security, which would not have left women destitute. However, would reduce their current asset portfolio. Under these circumstances women chose to stay because they were not prepared to allow the partner access to funds that he had not earned and where he would be provided with a more secure retirement than them. Younger women expressed frustration when the partner was not contributing to the

financial wellbeing of the family, and in some circumstances was hindering her efforts to build security.

### **The Impact of Children**

Many women were not willing to leave because of the negative impact on children. This reasoning differed from women with most feeling that staying was beneficial for the children as it was providing them with a secure environment, and they were building a good relationship with the father.

*Um I um put my kids first. Um, worried about them and their education, and how they'd grow up, and all that. And then when I did have a chance to leave I didn't then either. Because, um, oh just, I don't know. And then the Grandkids come and all this sort of thing. You know (Jane, 69)*

Jane originally stayed with the partner because she felt she was protecting the children's future and reports that she was not sure why she did not leave when she had the chance. However, Jane mentions grandchildren and the son's request that she return to his father. The idea of being there for the children and maintaining the family unit was Jane falling in with the social narrative of the women's responsibility to maintain the family unit. Jane was likely to be more influenced by this due to her generation, who placed more emphasis on women to take the responsibility for family unity and cohesion. Therefore, notably for many older participants there was the societal pressure for them to take responsibility for the family unity at a cost to their own wellbeing.

Others were staying out of concern that the children would have unsupervised access to the partner if they left. Eve saw her decision to stay involving the protection of her children. However, in Eve's circumstance for the children's protection she was willing to sacrifice her own quality of life.

*It's almost. There are times when I view it as being almost like a prison sentence. And I've, having children with him means I've got to do my time. And I take that responsibility seriously. I can't get early parole... Talking to somebody, like that counsellor, who just, every time we were together was talking about, "there's very little chance*

*of this,” and “really you should really consider leaving,” and “it would be better for the girls not to be there.” But, because of the way things are, they (the girls) would still see him. They would see him without me. And he would have to control them more, and I know that, and to try and explain that, and to try and explain all the complexities of it (Eve, 44).*

Eve described pressure from service providers who used the welfare of her children as a reason to leave. Eve felt that her attempts to protect her children were being undermined by the advice from these same services, as she was aware of the danger the children would be exposed to when the partner had access visits, a danger that the service providers appeared to be minimising. She reported that she was protecting her children, not only by staying with the partner, but by educating them to manage the partner’s behaviour. Eve reported that her communication methods with her daughters were her attempts to alleviate any negative emotional and psychological impact to them from the partner abuse.

*I started talking to the girls differently about it. I started intervening differently. That if, for instance, he’s talking to daughter in an abusive way, that I would say, “that’s not appropriate. You shouldn’t be doing that in front of her.” I don’t support what he does, I, I, say to her, if he’s got these issues, I don’t make him a demon. But I say, “You know he’s your Dad. This is. He came from this background. And it gave him these defences. And he hasn’t been able to get out from behind them. But it doesn’t mean that what he does, when he’s doing this kind of thing, is ok” (Eve, 44)*

Eve’s experience of help seeking with some service providers led to her not return to that service as she felt that they did not understand her circumstance and, if she was not prepared to leave service providers were often minimising the abuse to which she was exposed. Fortunately, Eve had sufficient self-efficacy to continue to seek aid from services until she was able to find individuals who were able to meet her needs to stay, while negotiating the safety of her children and herself. Eve’s experience of feeling trapped within the relationship because she was attempting to protect herself and her children was reported by a number of participants *“I don’t know where to run I couldn’t run I*

had this baby" (Carol) where women were prepared to live with the abuse until they were able to negotiate their way out.

### **Although Hopeful of Positive Change, Women Continue to Plan Their Leave**

There were women who were holding hope that the partner would change, and were cognisant of their hope keeping them in the relationship despite the current difficulties.

*He will just. He will keep doing what he's doing. I don't think (sigh). See the thing is, with our relationship, before was really, really, good. And I guess, the whole reason why I'm holding on to that little bit of faith is, because, I feel he can go back to that. He can go back to that person, and, umm. I know. I know that he can. But I just don't know what it's going to take to get him there. And I think that's the hardest thing about it. Because unless he's there, I don't know what situations I'm going to be in. I don't know whether that's going to happen. You know what I mean? (Beryl, 21)*

Beryl expressed feelings of being in limbo where she did not wish to leave the partner but was aware that if he does not change his current behaviour she will not stay. There was evidence of ambivalence because she was expressing doubts that her situation will change, but she appeared unable to negotiate any changes if the partner was not able to stop the abuse. Other women reported a more active planning strategy.

*You either snap out of it, and you be a part of our family, or I'm moving on, and you can do the same with your life. Which, I don't know how the kids and everyone's going to go with that, or myself. But, um, it's apparently, that has ta, it's going to have to happen, at some stage ..... because I'm sort of looking down the track now, if I am going to be a single Mum ..... So, um, but I think well if we were to separate, fully down the track, at the moment I can only earn \$35K to \$40K on my customer service/admin/teacher's aide experience, whereas if I do this scholarship and get the teaching then I'll be able to start at least on \$60K. So um, that should be able to fund me and the kids (Irene, 27)*

Although Irene expressed concerns at her ability to cope without the partner, and was hopeful the partner would change his behaviour, she was beginning to plan a life without him. Irene had identified that her hopes of

change may not come to fruition, and had made an active plan, although not a precise timeframe, to proceed with her life as a single mother. Irene's lack of timeframe indicated her continued hope of change from the partner. Her plans to move away and start a better life were not completely devoid of the partner's presence.

*I moved away from (town), and he actually followed, because he got suicidal and he started smoking marijuana again, and it messed with him again. And then he didn't want to live anymore, blah, blah, blah. So I said yeah come down and stay. And then I, cos he continued to, he was great for 2 months, he was cooking, he was cleaning, he was helping me with the kids, he was really good, was laughing, joking, getting along great. But he only manages to hold out that for about 2 months. It's never been any longer than that... But moving from (town) to (town) kind of helped. Because he, that really sort of knocked him. He said that he was really gutted. And he thought that I would never, ever, leave and then I did. And he was like you know ... I moved here to get away from him. And then he followed. I'm thinking, well then, if I move to (town) and he follows, then he might get, um, a different side of the coin, as to what life is about (Irene, 27)*

In this passage although Irene originally discussed moving to start an independent life, she appeared to hold hope that the partner would follow and improve his behaviour and they would be a family without abuse. Her past experience of the partner's improvement was also reinforced with previous reports of other family members ceasing abuse. Eve, who also reported that she was staying for her children's safety but would leave once they were older, was strategically making definite plans to leave and not return to the partner.

*Because I was wholly still in love, and when I got to the point where I don't love him anymore, I'm not actually that victim, then I realised that, that's when I could see what it is. And when I finally got to the point where I could figure all that out... And I'm working on, like, my life in a different way. But this isn't about, you know, I realised that, at the moment, I'm not in a position to leave ... He can't deal with abandonment. Is a big fear for him. So I know that, that's part of the issue. I, I, have started, I actually started last year... I believe that he, when daughter is gone as well, is not doing things you know, and all that, you know, that he will, you know, it is a natural kind of thing. That if I'm still there, when she goes, then that's her out of it... Then*

*if they're already gone, I won't have taken them away from her, from him. And whatever his theory is, whatever his theory is with me, if he sees me heading towards independence, which I am doing the training for a career of my own, and I'm, I'm, doing the personal work (Eve, 44)*

Eve discussed her plans to leave when her children are safe and have left the environment. However, there continued to be an underlying feeling of fear within her narrative where she reported:

*I know that I would be reading it, somebody would be reading a thing in the paper saying that he'd killed his kids and himself. Or he killed his wife and his kids because she was leaving. And everybody would be going, everyone that knew them, would be going "I can't believe it, I can't believe he would do that kind of thing," "he's not that kind of person, he's not violent, he's so nice." And "he did everything for them" and "he was" you know? I knew at that moment that I was I was stuck. Whatever, because he would go there, they're not safe (Eve, 44)*

Eve was focused on the protection of the children and building her emotional and psychological resources to enable her move. She also discussed that there may be financial issues for her, but was willing to accept this and move on with her life as an independent person who can support herself. But she was not prepared to undertake the move until the children were old enough to leave the home and gain their independence, as she felt this was the safest option. Eve presented as being strategic in her plans regarding staying in and leaving her relationship. She identified benefits from support that had helped her gain inner strength to cope with the DA while she stayed. She was also able to identify her growth as an individual which Eve felt would help her cope when she has left.

The process of leaving does not involve a single act and is often exhibited in subtle emotional and cognitive changes before the action of leaving (Anderson & Saunders, 2003). Women in this study expressed many attitude changes about their current relationship often expressing support for the partner, then suggesting that there needed to be change for the relationship to be successful

or them to remain. Although there were often suggestions from women of future plans with the partner, there was some underlying doubt noted, where they would express the behaviour and situation as not tenable or acceptable.

### **Resistance to Service Provider Views**

Women displayed agency in their decision making, where they were actively taking action to change the situation they faced. When displaying ambivalence in their decision making, they were often reacting to the limited options available to them through services and support from others. The dichotomous choices and advice available to women underestimated the complexity of their current situation and did not appear to provide appropriate support for women in this study. Although the social script suggests women need to leave the abusive partner, women found that the conditions applied for removal of themselves and their children, or the expectation that they leave was too restrictive for their wants.

*I felt like I was failing. And they were just stamping that across my forehead. Um, and the lady's mannerism, and the way she like, she wasn't sympathetic, or empathetic, or anything whatsoever. It was like, well you've put yourself in this situation. That kind of attitude, and I just thought, yeah. I was really, really, angry. And really, really, upset. And then I sort of turned it on Mum as well, a little bit. Cos I was like, well you bloody told me, and I didn't want to, and this is what's happened ... Like, just that extra kick in the guts, while I was down ... So then, he'd provide me support and comfort ... and so then, he was a shoulder for me to cry on (Irene, 27)*

In describing her attempt to access services to assist when she was having difficulties with her partner, Irene felt that she was being judged for her inability to cope with her home and family. Irene reported that she had moved out from the partner before accessing these services, however after the treatment she received and a perceived lack of support from family, she returned to the partner. Irene expressed an understanding at her lack of judgement in returning.

*Back in that situation again, and obviously you get down the track a bit more, I took that path and I made those choices. But like I said, at*

*the time when I was that angry, and that upset, I couldn't care less  
(Irene, 27)*

Irene's reported negative experience when accessing support made her reluctant to seek official support in the future, because of her justified concern that she would be judged as a bad mother and bad person. The literature supports the difficulty women face when seeking help after abuse, particularly if they have children (Rhodes et al., 2010), where women can be judged as not keeping children safe and the consequences may entail removal of them. Irene did not express concerns for removal of her children, but she presented as angry at the inference of being a 'bad mother' an attribute and skill that she had prided herself on in the past. Irene initially blamed the approach of service providers on her return to the partner, however, was cognisant of her own control over her behaviours. The ability to recognise and take responsibility for her own actions, even when these were not appropriate or wise, indicated resilience and an ability to maintain control over her emotional and psychological wellbeing.

The women in this study, were fighting the social narrative of themselves as victims of abuse, and were identifying as strong individuals who were managing the situation and were not identifying with being defenceless and unable to manage.

*I'm not a victim anymore. And saying that he's an abuser, there has to be a victim. And you know the number of counsellors that I eventually stopped going to, because it came to the point where they kept saying, "Well you've got to see what you're doing." I understand that there still is some of my stuff, and when I see it I deal with it. But I deal with my own feelings, I deal with my own emotions, I can realise that it's not me, but it's him. And I'm not a victim anymore. I'm working actively, while I'm still in that position. But it's like living in a war zone. You can live in a war zone, and not be a victim. Even if you do get hit by a bomb, or whatever, you can still go ahead and live your life. But, and that's not, I am not being a victim. I'm saving myself. I'm doing everything I can to save my girls (Eve, 44)*

This passage indicated that Eve was seeing herself as a coping, surviving individual, in a bad situation. She identified as having control in her powerless

environment. While others continued to indicate that she was powerless she felt she was making strategic decisions in her life that were beneficial to both her own and her children's future welfare. There was exacerbation expressed in her narrative where she was seeking aid from others to assist her to maintain control within her situation, and cope with her environment. However, she felt she was being thwarted by the services from whom she was attempting to seek aid. When Eve was faced with judgements by service providers, she stopped accessing these services stating that they were not willing to allow her to make her own decisions and she felt they were exposing her to the same abuse as her partner. Eve also expressed frustration when service providers were not prepared to accept her decision to stay as her maintaining control. Her feelings in this regard were expressed by her reporting that service providers would state that "*it cannot be that bad if you stay*" with Eve stating "*it is that bad,*" but that her reasoning for staying was her need to protect their children. Eve also felt that she was able to grow strong within the relationship so that she could live without the partner successfully.

### **Summary**

Women in this study were rejecting the social script which presents as very simplistic in terms of whether to stay or leave. They appeared to maintain control over their lives despite facing abuse from the partner and criticism from others such as service providers, and friends and family. Women reported finding strength within the relationship and expressed difficulties in leaving that portray the complex decision making process that women living with abuse face when undertaking decisions about their future and the future of the relationship. Many women felt the experience of abuse was a better outcome for them than to leave for a number of reasons; safety of the children, financial stability, and continued love for the partner. It is evident that women in this study continue to explore avenues to improve their situation by accessing services, asking me for information, and making proactive plans for an independent life. Many women, when seeking help, were faced with difficulties from service providers and others

who presented a judgemental and negative attitude to their decision making. The attitudes they encountered from service providers and family created barriers for them in their future help-seeking endeavours and in their confidence of assistance if they left or remained and on occasion led to them returning to the partner for support. However, many women persisted in their endeavours to seek assistance indicating a strong self-efficacy and resilience. Despite difficulties experienced, women expressed hope in a better future whether their plans were to leave or stay with the partner, as they felt they had a degree of control over their decisions, behaviours, and life.

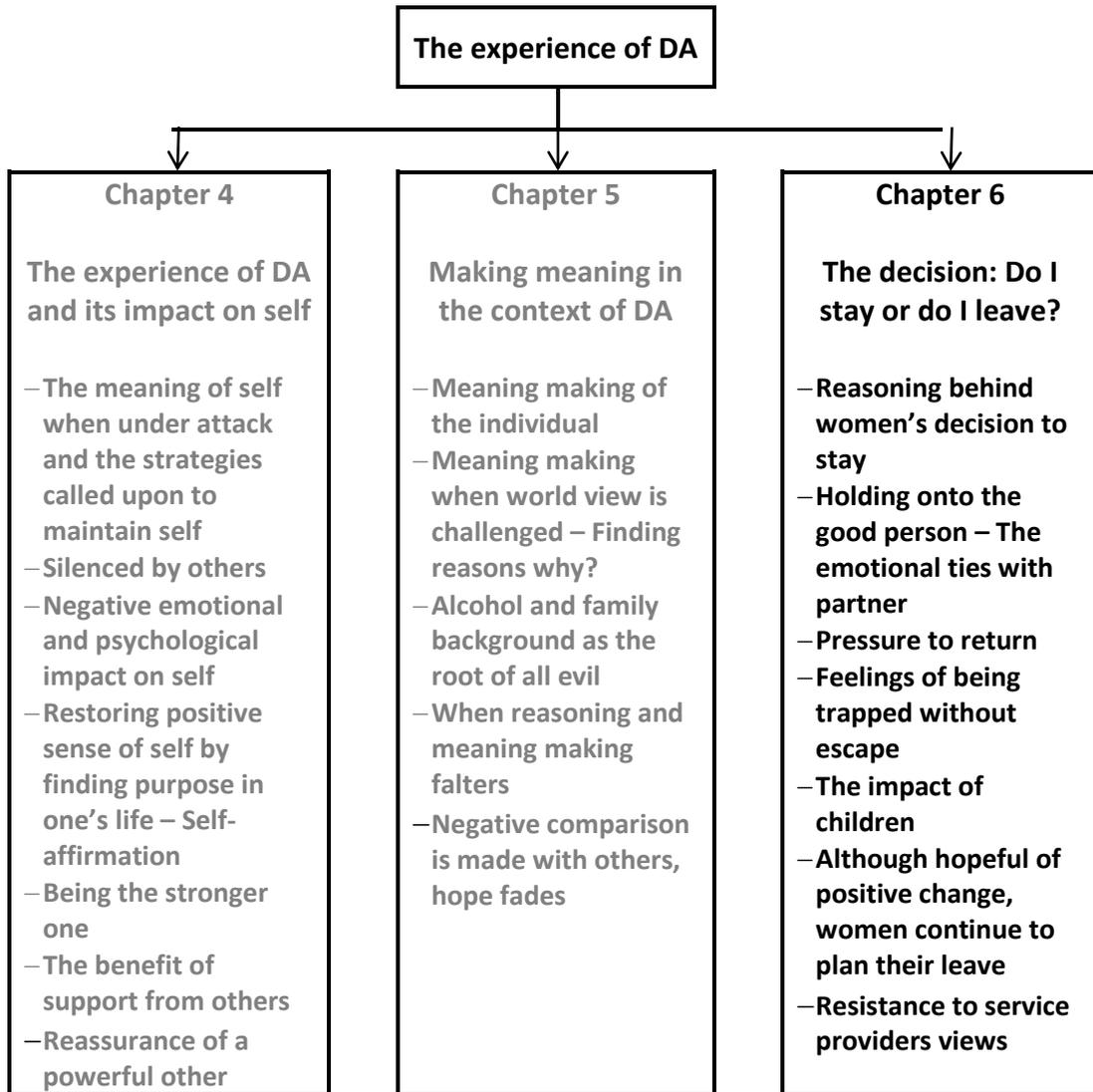


Figure 4. Heading indicating the superordinate theme for each analysis chapter followed by the associated emergent themes with the Chapter titled, 'The decision: Do I stay, do I leave?' emphasised

## Chapter 7

### Discussion

The aim of my research was to investigate women's experience of living with an abusive male partner. The study was exploratory in nature. Therefore, in an attempt to understand how women cope with their lives, and manage the abuse to which they are exposed, I chose to collect data through face to face interviews with women who were currently residing in a DA situation, with a male partner. This final chapter of my thesis completes the interpretative phenomenological journey for women in this study, where the stories of women's experiences will be integrated and considered alongside the existing DA literature.

My interpretations of the data identified women's fight to retain a positive sense of self, while being criticised by the partner and others. Women reported actions of resistance against the attack on their identity, by managing the criticism through positive self-talk and self-affirmation beyond that of the abused women. Their ability to maintain a positive sense of self, even when being criticised, reinforced women's concept of being a strong, capable woman who was strategically managing the DA to which she was exposed. Participants' attempts to use the current social narrative, to explain the reason for the abuse in their lives and their view of self, did not provide a match with their experience of DA. This led women to question the social narrative explaining DA and women facing DA. The social narrative of a woman as someone who lacks strength and an independent sense of self and who should leave an abusive partner was contradictory to the experience of women in this study, and one that they were rejecting in their decision to stay.

I will begin my discussion with a presentation of the current social, academic, and research narrative, relating to women who stay within an abusive relationship and the disassociation between this narrative and women in this study's reality of the DA experience. The discrepancies identified between my

results, and the literature, will be reviewed with an emphasis on the relevance of current services available to meet the needs of women within Australia who continue to face abuse while living with the partner, also the implication for intervention and support services for women facing DA. Suggestions will be proffered for future directions when attempting to support women living with abuse, followed by a reporting of the strengths and limitations of this study. The discussion will conclude with suggestions for future research in this area.

### **Impact of the Current Social Narrative for Women Who Stay**

#### **Maintenance of sense of self.**

Much research and social commentary in the field of DA is focused on the negative psychological symptoms resulting from remaining with an abusive male partner, with a focus on the resilience and strength of women who leave (Anderson, Renner, & Danis, 2012; Cobb et al., 2006; Humphreys, 2003). The majority of research suggests, women who stay are more emotionally and financially dependent on their partners, have a lower view of self, and decreased self-efficacy (Anderson, Renner, & Danis, 2012; Clements et al., 2004; Clements & Sawhney, 2000; Cuperman, Robinson, & Ickes, 2014; Estrellado & Loh, 2014; Landenburger, 1998; Peterson & Seligman, 1983; Rhatigan, Shorey, & Nathanson, 2011), and women lose themselves within the relationship only regaining a sense of self after leaving (Anderson et al., 2012; Enander & Holmberg, 2008; Landenburger, 1998; Patzel, 2001; Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 2001). In contradiction to previous reporting, women in my study, despite experiencing criticism of self and their behaviours and questioning self when this occurred, were able to renegotiate their identity of a strong individual who was making their own decisions and developing effective adaptive coping strategies that were beneficial to their emotional and psychological protection.

The description of women's attempts to maintain their sense of identity, which they viewed as positive and strong, was most evident in their management of others' attempts to silence their voice and their own strategic

silencing. Women reported, despite partners and others attempts to silence them, they were able, during times of safety, to persist with communication of their concerns and disagreements with the partners' views or behaviours, and during these times they felt heard. Participants reporting these actions, experienced strong self-efficacy and felt they had a degree of control over their situation. This also reflected women's confidence in their ability to communicate effectively, as participants appeared to believe that if they persisted they would be heard and understood by the partner. Women who reported, they were unable to voice their opinions, even in times of less danger, found strength and protection through strategic silencing. They had learned, through the act of silencing, they were able to alleviate their own negative psychological and emotional reactions to the abuse. Therefore, although women experienced being silenced by the partner, and chose to remain silent during times of risk, during times of less risk they were able to pursue their needs and exhibited a position of control over their world, despite living within a powerless situation. Other women were able to find feelings of control, within a powerless situation, through management of their own reactions when facing an abusive situation, where the action of strategic silencing appeared to provide them with a degree of protection to their emotional and psychological wellbeing.

There were women, in this study, who reported having entered the relationship with feelings of no control, low self-esteem, and a negative sense of self, reporting an expectation abuse would occur. However, many of these women reported experiencing positive psychological and emotional change while living with the abusive partner, which was achieved through their individual efforts of personal development. One participant identified, her aim had been to not only sustain herself, while living with the abusive partner, but to grow. While other participants, although not directly identifying growth as an aim, reported actions of strength and growth despite the abuse they were facing. One area of growth achieved within the DA situation was through women's ability to find a positive identity outside that of the abused women.

Suggestions have been proffered, individuals faced with a discrepancy to their worldview or sense of self, such as being abused by a partner, will often use reconstruction attempts in the form of defense mechanisms (McWilliams, 2011). Defense mechanisms are a healthy and adaptive reaction to threat and often result in the development of creative ways to cope with difficulties faced in life. One of the most common forms of defense mechanism is self-affirmation. Self-affirmation occurs when individuals recognise their accomplishments and abilities in an attempt to restore their self-esteem, identity, or concept of self when it has been threatened (Proulx, Inzlicht, & Harmon-Jones, 2012), viewing themselves as a valued member of society and family (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Women in this study displayed a number of these mechanisms, where they had found meaning in being, good mothers, friends and grandmothers, and these achievements provided feelings that they were now able to achieve a positive view of themselves and maintain control over aspects of their lives, outside the DA relationship. Self-affirmation, in the form of achievements outside the DA situation, also provided women with increased self-esteem and feelings of self-efficacy for managing their lives in a manner that enabled positive outcomes for them. Therefore, women in this study reported, they were able to forge a personal identity divorced from that of the abused woman, finding areas where they could experience growth, despite the adversity faced. Literature supports the positive aspect of promoting self-determination divorced from value based ideals or moral judgement from others (Wester, Wong, & Lagro-Janssen, 2007), experiences that may arise from social views of the abused women. Women in this study exhibited adaptive coping when experiencing attacks on their self-identity and were able to maintain a positive sense of who they were as an individual. Buchbinder and Barakat (2014) supported the idea that women exposed to an environment where they are able to develop a sense of self-efficacy in their ability to problem solve and adaptively cope, are likely to further improve their ability to cope effectively with the difficulties of life facing DA.

While acknowledging the distress and hardship experienced due to exposure to DA, women's experience was more often reported from a position of strength, resilience, control and growth, and an appreciation of their own personhood, than of the dependent defenceless woman. I therefore argue, although there needs to be recognition of the trauma and disempowerment of women facing DA, the ability of women to maintain their sense of self, control, and agency within the relationship, needs to also be considered. Therefore, more research is needed focusing on women's agency and strength while living with an abusive male partner. In recognising women's agency, while living with abuse, and communicating acceptance to them, women will be more likely to learn to trust in themselves, and then when accessing services, they will be more likely to express their feelings and experiences of living with DA. When women are able to communicate in this way more will be learned of their needs. It will then be possible to develop more accurate psychological models and better service provision for women, who face DA. Others have also argued for recognition of women's strength and agency when facing DA (Buchbinder & Barakat, 2014; Profitt, 1996; van Schalkwyk et al., 2014). However, the majority of research presenting this argument has been outside the area of psychology (Profitt, 1996), investigated women who have left (van Schalkwyk et al., 2014), or women from collective cultures (Buchbinder & Barakat, 2014), with little acknowledgement of western individualistic cultures and none investigating an Australian cohort (the exception being studies on women who have experienced sexual abuse, Astbury, 2006). It is likely, the lack of understanding and acceptance of women's experience of control and strength, while living with DA, is due to the predominance of retrospective research involving participants who have already left the abusive relationship, with little research accessing the experience of women currently living with the partner.

### **Growth Within Self Despite Facing the Adversity of DA**

Studies focusing on experiences of growth have investigated women who have left the DA relationship (Anderson et al., 2012; Bitton, 2014) with some

authors suggesting, there may be growth within the abusive relationship, but it would be greater after women left (Cobb et al., 2006). However, awareness of women facing DA, who have experienced post traumatic growth, is improving (Song, 2012; Song & Shih, 2010), particularly within collectivist cultures and religious traditional societies, where it is suggested growth may be quite common (Bitton, 2014; Buchbinder & Barakat, 2014). Post traumatic growth is defined as “positive growth following stressful events which includes changes in relating to others, a willingness to consider new opportunities, personal strength, spiritual transformation, and a re-evaluating of life” (Bitton, 2014, p. 57). Research investigating minority groups and women from collectivist cultural societies, who are living with DA, have focused on women’s agency, and report positive psychological and emotional outcomes, suggesting stronger support from agencies for women’s choice to stay (Briones-Vozmediano et al., 2014; Buchbinder & Barakat, 2014; Khadra et al., 2014). Less recognition of psychological growth in women currently living with DA has been acknowledged for women living in individualistic countries, with none to my knowledge within Australia.

The concept of positive growth in the face of adversity and trauma is not a new concept within psychology or philosophy (Blackie, Jayawickreme, Forgeard, & Jayawickreme, 2014; Frankl, 1984; Stutts, Bills, Erwin, & Good, 2015; Yalom & Lieberman, 1991). Researchers have indicated that facing trauma in one’s life can initiate positive change in a person’s perception of self, where they experience emotional and psychological growth when managing difficulties within their lives, reporting feeling stronger and more self-confident (Blackie et al., 2014; Stutts et al., 2015; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). The reported experience of psychological growth communicated by the women in this study is consistent with existing literature reporting similar positive psychological growth in individuals who have faced other forms of trauma. However, less research on growth when facing DA can be found in the literature, an indication that many researchers do not consider this a possibility, or that this is not a socially

acceptable attitude toward exposure to DA. It is likely to be advantageous to reconsider a focus on post traumatic growth in DA, because women who have accessed counselling services for other events of assault often report, they have learned techniques to protect self (Hegarty et al., 2013; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). A skill beneficial for women who are currently living with DA whether or not they are transitioning to remove self, or to stay.

Women in this study, as with women exposed to non DA assault (Joseph & Linley, 2005; Linley & Joseph, 2004), reported experiencing psychological growth. However, women in this study differed because they were not suggesting growth they experienced resulted from exposure to the abuse. They viewed their individual behaviours and learning to protect their emotional and psychological wellbeing, despite being exposed to the adversity of DA, as the strength builder. Women identified, not only being able to manage the difficulties faced while living with DA, they also experienced growth as a person, finding a life beyond being 'an abused woman'. Finding a positive sense of self and growth beyond the abuse presented in many forms, where women reported a stronger relationship with God, found self-affirmation in being a good mother, grandmother, or friend, or for some, having a successful work life. Women had learned to draw on traditional and socially acceptable actions, to reinforce their good identities and were therefore able to maintain a positive social identity outside the abusive woman script. They also appeared to be able to carry this positive feeling back into the abusive relationship, which provided women with agency over their emotional and psychological wellbeing.

### **Lack of Recognition of Women's Coping as Adaptive**

Problem-focused coping is considered to be the most adaptive coping style for women facing DA. It has been reported, this form of coping results in more positive psychological and emotional outcomes than emotion-focused coping, and that problem-focused coping often results in posttraumatic growth (Lilly & Graham-Bermann, 2010; Linley & Joseph, 2004; Taft, Vogt, Mechanic, &

Resick, 2007). Descriptions such as these, which are prominent within the DA literature, often call upon the masculine references of coping, with little respect for women's interpretation of adaptive coping. Women's way of managing distress and trauma differs from that of men and has therefore often been minimised as less effective. Rose (1990), in her study of inner strength of female nurses, identified the masculinity of current references to strength and control and the minimisation of feminine experiences in this regard. She explained that women viewed inner strength as:

...embracing vulnerability, of intimate authentic interrelating, helping others, of using humour, or being true to themselves, of centring and balancing, of becoming self-aware, of being quiet and calm, of knowing and experiencing capacity, and of seeing and understanding the whole of situations while remaining cognisant of the intricate compounding factors. (p. 68)

Rose suggested, characteristics that have been considered weaknesses in the androcentric literature could, for women, be considered strengths. She cited the example of passivity being seen as positive by women, as a way for them to regenerate and restore inner resources of energy that would be needed to manage and cope with adversity they would face in the present and future. Rose suggested, the evidence of strength displayed by women as a whole is not appreciated within research, and this is likely because research within this area has been distributed across many disciplines and therefore the depth of findings has been lost.

The androcentric view is a disservice to women who are currently living with an abusive man and are managing not only his behaviour but also their own. Women in this study displayed emotional intelligence as reflected in their ability to refrain from engaging in the aggressive incidents and displaying controlled strength over their emotions and psychological reactions when facing DA. The view of women's coping being adaptive, even though differing from the current

interpretation, offers new insight into the experience of abused women. It would appear, women who experience a sense of control over their environment and are able to hold a positive sense of self are those who are able to remain with the partner and attempt to build a fulfilling life. The decision to stay and adaptively manage the DA appears to occur whether or not there is hope for change to non-abuse.

### **Stay/Leave is the Basis of Most Research for Women Facing DA**

#### **Staying is an active logical decision made from a stance of strength.**

Women described behaviours and thoughts that were in direct contrast to the expected norm of what is considered the correct and appropriate action when facing DA, which is to leave. Instead, they described upholding the behaviour they considered conducive to their current needs. In displaying actions of resistance, women presented as strategic decision makers, with a purposeful aim, offering logical reasons for staying and exhibiting strength in their convictions relating to what they felt was best for themselves and the family unit. In fact, criticism from others such as family, friends, and service providers, often resulted in a more determined attitude to maintain their union with the partner. Women not only verbalised feelings of inner strength, strength was also displayed in their perseverance toward their choice to stay, despite their experience of less than positive reinforcement from others.

My findings contradict past research, which has suggested, women who stay have difficulty making appropriate decisions about their stay/leave choice and need others to intervene, not only to support them, but to take control of the decision making process. Although, women in my study displayed strength and determination in their decision to remain with the abusive partner, the impact of the negative social narrative, relating to women who stay, was evident during the interviews. Women themselves initiated discussion, in the interviews, regarding their decision to stay, without any prompting from myself as the interviewer and appeared motivated to justify their actions. The need for

justification, of this decision by women, is an indication of their experience of judgement by others, a feeling that is not unfounded. Although, there have been numerous research studies addressing the logical and practical reasoning behind why women stay, the concept that staying is unhealthy, an indication of pathology, and of a person unable to make logical decisions, continues to be perpetuated throughout research reports (Abramson et al., 1989; Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Bargai et al., 2007; Beydoun et al., 2012; Calvete, Corral, & Estévez, 2007; Calvete et al., 2008; Calvete, Estévez, & Corral, 2007; Campbell, 2002; Campbell et al., 1995; Cascardi & O'Leary, 1992; Cascardi et al., 1999; Nixon, Resick, & Nishith, 2004; Nurius et al., 2003; O'Campo et al., 2006; Rhatigan et al., 2011; Tuel & Russell, 1998; Vitaliano, DeWolfe, Maiuro, Russo, & Katon, 1990; Vitaliano et al., 1993), with the question of 'Why do they stay?' typically used when referring to women who remain in DA (Dunn & Powell-Williams, 2007; Enander, 2010; Enander & Holmberg, 2008; Gelles, 1976; Herbert et al., 1991; McDonough, 2010; McLeod et al., 2010; Murray, 2008; Rhodes & McKenzie, 1998). Also, the general public and many service providers, such as medical staff, child protection staff, and police, continue to express negative views of women who do not leave their abusive partner (Halket et al., 2014; Lempert, 1997; Murray, 2008; Overholser & Moll, 1990; Peled et al., 2000; Peterson, 2013; Salazar, Emshoff, Baker, & Crowley, 2007; Shorey, Tirone, & Stuart, 2014; Song, 2011; Summers, 1999; Terrance et al., 2008; Tutty et al., 2013; Yamawaki, Ochoa-Shipp, Pulsipher, Harlos, & Swindler, 2012).

Authors reporting on the issue of abuse continue to evaluate success in halting abuse and better outcomes for women from the perspective of them leaving, with little consideration given to women in relationships where abuse has stopped while living with the partner (Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Bell et al., 2007; Campbell, Rose, Kub, & Nedd, 1998; Rhatigan et al., 2006; Strube, 1988; Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 2008). Although there are researchers who have recognised the choice to stay with the abusive partner does not imply women have not made positive changes in their lives and exhibited strength (Brown,

1997; Buchbinder & Barakat, 2014; Humphreys, 2003; Song, 2012), and decisions made by women when experiencing abuse are logical and involve attempts to achieve an outcome where fear, risk of harm, and the abuse toward them by the partner is no longer experienced (Akers & Kaukinen, 2009; Hart, 1993; Hoyle & Sanders, 2000; Lempert, 1997; Meyer, 2012), the majority are less positive in their reporting of women who stay. There is a continued focus on and applauding of women who leave the partner. Therefore, women such as those in this study, who exhibited conviction and logical reasoning in their decision to stay, are likely to find it difficult to access service providers able to provide a service willing to understand their stance of strength and control and to work with them on the basis of their current decision to stay.

**The negative impact of social views of women who stay for the provision of services.**

Women who have left are described as, resilient and their abilities as remarkable in overcoming the impact of traumatic events in their lives, their leaving is considered a form of resistance to the violence (Anderson, 2003; Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Barnett, 2000, 2001; Brown, Trangsrud, & Linnemeyer, 2009; Brown, 1997; Dunn & Powell-Williams, 2007; Eckstein, 2011; Enander, 2010; Gelles, 1976; Herbert et al., 1991; Koepsell et al., 2006; Lacey, 2010; Lerner & Kennedy, 2000; Meyer, 2012; Murray, 2008; Rhodes et al., 2010; Salazar, Högberg, Valladares, & Öhman, 2012; Stanko, 1997; Tutty et al., 2013; van Schalkwyk et al., 2014). There is far less recognition of these same qualities in women who stay and minimum, if any, recognition of resistance to the abuse, by women currently living with the abusive partner (Gelles, 1976; Halket et al., 2014; Herbert et al., 1991; Kim & Gray, 2008; Lacey, 2010; Lerner & Kennedy, 2000; McDonough, 2010; Meyer, 2012; Murray, 2008; Rhatigan et al., 2011; Rhodes & McKenzie, 1998; Tutty et al., 2013). Therefore, views reinforcing the strength of women who leave and the weakness of women who stay (Bacchus, Mezey, & Bewley, 2003; Humphreys, 2003; Moe, 2007) create problems for

women attempting to access support services, while continuing to live with their abusive partner.

When views are perpetuated describing women's decision to stay from a negative, pathological, or problematic aspect, the assumption of service providers and others becomes, it is difficult to work with women who stay (Gerber et al., 2014; Humphreys, 2003), and service providers can only successfully work with women who are attempting or prepared to leave (Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Brown, 1997). In Australia, there is also continued reported frustration expressed about women who, despite being offered support from family, friends, and service providers, chose to remain with the abusive partner (Reisenhofer & Taft, 2013). Women who fight the social narrative and expectations of service providers, are often seen as recalcitrant and rebellious (Buchbinder & Barakat, 2014; Song, 2011), and women reporting decisions to stay have been accused of minimising the abuse, exaggerating the abuse, exhibiting characteristics of hopelessness and helplessness, and being so controlled by the partner, they are unable to make their own decisions (Baldry & Pagliaro, 2014; Felson et al., 2002; Song, 2012). Service providers are the gateways to many services that are advantageous for women living with abuse (Hegarty et al., 2013), and their attitudes and behaviours towards women who seek support will have a strong impact on women's future help-seeking behaviours (Astbury, 2006). For example, if negative attitudes are held by service providers their support and behaviours are likely to present as controlling, as they will be viewing women facing abuse as unable to make appropriate decisions (Buchbinder & Barakat, 2014). Attitudes such as these lead to service providers exhibiting controlling behaviour, which is similar to behaviour of women's current partner (Astbury, 2006). Women choosing to stay with the partner, are therefore likely to experience the attitude of service providers as, unsupportive and judgemental of their decision (Akers & Kaukinen, 2009; Baldry & Pagliaro, 2014; Felson et al., 2002; Hoyle & Sanders, 2000; Song, 2012; Vinson, 1996) and will deem the service and support received, from such providers, as

not particularly helpful (Bacchus et al., 2003; Briones-Vozmediano et al., 2014; Husso et al., 2012; Lavis, Horrocks, Kelly, & Barker, 2005; Peckover, 2003).

Further, if the perception of women living with abuse is of a woman who is unable to cope, solutions from support services will revolve around managing the situation 'for' them. Solutions of this view will run contradictory with the view of a resilient strong woman, who will expect service providers to work 'with' them in finding solutions to the problems and issues they are currently facing while living with DA.

The attitudes encountered from service providers and family are likely to create barriers for women in their future help-seeking endeavours and in their confidence to seek assistance, whether they leave or remain. If service providers wish to support women facing DA, there is a need to respect their resistance of others expectations and criticisms, with a transfer of control from what the service providers think is best for women, to what women themselves require in support of their coping with DA. Although, this study is not the first study to report this need from service providers (Allen, Bybee, & Sullivan, 2004; Astbury, 2006; Feder et al., 2006), to date there appears to be limited changes to service provision (including within Australia) for women living within a DA situation. To provide appropriate support, a non-judgemental, confidential environment, with an empathic and supportive manner is required, this will enable growth, resilience, and adaptive management strategies to be enriched, for those facing and living with DA. The reaction from service providers, of non-judgemental listening and acceptance of women's opinions and views, in itself will be experienced as heard for women facing DA (Allen, Bybee, & Sullivan, 2004; Baker, 1997; Buchbinder & Barakat, 2014; Hegarty et al., 2008), as this is likely not their experience in the home or often with friends and family. Intervention needs to be developed which has meaning for the users and provides the outcome to satisfy their needs and wants. The only way to provide a service to meet these criteria is to ask the recipients their opinion. Until professionals, who participate in the policy making and official actions relating to women facing DA,

are willing to acknowledge and listen to women's voice in relation to the violence they are experiencing, there is likely to be little progress in what women experience as appropriate actions offered to support them, when exposed to DA (Allen, Bybee, & Sullivan, 2004; Davis, 2002; Lehrner & Allen, 2008; Peled et al., 2000; van Schalkwyk et al., 2014). Therefore, if women are able to connect with friends and family without judgement and in ways where their contribution is valued and their opinion respected, they are likely to experience feelings of positive self-esteem, feelings they will be able to take back to the abusive relationship and aid them in their management of the abuse.

Other attitudes women experience from others is being viewed as a victim. Women in this study did not view self as a victim within the relationship, and often did not see the male as powerful, more so seeing him as the weaker member in the relationship. Simpson (2003) identified the misinterpretation many service providers hold of women facing DA, where workers at an Australian agency to support women facing DA used words such as "powerless, weak, helpless ... no control" (p. 7) to describe women and described the male abuser as "powerful, strong" (p. 7). When seeking aid from services, if women are presented with self as being the victim and not having strength, women such as those in my study, are not likely to return for assistance as they will not feel they are being understood and will likely not receive the services they required from the agency (Allen, Bybee, & Sullivan, 2004). Further, they may experience being managed because of the service provider's view that, women presenting for help are not capable of managing self. This view is widespread as evidenced in numerous studies reporting women as hopeless and helpless, when exposed to DA (Bargai et al., 2007; Clements et al., 2004; Clements & Sawhney, 2000). However, Simpson was cognisant of the discrepancy of this description and the presentation of clients to the Domestic Violence Crisis Service in Australia, acknowledging that their clients presented as strong, competent, and determined individuals, who were capable of making informed decisions relating to their lives. However, attitudes such as these are in the minority and more

often women are subjected to social narratives of being stupid, weak, and in need of guidance from others (Enander, 2010). Also, when able to provide services to women, who decide to stay, service providers have expressed difficulty maintaining the supportive stance, even when this approach evidenced positive adjustment for women attending their service (Buchbinder & Barakat, 2014; Simpson, 2003).

Support resulting in improvement to the wellbeing of women facing DA, has not only involved non-judgmental, supportive, and empathic approaches but, also reactions avoiding victim blaming (Allen, Bybee, & Sullivan, 2004; Campbell et al., 1995; Feder et al., 2006; Hegarty et al., 2008). This framework of strength and non-blame is likely to lead to a respect for women's decision to stay with the partner, if this is her choice. From a strength framework, service providers will be able to build on the current adaptive coping strategies women facing DA are adopting, and will therefore find their aim to be of assistance and support is more likely to be accepted and more likely to succeed (Allen, Bybee, & Sullivan, 2004; Feder et al., 2006; Hegarty et al., 2008; Humphreys, 2003; Simpson, 2003). The type and approach to support needs to be considered carefully for women facing DA, because of the contradictory experience for women, where helping can be experienced as another form of control over their lives and decision-making (Astbury, 2006; Buchbinder & Barakat, 2014). Women in this study were in need of practical advice and services such as education on how to manage their emotional, psychological, and physical wellbeing when facing abusive incidents. The most effective support for women was, knowledge about the legal system, resources women could access and options available to women who stay (Allen, Bybee, & Sullivan, 2004; Buchbinder & Barakat, 2014; Feder et al., 2006; Hegarty et al., 2008; Perilla et al., 2011). One woman suggested police services were difficult to access confidentially, without the partner being aware, suggesting a mobile text message service, where she would be able to message the police and then delete this from the phone to ensure she did not endure payback from the partner for contacting authorities. I would also suggest an offer

of free legal advice to women facing DA. Other countries encourage law students to provide advocacy, advice and information at no cost to women facing DA (Bell & Goodman, 2001; Shorey et al., 2014). Actions such as these would advantage to both parties involved, where students have an opportunity to gain experience with clients and women receive valuable information, enabling them to act in an informed manner. There would be no reason not to extend these services to financial, housing and job placement services (Salazar et al., 2007; Shorey et al., 2014).

Many women had accessed services where there were support groups with other women who had experienced abuse and found this beneficial, as they did not feel alone in their experience of DA, which eradicated their feelings of being 'crazy' because of the emotions they experienced. Within this process women must also feel, their decisions are being respected. Programs following this format will allow women to express their experience and their needs when facing DA, which is more likely to lead to change based on the actual needs of women. The participants in this study do not present as a passive recipient of the partner's abusive actions. Therefore, services designed to support women facing abuse need to consider her active and creative strategies in managing the abuse in her life, and only when this occurs will services be offered that are effective for women seeking assistance. Programs such as these aid women in identifying not only the problematic issues women face but, also their strengths and adaptive coping strategies in appropriately managing their lives.

But, the difficulty is, more often women report a lack of supportive networks, rather they experience judgement for their actions and feel the advice provided does not satisfy their needs (Allen, Bybee, & Sullivan, 2004; Hegarty et al., 2013), or match their view of a strong and capable self. Women in this study expressed frustration explaining, when they display strong resilience, service providers often underestimated the level of abuse endured and presented as dismissive of their concerns and need for support. This is likely the result of,

research reporting and the general social narrative of women who remain being 'weak and helpless.' Therefore, signs of strength are an indication of abuse being minimal or not present. Service providers therefore, need to be aware of the strength of women to endure the abuse faced, and the presentation of a strong woman does not negate the presence of exposure to substantial stressors and therefore the need for appropriate and collegial support in coping and managing their situation. Despite the difficulty to find appropriate help, as a result of negative attitudes experienced, women in this study continue to explore avenues to improve their situation by continuing to access different services, asking me for information and making proactive plans for an independent life. Therefore, criticism and negative experiences did not appear to thwart women's attempts to continue to seek support when required, which is likely driven by women's strength, resilience, and determination to improve their lives. Women in this study presented as anything but defenceless and weak, they were persisting with actions to improve their life despite, the reactions of others, the resistance to help, and the difficulties accessing appropriate supportive aid.

It would appear a paradigm shift is required, in our thinking of women facing abuse who chose to stay. Women's choice to stay is normally viewed as a rebellion against the social transcript of leaving and that of the weak female controlled by the abusive male partner. Although women experience a sense of aloneness, because of the limited support and judgement experienced from family, friends, and social groups, the majority of the participants continued to make attempts to access support. When not able to find appropriate support, women in this study's ability to bear the burden of the abuse, despite the lack of support from others, reinforced her feelings of strength. However, participants were cognisant of the negative impact on self, psychologically, emotionally, and physically. It was therefore, not through choice they isolated themselves from aid, it is women's reaction to the inappropriate responses they often received when attempting to access such support. The implications for women living with abuse are, assistance needs to be tailored to suit the perception of the

individual. This will mean there is a need for researchers, service providers, and policy makers, to listen to women's narratives when they access services, and through further projects such as this research project. It is only through continued listening to the actual experiences and needs of women facing DA, appropriate services to aid them, in their coping, can be developed and effective. Researchers have also reported on the perception of effectiveness of services provided to women when they make attempts to leave their abusive partner. They reported, feeling understood by others was a form of validation, providing women with feelings of strength and assisting them in making meaning out of their experience of abuse (Allen, Bybee, & Sullivan, 2004; Astbury, 2006; Buchbinder & Barakat, 2014; Feder et al., 2006; Hegarty et al., 2008; Hegarty et al., 2013; McLeod et al., 2010; Simpson, 2003). There is no indication that these benefits are also present for women who remain.

**More acceptance for women holding collectivist views than for women holding individualistic views, when facing DA.**

Women in this study, were enacting strategic and adaptive plans to improve their lives, were actively involved in attempts to reduce the exposure to DA, and are not the first women facing DA to express a desire to not leave the partner, but for the abuse to halt (Buchbinder & Barakat, 2014; Patton, 2003; Peled et al., 2000; Perilla et al., 2011; Simpson, 2003). A number of researchers are now considering the positive aspect of women staying with the abusive partner. Women from collectivist cultures and communities (Middle Eastern, South African and Aisan) (Bitton, 2014; Buchbinder & Barakat, 2014; Vakili, Nadrian, Fathipoor, Boniadi, & Morowatisharifabad, 2010; van Schalkwyk et al., 2014), and minority groups (such as Latino, Mexican and African Americans living within the U.S.A) (Crisostomo, Cruz, Cruz, & Cruz, 2012; Hodges & Cabanilla, 2011; Lacey, 2010; Song & Shih, 2010) are being reported as taking appropriate action and displaying strength based behaviour, in staying with the abusive male partner. Researchers investigating women from collectivist societies and cultural

groups appear to accept, if not expect, women to choose to stay, and there is a trend to support their decision in this process (Bitton, 2014; Buchbinder & Barakat, 2014; Perilla et al., 2011; Song, 2012; Vakili et al., 2010). Although it is reportedly difficult for service providers in individualistic cultures to understand the decision of women from collectivistic cultures to stay with the abusive partner, they are reportedly accepting the decision and making attempts to provide the appropriate support (Buchbinder & Barakat, 2014). Support from service providers, who are prepared to accept women's choice, is allowing women presenting for assistance to benefit (Astbury, 2006; Peled et al., 2000; Simpson, 2003). Women who are able to express themselves, without judgement or criticism of their actions and with an acceptance of their choices and decisions, experience themselves as a person of value, others are prepared to accept, which will allow them space to experience growth and strength, enabling them to return and cope adaptively with the DA, with minimum negative emotional and psychological consequences (Buchbinder & Barakat, 2014; Simpson, 2003). It would therefore appear, there is some movement toward support for women from particular cultural groups to stay within the relationship and maintain control over their lives. However, there continues to be less support for staying, for women who are members of Western societies, holding individualistic attitudes, where the attitude of others is that women facing abuse have the means and support from society to leave. Therefore, why would they stay? Under these circumstances, the individualistic attitude of independence may not be serving women facing DA well.

Women from all sectors of the community would benefit from the same support, whether from collectivist cultures or individualistic cultures. It is perhaps necessary for the social narrative to stop separating the social sectors and allow all women the opportunity to make the decisions appropriate for themselves, despite our personal preference of behaviour for them. In some aspects to accept the choice of collectivist women to stay and retaining the current feminist view, they are negatively impacted by the patriarchal situation,

the power brokers are creating a negative ‘them and us’ situation. It would suggest, women from individualistic cultures are receiving better support than women from collectivistic cultures, because we are making attempts to remove them from the abuse and patriarchal dominance. However, in reality it would appear, women from collectivist cultures are afforded a more respectful attitude to their decision-making and coping strategies, than women whose rights have been fought for, over a number of years.

### **The Issue of Empowerment**

It would appear, despite the insistence of service providers on empowering women who are experiencing DA, there is a focus on empowering them to find the resources to leave, a focus which has been referred to as the “dominant cultural script” (Baker, 1997, p. 56). This ‘dominant cultural script’ is presented to women from service providers, police services, and the general public, when in fact staying may be the wiser choice and women may be more empowered if they remain (Bowker, 1993; Lempert, 1996). The dominant social narrative perpetuates an attitude toward women who remain that is, judgemental, paternal, and disempowering. There is a need to recognise women’s agency in the abuse, while also appreciating the social constraints faced in her decision-making in staying with her abusive partner (van Schalkwyk et al., 2014). Service providers therefore, need to be aware of the limitation of what is often referred to as ‘empowering’ women.

When service providers suggest they are empowering clients, the act of empowerment is often on service provider terms or what they feel is empowering. Under these circumstances, the difficulty arising is, there is rarely a movement of power from others to women living with DA (Cattaneo et al., 2014; Johnson et al., 2005; Peled et al., 2000). Empowerment building by service providers is often on the service provider terms, with little consideration, or consultation, with women they are attempting to empower (Astbury, 2006). In reality it will be difficult for women to empower themselves when faced with

physical abuse, they can however, maintain a degree of control and agency within the situation. Control maybe over their own emotional and psychological reaction and control over their own involvement in the situation. These aspects of control were displayed and described by women in my study, who discussed their emotional intelligence in controlling their psychological experience and feelings during DA incidents. Also, many had developed strategies, to not only protect the emotional and psychological self, but to gain control over the environment and the partner's behaviours. It is the area of control which is in need of focus, because control is an element women can obtain through individual self-effort and is an achievable aim for women facing DA. Whereas, empowerment is an elusive concept women are unlikely to be able to achieve or maintain.

Looking at strengths women display when faced with DA situations is in concordance with feminist thought of an empowerment and strength based model, where recognition is given to the ability of women to grow despite the adversity they face. The issue of power and empowerment however, is often not necessarily obtainable through individual self-effort, often being beyond individuals' means because of the social aspects impacting on how much power any group is able to secure in a particular situation. Women in general are not afforded an equal degree of power as their male counterparts and women from lower socio-economic or minority groups are afforded even less power. A better approach would be to aid women in securing a sense of control over, their environment, living arrangements, and emotional and psychological wellbeing, within the adverse situation. Because, attempts to empower women who are not afforded power within the society they reside is to somewhat setting them up to fail. This is not to dissuade our efforts to fight for empowerment for women within our society, it is merely to suggest that the issue of empowerment is likely better fought by feminist groups within the political arena (Lehrner & Allen, 2008) who are more likely to be able to achieve a positive outcome, than to

expect individual women facing abuse to attempt to empower themselves while in the midst of an abusive situation.

**The service providers' dilemma.**

In Australia, service providers are likely to experience a degree of pressure to offer support aligned with current Government policy. This is because Government departments, within Australia, provide funding to agencies offering services to women facing DA. With limited resources available from government funding, it is likely that service providers will offer support aligned with the current social narrative, or what could be referred to as 'feel good' services (Astbury, 2006; Cattaneo et al., 2014). Therefore, it would be difficult for agencies to act against the social narrative expectations and approval, a narrative usually focused on women leaving the relationship, with little consideration for support of those who chose to stay

There is also the ethical dilemma for the service providers, where the professional may be placed in a compromising situation if there are children involved in the relationship, as the child protection laws within Australia require mandatory reporting if children are exposed to DA (State Law Publisher, 2004). The service provider, with whom the woman has confided, may find themselves stuck between a 'rock and a hard place,' where they are attempting to support and respect women's decisions, but are limited by statutory requirements in regard to reporting and safety of children. Therefore, although professionals may be aware of the benefits of non-judgemental support and allowing women to take control of the actions taken, they may not be able to officially support women's decision-making, as this would place them and their agency in a compromising position.

It has been suggested, reform is needed to allow DA agencies and child protection agencies to communicate and provide appropriate service provision which excludes statutory and criminal action penalising women facing DA (Allen, 2006; Allen, Bybee, & Sullivan, 2004). However, with funding being limited for

services in this area, agencies are careful to follow the social narrative, making decisions which are accepted by the general rule. The challenges service providers have, in effecting beneficial services for women facing DA, is providing evidence of positive change for them. With the competition for financial support always an issue, most service providers need constructive evidence of the benefits of the services they are providing. One of the challenges for future programs success will be to display positive change for women who stay with the abusive male partner.

### **Inadvertently taking control away from women facing DA.**

Therapeutic techniques empowering and supporting women's decisions have been suggested for a number of years (Astbury, 2006; Lehrner & Allen, 2008; Orava et al., 1996; Walker, 1981). However, there continues to be an attitude by service providers and social supports of the need to dispute women's opinions of what they require, in regard to their decisions to live with their partner. Currently, there is a strong influence to involve the police, criminal, and legal system in DA, which is being encouraged by the feminist movement in an attempt to move the patriarchal attitude, within the legal system. However, many women report, they do not want police or legal involvement (Bailey, 2012) and would prefer the management of the DA remain a private matter. The reason for women's opinion in this regard is, the adoption of many legal proceedings has removed control and a management tool they were able to use to manage the partner's abusive behaviour. With the implementation of mandatory sentencing in Australian courts, control has been removed from women and given to the legal system, where women will no longer be granted choice in the legal action taken against the partner (Mitchell, 2011). The use of mandatory sentencing and control, being taken over by the legal system, inhibits women from reporting the violence to which they are exposed, because once the partner is charged women are no longer able to withdraw the charges. In the past women were able to use police intervention as a bargaining chip with the

partner and this was often a deterrent for his abuse. However, women are now less motivated to use this service or system when facing problems with their partner. This is primarily because women are not able to withdraw the charge and the partner's knowledge of her lack of control and power in this situation allows him to continue his abusive behaviour, thereby minimising the power of her threats to call the authorities. Therefore, the legal service, in their attempt to improve women's lives, has inadvertently restricted women's ability to remain safe. Also, women often do not want to harm the partner (Allen, Bybee, & Sullivan, 2004; Briones-Vozmediano et al., 2014; Simpson, 2003), they just want him to stop the abuse. Therefore, with the threat of recrimination from arrest and charges, they are reluctant to contact authorities to intervene.

In supporting women's freedom of choice, service providers need to begin to recognise, if a woman chooses to stay with her partner, this is a viable option and to assist her they need to accept and respect her decision and make attempts to support her to achieve her aims within these parameters (Baker, 1997; Cattaneo et al., 2014) by working 'with' her, not taking the role of the expert adviser (Allen, Bybee, & Sullivan, 2004). Thus far, it appears there is a lack of knowledge on how to support women in this circumstance, even though there is evidence of women who have stayed and successfully eliminated violence from their relationship (Brown, 1997; Peled et al., 2000; Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 2008). Recognising, women can be victimised by the partner, without being a victim, is a necessary step toward being able to appropriately assist them in coping, a point that is missing in many theories (Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Dobash & Dobash, 1988; Dobash & Dobash, 1981; Rhatigan et al., 2006). Therefore, psychological explanations for staying need to not only consider the societal and material constraints involved in the stay/leave decision process (Anderson & Saunders, 2003), in unison with these considerations there is a requirement to consider women's needs and choices for practical useful services that support their choice (Allen, Bybee, & Sullivan, 2004), whether that is to leave or to stay.

**Women's opinions of what is needed is a necessity.**

Views of women's resilience and control when living with violence and supporting them staying, may appear to hold contradictions for those holding strong feminist views of male control. However, recognising the strength women exhibit and acknowledging and respecting their views of their situation, holds stronger feminist actions than to leave when experiencing pressure from the social norms of feminist thinking. Feminists in the past have focused on recovery from leaving, not recovery while remaining, without consideration for the estimated 75% of women who, after leaving, return to the abuser, or for women who chose to remain and not leave (Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Peled et al., 2000).

By providing services designed without input from women, to whom it is aimed to help, agencies are maintaining the power over women despite their professed aim to empower them. Actions such as these will lead to disillusioned clients who are less likely to return or access the systems developed for their benefit. Therefore, women seeking services are faced with aid which is not useful or relative to their needs (Allen, Bybee, & Sullivan, 2004). With a little effort agencies would be able to apply strategies allowing women to apply their own decision-making skills and coping strategies, which will enhance women's self-efficacy, which is part of the psychological concept of control enhancement (Song, 2012). An environment allowing women to maintain control, self-determine, and display their strength, women will experience a changed experience from the one experienced by the partner and by the social perception of an individual without choice (Murdaugh, Hunt, Sowell, & Santana, 2004; Peled et al., 2000). Results from research indicate more positive outcomes have been achieved in situations where women themselves were able to be viewed as the experts of their own situations (Perilla et al., 2011). A focus on resilience when assisting women facing DA will allow service providers and supporting others to

aid women in strengthening their adaptive strategies for coping with the DA they are facing.

When service providers create intervention programs to help women facing DA, without consultation with the individuals they are attempting to help, it is most likely they are applying services which are the most comfortable, efficient, and affordable for the provider, and appear most effective to the social narrative, with little consideration of the benefits for the women who will be using the system (Astbury, 2006; Cattaneo et al., 2014). Unfortunately, in the past these are the services that have been available to women facing DA.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

In this section, I will address the strengths and limitations of my study, emphasising the methodological, sampling, and recruitment techniques applied. The use of IPA, has provided a rich foundation of data which can be built upon in future research, to investigate the needs of women while they continue to reside with their abusive male partner. Although beneficial to be informed of women's needs when facing DA, this is an area currently void of information acquired directly from women engrossed within this experience. Therefore, more research is needed in the area and this study is a beginning to building our bank of knowledge, and can only improve services as the investigations continue to explore the needs in this area of the DA literature.

The methodology allowed an in depth examination of individual experience which uncovered the similarities of women, whether they were young or mature, but also allowed the individual experiences to be recognised and acknowledged. The diversity and similarities of women's experiences provided a depth of information not accessed through quantitative research, and this reinforced acknowledgement of the need to hear the voices of women currently living with abuse. Without direct knowledge of women's experiences and needs, service providers and policy makers will be unable to provide the necessary services and support to reduce the negative affect experienced by

women facing DA. Data of this nature is not possible when traditional quantitative methods of analysis are utilised. This study differs from many other studies, where the individual experience of women living with DA was not captured in depth, because of the retrospective nature of many reports. One of the most beneficial contributions of the methodological choice for this study is, the practicality of the data in advancing service providers current modes of practice when assisting women facing DA. Women's unstructured spontaneous responses, initiating from their experiential understanding of living with DA, contributes to our current knowledge of the needs and life of women living in a DA relationship.

As this was my first experience in interviewing for a large research project, I felt I may have missed some opportunities to delve further into topics that arose, during the interview. However, the literature has suggested, there is no need to be overly concerned about the questions asked or the expertise, as long as you are interacting with the individual in a genuine and sincere manner in exploring their ideas and experiences, the data will be rich and relevant (Rapley, 2007; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Further alleviating my concerns that I may have missed important information was my recognition of the many unexpected perspectives evolving from women's narratives in this study, where I needed to be careful I did not miss the meaning and experience being relayed to me. The danger of me missing the presented experience was because of my white Western individualistic perspective, where I initially started to interpret women's voices as one of a person with little control over their life. However, as I continually immersed myself in the narratives shared by women in this study, I became aware of the control they had enforced within their lives and the strength they experienced through self-control, even when exposed to a powerless environment. It is from the perspective of control and strength, experienced by women interviewed who were currently living in a DA relationship, of which most would consider was out of their control, I learned most from my participants.

Although I found myself comfortable going off script, I continued to have a focus on discovering the abusive incidents in women's lives. I feel this arose from my personal need to justify to others, supervisors, markers, and colleagues, that my participants were in an abusive relationship. This concern was often reinforced when discussing my participants with others, as they would often ask about the degree of physical abuse my participants were experiencing. The questioning of others confirmed to me, the social worldview and narratives related to DA continue to focus on the physical severity of abuse, with less consideration of the emotional and psychological aspects. There were times in retrospect, where I felt overly directive, which initially caused me concern. These concerns were reinforced by reports that an interviewer needs to be experienced to gain the data needed for IPA, as an interview without rich data will not be analysable (Flick, 2009; Smith & Eatough, 2007; Smith & Osborn, 2008). However, I found reassurance from others (Rapley, 2004) who suggest, any form of narrative between people, particularly if there is an interest in the subject on the part of the interviewer and the interviewer is actively listening, will provide informative information about the participants' experiences. Further, Rubin and Rubin (2005) explained:

You do not have to worry if 'that question was far too leading' ... *Just get on with interacting with that specific person (Italics from original text)*. Try and explore their thoughts, ideas and experiences on the specific topic and, if you feel it is relevant, offer your thoughts, ideas and experiences for comparison (p.16).

Further, I noticed my directive approach was often managed by participants, where they took control and redirected the conversation to their areas of concern, or by them advising I had misinterpreted their voice and redirecting me to their intended meaning. These occasions gave me solace that the interviews were not taking on my worldview, but were likely allowing the participant to have their own voice and present and interpret their experiences

in their own way. It also provided reassurance that participants were comfortable with the interview process, which was further reinforced by many reports of the interview being a 'cathartic' experience.

The techniques applied, by me during the interviews, elicited considerable discussion from participants and there appeared to be a good rapport between them and me. Evidence of the rapport was indicated when participants expressed a feeling of satisfaction and relief at being able to tell their story. One woman stated, it was nice not to be interrupted or told what to do, but just be able to talk. This will only occur if the interview is approached in an empathetic and inquiring manner, where the participant enters a narrative interaction conducive to sharing of their personal stories (Rapley, 2004). Sharing of this nature, in a safe environment, is more likely to uncover depth within the story, which will allow unexpected and new interpretations to come to the fore. There was also evidence of participant's eagerness for their story to be of importance to the research, which was displayed by participants asking me if they had provided the information required for the study. Participants asked questions such as, 'what else do you need to know?', or 'have I said the right thing?' or 'have I said enough?' Under circumstances where participants were eager to contribute, I was very aware of the willingness of the participant to please me, the interviewer, and therefore managed my response carefully making statements such as, 'this is your story. You tell me what you feel is right, or enough.' 'You know better than I.' My responses were aimed at indicating to the participant, they are the experts of their experiences and they are the ones who are guiding me in the story.

My study focused on the individual experiences of 16 women who are currently living with the abusive male partner. Therefore, there is no suggestion the results can be interpreted to represent the beliefs and experiences of all women exposed to DA. However, IPA does not attempt to satisfy size quotas, because it is not attempting to generalise the results to general trends or other

populations (Coyle, 2007; Flick, 2009). The use of small numbers, within IPA, allows a depth of analysis because of the time available, where the narratives provide an insightful view of women's experience of living with an abusive male partner. This study provides an important view on how women experience living with abuse and their ability to find themselves and draw on their strengths to find a sense of control over their situation. The smaller number of participants allowed the depth of analysis required to understand the full experience of these women. However, the regularity with which themes emerged is an indication of the soundness of the experiences expressed here and are likely to be supported in future research investigating this area.

Purposive convenience sampling was used in this study. Purposive sampling was applied, because it attracted individuals who have extensive experience of the topic being investigated, and convenience because of the limited access to this cohort of individuals. Purposive sampling was appropriate for my study as I was attempting to investigate the experience of a particular group of individuals, to answer a specific research question, what is it like to live with an abusive male partner, while seeking a diversity of opinions to allow for comparison within the data (Barbour, 2001). Therefore, my sample were selected for the unique information they were able to provide, which was representative of the cohort I was investigating (Teddlie & Yu, 2007), thereby adding to the reliability of the data collected (Tongco, 2007). Convenience sampling was the only choice, because of the limited access available to women who currently live with an abusive male. Therefore, I was accessing women who were willing to volunteer for my study. For this study, convenience samples were also advantageous, as it allowed women who were willing to share their experience with me and who were able to articulate their experiences, which allowed me access to their inner thoughts, emotions, and interpretations relating to their experiences. The two sampling techniques provided me with women who shared a rich narrative of their experiences, allowing an in depth insight into the experience of living with DA for the women in this study, and being

purposive a degree of representativeness or comparability with other women living within DA (Teddlie & Yu, 2007).

Participants formed a diversity of cultures, which is indicative of the Australian population however, all were English speaking. Therefore, linguistically diverse individuals were not represented within the research participants. Therefore, these results may not be indicative of non-English speaking women's experience of DA. However, the sampling techniques were as comprehensive as was possible, considering the sensitivity of the group being recruited and the limitations to access of women because of the sensitive topic, which instigated tight ethical restrictions regarding contact with women. Also, the participants were all recruited within Western Australia (WA). However, it is expected, the views of women within this state are not dissimilar to those of other states within Australia, who offer similar services and have the same demographic as WA.

All participants were living within the Perth metropolitan area, restricting our knowledge of women living in rural areas, where there are fewer services to access and women are often isolated. Therefore, comparison of these results with experiences of women living in rural areas needs to be taken with caution, as women in remote areas experience difficulties not faced by women living within the Perth metropolitan area. Women living in rural areas and remote areas are likely to experience more difficulties with service provision, as there are likely less services available and limited privacy of the DA. There is also the difficulty of escape for women in rural or remote areas, as the partner is likely to be aware of the location of services offered to women who are leaving and the legal system that she may be attempting to access.

Despite the limitations discussed here, results from this study and the views presented here can be utilised in highlighting the concerns held by women in similar situations, within the larger population. Findings from the study can be used to initiate change in services and interventions and to modify protocols and

policy to positively change the environment and perspectives toward DA within Australia.

### **Future Research Suggestions**

Although abuse has been placed on the political agenda, with the Australian Federal Government committing \$30AU million for a National awareness campaign on DA (Ireland, 2015), which is positive, the view that the abused woman is powerless, controlled, and deviant, if she does not follow the socially acceptable behaviour of the victim of DA, prevails. Interventions to stop DA have not been very successful (Rhatigan et al., 2006). Therefore, questions continue relating to why it occurs and how it can be stopped. Further, services offered to women facing DA, although improving, are considered inadequate (including Australia) and there is more needed to aid women facing DA (Hegarty et al., 2008), particularly for those who chose to stay. Because of the lack of understanding about the causes and how to prevent DA, plus the limited success from interventions with women and men, there is a need to attempt to investigate the processes involved in living with DA, to gain more knowledge by approaching the questions from a different perspective. The difficulty in stopping or explaining DA reinforces the need for interventions to support women facing DA to cope with their living situation.

Effective support for women facing DA needs to involve reciprocal provision of information and decision-making, a genuine trusting environment enabling women to share their experiences and views without value judgements, and allow women to maintain control over the decisions in their lives (Astbury, 2006; Lehrner & Allen, 2008; Rapp, 1998). When women are provided with services in this manner, women are more likely to experience emotional and psychological growth, enabling them to better cope with the adversity they are facing. Service providers are the gatekeepers for women facing DA and as such will impact on the provision of appropriate services. It would therefore add to our knowledge if we were able to access service providers' views on what they

think is appropriate aid for women who present when wanting to remain living with the abusive partner. Interviewing gatekeepers about their views of what women who stay need, plus their attitudes toward women who stay, would be beneficial in improving our understanding of the relationships between providers and users in service provision, for women facing DA who wish to stay. Also, it would be beneficial for future research to include an investigation into the issue of what hinders and helps service providers, in providing appropriate support to women living with DA.

As there has been a predominance of research investigating the negative aspects of exposure to DA, it may be beneficial to explore positive psychological growth that can occur in relation to DA. Psychological growth has emerged as an important theme in this study and appeared to not only increase women's wellbeing, but also offered a form of protection from the negative psychological and emotional impact of exposure to DA. If experiences of psychological growth are also observed with other groups facing DA, this will provide guidelines in ways to aid women to maintain some form of control during and after exposure to DA. Further research of a qualitative nature is also needed to explore the experience of other groups exposed to DA: individuals living in same sex relationships, individuals from Indigenous Australian communities, and men who are facing abuse from women. Each of these groups requires independent qualitative investigation to explore their experience, because different groups are likely to experience different challenges when faced with DA and therefore, require different service provision.

As the focus of the current study was to understand the experience of women living with DA, less specific effort was made to investigate their needs and preferences in terms of services. It would therefore be beneficial to, investigate their needs in more depth to allow service providers the information required for the design and implementation of appropriate services for women and others facing DA. Current social narratives are attempting to focus change of

behaviour toward the male partner, where the suggestion is that males need to begin to take responsibility, not only for their behaviour but for the safety of their family and children, a responsibility that in the past has been directed toward the female, who is seen as the protector of the children and family unit. A change in focus toward males taking responsibility is a positive move toward the management of abuse (Simpson, 2003). It may therefore be beneficial to investigate the abusive male perspective of, what is needed for him and the female in managing their journey to an abuse free relationship. Plus, there needs to be continued recognition of the support women will require as the male partner transitions from being an abuser to a non-abuser.

### **Conclusion**

The advantage of studying women's perspective from the IPA model is that we have been able to begin to understand the views of women, who are living with DA. This has allowed us to fill a gap of misunderstanding which has resulted from knowledge gained from women who are not in this situation, who have left, and has exposed a different perspective that, researchers, service providers, society, and policy makers, need to consider in order to provide services that are beneficial and effective for this cohort. This research has helped in overcoming the myths, misconceptions, and misunderstanding, that have become common when relating to women currently living with DA. The current study has provided an indication of how women see change, which was often focused more on their personal self-growth, than on the partner's behaviour. Although this is not to minimise the abuse experienced, and there was an expectation from women that the abuse was not acceptable and needed to stop, they expressed a desire to stay and be able to access appropriate support while improving their current situation. It is now up to others to respect their decision while making attempts to aid them in improving their life, through direct support and political action in improving the lives of those living with DA.

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## Appendix B

### Participant Information Sheet

My name is Maxine Symes and I am currently conducting research on difficulties in relationships for my PhD in Clinical psychology at Curtin University of Technology.

The aim of my study is to understand how women manage difficult situations within their current relationship.

If you are interested in being part of my study you will be asked to meet with me for an interview which should last for approximately one (1) hour. During this interview I will be asking you questions that relate to the difficulties you experience in your relationship, about any distress (if any) you experience due to these difficulties and how you manage these situations. Prior to the interview you will be asked to sign a consent form and I will offer you \$20 to cover any out of pocket expenses.

Your participation in the study is completely voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at any time should you feel that you do not want to continue with the interview. If you decide to withdraw there will be no loss of payment or questioning as to your reasons for withdrawal. Unfortunately there will be no direct benefit to you if you choose to participate in my study, however the results from this research may be useful in providing better services to women who are experiencing considerable difficulties within their current relationships.

Interviews will be recorded however these recordings will be deleted after a written transcript of the interview has been produced. Any information you provide will remain confidential. Your name or any identifying information will not be reported or published in any form. In following Curtin University of Technology policy all data collected for this study will be filed in a secure location for five (5) years after which time it will be destroyed.

The questions asked in the interview will be about feelings, emotions and difficulties in your relationship and this may result in you being upset. If this does occur the interview will be stopped immediately. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to. I am not able to offer you therapeutic assistance however I will provide you with a care pack which will have contact details of experienced and qualified people who can assist you.

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval number HR135/2009). If you would like further information about the study you can contact me at [maxine.symes@postgrad.curtin.edu.au](mailto:maxine.symes@postgrad.curtin.edu.au) or 9266.1397 or my supervisor Dr. Lyndall Steed at [l.steed@curtin.edu.au](mailto:l.steed@curtin.edu.au) or 9266.7182. If you would like to speak with someone regarding the ethics of this study please contact the Curtin University Ethics Committee secretary on 9266.2784.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet and taking part in my study.

Maxine Symes  
PhD (Clinical) Psychology Trainee  
Curtin University of Technology

**Appendix C**

**Consent Form**

**Project Title: The experience of women living in difficult relationships**

Participant Statement

I ..... (Print full name) have read the information sheet for this study, on women living in difficult relationships.

I understand the nature and purpose of this study, and what my participation involves.

I agree to participate in a one (1) hour interview and agree to have my interview recorded.

I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary and that I can withdraw at any time without penalty or refund of the \$20 I have received.

I have had the opportunity to ask any questions and express any concerns that I have.

I understand that all my information will remain confidential.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_

Participant

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_

Researcher

## Appendix D

### Question suggestions/prompts

What are the difficulties you are facing in your relationship?

How do you manage?

What sort of things do you do when you know that there is going to be an incident?

What sorts of things have helped in the past?

What do you think is the most helpful thing when you are trying to manage?

Has anything else helped?

Tell me about the latest incident?

When was this?

What services have you accessed for assistance?

Which have been most useful?

Have you ever left the partner?

How many times?

Does leaving help?

What have been people's attitudes when you have returned?

What are the good times like?

How long have you been in the relationship?

How has the relationship changed over time?

Is this your first?

## Appendix E

## Support services available to women

<p><b>Women's Law Centre of Western Australia:</b></p> <p>Freecall: 1800 625 122  Phone: 08 9272 8800  Fax: 08 9272 8866  Email: <a href="mailto:wlc@wlcwa.org.au">wlc@wlcwa.org.au</a>  Website:  <a href="http://www.wlcwa.org.au">http://www.wlcwa.org.au</a></p>	<p><b>Women's Health and Family Services:</b></p> <p>Freecall: 1800 998 399  Phone: 08 6330 5400  Fax: 08 6330 5499  Email: <a href="mailto:info@whfs.org.au">info@whfs.org.au</a></p>
<p><b>Women's Council for Domestic and Family Violence Services (WA):</b></p> <p>Phone: 08 9420 7264  Fax: 08 9486 8744</p>	<p><b>Women's Services for Women and Children Policy:</b></p> <p>Hotline: 1800 737 732</p>
<p><b>Family Helpline:</b></p> <p>Phone: 9223 1100</p>	<p><b>Relationship Australia:</b></p> <p>Freecall: 1300 364 277  Phone: 9278 4000</p>
<p><b>Centrecare:</b></p> <p>Phone: 9325 6644  Email:  <a href="mailto:enquiries@centrecare.com.au">enquiries@centrecare.com.au</a></p>	<p><b>Family Relationship Centre Perth City:</b></p> <p>Phone: 9278 4000</p>
<p><b>Lifeline:</b></p> <p>Phone: 131 114  Phone: 9261 4444</p>	<p><b>The Samaritans Crisis Line:</b></p> <p>Phone: 9381 5725</p>
<p><b>Women's Domestic Violence Helpline:</b></p> <p>Freecall: 1800 007 339  Phone: 9223 1188</p>	<p><b>Men's Domestic Violence Helpline:</b></p> <p>Freecall: 1800 000 599  Phone: 9223 1199</p>
<p><b>Sexual Assault Response Centre (SARC):</b></p> <p>Freecall: 1800 199 888  Phone: 9340 1828  Fax: 9381 5426</p>	<p><b>Department for Child Protection:</b></p> <p>Phone: 9222 2555</p>
<p><b>Crisis Care:</b></p> <p>Freecall: 1800 199 008  Phone: 9223 1111</p>	<p><b>Women's Information Service:</b></p> <p>Freecall: 1800 199 174  Email: <a href="mailto:wis@digc.wa.gov.au">wis@digc.wa.gov.au</a></p>