Over her shoulder: What are women’s relationship perceptions when there has been lived experience of domestic violence within that relationship?

Amy Hannan
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Over her shoulder

What are women’s relationship perceptions when there has been lived experience of domestic violence within that relationship?

Submitted by Amy Hannan

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of BACHELOR OF SOCIAL WORK (HONOURS)

Submitted on the 1st December 2014

Faculty of Regional Professional Studies

Edith Cowen University South West Campus W.A
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I would like to thank the women who participated in this study. Your bravery and strength cannot be measured. Thank you for generously sharing your journeys in order to help others: your beauty shines.

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And finally to my mother, Lyn Hannan, thank you for you unwavering support and encouragement. You taught me to never give up and always look forward. Your strength is the reason I have thrived. I love you and I hope I make you proud.
ABSTRACT

Research into the social phenomena of domestic violence is a relatively new area of exploration. The focus for domestic violence researchers has been across a broad range of topics with a key theme being the reasons that women stay or leave the relationship. The study described in this thesis engaged with women in discussions regarding their perception of their relationship when there had been experiences of domestic violence. The methodology included the use of a focus group with three women from the South West of Western Australia.

The focus group consisted of both individual and group sessions. For the focus group, word association and brainstorming were tools used to enable deep reaching, in-depth discussion that produced rich data. Data was thematically analysed using a process of coding. The analysis found a number of themes present, of which, four thematic chapters were developed. The findings of this study have implications for how the realities of domestic violence are understood by the greater community, and how services engage with women who have been subjected to abuse.
DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

I. Incorporate without acknowledgement of any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institute of higher education

II. Contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text of the Contain any defamatory material

Signed.............................................

Amy Hannan
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

This study focuses on women’s perception of their relationship where there has been lived experience of domestic violence within that relationship. Domestic violence has been present throughout history but has only been recognised as a societal issue since the 1970’s, with the feminist movement which began in the United Kingdom (Brown & Hampson, 2009, p.1; Cronin, 2013, p. 16). Research into domestic violence is defined by Cronin (2013) as the ‘tip of the iceberg’, there are many aspects of domestic violence that have yet to be thoroughly explored. Alongside research, public views of women have evolved throughout the years. Women have been seen as the deserving, the cause and more currently the victim within a violent relationship (Morgan & Thaper-Bjorkert, 2010, p. 37). Current perceptions of woman in domestic violence research are oriented towards their decision to either stay or leave their partners; women have been seen as making a choice to remain in the relationship for reasons of weakness, as condoning violence, as greedy or as being dependent or overcommitted (Overstreet & Quinn, 2013, p. 110; Payne & Policastro, 2013, p. 334).

A current focus of domestic violence research is the decision women make to remain or leave the relationship, with a particular focus on the factors that women consider in weighing up this choice (Campbell, Dziegielewski & Turnage, 2005, p. 11). The research described in this thesis has come from the observation of women’s representation in domestic violence research, and on the couple relationship as the element that appears to be overlooked. Investigation of the couple relationship has been centralised around theories of attachment and traumatic bonding; research from this perspective reflects a psychological approach to understanding the couple relationship, but does not identify how individuals within the couple see the relationship (Harlos et
al., 2012, p. 3199). Little or no research has investigated the significance of the couple relationship as perceived by the people within that relationship. Described by Marcus & Swett (2003) as an individual’s most “frequent source of both happiness and distress” (p. 314), the couple relationship is a significant element of human nature.

This study enabled women who have experienced violence at the hands of their partner to discuss their perception of their own relationship before, during and after domestic violence occurred. The insight this study provides on the reality of domestic violence, and how women process their experiences, is invaluable. The aim of this research will be to better inform the literature, professionals and the greater community of what domestic violence is to women who experience it.

Research Question

What are women’s relationship perceptions when there has been lived experience of domestic violence within that relationship?

The title ‘over her shoulder’ represents the researcher’s aim of understanding women’s perceptions of their relationship and their lived experiences of domestic violence; the researcher acknowledges that a person’s story is their own. Therefore, the title represents the study’s foundation of respecting the journey of women and the desire to follow them through their reflection.

Definition of terms

- *Domestic Violence*

The definition of domestic violence is culturally and individually specific, however for the purpose of this study I refer to Bird, Crofts & Schubert’s (2014) definition of domestic violence as one individual’s abuse of power in relation to another by means of asserting dominance and/or control. This study uses the term domestic violence instead
of family violence as it focuses on the relationship between the couple, rather than on the experiences of other family members such as children (Taylor, 2006, p. 19).

Behaviours that currently come under the umbrella of domestic violence are, but are not limited to:

- **Physical violence**: pushing, shoving, hitting, choking, kicking, slapping, beating with a weapon
- **Sexual violence**: Rape, unwanted sexual practices, mutilation, coerced prostitution
- **Intimidation**: aggressive looks, gestures, smashing furniture, damage of personal property, displaying weapons, harming pets
- **Threats**: threatening to harm partner, friends and/or children
- **Emotional abuse**: degrading comments, public humiliation, undermining, psychological games, rumour spreading
- **Isolation**: cutting off of individual from friends, family, work, social media or other networks, and/or geographical isolation
- **Stalking**: following, constant unwanted contact, monitoring
- **Financial abuse**: total control of money, making individual beg for money
- **Spiritual abuse**: control of religious expression (Brown & Hampson, 2009, p. 1; Stanford, 2009, p. 12)

- **Relationship**

  For the purpose of this study, the relationship is defined as a commitment between two individuals who had lived together for a period of six months or longer (Blais, Boucher, Sabourin & Vallard, 1990, p. 1022).

- **Perception**

  Perception is the process in which reality and experiences are acquired through an individual’s senses and cognitive understanding (Given, 2008, p. 607). A person’s
perception directly impacts their opinions, judgements, construction of meaning, future experiences and responses to situations, it is commonly defined as ‘how we see things’ (Given, 2008, p. 607).

- **Reality**

Reality is a concept that by definition is uniquely different for every individual. For the purpose of this study reality will be defined as the state or fact of something being real, a reality is the actuality of an experience (Eidlin, 2010, p. 782).

**Purpose**

Domestic violence remains a current and prevalent issue in Australian society with an estimated 18-20% of women having experienced violence at the hands of a past or current partner (Chadwick & Morgan, 2009, p. 2). Research in the field of spousal violence is relatively young but continues to grow. For instance, after the 2005 WHO multi-country study on domestic violence was released the number of research studies on domestic violence rose dramatically in a short period of time (Kelmendi, 2013, p. 560).

The prominent focus of domestic violence literature is on intervention, research is currently addressing the theories and models of why women do/don’t seek help and what changes need to be made at the professional level of service provision. Concept such as learned helplessness discussed in Barnett (2001) or the investment model in Mele, Roberts & Wolfer (2008) have taken centre stage, with research now actively searching for explanation why women choose to either stay or leave their abusive partners (Meyer, 2012, p. 180). This study will examine a particular factor in a women’s choice, the overlooked factor of the couple relationship (Bagshaw et al., 2000, p. 30).
An in-depth investigation into the couple relationship, specifically women’s perceptions of it will have significance for:

- Professionals in developing informed and sensitive practice, intervention and prevention strategies/programs that acknowledge the couple relationship and its importance (Rhatigan & Street, 2005, p. 1581)
- Informing the community about the reality of domestic violence and the complex nature of the couple relationship and the stay/leave decision
- Provide invaluable knowledge about under researched and often misunderstood aspect of the lived experience of domestic violence
- Participants feel empowered by the process and feel a sense of closure about their perceptions of the couple relationship which may have been previously ignored.

This chapter has provided an introduction to the field of domestic violence and what will be explored in this thesis. The following chapter will explore the literary background of the field and detail how the research question was developed. The methodology chapter will detail the method in which data was collected, and the later chapters will discuss the findings.
Domestic Violence: A Shadowed History

From the Roman Laws of Chastisement in 753BC, where a man was allowed to beat his wife if her behaviour reflected negatively on his reputation, to the 19th Century England ‘rule of thumb’ where a husband had the right to “discipline his wife by hitting her with any reasonable instrument no thicker than his thumb” (Cronin, 2013, p. 15), domestic violence has remained a consistent aspect of human history (Taylor, 2006, p. 43).

Described by Amnesty International as “one of the most pervasive human rights abuses” (Cronin, 2013, p. 14), domestic violence is estimated to impact 50% of women worldwide at some point in their life (Oke, 2008, p. 5). Within an Australian context, a 2006 Personal Safety survey found that over 33% of women had experienced domestic violence at some point in their life, and that 1 in 5 women were currently experiencing violence at the hands of their partner (Chadwick & Morgan, 2009, p. 2; Douglas & Stark, 2010, p. 11).

This literature review will look at present research in the area of domestic violence, with a particular focus on women and the couple relationship.

The Age of Exploration

With the second wave of feminism in the 1970s, understandings of domestic violence grew from a medical/clinical standpoint to a more evolved holistic approach (Cronin, 2013, p. 33; Taylor, 2006, p. 13). At this time research shed light on the breadth of domestic violence at an international level, it has brought spousal abuse into the public eye as a real and current societal issue (Goodman et al., 2005, p. 71). With a growing public acceptance of domestic violence as a prevalent societal problem, research has
increasingly focused on finding the causes. Theories regarding the cause of spousal abuse have included medical explanations of mental illness and alcohol, through to psychological, and sociological considerations that delve deeper into the perpetrators perspective (Brown & Hampson, 2009, p. 1). The introduction of feminist theory challenged community perceptions of domestic violence and their understanding of women’s experiences (Zosky, 2011, p. 202). A spotlight had been placed on the women who have experienced abuse at the hands of their partner, their identity in the relationship, and whether they leave or remain (Taylor, 2006, p. 3).

The Evolving Debate

Over the past decade research has explored the how, why and when of women leaving violent relationships, focusing particularly on those who don’t leave (Enander & Holmberg, 2008, p. 201). With public acknowledgement and understanding of what domestic violence is, and its severe consequences, there has been an active movement to assist women in getting out of these situations (Meyer, 2012, p. 190). There has also been research on the general public’s attitudes of domestic violence in the community, with this research demonstrating there is a lack of understanding regarding women’s abilities to make active choices within that relationship.

A sense of responsibility is placed on the women to make a definitive choice on whether to stay or leave the relationship; however as Tiggman & Worth (1996) found, a woman’s decision to stay or leave is often a complex process where the victim may leave and return a number of times (Murray, 2008, p. 67). This common reality was examined further in Boonzaier, Gobodo-Madikizela & Shalkwyk’s (2014) study, where they examined the personal process a woman undergoes while coming to the decision to leave (McDonough, 2010, p. 38). The women’s resistance to end the relationship was explored through narratives of women who had recently left their abusive relationships;
it found that the factors that kept those from leaving played a significant role in their decision (Boonzaier, Gobodo-Madikizela & Shalkwyk, 2014, pp. 316-317).

Congruently there has been a shift in research focus to examining the factors that contribute to a woman remaining in a violent relationship (Clark et al., 2012, p. 1657; Douglas & Stark, 2010, p. 16).

A study that explores these factors is Enander & Holmberg (2008) which describes an abusive relationship as a web, where an array of factors can make the relationship difficult to disentangle from. This idea was also explored in Fishel & Rynerson (1998) who refers to learned helplessness as a psychological condition wherein repeated control at the hands of their abuser leads to women believing they have no power and are unable to leave (Burton, Coop-Gordon & Porter, 2004, p. 331; Few & Rosen, 2005, p. 266; Stoever, 2013, pp. 506-507). Likewise models such as attachment and traumatic bonding focus on the interpersonal process of women that impacts their ability to see the situation rationally and make an attempt to leave (Duley, 2012, p. 28; Gormley et al., 2014, p. 36). Associated with internal issues of abandonment, dependency, love, guilt and fear, these models often result in the women being seen as victims to both their situation and their own flaws (Axsom, Rhatigan & Street, 2006, p. 333; Fiorello, 2002, p. 26). This ‘victim’ label invalidates women’s strengths within the relationship and ignores their ability to make informed choices (Collette, 2009, p. 5; Dunn, 2005, p. 2; Overstreet & Quinn, 2013, p. 110).

In contrast, Meyer (2012) looked at the explanation of rational choice in women who choose to stay in abusive relationships. The study consisted of interviewing 29 women who had experienced domestic violence and found that there is a process of risk evaluation undertaken when deciding to stay or go. This suggests women use a process of weighing the risks of leaving to the potential benefits and that staying is a rational
choice made when risks supersede the benefits (Brohl-Perelli, 2004, p. 2; Mele, Roberts & Wolfer, 2008, pp. 369-370; Meyer, 2012, p. 186). Other interview based studies such as Axsom & Rhatigan (2006) came to the same conclusion by applying the Investment model and finding that some women choose to stay with their partner after evaluating the investing factors of the relationship (eg. shared children) and their consequential commitment levels (Rhatigan & Street, 2005). This illustrates an alternative viewpoint regarding women’s empowerment in situations of violence, where women are seen as having a degree of control over their situation and able to rationalise their circumstances before making an informed decision regarding their relationship (Calhoun et al., 2000, p. 167). The research by Meyer (2012) and Axsom and Rhatigan (2006) provides a foundation for the research described in this thesis, which is an exploration into the experiences of women whilst in an abusive relationship.

**Issue of the Professional**

Another focus of domestic violence research is the increased access, effectiveness and success of domestic violence services. Literature has found professional discourse regarding women who remain in domestic violence is inconsistent and a potential barrier to service access (Chang, Hays & McCleod, 2010, p. 303). Taylor (2006) examined the consistency of perceptions of domestic violence across Perth’s (Western Australia) domestic violence services from multiple disciplines. This research explored professional understandings of the stay/go decision and potential barriers that may occur. Taylor found that professionals remained firm in their perception of women as victims and that their understanding of reasons for staying were based on learned helplessness models. Payne & Policastro (2013) suggested that professionals felt disconnection with women who chose to stay, some even felt that they could not understand the decision. Researchers have concluded that further research is needed to
explore women’s rationale for staying and that the focus of this research needs to be on women’s own understandings of why and how they came to their decision (Douglas & Stark, 2010, p. 50; Taylor, 2006, p. 168; Payne & Policastro, 2013, p. 334).

The Overlooked Factor

A factor that does not appear to have been considered in current research is the couple relationship itself. Discussion and recognition of the relationship as a significant element of the staying/leaving decision is under represented in literature (Bookwala, 2002, p. 94). Goodman, Liang, Tummala-Narra & Weintraub (2005) suggests that focus on women’s interpretations of the relationship could improve professional understanding of why women stay in relationships (Martin, Nunly & Smith, 2013, pp. 400-401). As Cronin’s (2013) feminist research into the lived experience of domestic violence in older women suggests, the value of reclaiming the voice of the victims is significant.

The literature discussed indicates an aperture that exists in current research, in relation to professional knowledge of the how women experience domestic violence and how they view their relationship.
Aim

The aim of this study is to explore the perceptions of a couple relationship through the eyes of women who have experienced the use of violence within that relationship. This study focuses on how women perceive the couple relationship in the changing circumstances of domestic violence (Bell, Dutton & Goodman, 2007, p.415). The aim of this study is to develop understanding of what it is to live in a violent relationship, and enable women to be empowered through sharing their experiences.

Theoretical Framework

This study utilises a constructivist approach in the exploration of women’s perceptions of their experiences with domestic violence. A constructivist approach aims to understand the world through the direct human experience and is based on the belief that knowledge derives from the reality of those who have this experience (Crotty, 1998, p. 43; Higgs & Trede, 2010, p.33; Mertens, 2005, p. 12). This study is designed to gain knowledge by focusing on the reality of each participant, and allowing understanding to be constructed through the participants’ engagement with the final data (Creswell, 2003; Knipe & Mackenzie, 2006, p. 197).

A feminist perspective aims to identify, empower and provide opportunities to marginalised, powerless and oppressed groups, and therefore provides a guiding approach for the methodology and data analysis in this research (Collette, 2009, p. 38; Zosky, 2011, p. 202). Historically, women have experienced oppression at the hands of a patriarchal society; their experiences and their knowledge have often been disregarded and at times silenced altogether (Cronin, 2013, pp. 34-35). The fundamental principle of
this research is to empower, it is designed to gain an understanding of women’s lived experiences by providing an opportunity for the women to have their voices heard and valued (Coombes & Morgan, 2013, p. 527).

Participants

Three women who had experienced domestic violence in a past relationship participated in this study. Participants were recruited through Waratah Support Centre, an outside organisation who was approached by the researcher to assist in the recruitment process. Participants needed to meet the following criteria:

- 18 years of age or older
- Client of Waratah Support Centre
- Have an assigned support worker at Waratah
- Relationship ended a minimum of 3 months ago
- Relationship had lasted 6 months or more
- Participant defines the relationship as being permanently discontinued
- Participant self-assessment of low current distress levels

The experiences of the participants were from a range of backgrounds. Participant’s personal details were not discussed in detail due to the anonymity of the recruitment process and to maintain privacy.

Recruitment was conducted using a third party organisation – Waratah Support Centre. Waratah is a South West based nongovernment organisation that provides free, specialised intervention services and support for those who have experienced sexual abuse and/or family or domestic violence. Recruitment was conducted using a third party rather than by direct approach by the researcher. This will be discussed further in the ethical consideration section of this chapter.
Waratah counselling staff were sent two information letters. One letter was directed to the staff member and outlined the aim and methodology of the research, their role in the recruitment process, and the participant criteria [see Appendix A]. The second letter was directed to potential participants describing the research project, what the focus group entailed and the criteria for participant inclusion in the focus group [see Appendix B]. Waratah staff were asked to advertise the research to potential participants utilising the second letter. Participants who were interested approached Waratah staff to register their interest, in total three women were recruited as participants. The number of participants was kept small to minimise issues of disorder and overpowering in group dynamics and to reduce the risk of discomfort due to the personal subject matter (Rabiee, 2004, p. 657).

**Ethical Considerations**

Harm minimisation and respect for all parties are two principles that need to be met in order for research to be ethical (Ben-Ari & Enosh, 2013, p. 425; Swauger, 2011, p. 500). Based on a World Health Organization 2001 report, the study required a number of strategies to be put in place in order for the study to follow the previously mentioned principles of harm minimisation and respect (World Health Organisation, 2001, p. 11).

The first ethical consideration was safety. Due to the nature of domestic violence there was a distinct need to ensure the safety of the participants, the staff of Waratah and the researcher in this research process. Strategies were put in place to ensure both physical safety (from ex-partner), psychological safety (re-traumatisation) and balanced power dynamics. Confidentiality was a significant element of the ethical consideration in this research. Keeping the privacy of participants and their involvement in the study, directly connected to maintaining the physical safety and reputation of the women. Strategies put in place to ensure the confidentiality of the participants include:
• Third party recruitment: recruiting through Waratah Support Centre ensured there was no record of any communication, or participants’ personal details. The focus group was held at the Waratah Support Centre as this organisation maintains high levels of client safety and confidentiality.

• Pseudonym: Participants were asked to select a pseudonym. They would be identified by this name in the data, the analysis and the thesis as a whole. This kept their identity private and their safety maintained.

• Confidentiality agreement: Participants were informed of the rules of confidentiality and asked to sign a confidentiality agreement [Appendix C]. The note-taker also signed a confidentiality agreement, as did the Waratah staff member who conducted the debriefing portion of the focus group. This form stipulates that anything disclosed or discussed during the focus group was to remain confidential and not shared.

Domestic violence is a difficult subject to discuss and so significant effort to reduce the risk of distress or further traumatisation for participants was necessary. Strategies were put in place to provide emotional and psychological support during and after the focus group. Such strategies are:

• Support: A Waratah staff member was available during the focus group for support if a participant(s) felt they need support during the focus group

• Debriefing: Waratah staff member conducted a debriefing after the focus group. Individual debriefing was offered

• Support worker: Each participant had an assigned support worker from Waratah to provide support post focus group if needed

• Services: Each participant received a list of relevant support services following the focus group
Breaks: Frequent breaks were taken during the focus group, at natural points in the discussion to reduce emotional fatigue and allow for time to decompress and reflect.

Imbalance of power is a significant element of a domestically violent relationship, and as such significant effort was made to reduce any imbalances of power throughout the research process. Strategies utilised were:

- Consent form: Participants signed a consent form agreeing to participate in the focus group and have their contribution used in analysis [see Appendix D]. The form also informed them of their rights to withdraw at any time without repercussions.

- Method: There was an initial individual session of the focus group, this strategy allowed the women to participate at their level of comfort without feeling overwhelmed.

- Analysis: participants were given the opportunity to provide feedback on data analysis two weeks after occurrence of focus group.

Method

The study utilised a focus group as the data collection method. Focus groups consist of a number of people who are asked questions as a collective, and are encouraged to discuss topics as a group. Each participant brings forth their own perceptions, experiences and opinions which are compared and explored deeply within the group setting (Kidd & Parshall, 2000, p. 294; Sim, 1998, p. 346).

The data that focus groups produce is considered highly valuable as it allows a researcher insight into the realities of its participants (McLachlan, 2005, p. 115; Plummer-D’Amato, 2008a, p. 69). Having such a limited number of participants
enabled a comfortable environment for participants to disclose more openly then they
may have in a larger group (Staveren, 1997, p. 131). The focus group setting allowed
sensitive topics to be discussed and a deeper level of understanding as each participant
contributed.

Data Collection
The focus group took place on the premise of the Waratah Support Centre, a neutral and
secure location that the participants had visited before. The focus group lasted three
hours including breaks. The focus group followed an agenda which was separated into
four distinct sections – introduction, individual session, group session and debriefing
session [see Appendix E].

The individual session consisted of participants being presented with a scenario and
asked to write down the first five to eight words that immediately came to mind.
Participants were given ten minutes to write their words down. This process was
conducted three times, each with a different scenario: the relationship before the
domestic violence had begun, during the violence, and after the violence had ended.

A group session followed this individual phase in which the participants were presented
with a large piece of white A1 sized paper. The piece was labelled ‘before’ and the
participants were encouraged to write down the words they had listed in their ‘before’
individual brainstorm. The participants were prompted to discuss words that connected,
surprised or related to their experiences before the abuse had begun, providing an
opportunity for group discussion about their shared individual experiences. This process
was repeated for the ‘during’ and the ‘after scenarios.

Following an in-depth discussion the A1 group brainstorm was placed in order from
‘before’ to ‘after’ and the group was asked general prompt questions. Once the
discussion had come to a natural end the group session for the focus group was concluded, and the recording was stopped. The debriefing session was then provided for the participants.

**Analysis**

The individual and group sections of the focus group were audio recorded. Notes were taken by the researcher’s supervisor during the focus group, they were used as points of consultation when initially analysing the data. Data was analysed using an inductive approach thematic analysis. This ‘bottom up’ approach coincided with the constructivist framework of the research project (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83).

The first stage of analysis consisted of the researcher becoming familiar with the data. The researcher transcribed the audio recording of the focus group verbatim; the transcript noted breaks, laughter and pauses to provide further meaning to the associated discussion (Bagshaw et al., 2000, p. 15). Computerised copies of the brainstorms were made (Plummer-D’Amato, 2008b, p. 126).

Transcript of the focus group underwent a basic coding process in which four major themes were identified (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Staveren, 1997, p. 132). Notes and brainstorms were used to correlate with the codes found in the transcript (Lloyd-Evans, 2006, p. 160). The four themes identified are: wordlessness, survival, responsibility and control.

At this point, two participants and the researcher met again at Waratah Support Centre and discussed the analysis. Participants were given the opportunity to read the focus group transcript and discuss the themes. Participants were encouraged to provide feedback on the analysis and the findings, this ensured no misrepresentation occurred in the thesis (Sim, 1998, p. 350; World Health Organisation, 2001, p. 16). The participant
who had not been able to attend was provided a summary sheet of the analysis and the researcher’s contact details if they wish to discuss the findings. All participants agreed to the findings and gave their consent for the researcher to use the data analysis in her thesis.

Limitations

Lloyd-Evans (2006) suggest that optimum focus group size is six to eight participants to achieve data that best reflects a wide range of perspectives and demonstrates invaluable group work processes. Due to the time constraints of an Honours research project, fewer participants were desirable. Other limitations of this study are the potential flaws of the focus group methodology, one of the biggest weaknesses of the focus group is the group dynamic itself (Morgan, 1996, p. 139). The possibility of peer pressure and overly dominant voices overriding the contribution of others is directly related to the potential for contaminated data (Lloyd-Evan, 2006, p. 166). This limitation was addressed by the use of individual time before the focus group so that each participant had the opportunity to develop their ideas without the pressure of a dominant group member being present.

Domestic violence is a complex and sensitive field in which methodological and ethical consideration must be made before research is commenced. This chapter looked at these considerations and the process of this research project into investigating women’s perceptions of their relationship in the context of domestic violence. The next chapter will explore findings of this research.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

This chapter examines the findings of this research project. All participants are referred to by their chosen pseudonym. Four themes were identified within the data. The findings will be explored in relation to the research question – what are women’s relationship perceptions when there has been lived experience of domestic violence within that relationship?

Theme 1: Wordlessness

In this research, participants were asked to reflect back on their relationship and produce words they associate with this journey, from the beginning to the end. It was during the group discussion session that a significant point was raised by the participants, that they would not have been able to complete this process had they still been in the relationship. Wordless was a word that participants agreed best described their lived experiences and how they perceived their relationship as a whole. As participant Marissa Rivers states:

“….at the time I didn’t have the words, the language in my head to think about what words I would have used to describe the relationship…um, it’s hard to say…it’s just like having some sort of blinkers on inside your mind. So yeah, I don’t know what words I would have used at the time”

This difficulty in finding the words to describe their relationship was corroborated in research by Berns & Schweingruber (2007) in which participants, who had suffered domestic violence, had struggled to ‘make sense’ of their relationship (p. 255). Upon further thematic analysis two subcategories were found to be contributing to this theme of wordlessness in women’s lived experiences; comprehension and silence.
Comprehension played a significant role in the women’s perceptions of wordlessness being a prominent element of their story. Comprehension is an individual’s ability to grasp or understand, and was found to be an element in the women’s lived experiences of wordlessness throughout their relationships (Berenstein & Dascal, 1987, p. 139). A lack of knowledge about what a healthy/unhealthy relationship was brought up on a number of occasions. Described by the women as naivety, lack of life experience and age were discussed as being factors in their diminished awareness of the true nature of their relationship.

“I really didn’t have any true idea about what a healthy relationship was at that age. I was too young to know, to see it for what it. I was quite naïve”

The inability to spot the potential or signs of domestic violence is a common issue for young women when entering into a relationship. Literature supports these findings and indicates that women base their understanding of domestic violence on their own experiences and those of others (Berns & Schweingruber, 2007, p. 251). Cordero (2014) suggests that although women experience abuse at the hands of their partner they don’t recognise it as domestic violence, or themselves as having lived experience of violence. As the quote above states, the participants were unable to see their relationship and the abuse for what it was, with the benefit of hindsight the participants could now reflect back and see the relationship as controlling and violent.

“I mean you don’t see that at the time but what I thought was attentive was actually quite controlling”

As Leslie Morgan Steiner, a survivor and advocate of domestic violence, states “I didn't know he was abusing me...I never once thought of myself as a battered wife. Instead, I was a very strong woman in love with a deeply troubled man” (Steiner, 2012). A perpetrator’s ability to manipulate their partner often end in women missing the ‘red
flags’ that indicate when their relationship is an unhealthy one (Cordero, 2014, p. 46). Being unable to comprehend the reality of their relationship situation left the participants of this study without the ability to ‘find the words’ to describe their relationship at the time.

Silence

Silence is an encouraged response to domestic violence; from historical societal expectations to threats from a partner, women are taught that staying quiet is their only option (Cronin, 2013). The women discussed their experiences of fear and oppression during the abuse, and how that would consume any ability they had to seek help and/or speak up.

“I’ve had an education and should be able to use words, but at that time being so silenced.....”

The women described a ‘fog’ that existed during the period of abuse, an all-consuming mass that dulled their ability to see clearly and find the ability to break the silence. It was indicated that this fog was a by-product of the women’s natural response of fear and shock, and an element in the survival mode that will be explored at a later time in this study. This literal loss of speech was addressed in Cronin (2013) in which her findings revealed that after the initial abuse or ‘ambush’, women are left in state of new victimhood where they are unable to find their narrative as a result of debilitating emotional upheaval (Birnbaum & Buchbinder, 2010, p. 659).

Unlike the literature, however, this inability to break through the wordlessness and find one’s narrative was experienced throughout the abusive period of the relationship not just the initial incident. In fact, participants spoke of still experiencing periods of paralysing fear which left them silenced. As participant Marissa Rivers states:
“that there is still fear, at the back of you, almost a part of your brain…um even though you know you’re doing the right thing and you’re sort of clawing your way forward, there still a…like…the fact that you still speak is, it triggers this sort of fog, this confusion”

The women spoke of fear being a part of their brain, a section that would be triggered when they attempted to speak out against the abuse – even though they had left the relationship. This reinforced behaviour, to fear when not silent, is found to be an aspect of self silencing that was established and maintained during the abusive relationship (Cordero, 2014, p. 78). The women were taught they had to stay silent as a means of avoiding further abuse, a method of survival throughout the relationship; this was such a necessity that the women remain in this taught behaviour cycle, in which they keep themselves silent (Cordero, 2014, p. 78; Cronin, 2013, p. 206). When the participants reflected back on their relationship, being silenced was a significant element of why they stayed in the relationship. The wordlessness they experienced, and still experience holds a prominent role in how they perceived their relationships and its journey.

Theme 2: Survival

One of the biggest themes that rose from the data was survival, all participants disclosed the methods they had employed to survive through the relationship and eventually leave. Survival strategies can be seen as coping mechanisms, tools in which a woman maintains self-preservation by ways of stoping, avoiding and/or dealing with the abuse (Boreman, 2014, p. 12). The survival strategies discussed in the focus group were employed by the women as a method of regulating their distress and handling their situation. Throughout the relationship the evolution of strategies enabled the women to adapt in the ever changing nature of the abusive relationship, a concept that is supported by literature (Kennedy & Lerner, 2000, pp. 218-219). Each participant had their own
unique journey of survival but all spoke of how they learnt to cope with their experiences of abuse. Consequently, two sub-categories were identified in the thematic analysis of the focus group transcribe: perfect wife, survival mode and health.

**Perfect Wife**

The perfect wife persona is modelled on the stereotypical 1950’s housewife and has been used as a survival strategy by many women who experienced the oppression of domestic violence (David, Lyon & Monti-Catania, 1998, p. 86). The perfect wife is often seen as someone who cooks and cleans, is always presentable and most importantly submissive to her husband and his needs. One of the women who participated described how she attempted to become the perfect wife:

“….be perfect enough for him not to get him upset or to have the house tidy enough or to have dinner on the table or his clothes laying out…you know you were just on eggshells or the time trying to make sure that you never stepped out of line, that you never did anything wrong”.

The idea behind the perfect wife persona is that a woman is the ideal partner, who never ‘does anything wrong’, she is less likely to anger her partner and consequently less likely to be abused. Davies, Lyon & Monti-Catania (1998) found that women use the persona as a means to calm and placate the abusive partner, if he feels that he is the dominant partner than he is less likely to attempt to control through abuse (p. 85)

The women spoke of this perfect persona as if it was a resorting strategy to subtly gain control; that if women were able to control the environment around the abuse then they are able to control the abuse itself. As Shoham (2000) states “she tries to prevent an escalation of the violence believing that if she is patient and manages to fend off the outbursts, her husband’s behaviour will change” (p. 244). Participant Ann Williams disclosed the following:
As the literature indicates however, this often does not work and the partners would continue violence regardless of a women’s ability to be the ‘perfect wife’. As Ann states in aforementioned quote, she wondered what she had done wrong when her husband had continued abuse regardless of her ability to create the perfect environment. Because of this it is not stretched to say that some women can feel responsible if they receive abuse and ask themselves, what did I do wrong? (Hammer & Itzin, 2001, p. 320).

Although research has found that abuse is in no way indicative of a women’s ability to keep a ‘perfect’ role, it has found that it is a common coping strategy that many women see as a significant element in their perception of surviving through their relationship.

**Survival mode**

Another survival strategy the women identified as using throughout their relationship was termed the ‘survival mode’. The goal of this survival mode was safety and it consisted of maintaining a hyper-aroused state through intense focus and detachment. The women described constant movement, during and after the relationship had ended. During the relationship, the women were used to the spontaneous nature of the abuse and so were at an elevated level or alertness throughout their daily life. After the relationship had ended the women experiencing this hyper-alert state in the context of running away, waiting for the repercussion from the partner for leaving. As seen in one of the participant’s disclosing:

“I’m always thinking, ‘so where do I go with this?’, ‘where is far enough?’, ‘when is long enough?’...”
This hyper-alertness is corroborated in literature; described as living in a ‘war zone’, women who have experienced domestic violence rarely know when an attack will occur and often stay in a state of prepared waiting (Bauer, Quiroga & Rodriguez, 1996, p. 155). As described by the participants there is a feeling of unrest even after the relationship has ended, the concept of safety is seen as either an illusion or a never reached ideal (Bauer, Quiroga & Rodriguez, 1996, pp. 155-156).

Another aspect of this survival mode was the participant’s detachment or stunting of their thinking/emotion whilst experiencing domestic violence in their relationship. The emotions the participant’s experience throughout the abuse was described as ‘overwhelming’ and as one of the participants describe – debilitating:

“you are just unfelt...you are drowning totally within a black hole of negativity and suffering, which really sucks you down and you feel like there’s no oxygen”

This consuming feeling inevitably resulting in the women finding a coping mechanism that allowed them to survive – the survival mode. Cordero (2014) findings correlate with the experiences of this study’s participants, women would “disassociated from their bodies and minds as a means to cope with the abuse that was occurring to them at the time” (p. 81). This detachment is an element of an atmosphere where there was no consideration of future, the focus is solely on the present – surviving day by day (Bostock, Plumpton & Pratt, 2009, p. 96). From a researcher standpoint I put the following to the group and received resounding agreement:

“During the abuse you were in a state of survival, and so there wasn’t any room to move and space to really think about words or even reflect to a point. It was always about surviving”

This survival mode allowed the women to cope with the abuse they experienced at the hands of their partner and eventually the repercussions of having decided to leave. The survival mode described was a theme the women identified as a significant factor in
their survival and their overall perception of their lived experiences of the relationship. Significantly, the women identify the theme of survival as one that continues, and its impacts effecting the women long after the relationship had ended.

**Health**

Health was an issue that arose when discussing the ‘survival mode’ experiences of all three participants. The women disclosed the physiological impacts prolonged hyper-alertness had on them. All women spoke of the toll the relationship had on their physical wellbeing and the coinciding health issues. Those who had developed illnesses associated their decline to the emotions they stunted whilst in ‘survival mode’

“I have had to take medication.....there is always symptoms of repressed emotion, rage grief, I’ve had to learn how to let those go in a healthy manner...the toll it can have on your health...”

Problems with health is a recognised consequences of domestic violence. Research like that of Dutton et al (2006) found that women are more likely to experience a decline in physical and mental health as a direct result of physical, sexual and psychological abuse. Chronic health issues as a result of domestic violence is a noted factor in many women’s experience of abuse by a partner. The long-term effects of abuse are not so clearly understood, nor is the association between the development of a new illness and abuse that had ended some time before (Fraser, 2003, p. 5).

**Theme 3: Responsibility**

Responsibility was a theme that carried throughout the timeline of the women’s relationships. Feelings of responsibility and the associated guilt and shame began at the beginning of the relationship and to a degree continued after the relationship had ended. The women spoke about their responsibility for the relationship; the feeling that they
had been responsible for bringing violence into their families by engaging in the relationship to begin with. As stated below:

“I brought this malevolence into our lives, I was responsible for it”

While the women did not see their partners’ actions as their fault, they described holding feelings of guilt that they had continued a relationship instead of leaving.

Staying has been incorrectly recognised in society, and by women who have experienced violence, as a form of consent (Brohl-Perelli, 2004, p. 26; Enander, 2010, p. 6). Further analysis of this theme produced three subcategories: loving, protecting and hiding.

**Loving**

Manipulation is a common tool used by abusers to gain control over a victim. Perpetrators often resort to manipulation as a means of instilling compassion and commitment in the victim towards the relationship and himself. An example can be seen in the experience of one participant:

“For me, he came into my life with a huge chip on his shoulder. All the saga about his childhood, his hard life which kind of...it was said in a way that made me feel pity for him and so that tapped into my willingness to nurture him and to think ‘okay I’ll love him enough, I’ll fix him, I’ll heal him’...almost like the burden was on me to fix him with my love”

The concept of loving one’s partner enough to ‘fix them’ was a theme that ran throughout the course of this participant’s relationship and played a role in why she chose to stay. As corroborated by the literature, women often feel a responsibility to their partner and the survival of their relationship. There is a pressure to bend to the agreement they made to their partner, ‘death do us part’, and therefore have the obligation to consistently work to improve the relationship, not leave (Cordero, 2014, p. 109; Enander & Holmberg, 2008, p. 207; Taylor, 2006, p. 46). The women spoke of the
burden they felt during the relationship but it is important to note that they no longer felt responsible for their partner having now left the situation.

Protecting

Two of the participants discussed their experiences of raising children in their relationship, and the increased responsibility it placed on them. Having children was used as a tool for control by many of the perpetrators, as stated by Ann:

“The game is ramped up then because you’ve taken on enormous responsibility... a different level of control as you were unable to work and you had that extra responsibility to the children”

The introduction of children into the relationship was a catalyst for increased violence; Ann’s feelings of responsibility likewise increased as she now had the added pressure of ensuring her children’s ongoing protection and wellbeing. As Lapierre (2010) found, women are instinctually protective of their children but in the context of an abusive home life this drive is increased tenfold.

“...you’re afraid because you’re terrified of what he’ll do to the kids, you know. Would we end up on the 6 o’clock news?”

Responsibility for the children and the instinctual drive to protect them against all measures of harm can act as barriers that prevent an individual from leaving an abusive relationship (Murray, 2008, p. 68). Whilst the participants did speak of the fear they felt for their children’s safety as reasons they remained in the relationship, one participant spoke of the role her child played in her decision to leave her relationship.

“I think my dropping point was my son...when I gave birth to him I realised I can do something right. And that’s when I thought ‘he needs to be safe and I need to get out’. And it took me almost two years to get out but I did...he gave me the strength to go”
This indicates that the factors that influence a woman’s choice to leave the relationship are individual to the person, and can be both barriers and motivators.

Hiding

Traditionally, domestic violence was seen as a private matter that wasn’t to leave the confines of family (Cronin, 2013, p. 13). With the recognition of domestic violence as a societal and public issue, people are encouraged to disclose and speak out about their experiences of abuse. Traditional values however remain an issue and can be seen in women’s attempts to hide evidence of abuse from the outside world (Crawford, Hill & Liebling-Kalifani, 2009, p. 65). The women discussed their feeling that hiding the abuse was their responsibility, whether that was through withdrawal and/or denial, and the shame they felt when this failed. The women explored this theme in relation to friends/family and their knowledge of the abuse:

“I understood that it was hard for her [friend] to see him behave and treat me in that way….and that is kind of what keeps you secretive…because you know people will judge you. They will say ‘get out, it’s as simple as that’. They will say ‘why are you putting up with this? Get out…’”

As described, there was a fear of being judged as if the abuse was something the women were to feel ashamed of. Studies have found that shame and embarrassment often lead to guilt as the women felt their responsibility of hiding the abuse was jeopardised (Enander, 2010, p. 8). It is the fear and feeling of responsibility that can lead to women isolating themselves as a measure of concealment, inevitably creating a further barrier that keeps them from leaving (Buchbinder & Eisikovits, 2003, p. 359). The fear and guilt that these women felt during their relationship remains a factor in their lives even after they had left their partner; they still feel shame over the abuse and hold responsibility for the abuse to a degree. The responsibility of hiding the abuse, from not
only the greater community but friends and family, remains a prominent theme that still exists in the day to day lives of the women – and their perceptions of the relationship.

**Theme 4: Control**

The women’s’ recollection of the three phases of their relationship indicated that control was a major theme for them. Control was indicated in the women’s descriptions of their partner and his behaviour; it was a fundamental motivation for domestic violence, and a primary method for gaining the power perpetrators wish to exert over their victims (Lamphier, 2001, p. 4). The women discussed how control was exerted over them by their partners and the impact it had on their journey during and even after the relationship had ended. The two subcategories identified in the findings were: process and power.

**Process**

The method of data collection allowed the women to reflect back on their experiences of control at three points – before, during and after the abuse. During the ‘before’ stage, the women discussed their courtship and the behaviours they can see as signs of potential abuse in hindsight. One such story was told by Ann Williams who describes the beginning of her relationship:

“I was pursued relentlessly so that’s kind of a different... He was relentless, obsessive, loving, protective, investigative… and that to me was disguised as love. That need to know everything about you, to be at your work before you arrive because he loves you. I thought that was love”

The ‘wooing’ step of every relationship differed in every woman but the word love was present in all. Research into the courtship of domestically violent relationships found a common theme of love, where women describe the experience as being charming, fun, positive and attentive (Fisher & Keeling, 2012, p. 1562). There was however also
findings that explore the process of how control is slowly incorporated into the relationship. As Ann now has hindsight she is able to see her experience as having been ‘obsessive’ and a sign of the control her partner would eventually have over her. This courtship period is often seen as a period where the abuser encourages and builds the women’s commitment and dependence to him and their relationship - thus making it easier to increase control with a reduced risk of the woman leaving (Cordero, 2014, p. 45; Wolfson, 2002, pp. 5-6).

Control was found to have continued on in the lives of the women, long after the relationship had ended. In the case of Marissa who had left her partner close to three decades previously, she found her abuser enter into her life spontaneously and attempt to gain control through new means she didn’t know he was capable of.

“I was in Queensland and then I came over here. When I was actually here, maybe 25 years later, he came back and I had some harassment stuff happening and that’s when this behaviour….stalking began happening, it wasn’t there before… I was really surprised that he was capable of some of this behaviour, I knew he could be a dickhead but I didn’t think he was capable of that.”

It has been found that abusers can still project control over their partners even without communication, and it remains an issue for many women who have left their relationship (Bostock, Plumpton & Pratt, 2009, p. 105). The importance of control to the perpetrator is clear in the experiences of the women whose ex-partners are unable to let go and still attempt to recall power over them at any cost (Lamphier, 2001, p. 9).

**Power**

Significantly participants in this research not only described the effects of domestic violence on their lives during the relationship but the effects that remain with them long after it ended. One such effect was the instinct to remain silent. As discussed previously
silence was a taught behaviour that had been ingrained into the women from the beginning of the abuse. Therefore speaking out becomes a sign of defiance and fought against an enforced behaviour.

“...as you go through that process of normalising life you constantly... I’m constantly hit by little balls of terror because I am just starting to express myself...”

The woman describe an unconscious mechanism where they were fighting with themselves to break free of the restrictions that had been ingrained during the relationship. Dunaway (2002) address this phenomena, where the roles that are enforced in the relationship continue on even when the relationship ends. The control that the perpetrator had over the victim is transcending; the power of control that the women experienced and are still experiencing is evident in their perceptions of the relationship.

The themes identified in this chapter represents the lived experiences of the couple relationship for three women, the four themes identified are: wordlessness, survival, responsibility and control. This next chapter will discuss the findings of this research project and explore what it means in regards to understanding women’s lived experience of the couple relationship, and its place in current research on the domestic violence field.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

A unique element of this research is its exploration of the relationship from three stages: before, during and after the abuse. This chapter will explore the aforementioned findings using these stages and will look at its place in literature and the greater field of domestic violence research.

The Courtship
This research looked at the couple relationship from the perspective of the women; it was examined from three stages, the before stage was associated with courtship by the participants. Courtship is the period of time wherein a couple dates prior to marriage, it is considered the beginning stage of a relationship. The research found that the courtship stage was associated with a lack of comprehension and the beginning of the control, by the participants. The women spoke of the lack of knowledge they possessed during the courtship stage of their relationship, they term this as naivety. The participants felt that their reduced understanding of what was healthy and unhealthy in a relationship led to an inability to comprehend the signs and speak out. One of the participants spoke at length about her ex-partner’s behaviour she thought of as loving and protecting in her courtship phase but now identified as the beginning means of control by her partner.

Literature on this stage of the relationship has a particular focus on the occurrence of courtship/dating violence. Courtship violence is defined in Ryan (2008) as “the use of physical aggression, sexual aggression, and/or sexual coercion in dating relationships” (p. 802) as a means to exert power and control over a partner. Whilst research has found that the ‘wooing’ stage of the relationship has been described as a charming, fun and
positive experience, there are significant findings that indicate the courtship phase as a
time where controlling and abusive behaviours begin (Cordero, 2014, p. 45; Fisher &

Research on courtship violence has found that this lack of knowledge leads to
vulnerability, a vulnerability that makes the women more susceptible to a perpetrators
manipulation (Avni, 1991, p. 234). This research often associates the lack of
understanding with the upbringing of an individual, which is those who were brought up
in a patriarchal home are likely to lack a understanding of what an unhealthy
relationship looks like, and consequently at risk of entering into a relationship that may
become abusive (Avni, 1991, p. 235). Although one of the participants did speak of her
childhood, a clear connection was not established between the upbringing and the lack
of insight during the courtship phase. This indicates a gap in literary knowledge of what
makes a woman vulnerable during the courtship phase.

A factor that was found at the core of both this research and the literature was the
connection between the courtship phase and the relationship/marriage phase (Bapat,
2011, p. 7). The courtship phase was where the commitment, emotional attachment and
investment began; it was also a time where the foundations of control were laid to build
on in later stages (Wolfson, 2002, pp. 5-6). These findings indicate further research is
necessary in order to understand the prudence of the courtship phase of the relationship.

The Juxtaposition

The second phase this chapter will be looking at is the ‘during’ phase, the time period
when the domestic violence was taking place. A significant finding of this research was
that the women’s experience of abuse was fluid and ever changing; the coping strategies
they employed were often in juxtaposition. As discussed in the literature review,
women’s responses are often seen as being of learned helplessness or rational thinking,
victim or survivor (Axsom & Rhatigan, 2006; Fishel & Rynerson, 1998). This research found that during the abuse the women experienced times of being a helpless victim, and times of being a rational thinking survivor; times where they could not think clearly, and times where they could. The times where the women felt they had no control and no ability to think, they were simply surviving the situation.

Described as the ‘survival mode’, the women spoke of a state where they ran on adrenaline and were functioning, but unable to see outside of the ‘fog’. The women were unable to see outside of the situation, nor were they able to think rationally; this experience was due directly to the behaviours of their partners whose aim was to reduce the women’s power of authority. In contrast, the women also spoke of the responsibilities they held and the strategy of the ‘perfect wife’ they used whilst experiencing abuse. It was at these times that the women were able to rationally assess the circumstances and adapt, a process that portrays survivor not victim.

Literature on how women respond to domestic violence addresses both these states of being, but not at the same time; women are seen as either being of victim or the survivor, never both. Cronin (2013) describes the initial abuse as an ‘ambush’ from which the shock can lead to women being pushed into a victim state automatically. While women can find coping mechanisms to deal with the abuse, there are times where the ‘war zone’ can pull them back into victimhood (Bauer, Quiroga & Rodriguez, 1996, p. 155; Birnbaum & Buchbinder, 2010, p. 659). The literature suggests that as the abuse increases the women will develop new strategies to preserve their safety, manage their distress and regain some control (Berman et al., 2012, p. 648). In this study, the women did develop rational strategies but the ‘fog’ remained, the two coincided throughout the ‘during’ stage.
Rational strategies are associated with empowerment; literature indicates that rational thinking enables a woman to take back some control and make decisions (Calhoun et al., 2000, p. 167). It consists of detaching to a degree from the emotions of the situation and periodically weighing up the benefits and costs before making a decision (Axsom & Rhatigan, 2006) The women in this study used strategies that took into account the safety of themselves and their children; the ‘perfect wife’ strategy, for example, is a rational choice made in an attempt to placate the partner and reduce the risk of harm (Brabeck & Guzman, 2008, p. 1287).

Women’s responses to domestic violence are a particular focus of current research; literature attempts to understand a woman’s decision to remain in an abusive relationship by delving into how women respond to the violence. A gap was identified in how the literature sees women’s responses to domestic violence, rather than a woman being a ‘victim’ or ‘survivor’, this research has found that women’s responses to domestic violence are fluid and ever-changing. The findings indicate that there is a need for in-depth exploration into how women move between the ‘victim’ and ‘survivor’ responses, and how these perceived roles help them to survive in situations of violence and abuse.

The Long Battle

The ‘after’ stage follows the women’s experiences after the relationship had ended; a significant finding of this research is domestic violence still affects the lives of women long after the relationship had finished. Although seen as a time of freedom and healing, the women experienced issues with control and long-term health after leaving their abusive partners. The research has found that women were still experiencing abuse at the hands of their ex-partner and suffering health issues. Two of the three participants spoke of control that extended past the end of the relationship; one participant had her
ex-partner stalk her 25 years after they had broken up, the other continually experienced psychological abuse from her ex-partner through the child they share custody for the past decade. All of the women spoke of health issues they developed after the relationship; the women associated the problems with the prolonged stress of the ‘survival mode’. This research found that women’s suffering does not end when the relationship does and, women are at risk of further damage even without the presence of the abusive partner.

It is a stated fact in literature that the most dangerous time for a woman is when she has just left a domestically violent relationship (Bostock, Plumpton & Pratt, 2009, p. 105; Murray, 2008, p. 68). Research has found that men use domestic violence as a means to gain power over their partner, and when this power is threatened they are likely to use whatever means possible to regain control (Dunaway, 2002, pp. 12-13; Lamphier, 2001, p. 9). This was experienced by participant Marissa Williams whose ex-partner went to extreme lengths to regain control, when she was not responding to attempts of intimidation. Exploration is required to understand the lengths a perpetrator will go to gain back control, specifically the length of time after the conclusion of the relationship.

Domestic violence by nature can cause problems with an individual’s health. There has been a substantial amount of research conducted on the health care needs of women who are in a domestic violence relationship; however, there has been a lack of research on the long term health effects (Dutton et al., 2006, p. 960). Whilst long term health issues resulting from injuries sustained during the relationship is documented, new health issues that arise long after the relationship ended is not (Fraser, 2003, p. 5). Literature such as Black (2011) and Hagion-Rzepka (2005) investigates the impact prolong stress has on the body. They found a state of ‘fight or flight’ over a long period can have serious health implications that can develop long after the stressful experience
has passed (Campbell et al., 2002, pp. 1157-1158). A similar state was indicated in this research, wherein the women describe a ‘survival mode’ that led to serious stress and the stunting of emotions. The impact that stunted emotions has on an individual’s long term health is not well investigated and a significant gap in domestic violence research.

These findings indicate a difference in how researchers perceive the period ‘after’ a domestically violent relationship is terminated and how women experience it. This research found that women perceived their experiences of life after the domestic violence as an ongoing extension of abuse, and as an ongoing battle. The women don’t identify their time after the violence as freedom and peace; it is a time of struggle, adjustment and at times risk. These revelations call for further investigation into the long term effects of domestic violence and what can be done to support women in coping with these after-effects.

The methodology of the focus group enabled the women to explore their journeys and provide valuable insight into the reality of what it is to experience domestic violence. Based on a social constructivist framework, the focus group enabled knowledge to be constructed by the realities of women who had experienced domestic violence (Crawford, Hill & Liebling-Kalifani, 2009, p. 66; Kimes & Muehlenhard, 1999, p. 234). This methodology provided a safe place for disclosure of a personal nature, and can be used when seeking to understand the factors that women take into account when deciding whether to leave or remain in an abusive relationship.

The research described in this thesis explored women’s perceptions of their relationship when there has been lived experiences of domestic violence. Findings indicate that the women’s experiences of the relationship are significantly different in each stage, from the beginning to the end. This research found that the courtship was a time of naivety,
where the women report that a lack of awareness led to signs of potential abuse being missed. The juggling women endured during the abuse consisted of periods where they felt incapable of thinking past functioning, and then times where they were able to think rationally and make decisions on how to protect themselves and their loved ones. Lastly the after stage was found to be an extension of the ‘during’ stage where women often experienced controlling and violent behaviours, negative health effects and ongoing danger. This research indicates there is a significant gap in the current literary understandings of domestic violence and how women perceive their relationship; the findings suggest further investigation into women’s experiences could only improve field knowledge.
This qualitative study explored domestic violence from the perspective of the women whose partners abuse them. By collaborating with women, this research provides insight into women’s lived experiences of domestic violence and the complexity of the couple relationship. This research not only contributes to the existing research on domestic violence, but also provides a new approach to working with women to understanding the complexity of domestic violence.

This research worked with three women to explore their views of their abusive relationship. The women reflected back on and discussed their experiences at three significant stages: before the abuse has begun, during the abuse, and after the abuse had ended. This research found that women view their relationship as a place of wordlessness, survival, responsibility and control. All the women spoke of their issues with naivety in the beginning of the relationship, their back and forth between survival mode and rationalising, and lastly the ongoing battle of continual abuse and health problems following the termination of their relationship.

These findings indicate there are areas that require further investigation. This study found that women’s experiences are complex and often misunderstood. It also indicates that research into the vulnerabilities of courtship, the women’s coping strategies and thinking processes during abuse, and the ongoing implications of experiencing violence are of great significance in generating understanding of domestic violence as a societal issue. By understanding the journey women take in their relationships, professionals may be better equipped to support and assist when women need it most.
REFERENCES


Bookwala, J. (2002). The Role of Own and Perceived Partner Attachment in Relationship Aggression. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 17(1), 84-100. DOI: 10.1177/0886260502017001006


APPENDIX A

Over her shoulder:

What are women’s relationship perceptions when there has been lived experience of domestic violence within that relationship?

My name is Amy Hannan and I am an undergraduate student currently enrolled in the Bachelor of Social Work course at Edith Cowan University, Western Australia. As an Honours student I am conducting a research project as part of the requirements for my degree, a project in which I am asking your organisation to be a part of.

My research will be looking at women’s perceptions of her relationship in the presence of domestic violence. This research aims to further understanding of the domestic violence field by providing insight into women’s realities of having lived with domestic violence.

You can be a part of this project by assisting me in finding individuals to participate in a focus group. The focus group is expected to take between 2-3 hours and will consist of no more than five participants. Requirements of participants are:

- 18 years or older.
- Clients of your organisation and have an assigned worker to provide ongoing support.
- Relationship had lasted 6 months or more.
- Relationship has ended at least 3 months ago.
- Client defines relationship as over.
- Willing and capable of participating in a focus group.
- Open to discussing their experiences.

If you know of any clients who are eligible please provide them with a participant information letter. If the client is willing to participate they can choose to contact me themselves or provide consent for you to contact me on their behalf.

Student Researcher: Amy Hannan
Email: ahannan@our.ecu.edu.au
Ph: 0427 342 927

Supervisor: Rebecca Burns
Email: r.burns@our.ecu.edu.au
APPENDIX B

Over her shoulder:

What are women’s relationship perceptions when there has been lived experience of domestic violence within that relationship?

My name is Amy Hannan and I am an undergraduate student currently enrolled in the Bachelor of Social Work course at Edith Cowan University, Western Australia. As an Honours student I am conducting a research project as part of the requirements for my degree, a project in which I am inviting you to take part.

My research will be looking at women’s perceptions of their former relationship in the presence of domestic violence. The purpose of the study is to better understand women’s lived experiences of domestic violence; specifically, to better understand the couple relationship. I hope to give women the chance to discuss their experiences in a space that is free of judgement and assumption. This research aims to further understanding of the domestic violence field by providing insight into women’s realities of having lived with domestic violence.

In order to participate in this research you must be:

- 18 years or older.
- A client of this organisation and have an assigned worker who can provide ongoing support.
- Your relationship must have been 6 months or more in length.
- Your relationship has to have ended at least 3 months ago and you must define the relationship as over.
- Willing to participate in a focus group.
- Open to discussing your experiences.

You can be a part of this project by consenting to participate in a focus group. The focus group is expected to take between 2-3 hours and will consist of no more than five participants. Participants will be required to reflect and discuss their past relationship at three stages: before the domestic violence, during the domestic violence and after the domestic violence. This will be done through individual brainstorming and a group discussion. The group will primarily be participant driven with myself asking prompt questions when necessary.
Participation in this study is voluntary and you can withdraw at any time. Withdrawal from the study will not impact your relationship with the service/organisation in any way. All information you disclose will be treated as confidential, your identity will not be disclosed nor will any identifying information. You will receive a pseudonym for the purpose of anonymity within the data. The focus group will be audio recorded as part of data collection but will be later transcribed so as to eliminate any identifying factors. Analysis of data will be presented to you and you will be encouraged to indicate any occurrence of miscommunication or misrepresentation and suggest changes.

The focus group will be undertaken in a regional area and there is a possibility that you may be known to other participants.

This research project has received ethical approval and steps have been made to ensure ethical conduct is upheld at all times. Measures have been made to ensure both your anonymity, safety and wellbeing is maintained, the strategies put in place are as follows:

- **Anonymity**: Recruitment will solely be done through a single third party organisation rather than advertisement/active recruitment to ensure the content matter of the project and your participation isn’t publicised. Pseudonym chosen prior to data collection will protect your identity in data collection, analysis and submitted thesis. The group session of the focus group will be audio recorded but later transcribed to eliminate identifiable elements and later destroyed.

- **Physical Safety**: The focus group will be held in a safe, local and private location. Contact can be established through the third party organisation if need be. Your involvement in this project will be confidential.

- **Emotional distress**: Participants are free to leave or withdraw from the project at any point. All participants will be debriefed following the group session by a professional. Professionals will be available during and after the focus group if a participant feels they need individual support. All participants will be provided a list of local services and organisation that can offer support/assistance. All participants must have a case manager to offer ongoing support.

The focus group will be undertaken in a regional area and there is a possibility that you may be known to other participants. If you are willing to participate in this study,
please complete the consent form and contact me. If you have any further questions or concerns about this study, please feel free to contact:

Student Researcher: Amy Hannan  
Email: ahannan@our.ecu.edu.au  
Ph: 0427 342 927

Supervisor: Rebecca Burns  
Email: r.burns@our.ecu.edu.au
I have agreed to participate in a focus group on the topic of women’s relationship perceptions in the presence of domestic violence and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.

I agree to abide by the ground rules of confidentiality which has been discussed with me by the researcher.

I will not disclose to anyone outside of this focus group about the content of the discussion which takes place in this focus group. I understand that anything I discuss in this focus group will not be disclosed outside of the group by other participants.

Participant

Date:

Researcher

Date:
APPENDIX D

Over her shoulder:

What are women’s relationship perceptions when there was, or is, lived experience of domestic violence within that relationship?

- I have been provided with a letter explaining the research project and I understand the letter.

- I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and all my questions have been answered satisfactorily.

- I am aware that I can contact Amy Hannan or Rebecca Burns if I have any further queries, or if I have concerns or complaints. I have been given their contact details in the Information Letter.

- I understand that participating in this project will involve:
  - Attending a focus group
  - Individual brain storming
  - My voice being recorded

- I consent to having my voice recorded during this research.

- I understand that the researcher will be able to identify me but that all the information I give will be coded, kept confidential and will be accessed only by the researcher and his/her supervisor.

- I am aware that the information collected during this research will be stored in a locked cabinet at ECU for 5 years after the completion of the project and will be destroyed after that time.

- I understand that I will not be identified in any report, thesis, or presentation of the results of this research.

- I understand that I can withdraw from the research at any time without penalty.

- I freely agree to participate in this project:

NAME: ____________________________________________

SIGNATURE: ______________________________ DATE: ____________
APPENDIX E

Prior to commencement:

- Gathering necessary writing materials
- Organising service contact lists
- Preparation of audio recording tools
- Participants select pseudonym
- Participants sign confidentiality forms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Estimated time</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Introductions</strong></td>
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<td>. Introductions</td>
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<tr>
<td>. Brief overview of study and focus group</td>
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<td>. Questions</td>
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<td>. Introduction of agenda</td>
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<td><strong>Discussion</strong></td>
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<td>. Participants select writing material</td>
<td>30 minutes</td>
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<td>. Asked the three prompt questions, further questions provided if clarification/rephrasing is needed</td>
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<td>. Given time between each question to write their answers</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Group Work</strong></td>
<td>90-120 minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td>. Individuals place their words onto group brainstorm</td>
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<tr>
<td>. Each question asked again, answers discussed as group</td>
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<td>. Natural discussion follows, prompt questions provided if necessary</td>
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<td>. Themes identified by researcher. Discussed</td>
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<tr>
<td>. Conclusion</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Debriefing</strong></td>
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<td>. Questions</td>
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<tr>
<td>. Professional introduced to take over debriefing session</td>
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<tr>
<td>. Open discussion on issues that have arisen or concerns participants have</td>
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<tr>
<td>. Introduction of service contact list</td>
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<tr>
<td>. Given opportunity to have individual debriefing if desired</td>
<td>20 minutes</td>
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